



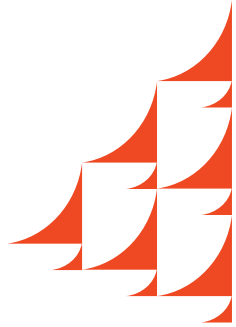
The Arab Gulf States
Institute in Washington

Building bridges of understanding



What's at Stake for the Gulf Arab States in Syria?

Hussein Ibish



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Executive Summary

Notwithstanding the range of views within the Gulf Cooperation Council, the Gulf Arab states are largely committed to the ouster of the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and the reduction, if not elimination, of Iranian influence in Syria. Saudi Arabia and Qatar, in particular, are convinced that the strategic future of the Middle East, and specifically the role of Iran, will be determined by the outcome of the Syrian conflict. They believe that if Iran and its allies prevail and the current Syrian regime survives unreconstructed it will open the door for further inroads by Tehran into the Arab world and the eventual creation of a Persian miniempire in the region. They are even concerned that Iranian destabilization efforts will intensify within the GCC states, particularly Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province. Therefore, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, along with Turkey, have been the primary sponsors of a range of rebel groups, some of which are deemed extremist by the United States and other Western countries.

Yet the conflict in Syria has not been going well for the Gulf states. The joint Iranian-Russian "surge" of 2015-16 swung momentum back in favor of the regime in the most crucial parts of the country. Moreover, the United States and a number of key Arab countries, including Egypt, are starting to view the continuation of the conflict as more destabilizing and dangerous than the continuation of the regime and Iranian influence over Damascus. Despite their threats, Saudi Arabia and Turkey are unlikely to conduct a direct military intervention in the foreseeable future because of the enormous risks involved, although it cannot be ruled out entirely, especially in the longer term. What is most likely for the near term is a major increase in Gulf support for armed rebel groups, combined with intensified overtures to win Moscow's backing for a post-Assad future in Syria.

The very least that the Gulf states can consider acceptable as an outcome to the Syrian conflict is the limitation of Iran's ambitions in the Arab world and the regional containment of Tehran. As long as there is a prospect that the outcome in Syria will be the prelude to further expansion of Iranian influence in the Middle East, the Gulf states are likely to persist in seeking sufficient military reversals to secure minimally acceptable political outcomes that ensure that Tehran cannot use the conflict as a springboard for acquiring even greater regional clout.

Introduction

The Gulf Cooperation Council countries are not fully united in their views of the Syrian conflict. Because the GCC states view the conflict primarily in the context of their rivalry with Iran, which is currently the dominant regional player in Syria, these divisions mostly stem from a diversity of attitudes toward Iran. While all GCC states would welcome a reduction in, if not an end to, Iranian influence in Syria, the intensity of commitment to this goal varies greatly.

Oman, in particular, has unusually good relations with Iran and was instrumental in facilitating the ultimately successful international nuclear negotiations. In its familiar foreign policy tradition, Muscat appears to be seeking to play a mediating role in Syria,¹ although so far

¹ "Omani foreign minister meets Syria's Assad: state TV," *Reuters*, October 26, 2015.

without much success. As a confederation, the United Arab Emirates incorporates a range of views toward Iran, although the perspectives and imperatives of Abu Dhabi tend to dominate national foreign policy. Dubai, however, maintains strong trade and cultural ties to Iran, and is the primary residence of an estimated 400,000 Iranian expatriates² living in the UAE. The UAE, therefore, has been fairly cautious in its approach to Syria and greatly concerned over the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). It criticized the 2015-16 Russian military intervention in Syria and has continuously opposed the regime of President Bashar al-Assad.³ However, the UAE appears increasingly concerned about the destabilizing impact of the ongoing conflict.

Kuwait has been following its traditional pattern of avoiding participation in external conflicts and emphasizing its strong ties to the United States as the cornerstone of its foreign policy.

Kuwait is also skittish about the Syrian conflict because it does not wish to unnecessarily antagonize its relatively well-assimilated Shia population. However, Kuwait has, on several occasions, publicly discussed potentially funding rebel groups.⁴ Private donations coming from

Saudi Arabia has expressed a categorical, and thus far nonnegotiable, insistence on the need to remove Assad from power.

or channeled through Kuwait have funded a wide range of armed opposition groups in Syria, including Ahrar al-Sham⁵ and allegedly even ISIL.⁶ Both local and regional private funders of Syrian rebel groups, including extremist elements,⁷ have preferred funneling support through Kuwait because of its unique legal protections of, and social expectations for, a zone of privacy⁸ and freedom of association beyond government oversight and control.

The remaining GCC states – Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Qatar – are strong supporters of the rebellion and backers of various rebel groups. Saudi Arabia has expressed a categorical, and thus far nonnegotiable, insistence on the need to remove Assad from power.⁹ Bahrain tends to support Saudi Arabia in all foreign and military policy matters, and Syria is no exception.

Qatar, which works even more closely with Turkey in Syria than it does with Saudi Arabia, is probably more committed to Assad's ouster than Riyadh. In addition to sharing Saudi Arabia's concerns about Iran's influence in Syria and a determination to use the Syrian conflict to curtail Tehran's inroads into the Arab world, Qatar sees an opportunity in Syria to advance the interests of its longstanding regional clients in the Muslim Brotherhood movement, a major player in the Syrian political opposition. Like Turkey and Saudi Arabia, Qatar has expressed

² Marcus George, "[Iranian expats shrug their shoulders as elections loom](#)," *Reuters*, February 29, 2012.

³ William Maclean, "[Gulf Arabs oppose Russia role in Syria, still bent on Assad's ouster](#)," *Reuters*, September 22, 2015.

⁴ Sylvia Westall and Mahmoud Harby, "[Insight – Kuwaitis campaign privately to arm Syrian rebels](#)," *Reuters*, June 26, 2013.

⁵ Rania Abouzeid, "[Syria's Secular and Islamist Rebels: Who Are the Saudis and the Qataris Arming?](#)" *Time*, September 18, 2012.

⁶ Josh Rogin, "[America's Allies Are Funding ISIS](#)," *The Daily Beast*, June 14, 2014.

⁷ Zoltan Pall, "[Kuwaiti Salafism and Its Growing Influence in the Levant](#)," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, May 2014.

⁸ Elizabeth Dickinson, "[Playing with Fire: Why Private Gulf Financing for Syria's Extremist Rebels Risks Igniting Sectarian Conflict at Home](#)," *Brookings Institution*, Analysis Paper no. 16, December 2013.

⁹ "[Syria crisis: Where key countries stand](#)," *BBC*, October 30, 2015.

a willingness to participate in a potential direct military intervention in Syria. Qatar's then Foreign Minister Khalid al-Attiyah vowed, "Anything that protects the Syrian people and Syria from partition, we will not spare any effort to carry it out with our Saudi and Turkish brothers, no matter what this is."¹⁰

Therefore, while there are varied positions among the GCC states, at least half are completely committed to the replacement of the Syrian regime and the elimination or reduction of Iranian influence in the country. The rest, including Oman, are supportive of this aim at least to some extent.

What's at Stake in Syria for the Gulf Arab States

It's difficult to overstate the strategic importance that the Gulf Arab states, particularly Saudi Arabia and Qatar, ascribe to the outcome of the conflict in Syria. Riyadh and Doha believe that the strategic landscape of the Middle East in the coming decades will be shaped by this outcome. It will therefore also be the most influential factor in determining the security of the Gulf region and even the stability of their societies, and those of their neighbors. Syria is seen as a turning point because it is perceived as Tehran's most important strategic regional asset.

From the Gulf Arab point of view, if Iran can consolidate its control over Syria, or even key areas of that country, it is likely to be successful in establishing what amounts to a Persian miniempire in the Middle East. This is most frequently imagined as an arc of Iranian-led Shia dominance, stretching from Afghanistan through Iran, Iraq, Syria, and into southern Lebanon.¹¹ Some add another potential zone of Iranian hegemony¹² in Shia population centers in the Gulf region itself.¹³ A third scenario envisages Iranian control of strategic maritime areas that would encircle and secure control of the Gulf waters and access to them.¹⁴ These Gulf Arab narratives¹⁵ hold that Iranian officials, particularly within the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), are leading a carefully orchestrated strategy for the long-term domination of these key areas of the Middle East.

If, however, the expansion of Iranian influence into the Arab world is stopped in Syria, and Tehran either loses its sway over the government in Damascus or is otherwise unable to secure its key interests there, then the seemingly inexorable rise of Iran will be halted. The limitations of Iranian ascendancy will have been established, and Iran will be restricted to its role as a large and powerful country with some irreversible, if barely tolerable, inroads into parts of the Arab world. But it will not become an unrivaled regional superpower and hegemon. Ideally, then, the battle in Syria and the war in Yemen are seen as first steps in what is hoped to be a gradual process of slowing, stopping, and, ultimately, reversing the spread of

¹⁰ "Qatar ready for military intervention in Syria," *Arab News*, October 22, 2015.

¹¹ "The Emerging Shia Crescent Symposium: Implications for U.S. Policy in the Middle East," *Council on Foreign Relations*, June 5, 2006.

¹² http://gulf2000.columbia.edu/images/maps/Shia_Crescent_sm.jpg

¹³ Moshe Ma'oz, "The 'Shi'i Crescent': Myth and Reality," *Brookings Institution*, Analysis Paper no. 15, November 2007.

¹⁴ Martin Walker, "The Revenge of the Shia," *Wilson Quarterly*, Autumn 2006.

¹⁵ Kristian Ulrichsen, "Gulf security: changing internal and external dynamics," *The Centre for the Study of Global Governance*, May 2009.

Iranian power in the Arab world.

Origins of the Rivalry

The Arab-Iranian rivalry is culturally rooted in historical and ethnically defined tensions between Arabs and Persians, although in reality this deep history has little to do with the actual details of present-day regional tensions. These ideas primarily inform legitimating narratives for disputes that are really about national power and ideological orientation. This nationalistic Arab-Persian animosity dovetails dangerously with Sunni-Shia sectarian antipathy, even though the religious angle bears even less relationship to the underlying politics than does the ethnic mythos. Contrasted with the historic Arab-Persian antagonism,¹⁶ a Sunni-Shia binary,¹⁷ while in many ways also ancient and bitter, has only more recently come to strongly influence political perceptions.¹⁸

However – because of the central role religious identity plays in the self-conceptualization and domestic political legitimation of both the Saudi and Iranian states – sectarian narratives have come to shape the way many, including political elites, conceptualize the ongoing tensions. Since 1979, Iran has seen itself as not only an “Islamic Republic,” but as the vanguard of a broader Muslim revolutionary trend (in its view, not limited to Shia). Since the founding of the modern Saudi state following World War I, the kingdom has seen itself as not only the purest of the Muslim nations, but also the natural leader of the Islamic world.

This rivalry pits against each other two very different conceptions of global Islamic leadership.¹⁹ On one hand, Iran is the only major Muslim-majority state that is a full-fledged theocracy, and therefore, in its view, integrates religion and politics more thoroughly and organically than any other. Since 1979 Iran has also claimed to have the greatest independence from global powers, at the time opposing both the United States and the Soviet Union, and to this day challenging the global and regional status quo in the name of “the downtrodden.”²⁰ On the other hand, the Saudi state is equally, if not more, confident in its theological and doctrinal purity, and approach to mediating civic and clerical authority. Moreover, its territory includes the birthplace of the faith, and it serves as the “custodian” of Islam’s most sacred sites to which all Muslims who are able are required to make pilgrimage.

This pits a modern republic in competition with an equally modern kingdom – each embodying almost entirely contemporary political systems and social orders while seeking legitimation in (largely imagined) traditions – in an effort to implicitly claim leadership of the world’s Muslims, or at least the Muslim-majority states. Iran does not believe that its Shia-majority population and religious and political culture should be a barrier to global Islamic leadership. This ambition was first articulated in 1979 by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who bluntly declared, “We shall export our revolution to the whole world. Until the cry ‘There is no God but God’ resounds over

¹⁶ Mohsen M. Milani, “[Explaining the Iran-Saudi rivalry](#),” *CNN*, October 12, 2011.

¹⁷ Yaroslav Trofimov, “[Sunni-Shiite Conflict Reflects Modern Power Struggle, Not Theological Schism](#),” *The Wall Street Journal*, May 14, 2015.

¹⁸ Uri Friedman, “[What’s the Saudi-Iran Feud Really About?](#)” *The Atlantic*, January 7, 2016.

¹⁹ Thom Poole, “[Iran and Saudi Arabia’s great rivalry explained](#),” *BBC*, January 4, 2016.

²⁰ Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 59.

the whole world, there will be struggle.”²¹ This ambition remains Tehran’s ultimate ideological goal as the basic aims and structures of the “Islamic Revolution” have, despite recurring episodes of pragmatism, never been abandoned.

While both Tehran and Riyadh seem to understand that political leadership of the global Muslim *ummah* (community) and state system is a distant aspiration, their rivalry is becoming increasingly global.²² Major influence in the policies of countries as diverse as Indonesia, Albania, Bangladesh, Nigeria, and Kazakhstan is beyond the capabilities of even the largest and most powerful of the Muslim-majority countries. However, Iran and Saudi Arabia are systematically pursuing more realistic, and hence more localized, leadership projects closer to home. And it is precisely the overlap between their ambitions, interests, and what each sees as natural constituencies, regional responsibilities, and spheres of interest that has led these two powers into their ongoing and wide-ranging rivalry.

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Even though during the Cold War the then-secular Iran was largely on the same side as Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states (many of which were founded during this period), aligned with the United States and against the Soviet Union, aspects of the present rivalry were already apparent. Indeed, Iran’s territorial claims over Bahrain were much stronger under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, until he was compelled to renounce them in 1969,²³ than they have been under the Islamic Republic. In 1971, Iran, with the support of Sharjah, seized three small Gulf Islands from the UAE as it gained independence from Britain. This territorial dispute remains an unresolved source of tension.²⁴ The Saudis and others were already concerned at that time about the loyalties of Shia communities in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and elsewhere in the Arab Gulf states.²⁵

It was following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, however, that Iran emerged as a competitor for Saudi Arabia regarding Islamic legitimacy and leadership in the Middle East and beyond. Iran’s radical theocratic experiment has been profoundly threatening to Saudi Arabia’s interpretation of Islamic politics, both regionally and, potentially, domestically. The tenets of Khomeini’s *vilayat e-faqih*²⁶ (rule of the jurisprudential scholars) are not directly applicable to Sunni-majority societies, and replicating Iran’s system has proved impossible because a Shia majority is effectively a sine qua non for such a system. Even those political groups in the Arab world directly inspired by Khomeini and theoretically enthusiastic about his model of

21 Robin Wright, *Sacred Rage: The Wrath of Modern Islam* (New York: Linden Press, 1985), 27.

22 Angus McDowall, “Saudi Arabia expands its anti-Iran strategy beyond the Middle East,” *Reuters*, June 5, 2016.

23 “Abu Musa: Island Dispute Between Iran and the UAE,” *American University*, accessed June 27, 2016.

24 Cecily Hilleary, “Iran-UAE Island Dispute Could Escalate,” *Voice of America*, October 18, 2012.

25 Neil Partrick (ed), *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy: Conflict and Cooperation in Uncertain Times* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 112.

26 Amr Sabet, “Wilayat al-Faqih and the Meaning of Islamic Government” in *A Critical Introduction to Khomeini* ed. Arshin Adib-Moghaddam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 69-87.

clerical rule, such as Hizballah²⁷ in Lebanon and the Dawa Party in Iraq, had to accept that its application in their own societies must be postponed until sufficient social change,²⁸ implicitly requiring mass conversions to Shia Islam, is accomplished. However, the realization of an Islamist, republican and anti-monarchical, and theocratic Shia revolution in Iran – particularly given that it was successful despite opposition from both Moscow and Washington – was profoundly alarming to Saudi Arabia and many other Arab countries including most, if not all, of the other Gulf states.

Moreover, the emergence of groups like Hizballah²⁹ and the political conversion of others like Dawa³⁰ – that were not only inspired by Khomeini, but also largely organized, financed, and overseen by Iran and the IRGC – signaled to Saudi Arabia and its allies that Iran intended to spread its ideology and influence into the Arab world. Where there were significant Shia constituencies, particularly those that suffered from a history of marginalization or had been radicalized by conflict, Tehran sometimes found willing partners.

Sunni Islamists could not directly adopt the Iranian political model because it does not correspond to Sunni models of relations between civic and clerical authority. Nonetheless, Iran's Islamic Revolution served as an inspiration for them, demonstrating that Islamists could topple powerful states without much, if any, international backing. Moreover, it served to radicalize these groups by creating an atmosphere of competition between Sunni and Shia Islamists. Finally, some Sunni Islamist groups in the Arab world, notably the Palestinian groups Hamas³¹ and Islamic Jihad,³² developed an alliance with Iran and the IRGC on the basis of a revolutionary affiliation within an "axis of resistance."³³ This axis was based in Damascus, and its influence – driven by anti-American, anti-Israeli, anti-monarchical, and anti-status quo rhetoric – peaked during the first decade of the 21st century.

The rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran and the sense of anxiety, and often alarm, in Gulf Arab states about Iran's power and ambitions have steadily intensified over the past 25 years, with occasional moments of thawing.³⁴ A series of major strategic changes in the region seemed to strengthen Iran's hand, and played a major role in promoting the current level of animosity. One of the most important of these developments was the disintegration of the Iraqi state and the dissolution of the Iraqi army following the 2003 U.S. invasion. Prior to that, the Gulf Arab states regarded Iraq and its relatively powerful and sophisticated military as a crucial bulwark against Iranian encroachment. With this rampart gone, in 2004 King

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27 Tony Badran, "Hezbollah is being elusive on Wilayat al-Faqih," *NOW*, June 24, 2009.

28 Fawwaz Traboulsi, "Hezbollah's New Political Platform," *GlobalResearch*, January 25, 2010.

29 Emile Hokayem, "Iran and Lebanon," *United States Institute of Peace*, August 2015.

30 Michael Eisenstadt, "Iran and Iraq," *United States Institute of Peace*, August 2015.

31 Con Coughlin, "Iran Rekindles Relations with Hamas," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 21, 2015.

32 Mayan Groisman, "Iran to renew financial support for Islamic Jihad after two-year hiatus," *The Jerusalem Post*, May 25, 2016.

33 Hussein Ibish, "Axes of Fable," *The Majalla*, October 17, 2013.

34 Ross Harrison, "Too Big to Fail: The Iran-Saudi Relationship," *Middle East Institute*, January 19, 2016.

Abdullah II of Jordan was among the first to publicly fret about the emergence of a potential “Shiite Crescent”³⁵ arcing from the Gulf region to the Mediterranean and transforming much of the Middle East into a de facto Iranian protectorate. The phrase has become a shopworn cliché, but at the time it expressed urgent fears that have only grown more acute.

The U.S. military response to 9/11 in Afghanistan and Iraq eliminated Iran’s most bitter enemy at the time, the Taliban, and its most powerful foe, not merely the Saddam Hussein regime, but more broadly the Sunni-dominated and nationally-integrated Iraqi state. With these key antagonists gone, Tehran ended the past decade in a greatly strengthened strategic position, which, in the view of the Gulf Arab states, had come largely at their expense. As Vali Nasr pointed out by 2006, these developments led to a regionwide rise of Shia identity-based political movements, particularly in the Arab world, that upended the pre-existing regional order.³⁶

From the Saudi perspective, the situation became even more dire during the “Arab Spring” uprisings. The Arab monarchies, with the partial exception of Qatar, were all unnerved by the epidemic of regime change sweeping Arab republics. Riyadh, especially, saw these developments – above all the overthrow of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak – as profoundly threatening.³⁷ Doha, on the other hand, saw an opportunity for its allies in the Muslim Brotherhood movements to come to power in states like Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya.³⁸ Iran also generally welcomed the uprisings and tried to spin them as an “Islamic Awakening,”³⁹ as if the Arab publics were somehow replicating, in their own way, the overthrow of the shah.

However, the narrative holding that Iran is inherently enthusiastic about revolution or that Saudi Arabia was deliberately unleashing a wave of reactionary and sectarian counterrevolution⁴⁰ is misguided. The reaction of regional powers to the Arab uprisings depended entirely on whose interests were being threatened. In Libya, the Gulf Arab states were supportive of the uprising, and even engaged in direct military intervention⁴¹ as part of a coalition air campaign, while Iran did not seem particularly invested in the outcome either way. In Syria, however, Iran marshaled its assets and allies to help preserve the regime, while the Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and Qatar, joined Turkey as the main backers of the armed opposition. So the assumption that Iran is an intrinsically “revolutionary” power, because it largely opposes the regional status quo, while Saudi Arabia is “counterrevolutionary,” because

In Syria, however, Iran marshaled its assets and allies to help preserve the regime, while the Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and Qatar, joined Turkey as the main backers of the armed opposition.

35 Jelle Puelings, “Fearing a ‘Shiite Octopus’: Sunni-Shi’a relations and the implications for Belgium and Europe,” *EGMONT* Paper 35, January 2010.

36 Vali Nasr, “When the Shiites Rise,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2006.

37 Charles Levinson, Margaret Coker, Matt Bradley, Adam Entous, and Jonathan Weisman, “Fall of Mubarak Shakes Middle East,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 12, 2011.

38 Giorgio Cafiero, “Is Qatar’s Foreign Policy Sustainable?” *Foreign Policy In Focus*, June 25, 2012.

39 Payam Mohseni, “The Islamic Awakening: Iran’s Grand Narrative of the Arab Uprisings,” *Brandeis University, Crown Center for Middle East Studies*, no. 71, April 2013.

40 Marc Lynch, “Saudi Arabia’s Counter Revolution,” *Foreign Policy*, August 10, 2011.

41 Nour Malas, “Gulf Arab States Defend Military Action in Libya,” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 22, 2011.

it largely supports regional stability, is groundless.

Crucially, the conflict in Syria eliminated the space that had been available for a small group of nonstate actors, most notably Hamas, to be Sunni Arab Islamists and core members of the Muslim Brotherhood movement, and simultaneously key allies of Iran and its partners in a largely Shia alliance. When the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood emerged as a major constituency within the opposition movement confronting the regime,⁴² Hamas had to choose between two aspects of its identity. Hamas' core self-definition as a Sunni Arab and Muslim Brotherhood organization prevailed over the group's extremely valuable, but not defining, alliances with Tehran and Damascus.⁴³ But by siding with its Syrian fellow Muslim Brothers against the regime, Hamas lost its headquarters in Syria, much of its assets and investments, and its main source of funding and military support in Tehran.⁴⁴

Hamas' predicament illustrates the extent to which sectarianism – mainly pitting Arab Sunnis led by Saudi Arabia against Middle Eastern Shia (and some other non-Sunni religiously-based identity groups) led by Iran – had come to define the political and strategic situation in the Middle East. The gray area that once allowed Hamas, under the rubric of the axis of resistance, to keep a foot in each of the two sectarian camps in the region during the 1990s and 2000s had vanished. In the post-Arab Spring Middle East, almost everyone had to choose sides, even if, like Hamas, they could ill-afford to do so.

From the perspective of the Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia, the rise of Iranian influence⁴⁵ in the Arab world over the past 15 years is unacceptable. From the 1979 Iranian Revolution until 9/11, in the Gulf Arab view, Iran was effectively contained by a number of key antagonists and other factors that have either disappeared or in some way been rendered ineffective in restraining the spread of its power. The inadvertent consequences of U.S. actions against the Taliban and Saddam Hussein, the fallout from the Arab uprisings, the growth of "Middle East fatigue" in Washington and a new risk aversion in U.S. foreign policy, and, most recently, the partial international rehabilitation of Iran through the nuclear agreement⁴⁶ between Tehran and the permanent five members of the U.N. Security Council plus Germany, have all combined to create a powerful sense in Gulf Arab societies of an inexorable rise in Iranian (or rather Persian) power.

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This narrative⁴⁷ is most frequently invoked by declarations that Tehran now controls four

⁴² Hassan Hassan, "How the Muslim Brotherhood Hijacked Syria's Revolution," *Foreign Policy*, March 13, 2013.

⁴³ Omar Fahmy and Nidal Al-Mughrabi, "Hamas ditches Assad, backs Syrian revolt," *Reuters*, February 24, 2012.

⁴⁴ Valentina Napolitano, "Hamas and the Syrian Uprising: A Difficult Choice," *Middle East Policy Council*, XX, no. 3, Fall 2013.

⁴⁵ Michael Slackman, "Arab Unrest Propels Iran as Saudi Influence Declines," *The New York Times*, February 23, 2011.

⁴⁶ "Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action," Vienna, Austria, July 14, 2015.

⁴⁷ Samia Nakhoul, "Iran expands regional 'empire' ahead of nuclear deal," *Reuters*, March 23, 2015.

Arab capitals⁴⁸ – Damascus, Baghdad, Beirut, and Sanaa – a view that has been repeated⁴⁹ by some boastful Iranian officials.⁵⁰ This idea not only informs a determination to prevent any further spread of Iranian influence in the Middle East, it also is motivating an emerging policy goal of rolling back Tehran’s gains wherever possible. And because Syria is seen as a linchpin of Iran’s status as a major regional power, the prospect that Tehran could be deprived of this all-important asset due to the rebellion against the Assad regime has made Syria (along with Yemen) a focal point of the regional rivalry. Yemen is seen as an essential battleground because it is considered to be in the “backyard” of the GCC states, and is especially crucial to Saudi Arabia geographically, culturally, politically, and strategically. Syria, by contrast, is, in all these senses, relatively far away. But because of its profound cultural and political significance in the Arab world, and because the outcome of the Syrian conflict is expected to have a decisive role in defining Iran’s regional prospects, the outcome in Syria is, in some ways, perhaps even more significant to the Gulf states than that in Yemen.

Three Potential Outcomes in Syria

From the point of view of the Gulf states that have engaged significantly in Syria, there are three basic potential outcomes to the conflict, each of which would define the fundamental balance of power in the region. The first scenario is that Iran wins – the Assad regime survives, and Iran develops into a regional superpower that could eventually threaten the independence, and possibly the territorial integrity, of Gulf Arab states. Alternatively, Iran loses – the Assad regime is ousted and Iran’s hegemonic ambitions in the Arab world are stopped and primed to be rolled back. In the second scenario, Iran would remain a large and powerful player, but not become a regionally dominant one. In particular, it would find its influence in the Arab world largely restricted to certain Shia-dominated areas such as Iraq and southern Lebanon. In a third scenario, the parties split the difference, both in Syria and, consequently, regionally. There would be a tolerable de facto partition in Syria. Iran would maintain much of the ground it has gained in the Arab world, particularly over the past 15 years, but find itself largely unable to expand its political sway much further. Iran’s sphere of influence would be much larger than most Arab states would regard as acceptable, but it would be contained, which might come to be seen as the most that can be accomplished under the current circumstances.

Syria is viewed as Iran’s central asset in the Arab world. It is the only Arab state, with the possible exception of Iraq, that has had a dominant central government unequivocally in Iran’s camp. Even though the uprising has reduced the control of the Assad regime to approximately a third of the country, it still controls most of the most crucial areas, particularly from Iran’s perspective (and that of its crucial ally, Hizballah). However, unlike the Shia-dominated government in Baghdad, which has never ruled a unified Iraq, the Assad dictatorship once controlled all of Syria without any effective opposition. The Syrian regime is not only entirely within the Iranian sphere of influence, it has become more dependent on Tehran than ever.

⁴⁸ Ian Black, [“Iran’s advances create alarm in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf,”](#) *The Guardian*, March 13, 2015.

⁴⁹ [“Sanaa is the Fourth Arab Capital to Join the Iranian Revolution,”](#) *Middle East Monitor*, September 27, 2014.

⁵⁰ Michael Segall, [“How Iran Views the Fall of Sana’a, Yemen: The Fourth Arab Capital in Our Hands,”](#) *Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs*, vol. 14, no. 36, November 3, 2014.

Syria provides Iran with a unique degree of strategic depth, projecting its influence all the way to the Mediterranean. Without the support of the Assad regime, it would be much more difficult for Iran and the IRGC to maintain the level of access,⁵¹ and material support it provides,⁵² to Hizballah. Iraq is an asset, but the Iraqi government has demonstrated its relative independence and followed its own national interests on numerous occasions over the past decade. Syria, by contrast, does not appear to have made any major decision in recent years divergent from Iranian imperatives. The Syrian regime therefore does not seem to recognize any major distinction between its interests and those of its patrons in Tehran. Without this kind of unequivocal support from Syria, Iran's ability to project its power into the Arab world would be greatly curtailed, and its maximal ambitions could not be achieved.

Syria provides Iran with a unique degree of strategic depth, projecting its influence all the way to the Mediterranean.

The first Syria scenario, which is the one that most motivates the Gulf Arab states, imagines the regime and its Iranian, Russian, and Hizballah sponsors being largely, or entirely, successful over time in subduing the rebellion.⁵³ For this to be realized, the Assad regime does not need to re-establish control over all parts of Syria. If, for example, Kurdish groups were able to maintain a practically autonomous presence in remote areas in northern Syria along the Turkish border, that would not significantly undermine Syria's value as an Iranian asset in the regional balance of power, which is the essential issue from the Gulf Arab perspective. The semipermanent loss of control over these Kurdish-majority regions might be a severe setback for the regime and its aim of restoring its uncontested control over a unified Syrian state. But, from a Gulf Arab perspective, it would not be much of a setback for Iran's larger regional interests.

Such a strategic failure does not necessarily hinge on the removal from power of Assad himself, or even his immediate inner circle. What must, in fact, be eliminated, from the point of view of Riyadh and its allies, is the continuation of any regime in Damascus that maintains the essential foreign policies of the current government. The most reliable means for Russia, Iran, and Hizballah to secure the continuation of the Syrian policies essential to their interests is the maintenance of the regime as it is presently constituted. But merely replacing the figurehead, or even a small group at the center, of the present regime with different individuals who maintain the same regional and international posture and relationships would constitute as much of a defeat for the Gulf Arab states as no change at all. The issue, therefore, is not one of personalities or the details of domestic political power in Syria. It is rather Syria's relationship with the rest of the region, and particularly its willingness to serve as the primary Arab member of a longstanding and remarkably unified pro-Iranian alliance that is increasingly operating under Russia's international guidance and protection.

⁵¹ Matthew Levitt, interview by Bernard Gwertzman, "[The Hezbollah Connection in Syria and Iran](#)," *Council on Foreign Relations*, February 15, 2013.

⁵² Matthew Levitt, "[Hezbollah Finances: Funding the Party of God](#)," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, February 2005.

⁵³ Patrick Wintour, "[Future of Bashar al-Assad remains 'red line' as Syria peace talks begin](#)," *The Guardian*, March 13, 2016.

Each of the three pillars – Russia, Iran, and Hizballah – that support the Assad regime have their own priorities. Russia is most concerned with protecting its strategic assets in Syria, especially its naval and air bases in the northwestern coastal region. Hizballah is most interested in ensuring regime control over regions adjacent to the Lebanese border in Syria's south and southwest. Of the three, Iran has the most wide-ranging interests in Syria, and is more interested than Russia in the long-term goal of restoring Assad's rule in as much of the country as possible. By contrast, Moscow has expressed irritation⁵⁴ when regime officials have publicly vowed⁵⁵ not to stop fighting until they have secured control of the entire country.⁵⁶ Russia apparently finds such rhetoric unrealistic, provocative, and disruptive to its diplomatic initiatives in Geneva and efforts to convince Washington to support Moscow's push for a long-term cease-fire that would involve an effective partition of the country. Russia's possible willingness to consider such an outcome means that it could live with both the first and second scenarios. This is much less true of Iran and Hizballah, which have a broader interest in securing as much power for the regime and inflicting as much damage as possible on mainstream rebel groups in Syria.

Syria also plays a crucial role in Iran's challenging quest for political legitimation in the contemporary Arab imagination. Syria is often regarded as the birthplace of Arab nationalism.⁵⁷

No other modern Arab political trope – including Palestine with its powerful emotional resonance, or Saudi Arabia with its religious authority – evokes the same nationalistic sentiments. The first pan-Arab

Syria also plays a crucial role in Iran's challenging quest for political legitimation in the contemporary Arab imagination.

state was established by Prince Faisal in the immediate aftermath of World War I with its capital in Damascus.⁵⁸ Although the "Arab Kingdom of Syria" existed for only a few months, it had an enormous impact on the Arab political imagination and contributed to a set of ideas that were extremely influential throughout the 20th century, and continue to resonate into the 21st.

The modern Syrian state may not correspond in many ways to this idealized concept of Arab "Syria,"⁵⁹ but the Baathist regimes in Damascus (of which the current dictatorship is the latest iteration) have spared no effort to convince their domestic constituency, as well as the rest of the Arab world, that they are the vanguard of Arab national identity and political self-assertion.⁶⁰ This has involved a prodigious exercise in rhetorical duplicity and double-think, whereby the interests of the Arab world as a whole are conflated with those of Syria, which are, in turn, then conflated with those of the regime. Because Syria is the natural leader of the Arab Nation, Damascus' parochial interests must therefore take priority over other, and often

54 "Russia Warns Assad Over 'Capturing All of Syria' Plan," HNGN, February 20, 2016.

55 Sam Dagher, "Syria Defies Russia in Bid to Keep Assad," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 11, 2016.

56 Liz Sly, "Assad pledges more bloodshed in Syria, says the peace process has failed," *The Washington Post*, June 7, 2016.

57 Michael Provence, *The Great Syrian Revolt and the Rise of Arab Nationalism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005).

58 See Isaiah Friedman, *British Pan-Arab Policy, 1915-1922* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2011).

59 Christopher Phillips, "Syria's Bloody Arab Spring," in "After the Arab Spring: Power Shift in the Middle East?" ed. Nicholas Kitchen, *London School of Economics* (May 2012).

60 Michael Young, "Assad laments losing his father's grand vision," *The National*, July 29, 2015.

far broader, Arab concerns. In the case of Palestine, for example, because, in this narrative, Syria is the indispensable hub of “resistance” and the struggle against Zionism, Syrian regime interests take precedence over the decisions of the Palestine Liberation Organization.⁶¹ In practice, of course, this means the issue of Palestine has been consistently hijacked by the Syrian government and pressed into the service of its own self-serving agendas, but all in the name of the Palestinian cause. While almost every Arab government that has been involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has used the Palestinian issue for its own purposes, the Syrian track record of coopting the Palestinian narrative, and coming into direct and often brutally violent confrontation with the actual Palestinian national movement (particularly in Lebanon), is unique.⁶²

This is all deeply significant for Syria’s strategic value to Iran as it pursues political legitimation and authority for its agenda in the Arab world. The axis of resistance narrative has been the primary rhetorical basis for legitimating and rationalizing the expansion of Iran’s influence in the Arab world since the early 1990s.⁶³ As noted, this narrative explained how Iran, despite being both a Persian and a Shia power, could be framed as an ally and an asset to Arab nationalist or even Sunni Islamist political projects. Secular

The axis of resistance narrative has been the primary rhetorical basis for legitimating and rationalizing the expansion of Iran’s influence in the Arab world since the early 1990s.

Arab nationalism, as practiced by Syrian Baathists, the Lebanese Syrian Social Nationalist Party, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and others, or Sunni Islamists such as Hamas or Islamist factions within the Sudanese government, were all aligned with Iran under this rubric until the Arab Spring-era reorientation eliminated this political space.

But the case of Hamas strongly suggests that, under the right conditions, those relationships could be resurrected. Several key factions within Hamas have never fully reconciled themselves with the break with Tehran. These include some Gaza-based Hamas leaders⁶⁴ who find little political advantage in the shift made by much of the exiled politburo’s, at least partial, rapprochement with Saudi Arabia.⁶⁵ Moreover, some of those associated with the organization’s paramilitary wing (which has been unable to find Arab sponsors willing to fund and arm it to support the conflict with Israel) have been trying to preserve ties with the IRGC. The Arab states may be willing to offer Hamas financial, diplomatic, and political support, at least to some extent. But none of them, other than Syria, have been willing to fund and provide military support for armed conflict with Israel. Insofar as Hamas, or at least some of its wings, continues to anticipate further wars with Israel, and, more importantly, sees armed conflict as its defining competitive advantage over the PLO and Palestinian Authority, Tehran

61 Hussein Ibish, “[The Evolution of Syrian Policy Towards Palestine and the Palestinians](#),” *Ibishblog*, July 28, 2011.

62 See Ghada Hashem Talhami, *Syria and the Palestinians: The Clash of Nationalisms* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001).

63 Erik Mohns and André Bank, “[Syrian Revolt Fallout: End of the Resistance Axis?](#)” *Middle East Policy Council* 19, no. 3 (Fall 2012).

64 Con Coughlin, “[Iran ‘is intensifying efforts to support Hamas in Gaza](#),” *The Telegraph*, April 4, 2015.

65 Khaled Abu Toameh, “[Hamas official sees ‘breakthrough’ in Saudi relations after Mashaal Visit](#),” *The Jerusalem Post*, July 19, 2015.

will continue to have a definite allure.⁶⁶

As with Hizballah, Syria under the control of the Assad regime was crucial for Iran to serve as the primary patron, financier, arms dealer, and military academy for Hamas. If Iran is to regain a significant foothold in the Palestinian national movement (a critical legitimating position in much of Arab political culture) it will greatly benefit from, and might even require, a cooperative regime in Damascus. Retaining influence in Syria is essential to Iran's potential for inroads into areas of Arab regional politics, and therefore, from the perspective of the Gulf Arab states, this must be closed to Tehran.

Moreover, one of Iran's most important assets in the Arab world, Hizballah, is also dependent on Iran retaining the cooperation of a Syrian regime that can control a significant part of the country. Not coincidentally, these crucial areas correspond more or less precisely to those areas that the Assad regime has been focusing on keeping under its sway in spite of the uprising, and particularly after the joint Iranian-Russian military surge. Hizballah's was probably the first major foreign military intervention in the Syrian conflict.⁶⁷ Since early 2013 at the latest, significant numbers of Hizballah cadres have been operating not only in the Lebanese border region but also deep into regime-controlled and contested areas of the country. The group has reportedly played a major role in several crucial contests and battlegrounds.⁶⁸

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Hizballah's intervention in Syria was a significant gamble, and was profoundly risky regarding its domestic standing in Lebanon.⁶⁹ Even many of its core constituents appear to have been skeptical about the organization's Syrian adventure. However, Hizballah felt that, between its own crucial interest in the survival of the Assad regime and pressure from its Iranian patrons, the group had, in effect, no choice but to go for broke in Syria. The apparent success of the Russian-Iranian surge and the revival of the Assad regime have meant that this roll of the dice has so far played well for the Hizballah leadership.

Hizballah's fortunes in Lebanon and its standing in domestic politics in that country have been strengthened by its successes in Syria.⁷⁰ This is not to say that Hizballah is consistently getting its own way in Beirut. To preserve its interests, Hizballah has blocked the Parliament's selection of a new Lebanese president for over two years.⁷¹ The perceived rise of Hizballah's influence in Lebanon, which was already very strong, has infuriated the Gulf Arab states. It was encapsulated in the refusal of Lebanon to join the Arab League condemnation of the attack on the Saudi Embassy in Tehran in January, after which the Saudis issued stern, although private,

⁶⁶ Ahmad Abu Amer, trans. Cynthia Milan, "[Will Iran deal mean more money for Hamas?](#)" *Al Monitor*, January 27, 2016.

⁶⁷ Marisa Sullivan, "[Hezbollah in Syria](#)," *Institute for the Study of War Middle East Security Report* 19 (April 2014).

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Anne Barnard, "[By Inserting Itself Into Syrian War, Hezbollah Makes Dramatic Gamble](#)," *The New York Times*, May 27, 2013.

⁷⁰ Daniel L. Byman, "[Hezbollah's growing threat against U.S. national security interests in the Middle East](#)," *Brookings Institution*, March 22, 2016.

⁷¹ Michael Young, "[Lebanese state slowly shatters amid stalemate](#)," *The National*, January 13, 2016.

warnings to their (also pro-Western) Lebanese allies that Hezbollah needed to be reined in at home. From Riyadh's perspective, nothing effective was being done in Lebanon to restrain Hezbollah. Further, the group allegedly began operating in Yemen⁷² as well, in support of the Houthi rebels fighting the Saudi-led Arab expeditionary force that intervened on behalf of the internationally recognized Yemeni government.⁷³

The Saudi, GCC, and Arab League response was unequivocal. All three declared Hezbollah a terrorist organization,⁷⁴ and the Gulf Arab states made supporting it illegal.⁷⁵ Saudi Arabia cut \$4 billion in aid to Lebanon's military and intelligence services.⁷⁶ Gulf Arab states issued travel warnings to Lebanon, undermining its vital tourism industry. They also began withdrawing assets from Lebanese companies and banks, and expelling Lebanese expatriate workers,⁷⁷ which has contributed to the collapse of remittances from the Gulf⁷⁸ – one of the main sources of foreign exchange for the Lebanese economy. The country faces a potential financial crisis as a direct consequence. This pressure on Lebanon is an effort to push back against Hezbollah because of its regional support for Iran, mainly in Syria.

The Gulf Arab states' clampdown on Hezbollah follows years of allegations of meddling, as well as subversive and even terrorist activities, by the Lebanese organization in the Gulf, reportedly at the behest of Iran.⁷⁹ The Gulf states have perceived and cast Hezbollah as Tehran's primary cat's-paw in a regional campaign of sedition and often violent destabilization in the Arab world. The greatest fears involve the spread of Iranian subversion into the Gulf states themselves. They are closely linked to fears about the potential disloyalty of Shia populations, particularly in Bahrain⁸⁰ and Saudi Arabia. Bahrain has a Shia majority with a long history of tensions with the ruling Sunni royal family and political elite.⁸¹ Saudi Arabia led a GCC Peninsula Shield Force intervention in the last major uprising in Bahrain in March 2011.⁸² Iran was accused of playing an essential role in the uprising,⁸³ although little evidence was produced to substantiate the allegation. There are also persistent concerns about the loyalties

The Gulf Arab states have perceived and cast Hezbollah as Tehran's primary cat's-paw in a regional campaign of sedition and often violent destabilization in the Arab world.

72 Alexander Corbeil and Amarnath Amarasingam, "[The Houthi Hezbollah](#)," *Foreign Affairs*, March 31, 2016.

73 Ian Black, "[Saudi Arabia sees Yemen intervention as defence of 'backyard'](#)," *The Guardian*, January 27, 2016.

74 "[GCC declares Lebanon's Hezbollah a 'terrorist' group](#)," *Al Jazeera*, March 2, 2016.

75 "[Gulf states declare Lebanon's Hezbollah terrorist group](#)," *BBC*, March 2, 2016.

76 Anne Barnard, "[Saudi Arabia Cuts Billions in Aid to Lebanon, Opening Door for Iran](#)," *The New York Times*, March 2, 2016.

77 Sami Aboudi, "[Lebanese expats fearful as Gulf expels dozens accused of Hezbollah links](#)," *Reuters*, April 8, 2016.

78 "[Expatriate remittances to Lebanon will continue to fall in 2016: Economist](#)," *Albawaba*, April 19, 2016.

79 Matthew Levitt, "[Behind the GCC's Terrorist Designation of Hezbollah](#)," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, March 10, 2016.

80 See Louay Bahry, "The Socioeconomic Foundations of the Shiite Opposition in Bahrain," *Mediterranean Quarterly* 11, no. 3 (2000), 129-143.

81 Reese Erlich, "[In Bahrain, a growing Sunni-Shia rift](#)," *The Global Post*, March 18, 2013.

82 Ethan Bronner and Michael Slackman, "[Saudi Troops Enter Bahrain to Help Put Down Unrest](#)," *The New York Times*, March 14, 2011.

83 Jane Kinninmont, "[Bahrain: Beyond the Impasse](#)," *Chatham House* (June 2012), Executive Summary.

of the marginalized Saudi Shia population in the oil-rich Eastern Province.⁸⁴ The area has been the scene of repeated clashes between protesters and the authorities, particularly after the execution in January of dissident Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr, who had called for the secession of the province.⁸⁵

Hizballah is seen as a central player in this purported long-term Iranian strategy, acting as the chief destabilizing nonstate actor, including by organizing and training other pro-Iranian proxy groups including militias and terrorist organizations. Syria, therefore, lurks in the background as the essential power beyond Iran in creating the context, conditions, and basic operating framework within which Tehran is believed to be orchestrating its strategy. This strategy is perceived to have at its core the destabilization of the Arab world, the GCC region in particular, leading to the establishment of a new regional order based on Iranian hegemony. The Gulf Arab states appear to sincerely regard the direct intervention in Yemen as existentially necessary to stop what is seen as an example of this process in action. The Gulf Arab engagement in Syria is similarly viewed as an indirect, but equally vital, effort to disrupt Iran's regional project.

The Gulf Arab aim in Syria is therefore not merely to stop Iran from winning. The ultimate goal is to strike a blow at the heart of Tehran's perceived hegemonic agenda by overthrowing the Assad regime and ensuring that Syria is no longer an Iranian asset. It is also an effort to isolate and cut down Hizballah, and stymie its alleged program of spreading subversion across the region. The intention is to ensure that Iran cannot maintain the nascent alliance it has built over the past 15 years or so, whether this is conceptualized in terms of "crescents" or any other metaphor.

Outright political defeat, and therefore total military failure, in Syria is thus unacceptable for the Gulf Arab states. A full-fledged victory, however, may well prove unattainable. There is a growing potential for a protracted stalemate in Syria, leading to a de facto partition. If partition lines look anything like the present situation on the ground in Syria, particularly as established by the Russian-led surge, that could constitute precisely such a strategic defeat for the Gulf Arab states.

Gulf Arab States' Engagement in Syria

At various times during the armed phase of the Syrian rebellion, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, along with Turkey, have funded⁸⁶ or supplied and supported different armed opposition groups, including some small Western-supported groups. These have essentially been covert operations, so it is not known precisely who has funded whom, or exactly when and to what extent. While a general consensus of observers agrees that these three states have funded some Western-supported groups, Saudi Arabia is also believed to have supported some groups that Washington regards as too extreme. Additionally, Qatar and Turkey have been

⁸⁴ See Toby Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis: Shiism, Dissent and Sectarianism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

⁸⁵ Moni Basu, "Saudi cleric's son: 'He knew they would kill him,'" *CNN*, January 22, 2016.

⁸⁶ Erika Solomon and Simeon Kerr, "Syria's rebels heartened by healing of Sunni Arab rift," *Financial Times*, April 13, 2015.

accused of backing groups that are accused of sometimes cooperating with the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra. The extent of such cooperation is extremely hard to establish, as is the timeline and whether this support is ongoing.

Broadly speaking the Southern Front is supported by a consortium of countries under U.S. leadership, but some groups within the coalition are closer to various countries. According to Hassan Hassan, an expert on the Syrian conflict, "Near Damascus, Jaish al-Islam is still backed by Saudis (businessmen and clerics), while Faylaq al-Rahman is backed by Qatar and the U.S. funding scheme in Jordan." He added, "In the north, Ahrar al-Sham remains Qatari and Turkish-backed. Sultan Murad is mostly Turkish-supported. Others like Harakat Nouredine Zinki used to be supported by the United States and I think it still is, as are Sultan Murad and Faylaq al-Sham who have fought ISIL recently." The anti-ISIL New Syrian Army is funded and trained by the United States and several of its allies. Insofar as it still exists, the Free Syrian Army and subsets of it in various "divisions" have been supported by both the United States and its Gulf allies. As Hassan noted, "Saudi Arabia doesn't support many groups on its own. Jaish al-Islam is the only clear instance."⁸⁷

Indeed, The New York Times reported that U.S. efforts to create Western-backed rebel groups in Syria, especially in 2013, relied heavily on Saudi funding.⁸⁸ There have been numerous reports of funding from private individuals in Gulf states for more extremist groups in Syria,⁸⁹ especially from 2012-14, leading to fears of blowback and the spread of extremism, which threatens the Gulf Arab states. However, there have been major efforts to restrict this sort of ad hoc funding,⁹⁰ which reportedly flowed mainly from Kuwait due to its extremely protective privacy laws that shield "personal matters" from many forms of government scrutiny typical in other countries. There have additionally been accusations that private individuals in the Gulf states have covertly funded ISIL,⁹¹ although with little supportive evidence. Others note that ISIL appears to be entirely self-funded⁹² and to have been so for quite a long time.⁹³ A recent U.S. government list reportedly cites seven private individual funders of Jabhat al-Nusra, seven in Kuwait, and one each in Qatar, Turkey, and Lebanon.⁹⁴ However, official funding from the Gulf Arab states has gone almost entirely to more mainstream groups in Syria.

Given the stakes that the Gulf states believe are involved in the Syrian conflict, it is almost impossible to imagine them walking away from a concerted effort to influence the trajectory of events on the ground. Even if the goal is as limited as strengthening the hand of opposition

⁸⁷ Hassan Hassan, in discussion with the author, June 2016.

⁸⁸ Mark Mazzetti and Matt Apuzzo, "[U.S. Relies Heavily on Saudi Money to Support Syrian Rebels](#)," *The New York Times*, January 23, 2016.

⁸⁹ Elizabeth Dickinson, "[Playing with Fire: Why Private Gulf Financing for Syria's Extremist Rebels Risks Igniting Sectarian Conflict at Home](#)," *Brookings Institution*, December 6, 2013.

⁹⁰ "FPI Bulletin: Saudi Arabia and Terror Financing," *The Foreign Policy Initiative*, February 25, 2016.

⁹¹ Daniel Loud, "[The Gulf Monarchies and Private Funding of ISIS](#)," *Sigma Iota Rho Journal of International Relations*, April 4, 2016.

⁹² Scott Bronstein and Drew Griffin, "[Self-funded and deep-rooted: How ISIS makes its millions](#)," *CNN*, October 7, 2014.

⁹³ "[Financing of the Terrorist Organisation Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant \(ISIL\)](#)," *Financial Action Task Force* (February 2015).

⁹⁴ Charles Lister (senior fellow, Middle East Institute) in discussion with the author, June 24, 2016, citing a list of designated individuals compiled for him by the U.S. Treasury Department.

groups, and weakening that of the government or ISIL, producing such an impact would require, at a minimum, continued and significant support for armed rebel factions. Any political agreement will be greatly shaped by the array of forces on the ground and their relative power and influence in different parts of the country. Therefore, even if, as Saudi Arabia has been indicating, the goal now is a political agreement rather than an outright rebel military victory (which is now seen by many as unachievable, at least in the near term), it is essential to strengthen the hands of the opposition in order to secure the minimally required conditions for the Gulf states at the negotiating table.

The bottom line for the Gulf states remains the future of Assad himself,⁹⁵ and his immediate supporters and advisors, and, far more importantly, the policies they oversee. Assad is seen as directly representing the interests of Iran and Hizballah in Syria. It is this political influence that Saudi Arabia and Qatar are seeking to roll back. Saudi Arabia has been initiating and expanding a series of calculated overtures to Russia by the GCC seeking its support for a political resolution to the Syrian conflict. This appears to be a recognition of the efficacy of the Iranian-Russian military intervention,⁹⁶ and the growing authority that Russia has acquired in the Syrian context because of its willingness to flex its military muscles to influence events on the ground.⁹⁷ But it is also a recognition of Russia's apparent dissatisfaction with some characteristics of the Assad regime, and its unwillingness to back a major push by Damascus to retake many parts of the country that have been lost to opposition groups. As noted, Moscow has made no secret of its exasperation with the regime's maximalist positions.

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The Russian position is increasingly, if thus far only faintly, echoed by a number of Arab states including Egypt. Even the UAE may be moving toward such a perspective, according to Rice University scholar Kristian Coates Ulrichsen.⁹⁸ This perspective holds that the least damaging outcome for all parties is for the fighting to stop, more or less as is, leading to two fundamental consequences. First would be the de facto partition of Syria along Lebanese lines, with a weak central government that does not control many parts of the country presiding over a fragmented republic with many areas of de facto local rule. The Lebanese model suggests that this, while fragile and suboptimal, is potentially sustainable at least in the medium term in a contemporary Levantine setting and following a devastating civil conflict. Second, such an outcome would be presumably the prelude to a concerted attack by multiple forces simultaneously to try to crush ISIL. If the strategic landscape were frozen exactly as things now stand, it would leave the current Assad regime in a relatively sound long-term position.

Such an arrangement is not acceptable to Riyadh and Doha, at least yet. Because of the stakes

⁹⁵ Raghida Dergham, "There is No Plan B in Yemen, or in Syria," *Al Arabiya*, May 23, 2016.

⁹⁶ Zach Abels, "What's Behind the Effectiveness of Russia's Syria Strategy," *The National Interest*, March 3, 2016.

⁹⁷ Andrew Roth, "After four months, Russia's campaign in Syria is proving successful for Moscow," *The Washington Post*, February 3, 2016.

⁹⁸ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen speaks on the panel "Gulf Rising: The Emerging International Role of the Gulf States," Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington video, 1:43:26, May 26, 2016.

they believe are at play in Syria, they would insist on a political arrangement that reduces the sway of Tehran and Hizballah over the Syrian government. Saudi Arabia is aware that it is in no position to challenge well-established Russian interests in Syria, particularly its naval and air bases in the northwest. In particular, Russia's naval base in Tartus appears to be nonnegotiable from Moscow's perspective.⁹⁹ It is a major signals intelligence hub¹⁰⁰ as well as an important naval base – the only major Russian military base outside the former Soviet Union and also the fabled warm water port sought since czarist times. Russia only acquired this long-yearned-for prize in the 1970s from Hafez al-Assad, Bashar's father, and there is virtually no chance it would voluntarily relinquish it.

Saudi Arabia is aware that it is in no position to challenge well-established Russian interests in Syria, particularly its naval and air bases in the northeast.

Moreover, Russia's intervention suggests that Moscow is willing to expend considerable amounts of blood and treasure, if necessary, to remain the dominant global player in Syrian affairs. U.S. disinterest in Syria under the Obama administration, which has been manifest and largely explained by the president¹⁰¹ and his closest associates¹⁰² in the White House in terms of the failed U.S. intervention in Iraq, has greatly facilitated Russia's ability to corner the market of global influence in Syria. The emerging Gulf Arab consensus, led by Saudi Arabia,¹⁰³ has been to try to win Moscow¹⁰⁴ over to the need to create a political agreement that ensures a post-Assad future in Syria that can achieve a number of goals simultaneously.

To be attractive to Russia, and acceptable to the Gulf Arab states, any such arrangement would have to fulfill the following conditions. It would have to secure Russian interests in northwest Syria and the country as a whole, including significant financial investments, deep diplomatic and political ties, and the safety and security of Russian expatriates living in Syria. Key minority groups such as Alawites, Christians, and former regime loyalists, among others, would have to be protected and their areas inviolable. Such an agreement would also have to intend to rid Syria of ISIL and al-Qaeda. These details are potentially negotiable between Russia and the Gulf states, and possibly Turkey as well. The sticking point would be the nature of the new government, especially its relations with Iran and Hizballah.

If Russia sees itself as the global godfather of a new Iranian-based alliance in the Middle East (which is what most alarms Riyadh and its partners), then it will be impossible to negotiate such an agreement between Saudi Arabia and Moscow. If, however, Russia does not want to be the international guarantor of a pro-Iranian, essentially Shia, Middle Eastern alliance pushing aggressively into the Sunni Arab world, then such an agreement would be a golden opportunity for Moscow to escape being dragooned by circumstances and Iranian maneuvering

⁹⁹ Edward Delman, "[The Link Between Putin's Military Campaigns in Syria and Ukraine](#)," *The Atlantic*, October 2, 2015.

¹⁰⁰ James Miller, "[Russian Military Intelligence Coordinating Syrian-Iranian Attacks on Rebels, Spying on Israel](#)," *The Interpreter*, October 7, 2014.

¹⁰¹ Jeffrey Goldberg, "[The Obama Doctrine](#)," *The Atlantic*, April 2016.

¹⁰² David Samuels, "The Aspiring Novelist Who Became Obama's Foreign-Policy Guru," *The New York Times Magazine*, May 5, 2016.

¹⁰³ "[Syria civil war tops Russia-Arab Gulf meeting agenda](#)," *Al Jazeera*, May 26, 2016.

¹⁰⁴ M.K. Bhadrakumar, "[A Saudi-Russian congruence promotes Syria peace process](#)," *Asia Times*, June 1, 2016.

into playing this role against its will. Russia scholar Mark Katz said Moscow has mixed feelings about this. He noted that while Russia wants a greater role in the region, it is not prepared to replace the United States as the principal external power responsible for maintaining order.¹⁰⁵ If this analysis is correct, it would suggest at least some space for a potential agreement with the Gulf Arab states on the future of Syria. If not, that would greatly complicate the prospects for any understanding, especially since the regime and its allies on the ground are more convinced than ever that they are winning the war against the armed opposition.

Turkey and Saudi Arabia have repeatedly intimated that they might seek to introduce ground forces into Syria in the coming months.¹⁰⁶ Both have said they would do so under the rubric of fighting ISIL and only on the condition of a broader coalition push against the group and, implicitly, U.S. leadership. However, as with Turkey's earlier intervention, which focused largely on Kurdish groups,¹⁰⁷ and the Russian-Iranian surge, which focused primarily on mainstream opposition groups,¹⁰⁸ any such intervention might be also designed to change the equation on the ground to the detriment of the regime and the benefit of more moderate opposition groups.

But there are serious reasons to doubt the plausibility of such an intervention. First, Turkey and Saudi Arabia do not share common goals. While both are concerned about ISIL, Turkey is more alarmed about the rise in Syria of the Kurdish opposition group the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is closely linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey that has been fighting a brutal war against Ankara for decades. The notion of a PKK bastion along the Syrian border is completely unacceptable to Turkey. Conversely, Saudi Arabia is focused on the role of Iran and Hizballah in Syria. If these goals could be reconciled, a joint intervention might be more plausible. But Turkey might just as easily be wooed by promises from the Assad regime to put a stop to PKK activity in the north,¹⁰⁹ and so reverse its hostile position toward the Syrian government.

The Saudis, meanwhile, are bogged down in a grinding campaign against the Houthi rebels and their allies in Yemen, in a conflict that appears stalemated.¹¹⁰ Saudi Arabia appears to have the manpower and firepower to fight a two-front war.¹¹¹ But its actual ability to do so,¹¹² and the political and diplomatic consequences of attempting such a feat, are hard to gauge. For both Riyadh and Ankara, the risks of an intervention, particularly a direct clash with Iranian¹¹³

¹⁰⁵ Mark Katz (professor of government and politics, George Mason University), in discussion with the author, June 16, 2016.

¹⁰⁶ "Syria: Turkey and Saudi Arabia consider ground campaign following border strikes," *The Guardian*, February 14, 2016.

¹⁰⁷ Stuart Williams with Rouba El Hussein, "Turkey strikes Kurd, regime forces in Syria, mulls ground attack," *AFP*, February 13, 2016.

¹⁰⁸ "More than 90% of Russian airstrikes in Syria have not targeted Isis, US says," *The Guardian*, October 7, 2015.

¹⁰⁹ Feyza Gumusluoglu, "The GCC's Kurdish Conundrum," *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, June 7, 2016.

¹¹⁰ David Ottaway, "Saudi Arabia's Yemeni Quagmire," *Wilson Center*, December 15, 2015.

¹¹¹ Faisal Al Yafai, "Saudi Arabia's two-war doctrine becomes a reality," *The National*, February 16, 2016.

¹¹² Hugh Naylor, "Concerns in Saudi Arabia over signs of more military involvement in Syria," *The Washington Post*, February 22, 2016.

¹¹³ J. Matthew McInnis, "Saudi Troops in Syria Send Shivers Through Tehran," *Newsweek*, February 23, 2016.

or, worse, Russian forces,¹¹⁴ are huge. They must also consider the reaction from Washington; the serious prospect of various forms of “blowback,”¹¹⁵ especially terrorist attacks inside Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and elsewhere; and the very real risk of being sucked into an endless quagmire of irresolvable, open-ended conflict. The prospect of defeat in Syria carries with it enormous pitfalls, but so does the prospect of a less than complete victory. Saudi Arabia may be ill-equipped to manage the responsibilities that could go with a sudden and unexpected level of success, perhaps almost as much as it might fear the prospects of failure.

The idea that Saudi Arabia might deploy ground forces in Syria was discouraged by U.S. Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL Brett McGurk in testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on June 28. McGurk said that focusing “on empowering local actors to liberate their own territory is the most sustainable strategy for defeating ISIL, and will remain our fundamental approach.”¹¹⁶ Yet, the only thing more threatening than the risks of such an action might be the risks of inaction, as Michael Stephens and Omar Mohamed point out.¹¹⁷ So, despite these significant hazards, a ground intervention by Turkey and/or Saudi Arabia cannot be completely ruled out.¹¹⁸

Growing Arab Resistance to Isolating the Assad Regime

In addition to their other mounting challenges, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey are encountering increasing obstacles to the campaign to politically and diplomatically isolate the Assad regime in the Arab world. Egypt and Jordan have long indicated ambivalence about the future of Assad, while formally supporting measures against his regime in the Arab League and Organization of Islamic Cooperation. But the strongest, and growing, resistance to this effort is centered in North Africa. None of the Maghreb states are strongly committed to the removal of the Assad regime. On the contrary, North African government elites and general public have shown persistent sympathy for Assad.¹¹⁹ No Maghreb state has a Shia majority, or even a very substantial Shia minority, and the attitudes of these societies are primarily shaped by political ideology. In Tunisia, for example, the Ennahda-led government, with its Muslim Brotherhood-inspired outlook, was enthusiastic about the ouster of Assad. But under the subsequent government led by the secular Nidaa Tounes party, Tunisia has become increasingly ambivalent.

Algeria, in particular, has been strongly supportive of the Assad regime from the outset of the uprising. Algiers views the Syrian rebels as a reincarnation of the Islamist extremists from its own bloody civil conflict from 1991-2002, and thus sees their defeat as essential.

¹¹⁴ Patrick Cockburn, “[Saudi Arabia intervening in the Syrian civil war would risk Russian wrath](#),” *Independent*, February 11, 2016.

¹¹⁵ Ian Black, “[Saudi Arabia and Isis: Riyadh keen to show it is tackling terror threat](#),” *The Guardian*, January 21, 2016.

¹¹⁶ Joe Gould, “[US Sees No Place for Saudi Ground Troops in ISIS Fight](#),” *Defense News*, June 28, 2016.

¹¹⁷ Michael Stephens and Omar Mohamed, “[Casus Belli](#),” *Newsweek Middle East*, May 25, 2016.

¹¹⁸ “[Analysis: Saudi Arabia's grand entrance into the Syria quagmire](#),” *i24 News*, February 15, 2016.

¹¹⁹ Akram Belkaid, “Lebanon’s ‘Party of God’ in fight against ISIS; Maghreb still supports Assad,” *Le Monde Diplomatique* (English), April 1, 2016.

Algeria opposed the suspension of Syria's membership from both the Organization of Islamic Cooperation¹²⁰ and the Arab League,¹²¹ and rejected the Arab League's demand that Assad resign.¹²² For the same reasons, Algeria was the only Arab state that never turned against the Libyan dictator Muammar al-Qaddafi.¹²³ It strongly feared his opponents and the potential spread of revolution to its own soil.

Algeria's position complicates efforts to isolate the regime and undercuts a sectarian anti-Assad narrative. This conundrum has only intensified over time. Algeria has recently exchanged high-level diplomatic visits with the Syrian regime.¹²⁴ In March, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem visited Algeria in an extremely rare instance of a major Arab capital welcoming one of the most prominent members of the Assad regime. In April, Algeria's minister to the Arab League, Abdelkader Messahel, visited Damascus¹²⁵ and expressed strong support for the regime's legitimacy and survival. When most of the Arab League joined the GCC in the crackdown against Hizballah, Algeria joined Lebanon and Iraq in opposing the move.¹²⁶ Algeria has also been encouraged by its close alliance with Russia,¹²⁷ Assad's key international backer.

North African fears about the rise of radical Islamists have been greatly exacerbated by ISIL's foothold in Libya. Moreover, several North African states, including Tunisia, have reportedly been among the largest sources of foreign fighters for ISIL. During the Algerian conflict in the 1990s the "Arab Afghans" – the extremists who fought the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, and emerged as al-Qaeda in 1996 – first brought their mayhem in the name of "jihad," and with the hallmark of "takfir" (the practice of condemning other Muslims as death-deserving apostates), to the Arab world.¹²⁸ The North Africans, therefore, were the first Arab societies to experience the horror of a terrorist "blowback." This bodes ill for efforts to get them to join the campaign, and for the whole project more broadly, to isolate the Assad regime in the Arab world.

Conclusion – Likely Gulf Strategies in the Coming Months

The Saudi and Gulf Arab imperative to create sufficient changes on the ground to ensure a reasonable agreement at the negotiating table must be seen in the broader context of a new level of regional assertion by Riyadh and its allies. The Gulf Arab states' response in Syria is closely linked to their intervention in Yemen. Indeed, in many ways Syria and Yemen are mirror opposites in the present regional rivalry bedeviling the Middle East. In Syria, Iranian troops (as

¹²⁰ Asma Alsharif, "Organization of Islamic Cooperation suspends Syria," *Reuters*, August 16, 2012.

¹²¹ Neil MacFarquhar, "Arab League Votes to Suspend Syria Over Crackdown," *The New York Times*, November 12, 2011.

¹²² "Algeria rejects Arab League Assad resignation call," *Al-Akhabar*, July 23, 2012.

¹²³ Dario Cristiani, "Algeria's Response to the Revolt in Libya," *The Jamestown Foundation*, May 27, 2011.

¹²⁴ "Algeria minister meets Syria's Assad on rare visit," *AFP*, April 25, 2016.

¹²⁵ "Abdelkader Messahel received by Bashar al-Assad," *Embassy of Algeria to the United States*, April 25, 2016.

¹²⁶ Adlene Meddi, "Algeria's Hezbollah stance 'reflects view on resistance, not terrorism'" *Middle East Eye*, March 29, 2016.

¹²⁷ Abdesselam Sakia, "Algeria-Russia-Syria Axis' versus 'France-Gulf Countries' Alliance," *Echorouk Online*, April 26, 2016.

¹²⁸ Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006) 160-84, 253-304.

well as their allies) directly confront Gulf Arab-backed militias. In Yemen, conversely, Saudi and Emirati troops directly confront Iranian-backed Houthi rebels and their Yemeni allies. In both cases, military forces of each party – Iran in Syria and Saudi Arabia and the UAE in Yemen – find themselves in open combat with the proxies of their regional rivals. This relatively recent development represents an intensification of the Middle Eastern rivalry that had theretofore merely pitted proxy against proxy, and not the armed forces of one state against surrogates of the others.

Other Saudi initiatives that are part of this broader trend of regional assertion include the attempt to form GCC¹²⁹ and Arab League¹³⁰ joint commands; the announcement of a new Islamic anti-terrorism military alliance;¹³¹ the huge Northern Thunder military exercise involving hundreds of thousands of troops from some 20 countries (including the GCC states, Pakistan, Malaysia, Turkey, Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, and Sudan);¹³² and the transfer of Saudi military planes to Turkey.¹³³ Added to this is the controversial effort to acquire three crucial Red Sea islands from Egypt.¹³⁴ A further expression of this new assertiveness has been the GCC's aforementioned legal and political assault against Hizballah and, by extension, Lebanon.

Saudi Arabia must, however, cope with significant differences with its putative partners on Syria: Turkey and Qatar. There are numerous potential strains on the Saudi-Turkish partnership on Syria, and they are not limited to Kurdish issues or that Turkey's options are constrained by its NATO membership. The overall aims of the two countries throughout the region are not consistent. These differences, particularly regarding Islamist movements,¹³⁵ were most dramatically illustrated by their diametrically opposed stances on the ouster of the Muslim Brotherhood-led government of Mohammed Morsi in Egypt.¹³⁶

Moreover, there is also the threat of increased U.S.-Russian understandings¹³⁷ within the Geneva-based diplomatic process that may ultimately deliver U.S. support for Russia's position that the fighting should stop more or less as things are. Finally, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey are facing diminishing support in the Arab world for their demand for the ouster of Assad. Several key Arab states, including Egypt,¹³⁸ seem to have come to the reluctant conclusion that ending the conflict is a more pressing need than replacing the regime. They think the destabilizing impact of the war, particularly the rise of ISIL, is more of a concern than the continuation of Iran's long-established influence in Damascus. Most Arab states would have

129 Fahd Al-Zayabi, "[GCC to launch Joint Military Command at Doha summit: source](#)," *Asharq Al Awsat*, November 25, 2014.

130 Bruce Riedel, "[Can this joint Arab military force succeed where others have failed?](#)" *Brookings Institution*, March 30, 2015.

131 "[Saudis announce Islamic anti-terrorism coalition](#)," *BBC*, December 15, 2015.

132 "[350,000 troops take part in Northern Thunder military exercise in Saudi desert](#)," *The National*, March 10, 2016.

133 Mehul Srivastava and Sam Jones, "[Saudi war planes begin arriving at Turkey's Incirlik air base](#)," *Financial Times*, February 25, 2016.

134 Ian Black, "[Egypt's president under fire over Red Sea islands transfer to Saudi Arabia](#)," *The Guardian*, April 11, 2016.

135 "[Call for peace with Egypt's 'only disagreement' with Riyadh: Erdogan](#)," *Ahram Online*, March 4, 2015.

136 Ilhan Tanir, "[Turkey alliances over Syria conflict strained by Egypt coup](#)," *+972 Magazine*, August 25, 2013.

137 Geoffrey Aronson, "[Moscow and Washington are not that far apart on Syria](#)," *Al Jazeera*, March 15, 2016.

138 Margherita Stancati and Tamer El-Ghobashy, "[Saudi King Makes First Official Visit to Egypt](#)," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 7, 2016.

welcomed an end to that influence, but most can also live with its continuation in a way that Riyadh no longer can. But the lack of broader Arab support is becoming a real obstacle to removing Assad.

All these challenges notwithstanding, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, along with their allies, especially Turkey, will likely continue relying on funding and supporting armed opposition groups to try to influence the situation on the ground, while simultaneously pressing forward with efforts to convince Russia of the benefits of a post-Assad future in Syria to be achieved by a political agreement guaranteed by Washington and Moscow. But Saudi Arabia will not agree to an outcome if the new political order in Damascus does not significantly weaken the grip of Tehran and Hizballah over the Syrian government. This means that Riyadh and its allies will be attempting to go both over Tehran's head, by appealing directly to Moscow and Washington, and simultaneously behind Iran's back through covert programs designed to change the military equation on the ground to ensure that the current regime cannot remain in place if the conflict in Syria is to be resolved.

If this cannot be achieved in Geneva or elsewhere through diplomatic and political means, the war in Syria is likely to continue for quite some time. Supporters of the Syrian regime – notably Russia, Iran, Hizballah, and Iraqi militias – have demonstrated their willingness to take serious measures to prop up their Syrian client and defend their interests. If Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey cannot succeed in splitting Moscow off from Tehran and other supporters of the Syrian regime, they will have little choice but to continue to seek gains on the ground in order to change the incentive structure for their adversaries – locally, regionally, and internationally – to undermine Iran's influence and dominance in Syria.

Therefore, while direct intervention is unlikely, it is possible if the situation is perceived as sufficiently dire. And if diplomatic openings are insufficient, intensifying support for armed rebels will be difficult to resist. The most likely near-term trajectory of GCC policies in Syria will be increased, but largely frustrated, diplomatic efforts in Geneva and overtures to Moscow, combined with redoubled efforts to find ways of impacting the strategic equation inside Syria to create desperately needed new diplomatic and political openings. Saudi Arabia and Qatar are determined to find a way of ensuring that the outcome in Syria, at the very least, constitutes the outer limits of the expansion of Iranian influence in the Arab world and ushers in an era of containment.

