

MIDDLE EAST NOTES AND COMMENT

The Age of Proxy Wars

by Jon B. Alterman

As revolutions swept the Middle East in 2011, many saw it as the dawn of an age of democratization. More recently, many have begun to see it as an age of Islamicization. It is more accurate, however, to see the region entering an age of proxy wars, on a scale that is likely to dwarf the Arab Cold War that pitted Saudi Arabia against Egypt in the 1950s and 1960s.

While Iran and Saudi Arabia are major antagonists in the unfolding battles, they are not the only ones. The emerging wars are genuinely multipolar, and U.S. policy and practice will need to adapt to this emerging reality.

The most active proxy war is in Syria, where a range of regional and global powers seeks to shape the future of the country. What is surprising is not so much the scale of that assistance as its diversity. Support flows from governments, institutions, and individuals to a dizzying array of actors. Some are principally armed and others are principally political; some are disciplined and others seem determined to sow terror.

More than two years into the conflict, there is remarkably little strategic coordination among the parties supporting Syrian opposition forces, contributing to sustained disarray and infighting among the forces themselves. Support does not follow clear sectarian or religious lines. Saudi Arabia and Qatar, two Wahhabi states, appear to support different clients in Syria. The Saudi government fears trained and networked jihadi fighters flowing back into the kingdom as they did after the Afghan war in the 1980s, and it fears inspiring a politicized Islamist opposition. It acts with some caution in Syria, and this avowedly religious government appears to favor secular nationalists. Qatar appears confident that a jihadi wave will not threaten the emirate and is casting bets widely to hasten Bashar al-Assad's fall. The United Arab Emirates, deeply distrustful of political Islam of any stripe, is among the most cautious of the Gulf states, seeking to check Iran without supporting Islamist fighters. Iran, of course, is betting heavily on the Assad government, while rumors spread that Russia is looking for a solution that preserves Syria's integrity even if it does

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Lights Out

Facing a critical influx of refugees, Lebanon has asked for food, blankets, and medical care. As another hot summer approaches, it may need the most help keeping the lights on.

Lebanon has not had a 24-hour supply of electricity since communal violence broke out almost 40 years ago. Blackouts currently last between 3 and 20 hours a day, and the state-run electrical utility, Electricité du Liban (EDL), is able to produce only two-thirds of the country's peak electricity needs. Consumers spend hundreds of millions of dollars annually on private generating capacity, and the economic drag of poor electrical supply on the Lebanese economy is billions of dollars per year. Things are so bad that the World Economic Forum's *Global Competitiveness Report 2012-2013* ranked the quality of Lebanon's energy supply dead last among the 144 countries it surveyed.

Three years ago, Water and Energy Minister Gebran Bassil spelled out an ambitious plan to double generating capacity by 2015. The plan called for renovating existing plants, building new plants, importing energy from Turkey, and boosting renewables. According to the plan, Lebanon's demand would grow 5.9 percent per year, supply would rise much more swiftly, and blackouts would be a thing of the past.

It did not work out that way. Bassil estimated in April that energy demand in Lebanon has jumped 27 percent over the past 18 months. A huge influx of Syrian refugees is only a part of the problem. But with around 200,000 Syrian arrivals in the past three months alone, Lebanon may be facing a greater energy dilemma than it ever anticipated. ■

Gulf Roundtable: China and the Gulf

Christopher K. Johnson, senior adviser and Freeman Chair in China Studies at CSIS, and Jon B. Alterman, Zbigniew Brzezinski Chair in Global Security and Geostrategy and director of the Middle East Program at CSIS, spoke at a Gulf Roundtable entitled "China and the Gulf" on April 26, 2013. They argued that China is becoming more consequential in the Middle East even when it does not want to be. Due to its growing energy reliance on the Middle East, China will have to decide soon what kind of power it wants to be in the region. Middle Eastern countries hope to draw China more into the region to balance against the United States, but China's capacity and desire to play a greater role are limited. You can read a full summary of the event [HERE](#). ■

not preserve Assad. Western countries have their own preferences and red lines, and each has its own clients.

The proxy war extends far beyond Syria, however. Egypt's major political parties reportedly receive extensive outside funding, with Qatar heavily bankrolling the Muslim Brotherhood and Saudi Arabia reportedly supporting salafi parties. Among a range of Arab forces, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates invested especially heavily in the effort to depose Muammar el-Qaddafi in Libya, supporting different troops on the ground under the protection of NATO airstrikes. They backed different parties in 2011 and continue to do so.

There are many antagonists in tiny Bahrain—with only 600,000 citizens—but Saudi Arabia and Iran are the most active, supporting the Sunni and Shi'ite communities respectively. The United States leads efforts to nudge the two sides toward some sort of reconciliation, to the satisfaction of neither side. The Kuwaiti government has not been identified with any particular political trend, but analysts point to wealthy individuals in Kuwait—as well as in other Gulf states—bankrolling militias and parties throughout the region.

From our twentieth century experience we know a number of things about proxy wars. One is that they tend to foster extremism, since the people supporting each side do not directly suffer the consequences of conflict. Just as mainstream Irish-Americans long supported the Irish Republican Army and delayed an end to "The Troubles," and overseas Tamils supported the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka, so too does the rise of proxy wars in the Middle East presage the prospect of greater extremism and score-settling.

None of the foregoing is to predict the course of politics in any specific country, or in the Middle East more broadly. While there is a certain path dependence for revolutions in the region—a series of perceived failed experiments will engender conservatism, while successful experiments will engender more risk-taking—each country has its own history and its own specific chemistry, and outcomes will differ.

But it does suggest two important things. The first is that the United States needs to get better at the task of donor coordination, especially among allies. Not only is it important to agree with friends on what we should all do; it is equally important to agree on what we should not do. There is a blithe expectation among some regional governments that once the battles are won, they will be able to co-opt or control the radicals they have fostered. The region's history tells another story. The risks are even greater now, as the ease of networking and the democratization of destruction now allow even small numbers of disaffected individuals to wreak havoc. For the United States, the metastasizing of jihadi groups is a profound security threat, and U.S. diplomacy with states which fund these groups must reflect that. The fall of Assad will make donor coordination even more urgent and more vital, and differences with our allies may grow even more profound—all the more reason to improve performance now.

The second is that the United States seems flat-footed when it appeals for free and fair elections, as outside actors often corrupt the process long before it gets to the ballot box. The U.S. government needs to be more aggressive, working directly and indirectly to help uncover the networks of money and influence in Middle Eastern politics. It is the nature of those politics, rather than conduct in elections themselves, that requires the greatest attention.

One might argue that these two are incompatible, and that the work of coordinating with allies requires a certain politesse toward their individual political activities. In fact, the opposite is true. The United States requires greater coordination between its interests and the actions of its allies. If coordination cannot be forged, the alliances themselves require re-examination. In the current period, the stakes are too high for any other approach. ■ 05/17/2013

Links of Interest

Reuters quoted Jon Alterman in "Obama won't rush to act against Syria over chemical weapons."

Reuters quoted Jon Alterman in "Analysis: after months of deadlock, diplomacy gets another chance in Syria."

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