



REPORT ARAB REGIONAL SECURITY

# A New Grand Bargain for the Middle East

The Search for a New Consociational and Geopolitical Order

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The centrality of armed sectarian nonstate actors is one of the hallmarks of the emerging Middle East regional system. The “return of the weak Arab state”<sup>1</sup> began as a result of the sectarianized geopolitical contests unleashed by the 2003 American invasion and occupation of Iraq. Now, with the conflicts that have consumed the region in the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings, state fragmentation has reached a more serious turning point. Whether in Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Syria, Yemen, or elsewhere, local and transnational nonstate actors have become decisive and powerful, sometimes with regional influence. They are often sectarian, challenge weak state institutions, and extend the geopolitical reach of their regional patrons. Further, they change the region’s very permeability—in other words, its openness to external and intraregional flows of ideology, and to the cross-border movement of people and material. They are bound to complicate the future prospects for state-building or state-rebuilding in the region. Weak states in the model of Iraq and Lebanon, which are highly vulnerable to outside influences and to nonstate actors, will become more common once the - overlapping domestic and external wars over them come to an end. Multiple social organizations will struggle to control these states’ institutions and populations—both physically, and through ideology.

These trends show no signs of abating, and the reality is that it may be difficult to reconstitute strong, effective states in much of the Arab world. Only a new, messy type of bargaining, which incorporates nonstate actors and sponsors of proxy wars, can restore a modicum of political stability in these collapsed states. There are two main parts to these bargains. First, there must be domestic consociational agreements among each state’s different sectarian, ethnic, and tribal communities. These agreements should help launch the difficult process of peace-building, state-building, and state-rebuilding. Second, there must be a grand regional geopolitical bargain demarcating clear spheres of influence among the main international and regional actors vying for influence in the Middle East. A new prevailing order must be hammered out, one that by definition will be weak and fluid but will be better than the current chaos. Only these dual bargains can help produce something resembling domestic and regional stability in the arc of crisis extending from Yemen to Libya via Iraq and Syria.

This report traces the recent history of nonstate actors in the Middle East from the second half of the twentieth century to the present. Doing so reveals the general shape that these twin bargains must take. Although unfolding events and each state’s particular decision-making processes will define the specifics of local bargains, especially at the national level, some general principles will need to be followed in creating these arrangements. To pursue effective solutions, politicians, theorists, and policymakers must also acknowledge that the state order is no longer the sole unit of analysis or unit of power and governance, as much as they might wish it otherwise. They must acknowledge that sectarianism and similar divides cannot be stamped out within states, at least in the foreseeable future. At the same time, a grand bargain for the region must not be based on sectarian and ethnic identity, but rather on balancing the security concerns of different states and actors in the region—including non-Arab states.

# The Erosion of State Power

The state collapse that the invasion of Iraq and the sectarian aftermath of the uprisings precipitated came on the morrow of a long period of regime resilience and state durability in the Arab world. Postindependence Arab states were institutionally weak and open to transnational ideological currents; this was on display most powerfully during the battles of the Arab Cold War (around 1958–70), when regional states battled for dominance with the backing of international patrons, especially Russia and the United States.<sup>2</sup> But by the 1970s, the states of the Middle East had drastically reduced their political permeability. Regimes engaged in sustained state-building efforts, organizing state-society relations in different corporatist strategies that gave them a substantial measure of control over the political arena.<sup>3</sup> There were always exceptions to this trend, such as the perennially weak states of Lebanon and Yemen, with their powerful sectarian or tribal and regional nonstate actors and sentiments. Beyond these exceptions, however, the strong Arab state, with its fearsome coercive apparatus, militarized state-society relations, and neopatrimonial management of economic resources—in other words, a clientelist system—looked as if it were here to stay.<sup>4</sup>

Many Arab states experienced significant socioeconomic dislocations starting in the late twentieth century, a direct consequence of the introduction of structural neoliberal reforms. But it was not until the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq that the era of the institutionally strong Arab state came to an end. The destruction of the Iraqi state unleashed proxy geopolitical battles throughout the region between Saudi Arabia and Iran—in the domestic arenas of both Lebanon and Yemen, but also in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.<sup>5</sup> Prior to the invasion and occupation, Iraq had been an institutionally strong state that was crucially important for the regional balance. Occupied Iraq was weak, and bereft of both coercive and infrastructural capabilities, thus providing another arena for proxy geopolitical battles between Riyadh and Tehran and other regional actors. Henceforth regional states became much more willing to undertake risky ventures, including through proxies. The region was thus ripe for the sectarianization of geopolitical battles after the popular uprisings of 2011. These conflicts led in turn to state collapse in Syria and Libya, turning both states into havens for local and transnational armed nonstate actors, whether of the sectarian, tribal, ethnic, or Salafi and jihadist types. Armed nonstate actors began to emerge in that “arc of state weakness and state failure, running from Lebanon through Syria to Iraq”<sup>6</sup> and beyond, not only as a challenge to the state’s domestic authority but also as pivotal proxy actors of which their regional patrons made instruments in their geopolitical battles—these regional patrons being mainly Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>7</sup>

Yet even though the strong Arab state model began to crumble with the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the progenitors of today’s powerful nonstate actors had actually emerged decades before. And though sectarianism was not yet an instrument through which geopolitical battles were waged, some of these actors already possessed a highly defined sectarian identity.

## Order from Ashes

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# The Rise of Nonstate Actors

Hezbollah is the prime and very early example of an armed sectarian nonstate actor.<sup>8</sup> Given its security dilemma—one rooted in limited military and economic capabilities—Tehran’s strategy in the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88) rested on commissioning the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the paramilitary Basij to use nonstate actors to advance and protect Iran’s geopolitical interests and to deter, through power projection, a possible American or Israeli attack against its nuclear facilities.<sup>9</sup> Born out of the ideological reverberations of the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the geopolitical ramifications of the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, Hezbollah would grow into a powerful domestic political actor in Lebanon, assembling a complex corporatist institutional network aimed at penetrating, mobilizing, and controlling large sections of the country’s Shia community through a mix of ideological indoctrination and social services provisions. Following Israel’s withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000, Hezbollah’s military wing served two objectives: to deter a future Israeli aggression against Lebanon, and to extend Iran’s geopolitical influence all the way to Israel’s northern borders.

Immediately after the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, Hezbollah was deployed to train Shia militias in asymmetric combat operations against U.S. troops. The party’s transnational dimension became much more pronounced, however, after the popular uprisings of 2011 and the civil war that followed in Syria. From strategic consultations with the Syrian regime on nonconventional military tactics to limited deployments of elite units around the Sayyidah Zaynab shrine in southern Damascus, Hezbollah then escalated its efforts to include logistical and military support to Shia villages on both sides of the Lebanese-Syrian border in the Hermel region against attacks by the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Ultimately, this transnational involvement developed into full-fledged operations in al-Qusayr, Syria in April–June 2013, Yabroud in the Qalamoun ridge in February 2014, and Aleppo in 2016.

Syria is not Hezbollah’s only transnational theater of operations on behalf of Iran’s geopolitical interests, however. In Yemen, the party is also operating a “train-and-equip program in Sanaa,” and may have even been tasked by Iran to form a Yemeni affiliate that one day will serve as a proxy for Tehran’s regional objectives.<sup>10</sup> In sum, and from its early origins

as a security shell for the IRGC in Lebanon, Hezbollah ultimately developed into “an instrument of Tehran’s foreign policy.”<sup>11</sup>



IRAQI PMF FIGHTERS JUNE 20, 2017 ON THE IRAQ-SYRIA BORDER IN NINEVEH, IRAQ. THE POPULAR MOBILISATION FRONT (PMF) FORCES, COMPOSED OF MAJORITY SHI'ITE MILITIA, PART OF THE IRAQI FORCES, PLAYED A MAJOR ROLE IN PUSHING ISLAMIC STATE MILITANTS FROM THE NORTH-WESTERN IRAQ BORDER STRIP BACK INTO SYRIA. SOURCE: MARTYN AIM/GETTY IMAGES.

State collapse in Iraq after the 2003 U.S. invasion, and across the Arab world after the 2011 popular uprisings, transformed Hezbollah from an anomaly to a model to emulate. The IRGC’s Quds Force, with direct Hezbollah assistance, created a number of cosectarian nonstate actors to consolidate Tehran’s control over post-Saddam Hussein Iraq.<sup>12</sup> Some of these nonstate actors were later gathered in the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU, al-Hashd al-Sha’abi), an umbrella organization consisting of around sixty mainly Shia paramilitary units, fielding some 110,000 fighters, which serves as a parallel army to that of the Iraqi state.<sup>13</sup> These include long-standing actors like the militia-political party Badr Organization, originally labeled the Badr Brigades when it was the armed wing of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq. But they also include more recent groups, many of which splintered from Muqtada al-Sadr’s Jaysh al-Mahdi after his fallout with Iran as a result of his objection to Nouri al-Maliki’s sectarian policies. These latter groups include ‘Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq, Kata’eb Hezbollah al-Iraqiya, Harakat al-Nujaba’ al-Iraqiya, Kata’eb Sayed al-Shuhada’, and Liwa’ Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, and like Hezbollah, the Afghan Liwa’ Fatemiyoun and the Pakistani Liwa’ Zaynabiyoun—the latter two recruited from refugees in Iran by the IRGC—are more nonstate actors that serve Iran’s geopolitical interests in a transnational capacity, and have been deployed in Syria since 2014, where they have proved instrumental in forestalling regime collapse. Anecdotal evidence suggests that it is these armed sectarian nonstate actors, usually led by Hezbollah fighters and Iranian and Russian special forces, and supported by Russian airpower, that tipped the balance of power in favor of the Syrian regime, especially in the Aleppo battles. Without them, it would have been impossible for



the regime to survive the combination of domestic and external opposition it has faced since 2011.<sup>15</sup> In addition to acting as surrogates for Tehran in Iraq, these militias are also busy creating a new land corridor through which arms and supplies can be funneled from Iran all the way to Lebanon, passing through Iraq and Syria. The prospective ground route may run along a line connecting Mosul to al-Ba'aj in Iraq, then onward toward Deir al-Zour, Palmyra, and Damascus in Syria, ending in Lebanon.<sup>16</sup> The latest deployments may also create another border with Israel.

The Iraqi Turkmen Front is another armed nonstate actor operating in Iraq. A protégé of Turkey, it is recruited from the Turkmen population around Mosul and serves as a bridge for Turkish influence and as a counterbalance to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in northern Iraq. Iraq also contains a host of Sunni, Christian, and other ethno-religious paramilitary organizations, some of which are also part of the PMUs.

Other sectarian nonstate actors have emerged in the aftermath of state collapse in Syria. The sectarianized geopolitical struggle for Syria torpedoed state institutions, curbing the once-aggressive regional activities of a shrewd Hobbesian player. Local actors consequently linked up with cosectarian regional states—Iran for the Shia, and Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey for the Sunnis.<sup>17</sup> As a result, the battleground in Syria is dotted by an array of local and transnational armed sectarian or ethnic nonstate actors, most of whom act as protégés for regional states. These include the FSA; Ahrar al-Sham, a gathering of a number of Islamist and Salafi groups supported by Turkey and Saudi Arabia; and the Army of Conquest (Jaysh al-Fateh), formed in 2015 and composed of an alliance of mainly Salafi and Salafi-jihadist factions, including Fateh al-Sham (formerly the Nusra Front, at one time al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate), Ahrar al-Sham, and more moderate rebel groups. In the Eastern Ghouta, there are the FSA-flagged al-Rahman Legion, the Islam Army (Riyadh's primary boots on the ground in Syria, some forty-three rebel brigades), and the Fustat Army. Countless other local groups have emerged either by foreign fiat or as a consequence of the war economy.<sup>18</sup> Qatar and Turkey also used local Salafi rebel groups to advance their respective geopolitical interests in Syria, namely Ahrar al-Sham and Fateh al-Sham.

In fact, armed nonstate actors are now the most powerful players in northern Syria. The United States-supported People's Protection Units (YPG), the fighting force of the PYD—the Democratic Union Party, the PKK's local affiliate—spearheaded the war against the Islamic State on multiple fronts, as did the U.S.-trained Syrian Arab Coalition, which fights with the YPG as part of the Syrian Democratic Forces, a mix of Kurdish and Arab units.<sup>19</sup> Turkey also relies on its own armed nonstate actors in northern Syria to balance against rising Kurdish power and autonomy; the Sultan Murad Brigade gathers mainly ethnic Turkmens fighting both the Syrian regime and Kurdish forces.

State collapse after authoritarian regime breakdown also gave rise to a plethora of armed nonstate actors in Libya. These include the pro-General National Congress (GNC) Libya Dawn, a now-defunct Islamist group, and the Libya Shield Force; the Salafi-jihadist Islamic State, and Ansar al-Sharia; and the progovernment groups gathering the Zintan, al-

Sawaiq, and al-Qaqa Brigades fighting alongside Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army. Moreover, all these groups operate with the aid of external state actors. Egypt, the strongest external actor in Libya, supports Haftar's forces. The Emirates has delivered weapons to Haftar's forces, but also to the Zintan militias, while Turkey supported Libya Dawn during the latter's existence and Qatar maintained ties with Islamist groups.

Although most of the armed nonstate actors throughout the region are rooted in local dynamics, they nonetheless serve as proxies for their regional patrons, whether the Emirates, Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, or Turkey. Some others, by contrast, pursue strictly local objectives but are nevertheless supported by regional states in a bid to accumulate more geopolitical capital. The relationship between Iran and the Houthis in Yemen exemplifies this latter subtype.<sup>20</sup> The war in Yemen is motivated by domestic rather than regional or sectarian factors; the revolt of Ansar Allah (more commonly known as the Houthis) is driven by socioeconomic and political grievances, and a reaction to Sanaa's decades of military attacks against their strongholds in the north of the country. Yet unlike the sectarian, transnational nonstate actors operating in Syria, the Houthis cannot be considered mere proxies serving Iran's geopolitical interests.<sup>21</sup> It was in fact Saudi support for the Houthis' opponents in Yemen that forced the rebel group to seek support from Iran. And support for the Houthis happens to fit Iran's general geopolitical strategy, where a modest investment in military training and supplies for the rebels has produced far larger geopolitical returns—in the immediate security environment of Saudi Arabia, Iran's rival.

Armed sectarian nonstate actors have thus played a pivotal role in the region's geopolitical battles, advancing the interests of their patrons while challenging the institutional and ideological authority of the territorial state. Their rise is symptomatic of a changing regional permeability, in comparison to that of the 1950s and 1960s. It is also bound to complicate any future prospects for postwar state-building or rebuilding in the region. The next section takes up these two themes.

## A Future of More Permeable States

The explosive growth of transnational armed nonstate actors underscores another trend in regional dynamics: the changing nature of the system's permeability, a process that began in earnest before the popular uprisings of 2011 but which has since reached a climax. In the 1950s and 1960s, Arab states were also permeable, albeit to ideology and to action by international powers. This was a regime-induced, top-down permeability. By the 1990s, that permeability was gradually being replaced by a bottom-up version driven by new information and communication technologies and by shared political and economic grievances.<sup>22</sup> This new permeability goes a long way toward explaining the diffusion effects propelling the 2011 popular uprisings from one Arab capital to another. The uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt were

caused by deep but similar structural transformations—namely, “growing inequality and economic exclusion, deepening economic insecurity, the pervasiveness of corruption, and the capture of economic liberalization programs by crony capitalists tightly linked to regime elites”<sup>23</sup>—yet their spread between states can only be explained by the regional system’s new bottom-up transnational permeability. This novel type of bottom-up permeability has proved instrumental in destroying a number of Arab states since the popular uprisings. By the time the region’s geopolitical battles were sectarianized after the popular uprisings, the state-building permeability of the past—driven by Arab nationalist ideology—was replaced by a bottom-up state-destroying permeability driven by sectarian identities, nonstate actors, and decades of misrule and poor governance. The ideology of Arab nationalism, which was homogenizing in its heyday, was now replaced by a divisive sectarian discourse and actors. In Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, transnational sectarian actors, whether Shia or Salafi-jihadists, torpedoed state institutions and rendered territorial borders meaningless.

The bottom-up permeability expressed by transnational nonstate actors is bound to complicate future prospects for state-rebuilding in the Arab world in at least two ways. Ethnic or sectarian demands for greater local autonomy may have become irreversible and cannot be ignored any longer. This is especially true of the Kurds in northern Syria, but also for the Sunnis of the Iraqi northwest, the Cyrenaic separatists in eastern Libya, and the secessionist al-Hirak in southern Yemen and their Houthi counterparts in the north, all mobilized under the banners of securitized ethnic, tribal, or sectarian identities. In some cases, such as the Syrian-Turkish frontier, demands for greater autonomy on one side of the border are bound to spill over and intensify those on the other side. Little wonder that Ankara is adamantly opposed to any kind of contiguous autonomous Kurdish area along the Syrian-Turkish borders. Yet as the geopolitical battle against the Islamic State ratchets up and American ground troops intensify their cooperation with the Kurdish YPG, demands for Kurdish autonomy are bound to increase. In the case of Iraqi Kurdistan, these demands have reached secessionist levels, creating the potential for interethnic conflict in the area around Kirkuk and between the authorities in Baghdad and those in Erbil.<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, the balance of sovereignty that will emerge between state and nonstate actors as a result of these new demands is not yet clear. Will it take the form of a devolved autonomy within unified state structures in a bid to incorporate rebel areas into reconstituted state institutions without bringing them under regime control, as members of the Syrian regime prefer?<sup>25</sup> Or, alternatively, will new types of geographic divisions of power emerge along confederal or loosely federal lines? Whatever the case, new political relations must be negotiated between a reconstituted postwar central authority and the myriad subnational groups that have emerged as a result of state collapse.

Complicating these questions is the fact that there is no consensus among the heavyweight international and regional actors over what kind of balance of political power should emerge in these postwar states between local and regional authorities. In the case of Syria, for example, Russia favors some form of federalism, especially for the Kurds in northern



Syria. The United States likely shares this position. Iran and Hezbollah, by contrast, reject this option and favor only a temporary form of local administration.<sup>26</sup> An inability to agree on new ways of sharing overlapping geographies in states dotted by local and transnational armed nonstate actors may blur the differences between sovereign and nonsovereign political actors in the same territorial entity: “Frail states would tacitly concede pockets where their physical control was



KURDISH PEOPLE SHOW THEIR SUPPORT FOR THE UPCOMING REFERENDUM FOR INDEPENDENCE OF KURDISTAN AT A MASSIVE RALLY HELD AT THE ERBIL STADIUM ON SEPTEMBER 22, 2017 IN ERBIL, IRAQ. SOURCE: CHRIS MCGRATH/GETTY IMAGES.

demonstrably nil. De facto states would give up the desire for international recognition that would, in effect, fracture existing states. Spatially, de jure and de facto states would sit not just side by side, but in a kind of patchwork, with de facto states pockmarking nominally sovereign territory.”<sup>27</sup>

The other impact that nonstate actors have on the prospects for state-rebuilding in the region involves what type of states will emerge from the debris of current proxy geopolitical battles. The type of state that exists today in Lebanon, or the one that has been emerging in Iraq since 2003, or the kinds that will emerge in Libya, Syria, or Yemen once the wars over them come to an end, will be at best one among many social organizations struggling for the institutional and ideological control of the population.<sup>28</sup> Armed sectarian nonstate actors are bound to actively resist or try to capture any kind of state attempt to achieve a modicum of social and political control through a monopoly over ideology (and its production) and resource distribution. These nonstate actors are bound to penetrate state institutions and capture their resources as well as those of international organizations, and deploy them in neopatrimonial ways that consolidate their control over local constituencies. Moreover, and in the context of weak state institutions, their ideological, sectarian, ethnic, or tribal symbols will prove more powerful than those of inclusive central authorities, which usually are forced to appeal to broader, multisectarian or multiethnic constituencies.

Thus, what is now true of Hezbollah's ideological and corporatist capabilities may become increasingly true of other armed nonstate actors and postwar states across the region. This is already evident in Iraq, where nonstate actors are capturing state resources and international aid, and using them to consolidate neopatrimonial ties with their sectarian constituencies, providing them with everything from ideological sustenance, and social and health services, to local security.<sup>29</sup> Similar dynamics are also apparent in Libya and Yemen.

## Bargains for a More Stable Future

Given the destructive local and transnational roles played by armed sectarian nonstate actors, two kinds of bargains, at both the domestic and regional levels, will be required to restore a modicum of political stability in postwar reconstituted states. Consociational compromises will be needed to establish and secure representation and power-sharing agreements to provide the necessary stability for functional state governance. At the same time, an overarching geopolitical bargain grounded in an understanding and acceptance of various state and nonstate actors' security concerns will solidify the regional basis for continued coexistence. This second bargain will have to take into account not only the interests of the key regional actors, but also those of the United States and Russia—the key international actors whose buy-in will be vital for the success of any arrangement in the Middle East.

### *Consociational Compromises for Postwar States*

Inescapably, the first bargain involves inclusive, consociational power-sharing arrangements that guarantee representation for all communities and a measure of territorial or nonterritorial segmental autonomy. Typically, consociational arrangements ensure that each sect, tribe, or ethnic group has sufficient representation and a share of national power through their elites and in rough proportion to their demographic weight; such arrangements also guarantee the participants a measure of local and cultural autonomy. As Lebanon's cyclical crises demonstrate, however, the pitfalls of these consociational arrangements are all too evident: they harden sectarian, tribal, and ethnic identities; distort political actors' incentive structures; expose the public sector to sectarian entrepreneurs' predatory practices; and often lead to cycles of political stagnation.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, the scope of violence perpetrated along securitized sectarian and ethnic identities in so many Arab countries in recent years makes such arrangements inescapable in the postwar period. They are also necessary to maintain the territorial integrity of collapsed states and to begin the difficult processes of state-rebuilding and peace-building. Paradoxically, a combination of popular uprisings and concomitant sectarianized geopolitical contests has conspired to move a number of Arab states from one unenviable situation to another. Before,

there were strong states with “authoritarian bargains,” in which political liberties were exchanged for socioeconomic rights. Now, there are weak states with consociational bargains—where national loyalties compete with subnational and transnational ones.

## *No Overarching Sectarianism for the Region*

Consociational bargains may be far from the ideal way to organize a deeply divided polity, but for many postwar countries in the Middle East, they will be the best of several bad options. Yet even these consociational bargains cannot be negotiated in the absence of a new overarching geopolitical bargain. An effective geopolitical bargain must stabilize a changing regional order that has been in search of a new security architecture ever since the outbreak of Saudi-Iranian proxy wars that followed the 2003 American invasion of Iraq, and which continue today.<sup>31</sup> Further, though such a prospective geopolitical bargain will be necessary for individual states to pursue stable consociational bargains, it cannot itself divide the region along either sectarian or ethnic lines.

Given that the current regional contest is geopolitical rather than sectarian, and that different Sunni-majority Arab powers in the region subscribe to “very different understandings of how political Islam should relate to the state,” any attempt to contain Iran’s growing geopolitical power through a strictly sectarian alliance will prove a nonstarter.<sup>32</sup> The Qatari-Saudi crisis of summer 2017 is symptomatic in this regard. It is a conflict between Sunni-majority Arab states over very different positions on the role of populist Islamist movements. Whereas Qatar, but also Turkey, support bottom-up populist Islamist movements (like the Muslim Brotherhood) that seek political power via electoral means, Saudi Arabia and the Emirates consider these groups a threat to regime security. The Saudi model of political authority rests on a top-down kind of tamed political Islam anchored on total obedience to a ruler allied to the Wahhabi religious establishment, a doctrine summed up in the phrase *ta’at wulat al-amr* (obeying the rulers). Consequently, whereas Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the Emirates consider the Muslim Brotherhood a domestic threat to their regimes, Qatar and Turkey seek to use such populist movements to expand their geopolitical influence. Differences over the role of political Islam in politics among the main regional Sunni-majority states make it impossible to assemble a Sunni-wide alliance against Iran.

A geopolitical bargain based on an ethnic balance of power among states in the region would not prove viable, either. Non-Arab states are overwhelmingly involved in the domestic politics of a number of major Arab states, directly or by proxy. Moreover, Arab states do not share similar security concerns, whether with regard to Iran, Israel, or Turkey. Some Gulf states, primarily Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, consider Iran an existential threat to their regimes, yet others are more willing to reach an accommodation with Iran—this latter group includes Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar. Iran’s proxy transnational Shia nonstate actors guarantee it substantial influence in the domestic politics of at least Iraq, Lebanon,

and Syria, and, in the future, probably Yemen. These proxies can also be deployed in new theaters of operation once the battle for Syria is over. With their organizations and indigenous networks, this highly mobile strike force may prove a powerful future asset used to extend Iran's geopolitical influence across the Middle East and Central Asia, with immense consequences. To be sure, Iran is driven by the quest to compensate for its security dilemma, but it nevertheless is able to sabotage any regional security framework that aims at ostracizing it and undermining its regional influence, including an Arab-Israeli peace accord. Any effort that fails to incorporate Iran into a new security framework will make prospects for regional peace—including Arab-Israeli peace—almost impossible.

Similarly, Turkey has substantial geopolitical interests in the Arab world. There is no Arab consensus on how to contain Turkey's growing geopolitical role in both Iraq and Syria. If anything, the Saudi-Qatari crisis has brought Qatar closer to Turkey in a bid to balance Riyadh's threats. Moreover, Turkey's brand of an electoral, populist political Islam makes it an inspiration to Muslim Brotherhood affiliates across many Arab states, allowing it a bridgehead into the domestic politics of Sunni-majority states. Saudi Arabia and Turkey compete over the mantle of Sunni leadership in the region, deploying very different brands of political Islam in the marketplace of ideologies competing in the Middle East. They also have different geopolitical priorities in the two Arab states, Iraq and Syria, whose outcomes will determine the region's future. Riyadh, on one hand, seems to have given up on regime change in Syria, while in Iraq it seeks to insinuate itself through the reconstruction of Sunni areas liberated from Islamic State control and by opening up to Shia actors free from Tehran's control, such as Muqtada al-Sadr.<sup>33</sup> Ankara, on the other hand, is obsessed with its overlapping Kurdish problem in Turkey, Iraq, and Syria, and is determined to deny the Kurds a contiguous landmass stretching from Iraqi Kurdistan to the eastern Mediterranean, which would be immune from Turkish influence.

If there is a clear geopolitical divide in the region, it is over relations with Israel. In addition to Israel's formal relations with Egypt, the Palestinian Authority, and Turkey, Israel's security, intelligence, and operational coordination with a number of Arab states is an open secret.<sup>34</sup> This is in sharp contrast to the threat that Israel poses to Iran and the armed nonstate actors that are Tehran's allies and proxies, whether in Iraq, Lebanon, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Syria, or Yemen.

In sum, then, the security landscape in the Middle East is interpenetrated in such a manner that neither sectarian- nor ethnic-based geopolitical bargains will prove viable. Instead, what is required is a comprehensive grand bargain among the major regional and international actors involved in the geopolitical struggles underway, one that can restore a semblance of peace and stability to a region torn apart by contests fought by local and transnational proxy nonstate actors. But what kind of a bargain will this involve?

### *A Geopolitical Bargain Based on Genuine Security Interests*



Any prospective geopolitical bargain must begin by recognizing the genuine security interests of the main regional actors, Arab and non-Arab alike, but especially Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. Describing the contest between Iran and Saudi Arabia in existential or sectarian terms misses each state's real security concerns. Riyadh views Tehran in offensive realist terms—as always seeking to expand its sphere of influence at Saudi Arabia's expense. By contrast, Iran considers itself engaged in a defensive realist confrontation with Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. From this perspective, transnational sectarian armed nonstate actors are simply instruments in Iran's strategy to escape its regional isolation and deter potential American or Israeli attacks. Riyadh and Tehran must come to an agreement on how to



UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR MAHMOUD KALI TEACHES IDEOLOGICAL PRINCIPALS DURING A COMMUNE MEETING AT A MALA GEL OR PEOPLE'S HOUSE UNDER A PORTRAIT OF PKK LEADER ABDULLAH OCALAN ON NOVEMBER 13, 2015 IN DEREK, IN AUTONOMOUS ROJAVA, SYRIA. WITH THE COLLAPSE OF THE SYRIAN REGIME IN THE REGION, ROJAVA'S GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN BASED ON A SYSTEM OF COMMUNES, UNIQUE IN THE MIDDLE EAST. THE LOCAL GOVERNING BODIES, OF WHICH AT LEAST 40 PERCENT MUST BE WOMEN, VOTE BY CONSENSUS WITH GOAL OF GENDER EQUALITY. THE COMMUNES SEND THEIR REPRESENTATIVES TO THEIR RESPECTIVE DISTRICT COUNCILS AND THE STRUCTURE CONTINUES INTO THE GENERAL COUNCIL OF ROJAVA. SOURCE: JOHN MOORE/GETTY IMAGES.

whether directly or by proxy, in a geopolitical arc stretching from the Mediterranean Sea in the west to the Arabian Sea in the south can no longer be ignored. Refusing to recognize Tehran's newfound role in the Middle East and real geopolitical interests is a recipe for more wars in the region; it also makes prospects for Arab-Israeli peace almost impossible. By the same token, Saudi Arabia cannot but enjoy substantial political influence in Iraq, Lebanon, and a postwar Syria as a balance to Iran's overwhelming position in these crucial states. Otherwise, Riyadh can sabotage any war-to-peace transition in Iraq and Syria and paralyze the whole political system in Lebanon, given its political and security assets. Yemen will always remain Saudi Arabia's security backyard. Consequently, Tehran may have to roll back its military and political engagement in Yemen in exchange for its reintegration into the system of regional states.



Turkey is another regional player whose geopolitical interests must be accommodated. Its principal aim in its immediate Arab neighborhood is to deny the emergence of autonomous Kurdish regions in Iraq and Syria. Beyond this main objective, its tactics are negotiable, as seen in how Ankara went from aggressively pursuing regime change in Syria to cooperating with Russia and Iran against the Islamic State. If an acceptable formula for Kurdish self-rule can be found under the guise of decentralization—one that does not intimidate Ankara—then Turkey may accommodate itself to a new political order in Syria despite its failure to achieve regime change. American reliance on the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces in the battle against the Islamic State, and Russian endorsement of a form of federalism in postwar Syria, may see the Kurds finally achieve a dream of self-rule in a reconstituted consociational political system in postwar Syria.

### *The Role of the United States and Russia*

A grand bargain between the United States and Russia—the main international actors involved in reshaping the geopolitics of the region—is an essential precondition for any of these agreements among the regional actors. Such a bargain necessarily involves a creative agreement on how to divide the geopolitical spoils in Iraq and Syria after the fall of the Islamic State. Would the United States claim Iraq as its own sphere of influence in exchange for a free Russian hand in a postwar Syria reconstituted along consociational and decentralized lines? Or will Washington at best share Iraq with Iran, with some subsidiary Saudi influence? Or, alternatively, will the dividing line run along the Euphrates River, with Russia claiming the Syrian areas west of the river as its own sphere of influence, and those areas lying east of the river falling under the American sphere of influence? These questions are open. The geopolitical bargains must also take into consideration Israel's own security interests in southwestern Syria, an area it wants clear from Iranian proxies. To be sure, such a twenty-first-century version of a neoimperial vivisection of the Middle East will clash with the geopolitical interests of the regional actors, especially Iran's. And Tehran's local and transnational proxies can create their own facts on the grounds in Iraq, Syria, and beyond. Such an agreement on the division of influence also has its limits: the investment of hundreds of billions of dollars by Gulf countries in the U.S. economy after the May 2017 Riyadh summit and following the Saudi-Qatari dispute underscores the overwhelming American security role in that part of the Middle East. By contrast, and in a bid to control Europe and part of Asia's gas supply, Russia is seeking leverage over the gas supply chain in the Mediterranean basin, earnestly putting together a cartel of natural-gas-exporting countries and regions, including Algeria, Cyprus, Egypt, Iran, Iraqi Kurdistan, Lebanon, Qatar, and Syria.<sup>35</sup> The intersection between the region's battlefields and the race to control its natural resources is bound to complicate the quest for a prospective geopolitical bargain.

## Conclusion

Undoubtedly, conditions are not yet ripe for the negotiation of the twin bargains necessary to bring about domestic and geopolitical peace in the Middle East. The local and proxy struggles in the arc of Arab instability are far from over. Whether in Iraq, Libya, Syria, or Yemen, fights over control of the state and its resources that predated or immediately followed the popular uprisings degenerated into bloody battles along freshly securitized sectarian, ethnic, and tribal lines. It is these subnational identities, rather than more moderate national ones, that will compete for political power and socioeconomic privileges once the Islamic State is defeated. Meanwhile, the geopolitical proxy wars across the region do not show signs of abating anytime soon, especially under the current rudderless American administration.

All this suggests that the region and its peoples are in for more wars and bloodshed in the foreseeable future. Still, when this latest chapter in the history of the region closes—as it eventually must—the new status quo will be based on some variation of the consociational and geopolitical bargains described above. Then begins the truly herculean task of rebuilding war-torn states and societies, and addressing the region's structural developmental needs. Without facing up to the grim reality of the options facing the Middle East at this juncture—and the sorts of compromises that will be necessary to restore stability—the region is bound to continue its political and economic nosedive, replicating current cycles of overlapping domestic and geopolitical wars. And with that, the difficult challenge of rebuilding will remain out of reach.

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