

# The Inflection Point

By Jon B. Alterman

## SOUL SINGERS

Sitting on a brightly lit stage, a man belts out an emotional song with a catchy tune. Before him, a hall packed with sweating, topless men echoes as they slap their chests in rhythm with the beat. This is no disco. It is an Islamic center in the heart of Tehran.

Shi'ite eulogists who sing to commemorate the sacrifices of prophet Muhammad's family are known in Iran as maddahs. In early Islam, Shi'ite Imams encouraged their followers to deliver eulogies (maddahi) for their predecessors. Over time, the function and style of maddahi has changed and they have become more political and more modern.

During the Iranian revolution, for example, some maddahi told stories about how the public rose up against incompetent caliphs, and during the Iran-Iraq War, dirges recalled the heroic feats of the Shi'ite martyr, Imam Hussein, in an attempt to mobilize troops to fight Iraq's Saddam Hussein.

More recently, some maddahs are exploring the path charted by Christian rock in the last few decades. In an effort to reach broader and younger audiences, they are borrowing lyrics and rhythmic structures from Iranian pop music. The strategy seems to be working: Some maddahs have become famous and their videos attract over a million views.

But the move is not without controversy. While maddahi are supposed to be addressed to Shi'ite martyrs, some appear to extol women. For example, one dirge addressed to Imam Hussein includes the lyrics, "Every night I call you, if you don't answer, I'll text you until you say something." Imam Hussein? Or girl? The latter seems more likely to text him back. ■



In 1967, the Middle East was transformed. Egypt's president, Gamal Abd al-Nasser, was mired in a pitiless war in Yemen that was draining his military and his treasury. Regardless, he led the Arabs into a swift but disastrous war, leading to Israel's capture of the Sinai Peninsula, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights.

The map was not all that changed. Nasser's Arab Socialism died, and so too did the dream of revolutionary republics leading the Arab world out from the shadow of colonialism to the center of the world stage. Nasser, who seemed to be the harbinger of the future, no longer was. Over the next several years, Arab monarchies steadied, political Islam gained steam, and the Soviet Union began to lose its Arab footholds. The environment that 1967 and its aftermath created lasted for another half-century.

Today, the rulers of the Middle East see the region at a similar tipping point, and they see the stakes as similarly high. It is the only explanation for a series of actions, especially from the Gulf Arab states, that would be utterly confounding in any other environment. The future of the Middle East will turn on whether their analysis is correct, and whether their actions are sufficient to shape the region's trajectory.

The region is at a tipping point in part because of three ongoing civil wars: Libya, Syria, and Yemen. In the first, Arab states are backing opposing sides; in the latter two, they are fighting proxy wars against Iranian allies. The wars create an enduring sense of crisis in the region, and they heighten states' feelings of vulnerability. But they also help persuade previously restive populations that an unhappy present is preferable to a catastrophically unstable future, building grudging support for existing governments.

In addition, three constants of the past suddenly seem in flux. The first is that rulers now understand that their economic future must be different from their past. State-centered economies and vast public sectors (in republics and monarchies alike) worked for a time when populations were smaller and revenues were growing. The math is catching up to them, the state cannot create government jobs nearly fast enough, and their private sectors are much too weak to create adequate jobs for the citizens who flood into the job markets every year. The prospect of a world in which

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## NEW REPORT: WATER PRESSURE: WATER, PROTEST, AND STATE LEGITIMACY IN THE MAGHREB

The CSIS Middle East Program released a new report by Haim Malka, "Water Pressure: Water, Protest, and State Legitimacy in the Maghreb." The report illustrates how water stress is eroding the ability of Maghreb governments to respond effectively to swelling demand and dwindling supply. It examines how water challenges both illustrate and exacerbate tensions between citizens and governments at a time of heightened social protest and discontent in the region. Ultimately, governments must rethink water's role in the contested relationship between citizens and the state while the problems are still manageable. You can read the full report [HERE](#). ■

## IN CASE YOU MISSED IT

Dr. Renad Mansour [argued](#) at a CSIS Middle East Program Gulf Roundtable on 6/04/18 that the resurgence of nationalism in Iraq creates an opportunity for Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states to reengage in the country.

He described the gap between Iraqi citizens and the elite as the most serious divide in Iraq and argued that if Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries work to bridge it, their ability to counter Iran's influence would be greater in Iraq than in other arenas of competition in the region.

You can see more on the Gulf Roundtable series and other CSIS Middle East Program Gulf events [HERE](#).

### The Middle East Notes and Comment

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### CSIS MIDDLE EAST PROGRAM

**Jon B. Alterman**, *Senior Vice President, Brzezinski Chair in Global Security and Geostrategy, and Director, Middle East Program*

**Haim Malka**, *Deputy Director and Senior Fellow*

**Amber Atteridge**, *Program Manager*

**Will Todman**, *Associate Fellow*

**Margo Balboni**, *Research Associate*

**Aaron Ach, Razieh Armin, and Claire Harrison**, *Research Interns*

Middle Eastern oil and gas are less central to the global economy is distressing both for countries that export hydrocarbons as well as for countries that export workers for hydrocarbon-driven economies. That encompasses virtually all of the Arab world.

Second, the United States appears less committed to regional security than at any time in three-quarters of a century. Alienated by 9/11, fatigued by Middle Eastern wars that seem endless, and excited by the prospect of domestic oil and gas freeing the United States from the region, the American public is increasingly skeptical of U.S. commitments to the region.

The Obama and Trump administrations' approaches to Syria are a clear sign that restraint will characterize the U.S. approach to the region going forward. President Trump's 2017 National Security Strategy said very little about supporting vulnerable allies, and the National Defense Strategy clearly signaled a pivot away from Middle Eastern commitments. Most Arab states have a national security strategy that relies on a strong U.S. security commitment, and that commitment is now less certain as China, Russia, and Iran explore larger regional roles.

Finally, Arab governments thought they understood their publics and how to manage them, but the events of 2011 continue to unnerve them. There is no consensus on what caused the Arab uprisings of that year, and therefore no consensus exists on how to prevent them from recurring. The response of some leaders in the wealthier states was that the uprisings were about material deprivation, but constrained budgets make it hard to continue down the path of increased subsidies. The information and communications revolution certainly played a role, but exactly what—and how technology can secure governments rather than threaten them—remains unclear. Governments struggle internally to decide what combination of liberty and control, mobilization and repression, will secure their future. Too little or too much of any could backfire.

Understanding this context of uncertainty helps explain why Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are engaged in an unprecedented set of military operations in Yemen, intended to beat back Iranian adventurism. It also helps explain why those countries are leading a small Arab coalition against Qatar, which has sought opportunities aligning with new regional political forces. It explains the broader Arab outreach to Israel, long a taboo but now seen as an important bulwark against Iran. And it explains increasingly aggressive efforts to control domestic politics throughout the region.

Middle Eastern governments are commonly described as conservative and cautious, but conservatism and caution won't do in an era in which the stakes are so high and the future is so uncertain. A younger generation of leaders, unscarred by the rivalries of the past and stung by the uncertainties of the present, are likely to continue to strike out in new ways. As they tell it themselves, they cannot let up on their enemies because their enemies will not let up on them. They foresee a fight to the finish. Volatility will increase.

Arab publics don't have many choices. They can rise up or hunker down. The potential costs of rising up have been made clear, but they may lack the patience to hunker down, too. How their governments respond to them, and how they respond to their governments, is what makes the current moment so uncertain.

As for the United States, it can choose how much influence it seeks to exercise in the region in the coming years. It can act directly, it can assist, or it can stand by while its friends take their chances—and learn new lessons. Recently, the temptation has been to lean strongly toward the latter. The consequences will lay the groundwork for the next half-century, for better and for worse. ■ 7/12/18