Identity Politics, Sectarian Conflict, and Regional Political Rivalry in the Middle East

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I An Introduction to Sectarian Identities

Although conflicts between Sunni and Shia Muslims are not the only sectarian violence in the Middle East, with an increase in violence against members of the Coptic community in Egypt before and after the overthrow of President Mubarak exciting domestic and international concern, most references to sectarian violence in the Middle East relate to conflicts between Sunnis and Shias.

Sunnis are a majority in most Muslim communities in Southeast Asia, China, South Asia, Africa, and most of the Arab World. Shias are in the majority of the Muslim population in Iran, Azerbaijan;
Iraq⁵, and Bahrain⁶. Minority communities are also found in Yemen⁷, Turkey⁸, Lebanon¹⁰, Saudi Arabia¹¹, Syria¹², Pakistan¹³, Afghanistan¹⁴, Nigeria¹⁵, and Tajikistan¹⁶.

The distinction between the two branches lies in deep disagreement about the succession of authority after the death of the Prophet Mohammad. Sunnis believe that Abu Bakr, the father of Muhammad’s wife Aisha, who was selected to succeed him by the Muslim umma on Muhammad’s death, was the Prophet’s rightful successor.¹⁷ Sunnis follow the four Rashidun “rightly guided Caliphs,” selected by the umma after the Prophet’s death: Abu Bakr (632–634 CE), Umar ibn al-Khattab (634–644 CE), Uthman ibn Affan (644–656 CE), and Ali Ibn Abi Talib (656–661 CE).

Shias believe that Muhammad, acting on the command of Allah, declared his cousin and son-in-law Ali Ibn Abi Talib¹⁸ the next Caliph, thus making him and his descendants the Prophet’s successors¹⁹. Shias deny the legitimacy of the first three “rightly guided Caliphs” (Abu Bakr, Umar and Uthman) and believe that Ali is the Prophet’s successor. Ali and his descendants by Fatimah – the Twelve Imams – are thus, in the Shia “Twelver” tradition, the legitimate Muslim leaders.²⁰

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⁵ About 55–60%.
⁶ About 65%.
⁷ Some 40% are Shia, mostly Zaidi.
⁸ About 15–20% are from the Alevi sect.
⁹ 30–40%.
¹⁰ 50% of the Muslim population.
¹¹ Some 25%.
¹² About 12% are Alawi.
¹³ 20–25%.
¹⁴ 15–20%.
¹⁵ Less than 6% of Nigeria’s Muslims.
¹⁶ Around 5%.
¹⁷ Sunnis believe that the Quran determines that leaders are to be chosen through the consensus of the umma.
¹⁸ Ali was the father of Muhammad's grandsons Hasan ibn Ali and Hussein ibn Ali, by Fatimah, Muhammad’s daughter by his wife Khadijah bint Khuwaylid.
¹⁹ Shias believe that Muhammad made this appointment clear in the Hadith of Ghadir Khumm (Arabic: مخ ر دغ خم), an account of a speech by Muhammad on 18 Dhu al-Hijjah, 10 AH (March 15, 632 CE) at Ghadir Khumm, near al-Jufah. The hadith is interpreted differently by Shias and Sunnis: The Shias maintain that in this hadith the prophet Muhammad appointed Ali as his heir and successor. The Sunnis recognize Muhammad’s declaration about Ali at Ghadir Khumm, but argue that he was simply urging the audience to hold his cousin and son-in-law in high esteem and affection. (Veccia Vaglieri, Laura, Ghadir Khumm, Encyclopedia of Islam, 2012, Brill Online).
   The Imamate of the Shias encompasses a prophetic function, unlike the Caliphate of the Sunnis, which was focused on political stability. Unlike the Sunnis, the Shias believe special spiritual qualities were granted to Muhammad and to Ali Ibn Abi Talib and the Imams that succeeded them. Shias believe the Imams are immaculate from sin and human error (ma'sūm) and can understand and interpret the meaning of the teachings of Islam. They are thus trustees (wasi) who bear the light of Muhammad (Nur Muhammaadin).
²⁰ Some 85% of Shias are “Twelvers.” Twelver (Arabic: Ithnā‘asharīyah; Persian: شیعه اثنا عشریه) Shia Islam or Imamiyyah (Arabic: إمامية) is the largest branch of Shia Islam. The term Twelver refers to adherents' belief in the Twelve Imams, and their belief that the last Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, lives in occultation and will reappear as the promised Mahdi. Twelvers constitute majorities in Iran, Azerbaijan, Iraq, and Bahrain; a plurality in Lebanon; and significant minorities in Kuwait, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Qatar, UAE and Saudi Arabia. Smaller minorities also exist in Oman, Yemen, Egypt and Uzbekistan.
Vali Nasr\textsuperscript{21} contextualizes this:\textsuperscript{22}

“The Shia view became crystallized at the siege and battle of Karbala in 680 C.E., when soldiers of the second Umayyad caliph, Yazid I, massacred Ali’s son Husayn along with seventy-two of his companions and family members.\textsuperscript{23} Husayn’s refusal to admit the legitimacy of the Umayyad caliphate… [was] shared with many of the people of Kufa, Ali’s capital. Many Kufans were liberated slaves and prisoners of war who had risen in revolt against the distinctly Arab character of Umayyad rule. Since that time, this town near Najaf [Kufa] has had a special emotional resonance for Shias. In 2004, when the firebrand Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr symbolically moved from Baghdad to Kufa to deliver his sermons dressed in a white funeral shroud, he was signalling his resolve to sponsor an armed challenge to the U.S. coalition, and Iraqi government authority.”\textsuperscript{24}

The Sunni and Shia traditions were embedded in political structures: Sunni Islam in the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates in Damascus and Baghdad, respectively, and Twelver Shia Islam, much later, in the Safavid dynasty\textsuperscript{25} which ruled from 1501 to 1722, and 1729 to 1736, over modern Iran, Azerbaijan, Bahrain and Armenia, most of Georgia, the North Caucasus, Iraq, Kuwait and Afghanistan, and parts of Turkey, Syria, Pakistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.\textsuperscript{26}

After the fall of the Abbasids in Baghdad, the Caliphate was claimed by the Ottomans. In 1453, after Mehmed’s conquest, the Ottoman seat moved to Constantinople. In 1517, Sultan Selim I incorporated the Mamluk Sultanate of Cairo, becoming defender of the Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina. Although the Ottomans were viewed as the representatives of the Sunni world, Ottoman Sultans did not use the title “Caliph” in state documents until the Empire declined. Then, and until the formal abolition of the Caliphate in 1924 after Turkey’s defeat in World War I, the Sultans used the title to give them prestige among Sunni Muslims.

\bibliography{references}


\textsuperscript{22} Dr. Nasr also served as senior advisor to the U.S. special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, between 2009 and 2011.

\textsuperscript{23} This event is commemorated by Shias each year on the 10\textsuperscript{th} day of Muharram in the Islamic lunar calendar, an occasion of collective lamentation and self-flagellation known as Ashoura. Processions of believers follow a tall staff with a black flag, topped by a carved hand symbolizing the five holy person held in highest regard — the Prophet Muhammed, his daughter Fatima al-Zahra, his son-in-law and cousin Ali, and his grandsons Hasan and Husayn. It excites Sunni disquiet and condemnation as Shias use the day to define their identity, often in extreme ways, leading Sunnis to condemn Shia practices.

\textsuperscript{24} Nasr op. cit. p. 40.

\textsuperscript{25} Persian: ﻢﺴﻠﺴﻠﻪ ﺣﺴﺒﻮorado, The Safavids arose from the Safaviyya Sufi order in Ardabil in Azerbaijan.

\textsuperscript{26} When the dynasty fell in 1736, the Safavids had revived Persia as a major economic power with an efficient state, and spread Shia Islam throughout Iran and large parts of the Caucasus, Anatolia, and Mesopotamia.
“Debates between Sunnis and Shias … have their own internal dynamics, but events … imposed a certain logic on them. The end of [WWI] brought important changes…. The Ottoman Empire collapsed, and within … Asia-Minor arose the modern, secular-nationalist Republic of Turkey under its … first President, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. Kemalism’s anti-Islamic program would … become the model for emerging Muslim states…. Nationalism and secularism replaced Islam as the credo of state leaders[27], and muftis (Sunnī religious leaders) and ayatollahs [Shīa religious teachers] alike found themselves relegated to the margins…. In 1924, the Turkish Republic abolished the caliphate, ending the last vestige of Muslim unity…. In the turmoil…, Shias and Sunnis found pressing reasons to join forces. Intra-Muslim polemics began to appear trivial in the harsh light [of] … colonialism and modernity as the enemy within, guilty of polluting Islam and facilitating the fall of the Caliphate during the Mongol invasion.”[28]

Nasr describes the interplay between clashing sectarian identities and the political context in the 20th century:

Faced with Westernization and secular modernization over the next 50 years, Sunnis and Shias collaborated in Egypt, the Maghreb, and the Levant. In 1959, the Al Azhar University in Cairo included courses on Shia jurisprudence in its curriculum by way of a fatwa[29] declaring Shia law the fifth school of Islamic law (fiqh).[30] But two factors later frustrated this collaboration: The birth of Wahabism in the Nejd in what became the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), and the Iranian revolution and the birth of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979.

Nasr relates the rise of Islamist fundamentalism and the present intensity of Sunni-Shia hostility to the Wahabi and Salafi[31] traditions originating from Ibn Taymiya (d. 1328 CE), who “saw the Shia as the enemy within, guilty of polluting Islam and facilitating the fall of the Caliphate during the Mongol invasion.”[32] Ibn Taymiya “dismissed Shiism as heresy and sanctioned violence against its opponents.”[33]

27 This was also the path followed in Iran. Reza Shah Pahlavi (Persian: رضا شاه پهلوی (15 March 1878 – 26 July 1944) was Shah from December 15, 1925 until forced to abdicate by the British and Soviet governments on September 16, 1941. As chief of the Iranian General Staff in 1921, Reza Pahlavi executed a coup against the pro-British government; in 1923, he was selected as Iran’s prime minister by the National Assembly. In 1925, he was appointed as the legal monarch (Shah) of Iran by Iran’s Constituent Assembly, which amended the 1906 Constitution to depose Ahmad Shah Qajar, the last Shah of the Qajar dynasty. Reza Shah established the Pahlavi dynasty as a secular, quasi-constitutional monarchy that lasted until 1979 when it was overthrown in the Iranian Revolution. He introduced social, economic, and political reforms, laying the foundations of the Iranian state, and requiring government ministers and Assembly members to wear secular clothes and not to invoke the Quran in debates on public policy.


29 A fatwa (Arabic: فتاوى) is a legal opinion or learned interpretation that the Sheikhul Islam, a qualified jurist or mufti, can give on issues pertaining to Islamic law. This fatwa was issued by the Rector of al Azhar, Sheikh Mahmoud Shaltut.

30 The four Sunni schools are: Hanafi (Turkey, the Balkans, Central Asia, Indian subcontinent, China and Egypt); Maliki (North Africa, West Africa and several Arab states in the Gulf); Shafi’i (Kurdistan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Egypt, East Africa, Yemen, Somalia and southern parts of India); and Hanbali (Saudi Arabia).

31 The Salafist movement is an ultra-conservative movement within Sunni Islam that takes a fundamentalist approach to Islam, emulating the Prophet Muhammad and his earliest followers – al-salaf al-salih, the “pious forefathers” – and rejecting any form of religious innovation, or bid’ah, while requiring the implementation of sharia (Islamic law). A hadith of the Prophet Muhammad has him saying, “The people of my own generation are the best, then those who come after them, and then those of the next generation.” This is seen as a call to Muslims to follow the example of those first three generations, known collectively as the salaf or “pious Predecessors” (الصالحين as-Salaf as-Sālih), including Muhammad, the “Companions” (Saḥabah), the “Followers” (Tabi‘un) and the “Followers of the Followers” (Tabi‘ al-Tabi‘in). The hadith is narrated in the Sahih of Abū Bakr ibn ‘Umar.

32 The Mongols, led by Genghis Khan, were a confederation of nomadic tribes which had conquered China. In 1220 they took Samarkand and Bukhara. By mid-century they had taken Russia, Central Europe, northern Iran,
followers. More important, he put forth a formal Sunni refutation of Shiism that set the tone for … sectarian conflict even to this day."

Wahabism, Nasr notes, "emerged in the Arabian peninsula as a … reform movement in the 19th century. … Abdul Wahab was a purist. His creed reflected the simple ways of the desert tribesmen of the Nejd…. He sought to cleanse Islam of … cultural practices … it had … incorporated over the centuries. They had corrupted and weakened Islam, he said, and must be purged. Following the example of Ibn Taymiya, he rejected anything other than a literal reading of the Quran and the prophetic traditions."33

The conflict was exacerbated in religious terms by the Islamic revolution in Iran. While Mohammed Reza Pahlavi was both Iranian and Shia, and had covert relations with Israel, he was by the 1970s a known quantity in the Arab world, having developed close relations with Anwar Sadat of Egypt, Sultan Qaboos bin Said al Said of Oman, and other Gulf leaders. The Shah had abandoned Iran’s territorial claims to Bahrain34 in March 1970, and signed a treaty normalizing relations with Iraq in 1975. Iran had worked with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), Iraq, Abu Dhabi, Kuwait, and Qatar in raising oil prices and cutting production on October 16, 1973 in the aftermath of the war between Israel and Arab states. The Empress Farah had made a pilgrimage to Shia shrines in Iraq in 1977, and been received by Saddam Hussein.

The emergence of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in Iran after the Islamic Revolution effected a radical change: Khomeini attacked “the concept of monarchy,” causing concern in all the Gulf monarchies. Khomeini’s call for support for the oppressed and abandonment of the oppressors caused further tensions, as Iranian Shia jurists judged Arab regimes to be oppressors. Khomeini sought to spread his Islamic revolution in the Muslim world, leading Shias to demand their rights. The KSA countered by exporting Wahabi doctrine and establishing madrassahs35 in Pakistan, in which many Afghan Taliban were educated. Iran’s diplomatic isolation from its neighbors, and

and the Caucasus, and in 1258, under Hulagu Khan, they invaded Baghdad and ended the once-glorious Abbasid Empire.

33 Among the consequences were the desecration of the shrine of the Shia Imam Husayn by Wahabi armies in 1802 CE; the destruction of the Prophet Muhammad’s tombstone in Medina in 1804, to prevent it being "worshipped"; and, over a century later, an attempt by the Ikhwan (Brotherhood) army of Abdul- Aziz ibn Saud (later the first king of Saudi Arabia), to impose Wahabism on the Shia population of Al Hasa in 1913 CE; and the destruction of the cemetery of Jannat al-Baghi in Medina in 1925 – where the daughter of the Prophet, and the second, fourth, fifth, and sixth Shia Imams were buried. The Ikhwan sought Abdul- Aziz ibn Saud’s permission to convert or kill the Shias of Al-Hasa, and although he did not grant it, they killed a large number in 1926. Although the King did not permit the eradication of the Shia, they were systematically marginalized and stripped of public roles.

34 Iran periodically made claims to Bahrain, maintaining that the island was improperly removed from Iranian sovereignty by Britain in 1802 CE; the destruction of the Prophet Muhammad’s tombstone in Medina in 1804, to prevent it being "worshipped"; and, over a century later, an attempt by the Ikhwan (Brotherhood) army of Abdul- Aziz ibn Saud (later the first king of Saudi Arabia), to impose Wahabism on the Shia population of Al Hasa in 1913 CE; and the destruction of the cemetery of Jannat al-Baghi in Medina in 1925 – where the daughter of the Prophet, and the second, fourth, fifth, and sixth Shia Imams were buried. The Ikhwan sought Abdul- Aziz ibn Saud’s permission to convert or kill the Shias of Al-Hasa, and although he did not grant it, they killed a large number in 1926. Although the King did not permit the eradication of the Shia, they were systematically marginalized and stripped of public roles.

35 Islamic schools.
internationally, intensified during the Iran–Iraq War from 1980 to 1988. All neighboring Arab states, except Syria, provided logistic and economic support to Baghdad. The eight years of war inflicted great costs and loss of life, with Iraqi forces using chemical weapons, and both sides deploying large resources of armor and artillery.


II  Wider Dimensions

1. Context:

While sectarian identities define part of today’s conflicts, their relevance was sharpened by the rise of anti-Americanism, religious conservatism, and extremism. As Nasr noted in 2006: “Sunni extremism feeds on anti-Shia bias…. The spasms of sectarian rivalries strengthen Sunni extremism and sanction the violence, which – at least in places where the Shia can fight back – leads to a vicious cycle of provocation and revenge.” He argued that sectarian politics sharpened debates about democracy, individual rights, the rule of law, and government reforms, by focusing on the relative power of Shias and Sunnis in creating governments, and controlling state resources. The displacement of Saddam Hussein in 2003 and the subsequent war in Iraq, moreover, changed the balance of regional power, leading to a struggle to shape a new equilibrium in a region of weak states and contending local factions. Saudi and Iranian patronage exacerbates sectarian politics, whether the principals intend this or not.

Neither the KSA nor Iran wishes to confront the other on the battlefield; each engages asymmetrically. Iran backs militant non-state – primarily Shia – actors and the KSA has deployed substantial financial resources, pan-Arab media, and U.S. political and intelligence support, balancing alignment with Washington with unilateral Arab diplomacy. Sectarian differences between the KSA and Iran are not the principal determinants of the policies of either regime. The sectarian schism between Sunni and Shia influences the calculus of both governments, and each manipulates sectarian concerns in its geopolitical positioning. Both governments also have key constituents that define themselves in sectarian terms, requiring both, especially the KSA, to factor these in, but sectarian priorities do not drive the geostrategic agenda of either state.37

The KSA monarchy faces pressure from the Salafi ulema to counter Shia advances, and public pressure to protect Sunnis. The Saudi rulers counter Iran’s pan-Islamist populism, fearing efforts to weaken Saudi primacy. After Hezbollah’s popularity rose on the Arab “street” after the 2006 war in Lebanon, the KSA sought to depict Iran’s Shia, and Persian ambitions, as a threat to Sunnis and Arabs. The KSA’s own Shia community in the Eastern Province bore the brunt. Iran downplays sectarianism in the bilateral relationship, criticizing anti-Shia rhetoric from the Kingdom, but recognizing that voices from the Wahabi ulema are not those of the monarchy. Both states have also cooperated, at times, to mitigate sectarian conflict in Lebanon and Iraq.

36 Nasr, op. cit. p. 27.
Other Gulf states, notably Oman, Qatar, and the UAE, engage bilaterally with Iran. The KSA has engaged Iran directly when it was concerned about ambiguity in U.S. policy, notably after the 2007 U.S. National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) suggested that Tehran had halted its nuclear weapons program. Iran’s vacillating policy towards its Arab neighbors, reflects internal disagreements between factions in the Islamic Republic, some of which see the Gulf as a zone of shared economic opportunity, while others seek hegemony.

The Shia communities in Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province, Bahrain, and Kuwait are points of tension. These are not under Iran’s control; spiritual ties are real, but none has encouraged adoption of Iran’s unique theocratic-democratic construct, velāyat-e faqīh. Radical elements may become empowered, however, if political inclusion, civil rights, and economic advancement are blocked.

The risk and consequences of sectarian schism are sharpened by the collapse of the state in much of the Middle East. Ernst Gellner defined nationalism as “the striving to make culture and polity congruent, to endow a culture with its own political roof….“ He also offered a provisional definition of a nation, citing shared culture and reciprocal recognition of a shared national identity. In the sense defined by Max Weber, the state is the agency that possesses the monopoly of legitimate violence in a society. When the state lacks legitimacy, or cannot secure its borders, or provide protection to its citizens, people mobilize on the basis of other identities, especially those defined by ethnicity, culture, and religion.

Nor are all societies in the Middle East endowed with states. The Kurds, who regard themselves as a nation, have become highly relevant in the conflicts in Iraq and Syria, and in Turkey; they also have important agendas and do not exercise state control over territory commensurate with their residence.

38 “Guardianship of the Jurist”: The proposition that a government under Islamic law (sharia) requires a leading Islamic jurist (faqih) to provide “guardianship” (velāyat) over the people. It was advanced in 19 lectures on Islamic Government by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, between January 21 and February 8, 1970 while in exile in Najaf in Iraq. Notes of the lectures were published under the title “The Islamic Government, Authority of the Jurist,” in 1970. The principle underpinned the 1979 Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, in which Ayatollah Khomeini served as the first faqih. [See Dabashi, Hamid, Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundations of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, New York University Press, 1993].

39 The structural conditions for explosive intra-state conflicts of the sort we have seen in the region include weak state capacity and defective legitimacy; historical or current experience of grievance by one or more subservient or marginalized groups, and the politicization of sub-national identities. Common catalysts include the narrowing of channels for political expression, manipulation of social grievances, economic mismanagement, and the disruption of livelihoods. Familiar triggers include elections, economic shocks, the death or removal of a political leader, or a natural disaster causing social disruption.


41 Gellner, op. cit. p. 7: “1. Two men are of the same nation if and only if they share the same culture, where culture in turn means a system of ideas and signs and associations, and ways of behaving and communicating. 2. Two men are of the same nation if and only if they recognize each other as belonging to the same nation. In other words, nations maketh man; nations are the artefacts of men’s convictions and loyalties and solidarities.”

42 Weber, Max, “Politik als Beruf,” the second lecture in a series to the Free Students Union of Bavaria on January 28, 1919. The state is the “only human Gemeinschaft which lays claim to the monopoly on the legitimated use of physical force. However, this monopoly is limited to a certain geographical area, and in fact this limitation to a particular area is one of the things that defines a state.” Weber’s Rationalism and Modern Society. Trans. and ed. by Tony Waters and Dagmar Waters, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2015. See also Weber, Max. Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft, 1921, p. 29.

43 The Kurds are dispersed across parts of Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran, with different relations with each state.

The states in the Mashriq (Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, Syria, and Iraq) and the Arabian peninsula (the KSA and (north) Yemen) arose out of the Arab Revolt of 1916, leading to the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in 1918, and its dissolution thereafter. These circumstances did not predispose to stable state structures. The Sykes–Picot Asia Minor Agreement, signed on May 16, 1916 by the United Kingdom and the French Third Republic, with the assent of the Russian Empire, defined the respective spheres of influence and control of France and Britain in Asia Minor if the Triple Entente were to defeat the Ottomans. Neither the Sykes–Picot Agreement, nor the Treaty of Sèvres that followed it, facilitated effective state formation.

A summary history of Iraq and Syria since 1920 makes their weakness evident.

Iraq’s modern borders were demarcated in 1920 when the Ottoman Empire was divided in the Treaty of Sèvres. The United Kingdom exercised control under the British Mandate of Mesopotamia. A Hashemite monarchy was established in 1921 and the Kingdom of Iraq became independent in 1932. In 1958, the monarchy was overthrown, and the Republic of Iraq was created. The Arab Socialist Ba’ath Party ruled from 1968 until 2003. After an invasion by the United States and its allies in 2003, Saddam Hussein’s Ba’athists were removed and parliamentary elections leading to Shia dominance were held in 2005. The American presence in Iraq ended in 2011, and the Iraqi insurgency intensified, as fighters from the Syrian Civil War spilled into the country.

France was assigned the League of Nations mandate of Syria, which included the territory of present-day Lebanon and Alexandretta, in addition to Syria. French administration took the form of the Syrian Federation (1922–24), the State of Syria (1924–30) and the Syrian Republic (1930–1958), as well as the State of Greater Lebanon, the Alawite State and Jabal Druze State. The French mandate of Syria lasted until 1943, when Syria and Lebanon achieved independence, Hatay having been annexed by Turkey in 1939. French troops left Syria and Lebanon in April 1946, after Syria became independent as a parliamentary republic on October 24, 1945. The post-independence period saw military coups and coup attempts from 1949 to 1971. In 1958, Syria briefly united with Egypt in the United Arab Republic. This ended with the Syrian coup d’État in 1961, leading to The Arab Republic of Syria after a constitutional referendum. Its term ended with the Ba’athist coup in 1963, since which the Ba’ath Party has retained power despite an intra-party coup in 1966, and the emergence of the Corrective Movement in 1970, which brought Hafez al-Assad to power. Syria was governed under Emergency Law suspending most constitutional protections from 1963 to 2011. Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father in 2000. Since March 2011, Syria has seen an uprising against Assad and the Ba’athist government. A Syrian Interim Government was formed by the Syrian National Coalition in March 2013 and its representatives have taken up Syria’s seat in the Arab League.

45 The Arab world extending eastwards from Egypt – “place of sunrise,” from the verb sharaqa (شراقة) “to shine, illuminate” and “to rise”), referring to the east, where the sun rises.
46 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sykes%E2%80%93Picot_Agreement [retrieved May 1, 2016].
47 The agreement deviated from the Reglement Organique on the governance and non-intervention in the affairs of the Maronite, Orthodox Christian, Druze, and Muslim communities, under the Beirut Vilayet of June 1861 and September 1864; clashed with the Balfour Declaration of 1917 which noted that “His Majesty’s government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object”; and negated British promises made to Arabs through Colonel T. E. Lawrence for a national Arab homeland in the area of Greater Syria, in exchange for their joining with British forces against the Ottoman Empire.
48 Under tutelage of the League of Nation.
2. Weak states and national identities

Bassam Tibi noted in 1998\(^{49}\) that all states in the Arab Middle East were governed by authoritarian regimes with a culture of “neo-patriarchy.”\(^{50}\) Tibi described them as “nation-states only in a formal sense…. From modernity they adopted the technology of rule, but not the democratic logic of government. Rhetorically, they claim to have the legitimacy of governments by the people, and … all Middle Eastern states … enjoy international legitimacy. Internally, however, these states lack – by all reasonable measures – the legitimacy they claim.\(^{51}\) Under these conditions, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism contributes to de-legitimizing these states, and thus to their political destabilization.\(^{52}\)

Tibi, like Gellner, argues that a nation-state presupposes a political community which shares norms and values. In the Arab states that he is critiquing, however, “citizenship has no substance” and is not related to “any awareness of belonging to a … political community and … the related polity.” Instead, “in the Middle East, an awareness of being a member of a community connotes membership not in a civil society, but in an ethnic or sectarian sub-community and its subordinate identity.”\(^{53}\)

Linking this to the appeal of Islamic fundamentalism, he argues that “ideal and real patterns of collective identity” coexist in these countries. “The religious ideal of an all subsuming Islamic umma/community underlies the supposition that there is a superordinate Islamic identity given to the faithful by an overarching Islamic civilization. Similarly, the belief that there is an Arab umma/nation derived from a superordinate multinational pan-Arab identity. In Arabic, the term umma is employed indiscriminately for both meanings.”\(^{54}\)

Speaking to the situation in Iraq under Saddam Hussein, he suggests that there are also other identities imposed by the states. “We might … refer to the idea of ‘al-Iraqiya/Iraqihood’… … imposed in Iraq by the mukhabarat\(^{55}\) of the totalitarian regime. This constitutes a pattern of national superordinate identity, since the real identity patterns in Iraq are either ethnic … or sectarian … or both…. The real identities in the Middle East are related to communal, ethnic and/or sectarian subgroups, each within its own local culture. The real conflict is thus not a conflict between Islamic fundamentalism and pan-nationalist or local-nationalist regimes. In reality, fundamentalism is, despite its universalist rhetoric, imbued with ethnicity and sectarianism. Similarly, the crisis of the nation-state lies not in the threat of an Islamic system of government, but rather in the potential breakdown of existing nation-state regimes induced through mobilization on religious grounds.”\(^{56}\)

Writing in 1998, Tibi did not anticipate the destruction of the Iraqi state as a result of the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, and the dismantlement of the Ba’athist state administration. Iraqi citizens’

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\(^{52}\) Tibi, op. cit. p. 121.

\(^{53}\) Tibi, op. cit p. 122.

\(^{54}\) Tibi, op. cit.

\(^{55}\) The Iraqi Intelligence Service (Jihaz Al-Mukhabarat Al-Amma), also known as the Mukhabarat or General Directorate of Intelligence, was the main state intelligence organization in Iraq under Saddam Hussein.

\(^{56}\) Tibi, op. cit.
assertion of their ethnic and sectarian identities in the aftermath of these events is, however, consistent with his and Nasr’s analyses.

Neither Iraq nor Syria is a nation-state – “a sovereign state of which most of the citizens … are united also by factors which define a nation, such as language or common descent.”57 A more extensive definition makes the defect still clearer: “A nation state … conjoins the political entity of a state to the cultural entity of a nation, from which it aims to derive its political legitimacy to rule, and potentially its status as a sovereign state…. A state is a … political and geopolitical entity, whilst a nation is a cultural and ethnic one. The term ‘nation state’ implies that the two coincide…. ”58 They do not in either Iraq or Syria.

III Conclusions

The conflicts in the region are driven by several factors, some related to weak state formation and the persistence of sub-national identities that supersede national loyalties; some that are the product of authoritarian (or totalitarian) state structures that provide no rights or voice to their citizens; some that are the result of Muslim revolutionary ambitions exemplified by the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the accession to power of the Taliban in Afghanistan, and the campaigns of al Qaeda and ISIL/Da’esh; and some that derive from sub-regional power politics founded on perceived national interests and security concerns, notably between the KSA and Iran, also influenced by Turkey and Egypt.

The impact of external interventions has also been significant, both on local realities and regional perceptions: the schism between Washington and Tehran after the Islamic Revolution and the occupation of the U.S. Embassy in 1979; Soviet, Chinese, French, and U.S.59 support for Iraq in its war against Iran from 1980 to 198860; the close alliance between the KSA and the U.S. in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm after Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990; the displacement of the Taliban in Afghanistan, followed by the invasion of Iraq, without UNSC authorization, by a U.S.-led coalition in 200361, the disbandment of the Ba’athist government and Iraqi military forces, the execution of Saddam Hussein, and revelations about interrogation of prisoners in Abu Ghraib; U.S. and other Western states’ relations with the governments of Egypt and Syria, notably to bolster peace agreements with Israel; Western ambivalence and Russian strategic purpose in the Syrian civil war; and the conclusion of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of

57 Oxford English Dictionary.
59 Howard Teicher, National Security Council Director of Political-Military Affairs, accompanied Donald Rumsfeld to Baghdad in 1983. In an affidavit in 1995 he affirmed that the Central Intelligence Agency directed armaments and hi-tech components to Iraq through fronts and friendly third parties (Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Kuwait): “[T]he United States actively supported the Iraqi war effort by supplying the Iraqis with billions of dollars of credits, by providing U.S. military intelligence and advice to the Iraqis, and by closely monitoring third country arms sales to Iraq to make sure that Iraq had the military weaponry required. The United States also provided strategic operational advice to the Iraqis to better use their assets in combat…. The CIA, including both CIA Director Case and Deputy Director Gates, knew of, approved of, and assisted in the sale of non-U.S. origin military weapons, ammunition and vehicles to Iraq. My notes, memoranda and other documents in my NSC files show or tend to show that the CIA knew of, approved of, and assisted in the sale of non-U.S. origin military weapons, munitions and vehicles to Iraq. [Statement by former NSC official Howard Teicher to the U.S. District Court, Southern District of Florida, 1/31/95].
60 http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/iran-iraq.htm; see also https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iran%E2%80%93Iraq_War#Iraq_2 [retrieved May 6, 2016].
Action on July 14, 2015 between the P5+1 and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Behind all this, the unresolved, though perhaps frozen, Israel-Palestine conflict still festers, and serves as tinder for radicals competing for support on the street.

These factors have played out in different ways in the four major sectarian conflicts of the past decade – Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain.

1. Iraq

Among some 32 million Iraqis, 25 percent are non-Arab minorities – Kurds number about 7 million, followed by Assyrians, Turkmen, Yazidis, Armenians, Circassians, and Iranians, with smaller communities of Palestinians and Chechens. A significant Jewish community, over 100,000 in 1948, dwindled due to emigration to Israel.

Some 55 percent of Iraqis are ithna-Ashari (Twelver) Shia; Hanafi Sunnis comprise about 30 percent, followed by Christians, Yazidis, Zoroastrians, and Baha’is. Many Iraqi Kurds are Sunnis of the Shafi’i school. Shia unity in Iraq was fractured after the Ba’athists came to power in 1968 and Saddam Hussein focused on stabilizing a country divided along social, ethnic, religious, and economic lines. To do so, Saddam engaged in widespread repression while investing in economic development.

He modernized the economy while building a strong security apparatus. Seeking to broaden support, he implemented welfare and development programs in the 1970s, leveraging rising oil revenues to diversify the economy into mining and industry and expand the road and electricity networks.

The Shias became less politically active, with some joining the Ba’ath Party, although a few supported leftist parties and attracted Ba’athist ire. Disaffection led a growing number to look to the Shia ulema. In 1974, Shia religious processions turned into political protests, leading to clashes with the authorities. Several Da’wa Party members were executed, and Ayatollah Abul Qasim al-Khoei visited Saddam to make a short-lived peace. More executions followed in 1977 after fresh...
riots, which escalated after the Islamic Revolution in Iran, when the al-Da’wa Party mobilized to create an Islamic state in Iraq. Saddam Hussein cracked down hard, killing al-Da’wa leaders and purging the Ba’ath party and the armed forces of senior Shia members.

In June 1979, Shia Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr was apprehended for inciting violence and placed under house arrest. After an attempt was made to assassinate Saddam in 1980, Sadr was executed. In 1982, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq was formed by Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim to overthrow the government. Al-Hakim tried to join forces with al-Da’wa and the Jamaat al‘Ulama but ethnic divisions frustrated this. Iraq’s war with Iran, meanwhile, led Saddam to woo support from Iraq’s Shias by providing resources to the predominantly Shia southern provinces, and emphasizing Iraq’s inclusive Arab identity.

After the First Gulf War in 1991, Iraq’s Shias rose against Saddam in March and April 1991. The insurgency was largely uncoordinated, fuelled by the sense that foreign support would be forthcoming. Before the uprising, on February 15, 1991, U.S. President George H. W. Bush called for a coup to topple Saddam Hussein. Bush made a similar appeal on March 1, two days after the liberation of Kuwait. On February 24, shortly before the ceasefire, the Voice of Free Iraq called on the Iraqis to overthrow Saddam.

Shias in southern Iraq, where the uprisings began, were either demoralized Shia conscripts from the Iraqi Army or members of the Da’wa Party and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq. They were joined by Kurdish nationalists and far-left groups. In the first two weeks most cities fell to rebel forces, but the revolutionaries could not consolidate because of internal divisions. The government retained control over Baghdad, regrouped, and crushed the rebels in a brutal campaign spearheaded by the Republican Guard.

67 Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr (March 1, 1935 – April 9, 1980) was an Iraqi Shia cleric, philosopher, and ideological founder of the Islamic Da’wa Party. He is the father-in-law of Muqtada al-Sadr and a cousin of Muqtada’s father Muhammad Sadeq al-Sadr and Imam Musa as-Sadr. His Shia lineage goes back to the Prophet Muhammad, through the seventh Shia Imam, Musa al-Kazim.

68 On the VOA broadcast, President GHW Bush said: “There is another way for the bloodshed to stop: and that is, for the Iraqi military and the Iraqi people to take matters into their own hands and force Saddam Hussein, the dictator, to step aside and then comply with the United Nations’ resolutions and rejoin the family of peace-loving nations.”

69 On this occasion President Bush broadcast: “In my own view ... the Iraqi people should put [Saddam] aside, and that would facilitate the resolution of all these problems that exist and certainly would facilitate the acceptance of Iraq back into the family of peace-loving nations.”

70 The speaker was Salah Omar al-Ali, a former member of the Ba’athist Revolutionary Command Council. Al-Ali urged the Iraqis to overthrow the “criminal tyrant of Iraq,” asserting that Saddam “will flee the battlefield when he becomes certain that the catastrophe has engulfed every street, every house and every family in Iraq.” He continued: “Rise to save the homeland from the clutches of dictatorship so that you can devote yourself to avoiding the dangers of the continuation of the war and destruction.Honorable Sons of the Tigris and Euphrates, at these decisive moments of your life, and while facing the danger of death at the hands of foreign forces, you have no option in order to survive and defend the homeland but put an end to the dictator and his criminal gang.”

71 Another insurgency broke out in March in Kurdish areas of northern Iraq. Unlike the spontaneous rebellion in the south, the uprising in the north was organized by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). The defection of the government-recruited Kurdish home guard militias boosted the rebellion.

72 Many exiled Iraqi dissidents, including Iran-based Badr Brigade militants of SCIRI, joined the rebellion. SCIRI concentrated their efforts on the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala, alienating many people who did not subscribe to their Shia Islamist agenda and pro-Iranian slogans, for which SCIRI was later criticized by the Da’wa Party. Rebel ranks were swelled by mutinous Sunni members of the military, leftist members of the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP), and allied Saddam Arab nationalists, and disaffected Ba’athists. But the diverse revolutionary groups, militias, and parties were united only in their desire for regime change. They had no common political or military program or leadership, and little coordination.
In the month-long fighting, tens of thousands died and nearly two million were displaced.\textsuperscript{73} The government forced the relocation of Marsh Arabs and the draining of the marshes in the Tigris–Euphrates system.\textsuperscript{74} The Gulf War Coalition established no-fly zones over northern and southern Iraq, enabling the Kurdish opposition to establish the Kurdish Autonomous Republic\textsuperscript{75} in what is now Iraqi Kurdistan.\textsuperscript{76}

Shia and Kurdish actions in Iraq after Saddam Hussein was toppled in 2003, thus occasion no surprise, nor do efforts by Sunni members of Iraq’s former armed forces to restore their erstwhile power. The circumstances of Nouri Kamal Mohammed Hasan al-Maliki, prime minister of Iraq from 2006–2014, secretary-general of the Islamic Da’wa Party and a vice president of Iraq after stepping down as prime minister\textsuperscript{77}, illustrate the continuum. Al-Maliki’s first government succeeded the Iraqi Transitional Government installed by the U.S.-led coalition. His first Cabinet was sworn in on May 20, 2006; his second, in which he was also acting interior minister, defense minister, and national security minister, was approved on December 21, 2010.

Al-Maliki was a Shia dissident in the late 1970s and fled into exile for 24 years after being sentenced to death. He rose in the leadership of the Da’wa Party, coordinated anti-Saddam guerrillas, and built relationships with Iranian and Syrian officials in trying to overthrow Saddam.

He worked closely with the U.S. before and after the withdrawal of Coalition Forces from Iraq in 2011, but his use of Shia militias to supplement the Iraqi security forces led to opposition from non-Shia Iraqis, and opened the way for the entry into Iraq of ISIL/Da’esh. After Iraqi forces suffered

\textsuperscript{73} In March and early April, nearly two million Iraqis, 1.5 million of them Kurds, escaped to the mountains in the north, the southern marshes, and into Turkey and Iran. By April 6, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimated that about 750,000 Iraqi Kurds had fled to Iran and 280,000 to Turkey, with 300,000 more gathered at the Turkish border. Many were gunned down by Republican Guard helicopters, which strafed columns of civilians in both the north and south.

\textsuperscript{74} In March 1993, a U.N. investigation reported hundreds of executions of Iraqis from the marshes in prior months, reporting that the Iraqi army’s behavior in the south is the most “worrying development [in Iraq] in the past year” and added that following the formation of the no-fly zone, the army switched to long-range artillery attacks, followed by ground assaults resulting in “heavy casualties” and widespread destruction of property, along with allegations of mass executions. In November 1993, the U.N. reported that 40% of the marshlands were drained, and there were unconfirmed reports that the Iraq army had used poisonous gas against villages near the Iranian border. In December 1993, the U.S. Department of State accused Iraq of “indiscriminate military operations in the south, which include the burning of villages and forced relocation of non-combatants.” On February 23, 1994, Iraq diverted waters from the Tigris River south and east of the marshes, to render farmlands useless and drive the rebels hiding there back to the drained marshes. In April 1994, the U.S. officials said Iraq was continuing a military campaign in Iraq’s remote marshes. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1991_uprisings_in_Iraq [retrieved April 30, 2016].

\textsuperscript{75} Fighting continued until October 1991 when an agreement was made for Iraqi withdrawal from parts of the Kurdish region, and the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government and a Kurdish Autonomous Republic in three provinces of northern Iraq. Tens of thousands of Iraqi soldiers dug-in along the front, backed by tanks and heavy artillery, while the Iraqi government blockaded food, fuel, and other deliveries. The U.S. Air Force continued to enforce a no-fly zone over northern Iraq. The stalemate was broken in the 1994–1997 Iraqi Kurdish Civil War, when, due to the PUK’s alliance with Iran, the KDP called in Iraqi military support leading to the capture of Arbil and Sulaymaniyah, Iraqi government forces retreated after the U.S. launched missile strikes on southern Iraq. On January 1, 1997, the U.S. and its allies launched Operation Northern Watch to continue the no-fly zone in the north after Operation Provide Comfort ended. The Kurds expanded their area of control after participating in the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, which led to the new Iraqi government’s recognition of Kurdish autonomy in this region.

\textsuperscript{76} In March 1991, the U.S. and its allies established a no-fly zone over northern Iraq and provided humanitarian assistance to the Kurds. On April 17, U.S. forces began to take control of areas more than 100 km inside Iraq to build camps for Kurdish refugees. Many Shia refugees fled to Syria, where thousands settled in Sayyidah Zaynab.

defeats by ISIL forces in the Northern Iraq Offensive, the U.S. determined that that al-Maliki should step down, and on August 14, 2014, he resigned as prime minister, but in September 2014, was elected as one of three vice presidents.

ISIL’s success in the Northern Iraq Offensive transformed the security situation not only in Iraq, but also in Syria.

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78 The Northern Iraq offensive began on June 5, 2014, when the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and its allies began an offensive in northern Iraq against the Iraqi government, building on earlier clashes in December 2013. ISIL captured several cities and related territory, securing Samarra on June 5, Mosul on June 10 and Tikrit on June 11. As Iraqi government forces fled south on June 13, the Kurdish forces took control of the oil hub of Kirkuk. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki sought to have parliament declare a national state of emergency on June 10, but many Sunni Arab and Kurdish legislators boycotted the session to block an expansion of the prime minister’s powers. By late June, Iraq had lost control of its border with Jordan and Syria.

Coalition Air-Strike Targets – as of April 26, 2016

Air Strikes in Iraq and Syria

US-led coalition strikes:
- Iraq: 7,817
- Syria: 3,649

Russian air strikes:
- 1,500

Note: Approximate location of areas Russia has targeted; number of strikes unknown.


Financing Sources for ISIL: Oil

Source: World Energy Outlook, EA, Petroleum Economist, ISW.
The Northern Iraq Offensive in 2014 was supported by many Sunni Arabs in the Gulf, despite their governments' concerns about the rise of ISIL/Da’esh. Many saw Iraq’s Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki as an Iranian stooge. The ISIL advance fuelled sectarian passions, with the Iraqi government criticizing Gulf States for arming and backing Sunni fighters, and accusing KSA of promoting “genocide” in Iraq. Support is not limited to the Gulf, of course. Tunisia, Russia, Turkey, Jordan and France are all major sources of recruits.

### Nationalities of Foreign Fighters with ISIL – as of December 2015

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Number of Fighters</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tunisia</td>
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<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
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Source: The Soutan Group (December 2015).

2. **Syria**

In 2014, Lawrence Potter called the Syrian civil war an “intensely sectarian conflict.” By the end of 2012, the UN Human Rights Council had concluded that “the 21-month-old civil war in Syria is rapidly devolving into an ‘overtly sectarian’ and ethnic conflict.” An extensive collaboration on Wikipedia concluded.

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80 “Today’s battle is waged in the Baghdad of Rasheed and Damascus of Waleed on behalf of the whole Islamic nation to restore anew its dignity. God, grant your victory,” tweeted Hakem al-Mutairi, head of a Kuwaiti Salafi group, referring to the Umayyad caliph in Syria, and his Abbasid successor in Iraq. http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-iraq-security-gulf-opinion-idUKKBN0EY1UF20140623 [retrieved April 30, 2016].

81 “Smile if you wish, the apostates (Shi'ites) in Kerbala are taking to the streets chanting ‘We want the Messiah to appear’ in order to save them from the holy warriors,” tweeted Ibraheem al-Faris, a professor of religion at Saudi Arabia’s King Saud University.


84 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sectarianism_and_minorities_in_the_Syrian_Civil_War#cite_ref-2 [retrieved April 28, 2016].
“The focus of the conflict ... [is] a ruling minority Alawite government ... and allied Shia governments such as Iran, pitted against the country’s Sunni Muslim majority who are aligned with the Syrian opposition and their Sunni Turkish and Persian Gulf State backers. The conflict has drawn in other ethno-religious minorities, including Armenians, Assyrians, Druze, Palestinians, Kurds, Yazidi, Mhallami, Mandaean, Arab Christians, Turkmen and Greeks.

“In 2012 the first Christian Free Syrian Army (FSA) unit formed, yet ... the Assad government still had the reluctant support of the majority of the country’s Christians of various ethnicities and denominations. By 2013 an increasing number of Christians favored opposition. In 2014, the predominantly Christian Syriac Military Council formed an alliance with the FSA, and other Syrian Christian militias such as the Syriac Security Office (Sutoro) had joined the Syrian opposition against the Assad regime.”

In her paper in June 2013, Nicole Bibbins Sedaca argued that the conflict began like other uprisings in the “Arab Spring,” with citizens claiming freedoms from a dictator. She continued: “But it is unquestionably religious now, as we see from the definition of religious conflict put forward by noted scholar of religion Monica Duffy Toft [who] ... defines ... religious civil war as civil war in which combatants identify with different faith traditions or are of the same faith but contest the role of their religion vis-à-vis society and the state. Syria falls squarely [within] ... [this] definition.”

Daniel Philpott, in an interview on July 2, 2013, on The Role of Religion in Post-conflict Syria, observed, “The Bashar al-Assad dictatorship follows a pattern of Arab dictatorship with respect to religion.... It can be seen as a protector of minorities ... the Alawites and Christians, but it follows a pattern of authoritarian rule ... based upon an Arab nationalist ideology that is all about modernization.... The view of religion is that Islam is something that ... needs to be contained and managed.”

He argued that many feared that if Assad was overthrown, Syria “will not become a ... secular democracy, but Sunni Islamist ... an ally of other Sunni Muslim forces around the region. ... [T]he Arab nationalist project has been an economic disaster, often built on socialism, on statist-style economies. ...The failure of nationalism creates a vacuum. People’s religious identities haven’t gone away; they’ve started to mobilize around them politically.” The validity of these assertions of societal fracture, and divisions along ethnic, sectarian, and secularist-religious axes is reflected in the fragmentation of control in Syria today.

86 Potter, p. 36.
87 (Syriac: مەܟܬەبە دەسۆتۆڕۆ، Arabic: ئەژۆرە), a Syriac (Assyrian) Christian militia in the Al-Hasakah Governorate of the Syrian Arab Republic. It is the armed wing of the Syriac Union Party (SUP).
Russian aerial bombardment of anti-regime forces since September 30, 2015 and its support of the Syrian military enabled Assad’s forces to retake key cities. Russia supported the government from the beginning of the civil war, vetoing Western and Arab League draft resolutions in the U.N. Security Council that called for the removal of Assad and for U.N. sanctions against the government. After several statements critical of Assad in 2012, however, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov proposed on September 9, to avert a U.S. attack after reports that the government had used chemical weapons against its citizens, that Syria place its chemical weapons under international control prior to their destruction.

On September 11, 2013 in an op-ed in the New York Times, Russian President Vladimir Putin argued for caution:

“Syria is not witnessing a battle for democracy, but an armed conflict between government and opposition in a multi-religious country. There are few champions of democracy in Syria. But there are more than enough al-Qaeda fighters and extremists of all stripes battling the government. The United States State Department has designated al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, fighting with the opposition, as terrorist organizations. This internal conflict, fueled by foreign weapons supplied to the opposition, is one of the bloodiest in the world. Mercenaries from Arab countries fighting there, and hundreds of militants from Western countries and even Russia, are an issue of our deep concern. Might they not return to our countries with experience acquired in Syria? After all, after fighting in Libya, extremists moved on to Mali. This threatens us all.”

Putin called for “peaceful dialogue enabling Syrians to develop a compromise plan for their own future,” using the U.N. Security Council to “preserv[e] law and order in today’s complex and turbulent world … to keep international relations from sliding into chaos.” Warning against military intervention against Assad, he argued that “force has proved ineffective and pointless. Afghanistan is reeling, and no one can say what will happen after international forces withdraw. Libya is divided into tribes and clans. In Iraq the civil war continues, with dozens killed each day. In the United States, many draw an analogy between Iraq and Syria, and ask why their government would want to repeat recent mistakes.” Citing an opportunity to avoid military action because of the pressure that Russia had brought to bear on Assad, he argued for the need to “take advantage of the Syrian government’s willingness to place its chemical arsenal under international control for subsequent destruction.”

After the U.N. action to destroy Syria’s chemical weapon stocks, Washington and Moscow crafted a joint approach to a ceasefire, and arranged new peace talks between the government and parties not designated as “terrorist organizations.” Addressing the UN General Assembly in September 201592, Putin spoke his mind:

“Attempts to push for changes within other countries based on ideological preferences often led to tragic consequences and to degradation rather than progress. It seems however, that far from learning from others’ mistakes, everyone just keeps repeating them. And so the export of revolutions, this time of so-called ‘democratic’ ones, continues. Suffice it to look at the situation in the Middle East and North Africa. … Instead of the triumph of democracy and progress we got violence, poverty and a social disaster. … It is now obvious that the power vacuum created in some countries of the Middle East and North Africa led to emergence of areas of anarchy. Those were filled with extremists and terrorists. Tens of thousands of militants are fighting under the banners of the so-called ‘Islamic State’. … And now the ranks of radicals are being joined by the members of the so-called “moderate” Syrian opposition supported by the Western countries. First, they are armed and trained, and then they defect to the Islamic State.

“…Russia has always been … consistent in opposing terrorism…. Today, we provide military and technical assistance … to Iraq and Syria [in] fighting terrorist groups. We think it is an enormous mistake to refuse to cooperate with the Syrian government…. We should … acknowledge that no one but President Assad’s Armed Forces and Kurd militia are truly fighting the Islamic State and other terrorist organizations in Syria.”

Russia’s upper house authorized the president to use its armed forces in Syria after the Syrian government requested military help. Moscow’s intervention consisted chiefly of air strikes in northwestern Syria against militant opposition and terrorist groups, including ISIL, Jabhat al-Nusra (al-Qaeda in the Levant) and the Army of Conquest. In an interview on October 11, 2015 Putin defined

92 Statement by Mr. Vladimir V. Putin, president of the Russian Federation, at the 70th session of the U.N. General Assembly, September 28, 2015.
Russia’s goal as “stabilising the legitimate power in Syria and creating the conditions for political compromise.”\(^\text{93}\)

In December 2015, the UN Security Council endorsed a joint U.S. and Russian peace plan envisioning “credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance” in Syria within six months, followed by “free and fair elections” within 18 months. In February, the Syrian government and some rebel groups (excluding ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra, and other “terrorist organizations”) agreed to end hostilities, and peace talks began in Geneva. While nothing emerged from the talks, the truce held in many areas despite violations. In mid-March, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry claimed that the level of violence “has been reduced by 80 to 90 percent.” On March 14, 2016 Putin ordered the withdrawal of the “main part” of Russian forces from Syria.\(^\text{94}\)

In late February, before withdrawing, Russia was executing 60 air strikes daily, while the U.S.-led coalition averaged seven. The Russian air strikes were effective against ISIL’s oil trade and supply routes. Some 209 oil facilities were destroyed, along with 2,000 petroleum transport trucks. When Putin ordered the withdrawal, Russia had conducted over 9,000 airstrikes over five and a half months, and helped the Syrian army recapture 400 towns and 10,000 square kilometers of territory. Vincent R. Stewart, director of the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, said in February 2016 that the “Russian reinforcement has changed the calculus completely” and that Assad “is in a much stronger … position than he was just six months ago.”\(^\text{95}\)

Russian military operations in Syria have continued, albeit at lower intensity. Tensions rose as a result of apparently calculated attacks on civilian facilities, including a hospital, in Aleppo, but an agreement between Russia and the U.S. to extend the cease-fire to include Aleppo was reached on May 3.\(^\text{96}\)

\(^{93}\) "Путин назвал основную задачу российских военных в Сирии," Interfax, October 11, 2015.


\(^{95}\) “U.S. officials: Russian airstrikes have changed calculus completely in Syria,” Washington Post, February 9, 2016.

\(^{96}\) [http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/us-russia-agree-extend-ceasefire-aleppo-1558313](http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/us-russia-agree-extend-ceasefire-aleppo-1558313) [retrieved July 15, 2016].
3. Yemen

The Houthi insurgency in Yemen is a sectarian military rebellion that began in June 2004 against the government of Ali Abdullah Saleh Al-Sanhani Al-Humairi, president of the Yemen Arab Republic from 1990, and formerly president of North Yemen from 1978 to Yemen's unification. It has since become a civil war pitting Zaidi Shia Houthis against the Yemeni military.

In 2004, dissident cleric Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi, of the Zaidi sect, launched an uprising against the government, in which he later died. Initially, most fighting was in the Sa'dah Governorate in north-western Yemen, but later spread to Hajjah, 'Amran, al-Jawf and the Saudi province of Jizan. In 2009 and 2010, the KSA air force bombed key Houthi targets, and Arab Special Forces were deployed to support the Yemeni army and pro-government Sunni tribes. Iran's Revolutionary Guard was said by Arab media to be assisting the Houthis.

A presidential election was held on February 21, 2012 with a reported 65 percent turnout, in which Abd Rabbuh Mansur al-Hadi won 99.8 percent of the vote, and was sworn in on February 25, 2012 after President Saleh stepped aside. In 2014, however, the Houthis took over key government facilities, capturing the presidential palace on January 20, 2015. The presidential guards surrendered after being assured that President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi could leave unharmed. The U.N. Security Council called an emergency meeting, calling for an end to hostilities. On January 22, President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi and Prime Minister Khaled Bahah tendered their resignations.

A full-blown Civil War began in 2015 between two factions claiming to constitute the Yemeni government. Houthi forces controlling Sana'a, allied with forces loyal to former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, clashed with forces loyal to the government of President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, in Aden. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the ISIL/Da'esh have also carried

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97 Yemen (Arabic: اليمن, تُمَنُّ), officially the Republic of Yemen (Arabic: جمهورية اليمن, Ǧumhūrīyā ẗūmnāʾ), lies on the southwestern and southern end of the Arabian Peninsula, over an extent of 527,970 km² with a coastline of about 2,000 km. Saudi Arabia lies to the north, the Red Sea to the west, the Gulf of Aden and Arabian Sea to the south, and Oman to the east. The territory includes more than 200 islands; the largest of which is Socotra. Officially the capital is Sana'a, which has been under rebel control since February 2015. As a result, the capital has been temporarily relocated to Aden, on the southern coast. Yemen was originally the home of the Sabaeans, a trading state that flourished for over a thousand years probably extending to include parts of Ethiopia and Eritrea. In 275 AD, the region came under the rule of the later Himyarite Kingdom. Christianity arrived in the 4th CE after Judaism and local paganism were already entrenched. Islam was widely adopted in the 7th CE and Yemenite troops were active in early Islamic conquests. Several dynasties emerged between the 9th-16th centuries CE, the Rasulid being the strongest. Yemen was divided between the Ottoman and British empires in the early 20th C, and the Zaydi Mutawakkilite Kingdom of Yemen was established after World War I in North Yemen, which became the Yemen Arab Republic in 1962. South Yemen was a British protectorate until 1967. The two Yemeni states united to form the modern republic of Yemen in 1990.

See also https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yemen#The_Zaydis_and_Ottomans.

98 The Houthis (Arabic: الحوثيون, al-Hūthiyūn), officially called Ansar Allah (أنصار الله, anṣār allāh “Supporters of God”), is a Zaidi Shia-led movement from Sa'dah, in northern Yemen, founded by Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi who started the rebellion in 2004 and was killed the same year. The group has been led since then by Abdul-Malik al-Houthi.

99 Iranian shias are “Twelver Shia” (إثنا عشرية, ʾithnā ashariyyah) and constitute the largest branch of Shia Islam, perhaps 85 percent of Shias are “Twelvers”, honoring twelve Shia Imams. The Houthi are Zaydi Shia, members of a sect that emerged in the 8th CE, named after Zayd ibn ‘Alī, the grandson of Husayn ibn ‘Alī. Zaydi Shia make up about 35–40% of Muslims in Yemen.


out attacks, as AQAP controlled swaths of territory in the interior, and along stretches of the coast.\textsuperscript{102}

On March 21, after capturing Sana‘a, the Houthi-led \textit{Supreme Revolutionary Committee} mobilized to overthrow Hadi and drive into the southern provinces. By March 25, Lahij had fallen to the Houthis and they reached the outskirts of Aden, leading Hadi to flee Yemen. A coalition led by KSA launched military operations backed by airstrikes\textsuperscript{103}. The U.S. provided intelligence and logistical support, aimed at persuading the KSA to limit their goals to halting rebel advances and reaching a battlefield stalemate, to lead all sides to the negotiating table.\textsuperscript{104} According to the U.N., over 6,500 people were killed in Yemen from March 2015 to March 2016, including 3,218 civilians.

4. Bahrain\textsuperscript{105}

Bahrain saw sustained civil and violent resistance from February to July 2011, in the wave of civic protests in the Middle East and North Africa, initially aimed at political freedom for the Shia majority, and then expanded to calls to end the Al Khalifa monarchy after protesters were killed in police action at the Pearl Roundabout on February 17.

On February 27, 2011 the 18 \textit{Al-Wefaq} Shia opposition MP’s resigned to protest regime violence against protestors. On March 14, 1,000 troops and armor from Saudi Arabia, and 500 troops from UAE, entered Bahrain to crush the uprising. King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa declared martial law and a three-month state of emergency. A number of other Shia officials, including two ministers, four MPs, and a dozen judges, also resigned. In April the government destroyed 35 Shia mosques, including the 400 year-old Amir Mohammed Braighi mosque in A‘ali, claiming they had been illegally built.

On 14 April, the Ministry of Justice banned \textit{Al Wefaq} and the \textit{Islamic Action Society (Amal al-Islām)}\textsuperscript{106} for damaging “social peace and national unity,” but withdrew the banning orders after U.S.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[105] Bahrain (Arabic: البحرين (ملكة البحرين) is officially the Kingdom of Bahrain is a small archipelago on the western side of the Gulf. Bahrain Island is 55 km long and 18 km wide. Saudi Arabia lies to the west, connected to Bahrain by the King Fahd Causeway; Iran is 200 km to the north across the Gulf. The population in 2010 was 1,234,571, including 666,172 non-nationals. The archipelago was originally part of the ancient Dilmun civilisation and the inhabitants converted to Islam in 628CE. After nine centuries of Muslim rule, Bahrain was occupied by the Portuguese in 1521, who were expelled by the Persian Safavid Shah Abbas I in 1602. In 1783, the Bani Utbah clan captured Bahrain from Nasr Al-Madhkur head of an Omani tribe controlling Bushehr province, including Bahrain, on the Persian Gulf littoral. Under Safavid suzerainty, the Al-Madhkurs, although Sunni Arabs of Omani extraction held allegiance to the governors in southern Persia. Since 1783, Bahrain been ruled by the Sunni Al Khalifa family, with the head of the family originally styled Hakim al-Bahrain. In the late 1800s, following successive treaties with the British crown, Bahrain became a protectorate of the United Kingdom, according to independence in 1971 after the United Kingdom’s decision to withdraw its forces from East of Suez. After his accession in 1999, after an earlier uprising against his father, Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa introduced wide ranging reforms in 2001, which were approved by 98.4 percent of Bahraini citizens in a referendum. Bahrain was declared a Kingdom in 2002. Since early 2011, the country has experienced sustained protests and unrest inspired by the Arab Spring, led by the Shia population who make up some 70 percent of Bahrain’s citizens.
\item[106] The Islamic Action Society (Arabic: جماعة العمل الإسلامي Jamʿiyyat al-ISLĀM), also referred to as Amal Party (Arabic: حزب أمّ, 'Amal), is a leading Islamist party that appeals to Shia followers of the late Islamic philosopher Mohammad Husaini Shirazi. The party boycotted the 2002 general election along with other opposition groups, but contested the election in 2006, securing no seats. It arose from the militant Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain, whose members were pardoned after political reforms instituted by King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa in 2001, leading to the formation of the Islamic Action Society.
\end{footnotes}
representations. After the state of emergency was lifted on June 1, Al Wefaq organized weekly protests which drew tens of thousands, and continued into 2012. The Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry\(^{107}\), appointed by King Hamad bin Isa in June 2011, reported on November 23 that the government had abused detainees, and rejected claims that the protests had been instigated by Iran.

In February 2012, talks between the opposition and the government were announced, “to pave the way for a dialogue that would lead to a united Bahrain,” supported by Al Wefaq and Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa.\(^{108}\) Seven points for democratic reform, announced by Crown Prince Salman in March 2011, served as the basis for discussion. On March 9, however, a hundred thousand Bahrainis protested in an anti-government rally led by Sheikh Isa Qassim, a leading Shia cleric, calling for the removal of the King and the release of political leaders. The protest ended peacefully, but when hundreds of youths marched to the Pearl roundabout, they were dispersed by security forces with tear gas.

In 2013, opposition activists called for protests on August 14, the 42nd anniversary of Bahrain Independence Day, and the 30-month anniversary of the uprising in 2011, despite warnings by the Ministry of Interior against “illegal demonstrations and activities that endanger security.” Small protests continued through December, leading to arrests and home raids.

In 2014, a bomb blast during protests by Shias in Daih on March 3 killed three police officers (one from the UAE) and injured another. More than 20 suspects were arrested and the Cabinet designated certain protest groups as “terrorist organizations.”

General elections were held on November 22,\(^{109}\) with a second round on November 29 in constituencies where no candidate received 50 percent of the vote. The elections were boycotted by Al Wefaq which had 64 percent of the popular vote in 2010, but only eighteen seats due to manipulation of constituency boundaries. The government announced the voter turnout as 52.6 percent, although the opposition claimed it was only 30 percent. Independents won 37 of the 40 seats, with Sunni Islamists losing two of the five seats they had earlier held. The number of Shia MPs – all independents – fell to 14 due to Al Wefaq’s boycott. Three women were elected, down from four in 2010.

### IV Policy Recommendations

The absence of cultural homogeneity in a state is not necessarily debilitating. Belgium and Switzerland are not “nation-states,” but both have effective consociational\(^{110}\) structures. The U.S. is not a “nation-state”: Waves of migrants from Europe and Latin America displaced indigenous peoples beginning in the 18th century before accommodating those who survived. Ten percent of the population derives from the slave trade, and slavery continued until the 13th Amendment to the Constitution in 1864. A conscious effort to promote “Americanization” through cultural assimilation


\(^{110}\) Consociation is a political system formed by the cooperation of different, especially antagonistic, social groups on the basis of shared power. Oxford English Dictionary.
was pursued over the past century with success\textsuperscript{111}, although the assumed primacy of European post-Enlightenment values is now under stress in a more pluralistic society.

In the 20\textsuperscript{th} and early 21\textsuperscript{st} centuries, powerful authoritarian\textsuperscript{112} or totalitarian\textsuperscript{113} states like the USSR\textsuperscript{114} between 1922 and 1991, Yugoslavia under Josip Broz Tito\textsuperscript{115}, Iraq under Saddam Hussein, or Syria under Hafez al-Assad, contained the centrifugal effects of cultural diversity\textsuperscript{116} by using force and guile. The demise of each was followed by cultural fragmentation, with bloody wars in the Balkans between 1991 and 2001, as well as in parts of the former USSR\textsuperscript{117}, and continuing bloodshed in Iraq and Syria on an even larger scale. So, confronted with these conflicts today, how can we shape a successful neighborhood policy in the Middle East? This is easier said than done, but efforts to achieve it, must be informed by five principles:

1. **Define each conflict – and its components – correctly**

In his seminal text on *deep-seated* conflicts, John Burton noted:\textsuperscript{118}

“Conflicts which involve deep feelings, values and needs cannot be settled by an order from ... outside authority.... These are conflicts which may seem endless, erupting into emotional displays and even violence from time to time, contained only by imprisonment or social, political and ... military pressures. Containing serious conflicts, however, does not resolve them.... It tends to protract them.”

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\textsuperscript{111} The achievements and the limits are well described in Glaser, Nathan and Moynihan, Daniel P., *Beyond the Melting Pot, 2nd Edition: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City*, MIT and Harvard, 1970.

\textsuperscript{112} Authoritarianism is a form of government characterized by strong central power and limited political freedoms. Juan Linz’s description of authoritarianism characterized authoritarian political systems by:

1. limited political pluralism; with constraints on political institutions;
2. legitimacy based on emotion, especially the identification of the regime as a necessary evil to combat dangerous societal problems;
3. minimal social mobilization because of constraints on political opposition and anti-regime activity, and
4. informally defined — and thus imprecise limits on — executive power.


\textsuperscript{113} Totalitarianism is characterized by the executive power in a state accepting no limits to its authority. Totalitarian regimes tend to be one-party systems, relying on propaganda disseminated through state-controlled mass media, political repression, control of the economy, regulation of speech, mass surveillance, and state repression. The concept was first developed by the Weimar German jurist, and later Nazi academic, Carl Schmitt, who used the term *Totalstaat* in his work on the legal basis of an all-powerful state, *Der Begriff des Politischen*, 1927.

\textsuperscript{114} The USSR was very ethnically diverse, with more than 100 distinct ethnic groups in a population estimated at 293 million in 1991; the majority Russians (50.78%), Ukrainians (15.45%), and Uzbeks (5.84%). All citizens of the USSR had an ethnic affiliation, chosen at the age of sixteen by the child’s parents.

\textsuperscript{115} Tito was general secretary (later chairman of the Presidium) of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (1939–80) and led the Yugoslav Partisans (1941–45). After the war, he was prime minister (1944–63) and president (later president for life) (1953–80) of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

\textsuperscript{116} Culture comprises the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group, defined by language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music, and arts. It comprises shared patterns of behaviors and interactions, cognitive constructs and understanding learned by socialization, and enables a group identity fostered by social patterns unique to the group.

\textsuperscript{117} https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Post-Soviet_conflicts [retrieved May 1, 2016]

These conflicts are driven by imperatives that defy rational analysis. Typically, they are enduring, lasting many generations\(^\text{119}\) and, rarely, even centuries\(^\text{120}\). They are not initiated for reasons of state\(^\text{121}\) by governments, but rather by family\(^\text{122}\), ethnic, cultural or religious groups which perceive threats to their identity or group security. Analysis of group conflicts suggests four causes, in two broad categories: firstly, exclusion from (i) political participation or (ii) economic access; and secondly, threat, whether intended by the aggressor or perceived by the group that sees itself as a victim, to that group’s (iii) identity or (iv) security.\(^\text{123}\) The enduring group conflicts to which Burton referred are driven by threats to group identity and/or security.

Burton notes further:

“...an incorrect definition of the cause of a serious conflict leads to the adoption of procedures of management... inconsistent with the realities of that conflict ... (and) ... likely to be unsuccessful. If a conflict is caused by an unsuppressable need for identity and cultural security, but is defined as one stemming from aggressiveness, the likely outcome will be protracted ... conflict. Equally if a conflict stems from ... attempts to pursue ideological or leadership interests, but has been defined and treated as one based on legitimate aspirations, there could be outcomes that would threaten the societies involved, as well as global society.”\(^\text{124}\)

Burton argues that conflicts may be protracted “not necessarily because of their inherent complexities, but because of the ways in which they have been initially defined, and the means employed to manage them.”\(^\text{125}\)

Ethnic, racial, or religious diversity is not itself a cause of conflict. Claims by individuals and groups to political access or influence and economic opportunity are normally pursued through political institutions\(^\text{126}\) and mediated through civil society\(^\text{127}\), as in Switzerland or Belgium. But when there is acute social uncertainty because of sharp disparities, when the political system is exclusive or ineffective, and when civil society institutions have atrophied or been repressed, ethnic and religious dynamics can come to dominate the social landscape.

\(^\text{119}\) Examples would include conflicts in Cyprus, Angola, and between Israelis and Palestinians. Blood feuds in Sicily or KwaZulu illustrate the phenomenon at a local level and on a smaller scale.

\(^\text{120}\) The Irish and Balkan conflicts would fall in this category.

\(^\text{121}\) Cardinal Richelieu’s famous phrase raison d’État indicated that an act undertaken by a state in pursuit of its legitimate interests was always appropriate. Such acts were not grounds for censure by other sovereigns.

\(^\text{122}\) Typically family feuds involving revenge or “honor” killings continuing for generations.

\(^\text{123}\) It is necessary to distinguish between disputes about interests (which can be negotiated), needs (which are ontological), and deeply held values (on which the parties will often not compromise). Such needs and values may include identity, group security, and recognition, and, in this context, political participation and distributive justice. Burton suggests that these are pursued “regardless of human costs and consequences.”

\(^\text{124}\) Burton op. cit., p. 21.

\(^\text{125}\) Burton op. cit., p. 21.

\(^\text{126}\) Political systems have six functions: (i) to allow for the expression of their needs and interests by all in the society, (ii) to aggregate similar needs and reconcile those which are divergent, (iii) to institutionalize a normative framework acceptable to all those participating in the system that facilitates such decisions; (iv) to formalize pre-eminent norms in the form of laws; (v) to execute and administer these laws; and (vi) to adjudicate disputes and transgressions when reconciliation is either impossible or inappropriate.

\(^\text{127}\) Civil society refers to the civic and social organizations which form the voluntary basis of a functioning society, as opposed to the authority-backed structures of the state. The London School of Economics Centre for Civil Society defines it as follows: “Civil society refers to the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organisations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organisations, community groups, women’s organisations, faith-based organisations, professional associations, trade unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy groups.”
religions cleavages become a major societal fault-line, usually characterized by human rights abuses.

The Progression of Ethnic or Religious Conflicts

Ethnic activists strengthen the preference of members of each group for ethnic activity, dividing societies to the point where groups may have little social contact with one another; political entrepreneurs and related, often unicultural media mobilize their (ethnic) constituencies on the basis of political myths. These have some historical basis, though they are often distorted, perhaps deliberately, under the influence of nationalistic historians. Fear and resentment of the other defines each party. “Ethnic conflict is … fear of the future, lived in the past,” observed Vesna Pesić, at the height of the war in the Balkans. These conflicts are sustained because of minimal inter-group communication, deep reciprocal mistrust and mutual incentives to pre-emptive violence.

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128 The word “ethnic” is used in the remainder of this section as an inclusive concept pertaining to a population subgroup (within a larger or dominant national group) with a common national or cultural tradition. It thus expressly includes “sectarian” identities like Shia and Sunni.

129 The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is interpreted for the two parties by Israeli media writing and broadcasting in Hebrew, and Palestinian and other Arab media doing the same in Arabic.

130 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vesna_Pe%C5%A1i%C4%87 [retrieved May 6, 2016].

131 More generally, see Gates, Nygård, Trappeniers, “Conflict Recurrence,” Conflict Trends 2-2016, Peace Research Institute, Oslo: “Of the 259 armed conflicts identified by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), 159 recurred and 100 involved a new group or incompatibility. 135 different countries have experienced conflict
2. Use the appropriate instruments at the correct time

On February 26, 2016 the U.N. Security Council adopted Resolution 2268 (2016) to endorse the Accord on the Cessation of Hostilities in Syria.\(^{132}\) The cessation did not apply to Jabhat al-Nusra\(^{133}\) and ISIL, or other terrorist organizations designated by the U.N. Security Council,\(^{134}\) as the co-chairs intended to continue against these organizations.

Diplomatic efforts to end the Syrian civil war are unlikely to succeed until the warring parties are exhausted by their violent efforts. It is usually “conflict weariness” – a sense that victory is not available at an acceptable cost – that brings armed conflicts to a close, rather than political solutions crafted by disinterested mediators.

William Zartman has long argued that conflicts must be “ripe” for resolution before substantive proposals will be accepted by the parties.\(^{135}\) Referring to Kissinger (1974), who observed that “stalemate is the most propitious condition for settlement”\(^{136}\), Zartman argues for three propositions:

- **Ripeness**\(^{137}\) is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the initiation of negotiations, whether bilateral or mediated.
- Some, but not all parties, notably their military components, or their patrons, must perceive a *hurting stalemate*, and a *way out*; parties may then see an opportunity for victory in an alternative outcome prepared by negotiation, although some will be proven wrong.\(^{138}\)

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\(^{132}\) The Accord is set out in the *Joint Statement by the United States and the Russian Federation*, co-chairs of the International Syria Support Group.


\(^{134}\) [http://www.rbs0.com/CF201602222.html](http://www.rbs0.com/CF201602222.html) [retrieved July 15, 2016]. Paragraph 3 of the *Joint Statement of the United States of America and the Russian Federation*, as co-chairs of the International Syria Support Group, provides: ‘Military actions, including airstrikes, of the Armed Forces of the Syrian Arab Republic, the Russian Armed Forces, and the U.S.-led Counter ISIL Coalition will continue against ISIL, Jābhat al-Nūsra, and other terrorist organizations designated by the U.N. Security Council. The Russian Federation and United States will also work together, and with other members of the Ceasefire Task Force, as appropriate and pursuant to the ISSG decision of February 11, 2016, to delineate the territory held by ‘Da’esh,’ Jābhat al-Nūsra’ and other terrorist organizations designated by the U.N. Security Council, which are excluded from the cessation of hostilities.’


\(^{136}\) See also: “In his parting report, Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations Marrack Goulding (1997:20) specifically cited the literature on ripeness in discussing the selection of conflicts to be handled by an overburdened U.N.: ‘Not all conflicts are “ripe” for action by the United Nations (or any other third party).…. It therefore behooves the Secretary-General to be selective and to recommend action only in situations where he judges that the investment of scarce resources is likely to produce a good return (in terms of preventing, managing and resolving conflict).’” Zartman, op. cit., p. 234.

\(^{137}\) “The concept of a ripe moment centers on the parties’ perception of a mutually hurting stalemate (MHS), optimally associated with an impending, past, or recently avoided catastrophe (Zartman and Berman, 1982; Zartman, 1983, 1985/1989; Touval and Zartman, 1985). The idea behind the concept is that, when the parties find themselves locked in a conflict from which they cannot escalate to victory and this deadlock is painful to both of them (although not necessarily in equal degrees or for the same reasons), they seek a way out. The catastrophe provides a deadline or a lesson indicating that pain can be sharply increased if something is not done about it now; catastrophe is a useful extension of the notion of an MHS but is not necessary to either its definition or its existence.”, Zartman op. cit., p. 228.

(At a second level), the presence of strong leadership of each party, able to deliver its compliance to an agreement, is a necessary (though insufficient) condition. ¹³⁹

The Progression of Ethnic and Religious Conflicts

At present, no actor can enforce its preferred solution. ¹⁴⁰ Saudi Arabia and Turkey sought to unseat President Assad but their weakness was exploited by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and Hezbollah. Western aid to the (Sunni) anti-Assad rebels was ineffective. ISIL/Da’esh has been contained and weakened by Western, Arab and Russian air strikes and Peshmerga ground offensives. Russia’s military strikes shifted the balance of power in favor of the Syrian government, but has not destroyed the opposition. The parties are not yet experiencing a “mutually hurting stalemate,” and the government does not see a “way out,” especially for Assad. President Assad and his military may now believe in a possible victory, and seem determined to seek it.

Outside forces have some leverage. Russia has shown its capability, having preserved its strategic assets at Tartus¹⁴¹, built up its Mediterranean fleet, and used air operations to enable Syrian forces to retake Palmyra in March 2016. Putin’s announcement of his withdrawal of forces underscored Moscow’s ability to frustrate any outcome inconsistent with its interests. Turkey is in a difficult position, having supported rebel groups from the outset. Its porous border exposes it to terrorist attacks, and the flood of refugees from the fighting has a high economic cost. Turkey has confronted Iran in Syria, underscoring Sunni-Shia fault lines and Turkish-Iranian geopolitical rivalry. It can ill afford Iranian support for Kurdish militias, notably the PKK, which constitutes a security threat. Ankara’s decision to down a Russian fighter aircraft in November 2015 was a miscalculation.

¹⁴¹ http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/syria/tartous.htm [retrieved May 6, 2016].
The direction of the country's evolution under Recep Tayyip Erdogan's presidency is likewise uncertain.

The situations in Iraq and Yemen also show few signs of “ripeness.” Well-coordinated programs combining military and diplomatic instruments should, however, be directed to promoting this.¹⁴² Bahrain is probably capable of resolution with the support of the KSA, and responsible undertakings from Iran.

3. **Craft an appropriate policy for each conflict, and an integrating concept**

Each conflict requires a specific approach to management and resolution, but two principles provide an *integrating concept* in each case: (a) The core interests of all relevant parties¹⁴³ – local, regional, and external – must be accommodated in an integrative, potentially sustainable solution; and (b) local interests must enjoy priority over those of outside powers, to enable sustainable solutions.

- In Iraq, the relevant local parties are (a) the government of Iraq; (b) the Shia communities who suffered under Ba'athist rule; (c) the Sunni communities which have felt threatened since the destruction of Ba'athist structures; and (d) the Kurdish communities that suffered under Ba'athist rule, and have played significant roles since 2003. The relevant outside powers are the U.S., Iran, and Turkey.
- In Syria, the relevant local parties are (a) the government of Syria; (b) organized Syrian communities of all ethnic and sectarian affiliations, and secular communities that suffered under Assad’s brutal attempts to crush the rebellion; (c) the communities that have suffered under *ISIL/Da’esh* occupation; (d) the Kurdish communities that have played significant roles since 2012. The relevant outside powers are the U.S., Russia, Turkey, and Iran.
- In Yemen, the relevant local parties are (a) Yemenis loyal to President Abd Rabbuh Mansur al-Hadi who won 99.8 percent of the vote in 2012, and served as president from February 25, 2012 until he was deposed illegally on January 20, 2015 by Houthi insurgents; (b) Zaidi Shias who are part of the Houthi rebellion; (c) Yemenis loyal to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh Al-Sanhani Al-Humairi (1990–2012). The relevant outside powers are the KSA, the U.S., and Iran.
- In Bahrain, the relevant local parties are (a) the government of Bahrain; (b) the Shia political parties that have participated in governmental institutions and civic organizations since 2002, notably *Al Wifaq* and *Amal al-Islâm*; and (c) those – Sunni and Shia alike – who gathered as “Independents” to support dialogue, and stand for representation in Parliament. The relevant outside powers are the KSA, the U.S., and Iran.

Where possible, the outside powers should agree on formulae with the potential to resolve the conflict, before convening the local parties. As several outside powers – the U.S., the KSA, and Iran – have a stake in each conflict, it is in their collective interests to establish formal but flexible channels of conversation to clarify their interests, and enable progress to resolution. In Syria, Russia and Turkey must be part of these talks. The co-chairmanship of the U.S. and Russia of the *International Syria Support Group* provides a working template.

¹⁴² Peace agreements guaranteed by peacekeepers are much more likely to prevent wars from recurring in the years immediately following war. In the long run, political reforms are necessary to ensure durable peace. Conflict Recurrence Peace Research Institute Oslo (op. cit).

¹⁴³ A “relevant” party is one with the capacity to prevent or destroy a program otherwise capable of resolving the conflict.
Additional resources are needed. The rapid increase in refugee flows in 2015 has strained the humanitarian regime and the reception systems of states, and called into question the protections afforded to refugees. Some 60 million people are displaced around the world, due primarily to violent conflicts, and displaced populations are more mobile because of new means of transportation and communication. Official development assistance (ODA) for conflict prevention and resolution, peace and security (CPS) is needed to prevent and resolve conflict, support the transition from conflict to peace, and lay the foundation for reconstruction. The resources are far too small. In 2014, CPS comprised US$3.2 billion, 1.9 percent of ODA. While ODA spent on CPS-related activities may be a little larger, more resources are needed.

4. Prepare for integrated post-conflict reconstruction

Sustained, violent inter-group conflict causes death and economic destruction, delegitimates political and legal institutions, fractures the bonds of trust that permit cooperative behavior, and induces social trauma. The challenge of post-conflict reconstruction, originally conceived as the restoration of economic activity in the aftermath of conflict, goes well beyond what development officials are equipped to address. Apart from restoring economic activity and reconstructing political institutions with society-wide legitimacy, means must be found to rebuild a sense of community, and social and institutional legitimacy.

The Challenge of Post-Conflict Reconstruction: Recreating Working Institutions

Source: Sean Clancy, Cognitive Distortions in the Appreciation of Risk and the Manifestation of Prejudice, Parmendes Foundation Faculty Meeting, Starnberg, Germany, October 24, 2005.


145 Some may be included in other categories in the OECD Development Assistance Committee’s reporting system, from which these figures are drawn.

146 Although the World Bank, in its original incarnation as the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, was created to address this challenge, especially in war-torn Europe, it introduced the term “post-conflict reconstruction” in 1997, in a seminal paper entitled “A Framework for World Bank Involvement in Post-Conflict Reconstruction”, Washington DC, April 1997.

147 Typically rebuilding damaged infrastructure, rehabilitating the primary and secondary sectors, and restoring urban and rural markets and financial services.
Without success in this realm, neither the legislature, the executive authority, nor the courts will be trusted nor able to function effectively. In facilitating the reconstruction of community, one must recognize the personal trauma suffered by many directly affected by conflict. Post-traumatic stress disorders and neuroses are common, and psychoses not infrequent. Many combatants have indulged in behavior deemed psychopathic in more normal times. Reintegrating former combatants into civilian society, poses a far greater challenge than teaching them civilian skills.

Poor understanding of the need for an integrated approach vitiated success. As Western governments and multilateral institutions do not know how address the trauma caused by sustained, violent conflict, and as resources are scarce, they focus on political and economic reconstruction. The efforts of the occupation forces in Afghanistan and Iraq to restore basic infrastructure services and oil delivery, and to install, in conditions of civil war, democratically-elected governments, make the inadequacy of these efforts all too clear.

5. Facilitate the emergence of sub-regional economic and security institutions

A sustainable solution requires the states of the region to recognize overarching interests and agree to be bound by common rules. The challenge lies in clarifying these interests, and defining the rules for constructive inter-state behavior. This requires a Regional Security Framework to provide a collaborative space in which to clarify interests, define appropriate behavior, and allow states to share intelligence, resolve disputes and build confidence. Those who seek stability and progress must work on constructing such a framework.

While this agenda is extensive, executing it is necessary if these conflicts, driven by weak states, divisive sub-national identities, and utopian myths, are not to spawn new waves of radicalism and fanaticism.

The first step should be a joint initiative by the U.S., the EU, and Russia – after agreement on the parameters – to engage collaboratively with the KSA and Iran to contain, manage, and work to resolve these conflicts. Further confidence-building measures on Iran's nuclear intentions may be necessary. Progress would allow for Turkey's constructive engagement, and, over time, inclusion of Israel in a comprehensive peace between Israel and the Arab states, under the Arab Peace Plan, and enable Israel's recognition by Iran.

Painstaking work will be necessary to address each conflict, and to craft the reconstruction of state and community in each environment. The borders of states in the region established over the last century, may not survive.

148 This lack of comprehension is institutional, not personal. Many employees have deep insight into the issues, but are unable to influence organizational outcomes.


150 The circumstances of the Kurds will need to be addressed, which risks opening up the plight of the Armenians. These issues still undermine stability in the Caucasus, and engage the interests of Turkey and Russia, as well as Azerbaijan. Since the end of the Nagorno-Karabakh War in 1994, representatives of the governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan have engaged in perfunctory talks mediated by the OSCE Minsk Group on disputed status of territory in the region.
To allow the major regional states to engage constructively, a new paradigm is needed, one that abandons the institutional dependency of Arab states, and Israel, on foreign big powers, and avoids its replacement by sectarian geopolitics. Regional stability is only possible if all states recognize and accept their individual and collective responsibility to craft and maintain peace, and create conditions for progress, in the Middle East.

A central pillar of the modern era was created when treaties embodying the Peace of Westphalia, were signed in 1648, building on the Peace of Augsburg of 1555, to end a century of religious wars and establish the basis of the nation-state. Europe's reconstruction after the Napoleonic Wars was effected at the Congress of Vienna in 1815, largely through Metternich's conservative vision and Castlereagh's prudence; its rebirth after the devastation of World War II was due to the vision of Jean Monnet and the political courage of French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman in proposing the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1950, to unite France and Germany, so as to make another European war "not only unthinkable, but materially impossible."

We need visionaries of that sort today, to create the future in the Middle East.

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151 The term is used loosely here to denote the use of political power in relation to geographic space.


