



## **AMBIGUOUS ENDINGS**

MIDDLE EAST REGIONAL SECURITY  
IN THE WAKE OF THE ARAB UPRISINGS  
AND THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

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## **Executive summary in Danish**

Mellemøstens regionale sikkerhedsorden er under hastig forandring. De arabiske oprør og krigen i Syrien har ikke blot ændret forholdet mellem stat og samfund, men også nogle af regionens grundlæggende normer og historiske skillelinjer. Denne rapport sætter fokus på de vigtigste forandringer i Mellemøsten siden 2011 med vægt på fem nøgletemaer:

- Relationen mellem stat og samfund
- Forholdet til Vesten og udenrigspolitikken
- Iran-Syrien-Hizbollah akse under pres
- Sunni-Shia skel og identitetspolitikens genkomst
- Saudi-Qatar rivalisering og Det Muslimske Broderskab

## **Executive summary**

Middle East regional security is changing rapidly. The Arab Uprisings and the Syrian civil war are changing not only the relationship between state and society, but also some of the region's core norms and historical divisions. This report analyses key changes in regional security in the Middle East since 2011 with emphasis on five important issues:

- The relationship between state and society
- Relationship with the West and foreign policy posturing
- The impact of the Iran–Syria–Hezbollah resistance front and the radical-moderate divide
- The Sunni-Shia rift and the rise of identity politics
- The Saudi-Qatar rivalry and the role of the Muslim Brotherhood

The report concludes that the Middle East regional security situation has not been as unstable and conflict-ridden since the 1950s and early 1960s, when revolutionary ideologies, interventionism and wars marked the region with equal force. To the extent that the Syrian civil war is allowed to carry on, this instability and level of conflict will continue to damage many of the positive developments originally set in motion by the Arab Uprisings, which is why a more robust, unified Western effort may be called for.



## **I. Introduction, aim and structure**

The Arab Uprisings of 2011 catalysed far-reaching changes, not only in the way Arab people relate to their rulers, but also in the way the state and society in the region relate to one another. As one entrenched regime after another fell a new sense of Arab unity and pride seemed to spread across the region, just as new life was breathed into decaying regional institutions. Prepared to expel ruthless dictatorships and give voice to principles of democracy and human rights, the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) took on enhanced roles in Libya, Yemen and Syria. At the time, many observers hoped for a brave new Arab world, where realist power politics would give way to regional cooperation. Peaceful protests in Bahrain and Syria, however, turned into brutal repression and war, working to shatter such hopes. The Syrian conflict has now evolved into a tragic civil war of sectarianism and proxy war, drawing in regional powers and spilling over to neighbouring states. The dynamics on the domestic front in Tunisia and Egypt are similarly having serious regional repercussions: violence, insecurity and the ever-deepening divide between Islamist and non-Islamist groups are dampening the positive effect that initially led protesters across the region to emulate what happened in Tunisia. And, conversely, the intense polarization of Egyptian and Tunisian society makes ample room for regional powers to support competing societal fractions, as clearly evidenced by Saudi Arabia and the UAE's responses to the military overthrow of Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi. The eventual outcome of the Arab Uprisings and the struggles for power and identity will shape regional politics for years to come. This report nevertheless purports that it is already possible to identify key changes in the regional security situation that have taken place with the Arab Uprisings as their backdrop. This is the main topic of this report.

This report accordingly sets out to assess the changes in regional security and the complex dynamics between the domestic and the regional level in the Middle East. In other words, the report will *assess how the Arab Uprisings and the Syrian civil war have altered the nature of regional politics since 2011*. First, a short analysis is presented of what regional politics looked like prior to the uprising (2003-2010). Next, the following five key issues that have emerged and/or changed as a result of the wave of demonstrations and protests will be discussed: 1) a re-configuration of the relationship between the state and society; 2) a lessening of the importance of the pro versus anti-Western divide; 3) a weakening of the resistance front and the moderate versus radical divide; 4) a renewal of the Sunni-Shia rift; and 5) the emergence of a

Salafi-Muslim Brotherhood divide. The report's conclusion points out implications for the EU and the US due to the changes occurring in the region, especially in relation to the on-going conflict in Syria. These five issues also guide the structure and chronology of the remainder of the report.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The report is based on open sources, diplomatic cables and key interviews with political actors, institutions, researchers and diplomats from the region gathered from February 2011 to June 2013 in Egypt, Israel, Iran, Lebanon, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Syria.



## 2. Middle East regional security from 2001 to 2010

The period from 2003 until the Arab Uprisings in 2011 was marked by the US-led war in Iraq, the sectarian rifts it set in motion and the rise of Iran and non-state actors such as Hezbollah and Hamas. With crippling international sanctions ending with war against Iraq, Iran saw its traditional powerful rival in the Gulf greatly diminished. After the fall of the regime of Saddam Hussein, the new Shia-led government in Baghdad eased the way for increased Iranian influence into Iraqi politics and society. Thus, although Iran had been identified as part of the Axis of Evil by the Bush administration in 2002 – and the Iranian regime initially feared that it would be next in line – Iran ironically turned out to be one of the great winners of the Iraq War, as indicated by the *Financial Times* headline, ‘Winning the Peace’.<sup>2</sup>

The Iraq War also opened what the Jordanian King Abdullah called the ‘wound of sectarianism’ between Sunnis and Shiites in the Middle East. While the Sunni insurgency in Iraq initially targeted US troops, it soon turned sectarian with attacks against Shia holy sites and entire Shia neighbourhoods. By 2006 Shia and Sunni militias were fighting each other, effectively throwing Iraq into a sectarian war. In neighbouring states such as Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, the Sunni monarchies watched with concern due to their own significantly sized Shia communities, who generally make up the poorest sections of society and see themselves as discriminated against by the Sunni leadership. At a regional level, the Sunni-Shia divide allegedly pitted Sunni Arab states against a so-called Shia Crescent, led by Iran, that ranged from Bahrain to Iran, Iraq to Syria and then to Lebanon. Already in 2004 King Abdullah infamously warned against a rising Shia Crescent; a term which was soon picked up by Mid-East analysts and Sunni Arab leaders alike to describe the new conflict lines in the region. Some even argued that the Sunni-Shia rift would become the most important line of conflict in the Middle East in the twenty-first century (Nasr, 2007).

Yet Sunni-Shia tensions were easily exaggerated and instrumentalized by Arab rulers trying to hold on to their power and confront the widespread popularity that Iran and Hezbollah enjoyed in many Arab societies. The Shia Crescent warning was, in other words, also a means used by unpopular rulers in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jor-

<sup>2</sup> Even rivaling Gulf states eventually seemed compelled to reach out to Iran, with both Qatar and Saudi Arabia softening their positions on Iran and Syria. In 2007, for instance, Iran was invited to the GCC meeting in Doha, just as Iran was included in discussions about the formation of a new government in Lebanon and the security situation in Iraq (see also Malmvig, 2009).

**Textbox I. The Sunni-Shia divide**

The Sunni-Shia divide nominally refers to an unresolved dispute within Islam concerning the question of rightful succession to the Prophet Muhammad after his death in 632, resulting over time in different religious practices, customs and interpretations between the two sects. Sunni-Shia relations, however, have been marked by both cooperation and conflict, and the importance of the issue has ebbed and flowed in the history of the region. Discriminated against in modern times the Shias have played a weak role in Arab societies. Nonetheless, over the last 35 years, the Shias have mobilized and become politically stronger, in part as a result of the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 and the Ayatollah Khomeini's more radical interpretations of Shia Islam, but also as a result of the rise of Shia movements in Lebanon in the 1970s and 1980s, and lately by the overthrow of the Sunni dominated Baath regime in Iraq with al-Maliki's Shia-led government, in addition to Shias claiming their rights in, for instance, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. The Shia, comprising 10-15 percent of the population in the Arab world, are mainly situated in Lebanon, Syria, Bahrain and Iraq; in the remainder of the Arab countries the Sunni-Shia division has therefore historically played much less of a role in the identity politics of most Arab communities. As a result, it is also important not to reduce the Sunni-Shia divide to a centuries-old religious conflict alone, but also to see the Sunni rift as part of regional identity and power politics, in which local actors may instrumentalize and co-produce specific sectarian narratives to gain support or discredit their opponents. Often the Sunni-Shia divide has been employed at times of uncertainty, upheaval and war in the region, as the present wars and instability in Syria, Iraq, Bahrain and Lebanon amply exemplify.

dan to discredit Iran, and not least to de-legitimize Iran's popular ally in Lebanon: Hezbollah (see also Valbjørn & Bank, 2012).

It was above all the 2006 Lebanon War that gave Hezbollah its popularity in Arab societies, just as this war came to define the region's main patterns of enmity and amity between pro-Western and anti-Western governments, between the so-called resistance front and the more Israel-tolerating governments, and between Arab states and Arab societies. As Israel attacked Hezbollah strongholds in southern Lebanon and in Beirut itself, causing a great number of civilian casualties and material losses,<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> According to Human Rights Watch more than 1,100 Lebanese civilians died during the 34-day conflict ('Why they Died' Human Rights Watch, New York, 2007).

Hezbollah and its charismatic leader, Hassan Nasrallah, gained enormous popularity in the Arab street for taking up the fight against Israel. The Shia movement and its supporters in the resistance front – Iran, Syria and Hamas – were heralded as true champions of the resistance against Israel and Nasrallah was even compared to the star of Arab nationalism, Gamal Abdel Nasser. This was openly contrasted with the more pro-Western regimes in Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, who were accused on Arab satellite channels of merely paying lip service to the Palestinian cause, or even of secretly condoning Israel's war against Hezbollah in an attempt to counter Iran's rising power by proxy. This accusation was perhaps not so far-fetched given the fact that the leadership in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan initially all warned Hezbollah of adventurism and of dragging the region into an unnecessary war, a rather unprecedented warning given the traditionally sacrosanct status that confrontation against Israel has in Arab politics. Faced with Hezbollah's rising popularity and anti-Israeli sentiments, the regimes were also soon forced to backpedal on the warning. Thus, although the Iraq War opened the Pandora box of Sunni-Shia sectarianism, Sunni-Arab governments also had a vested interest in amplifying the Sunni-Shia divide in order to counter the soft power of Iran and Hezbollah. The reverse was of course also true, in the sense that Iran and Hezbollah were keen to downplay their Shia identity and ideology in order not to alienate their wider Sunni-dominated Arab audience. Doing this demanded, for instance, appealing to the Palestinian cause or building close ties to Hamas in Gaza.

Regional relations, however, were not only marked by divisions. Over the course of the 00s, Arab regional politics also witnessed a new kind of Arab identity politics. The emergence of a plethora of new Arab satellite channels and internet sites in the late 1990s created a new Arab public sphere that challenged the media monopoly of the autocratic Arab state and provided a common Arab reference point (Lynch, 2006). On the new satellite channels, such as Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya and MBC, ordinary Arabs were allowed for the first time to debate political issues on live broadcast, to question the policies of their leaders, and even at rare times debate the corrupt and repressive nature of their current political systems. Indeed, the ever growing gap between the autocratic Arab police states and their discontented societies was perhaps the most significant dividing line in the region, and one of the main drivers behind Hamas and Hezbollah's popularity and successful rallying of Arab societies (see also Lynch, Valbjørn & Bank, 2012). Thus the two Islamist parties had been elected at fair parliamentary elections, in contrast to the incumbent rulers in e.g. Tunisia, Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, who were in the habit of wrecking election results, or in the case of the last, of not having parliamentary elections at all, just as Hamas

and Hezbollah were effectively challenging the West and Israel, thereby exposing the foreign policy hypocrisy of leading Arab rulers.

The deep divide between state and society had of course also been one of the main reasons for the Bush administration's strategy of democracy promotion launched in the wake of 11 September. The US attempt to bring democracy to the region was articulated as a long-term security effort to counter the root causes of radicalism and terrorism in the region, the authoritarian Arab state being pinpointed as a structural cause of Islamist extremism and terrorism. The US promised to turn its previous Middle East policy on its head. Rather than seeking stability in the quest for democracy, it would now pursue a different policy, a broad hint to the rulers in Saudi Arabia and Egypt to undertake political reforms in earnest.<sup>4</sup> Although many European governments did not agree with the US over how to promote democracy – especially in light of the Iraq War – they did recognise the need for pushing the reform agenda more actively. Consequently the EU launched its own strategic partnership for democracy with the region and a new European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in 2004 offering privileged trade relations and financial bonuses to Arab Mediterranean states in return for democratic reforms. Individual European governments also launched separate bilateral initiatives for democracy promotion in the Arab world, such as the Danish-Arab Partnership Programme and the Dutch MATRA programme (see also Malmvig, 2013, 2004, 2007).

Initially there was some optimism regarding the prospects of democratic reform. In Egypt, for instance, the Mubarak government promised to abolish emergency law and widen the arena for political opposition. Egypt held parliamentary elections with the participation of the Muslim Brotherhood, while the Kefaya (Enough) movement openly refused hereditary rule in response to plans for Gamal Mubarak to take over from his father. In Jordan, King Abdullah initiated the so-called National Agenda, while in Kuwait the parliament pressed the government to electoral reform, and in Morocco King Mohammed IV adopted a new progressive family law (Mudawwana) and began tackling widespread corruption. Already by 2007-2008, however, many of these political openings were rolled back, never materialized or were simply used to cement existing authoritarian structures (see also Brumberg, 2003; Heydemann, 2007). Upheld by a combination of fear of the ever-ominous security apparatus (the

<sup>4</sup> In her (in)famous speech in Cairo Condoleezza Rice argued, "For 60 years, my country, the United States, pursued stability at the expense of democracy in this region, here in the Middle East, and we achieved neither.... Throughout the Middle East the fear of free choices can no longer justify the denial of liberty" (20.06.2005, BBC <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/4109902.stm>).

*Mukhabarat*), rent seeking, divide and rule tactics, and skin-deep liberalization, the incumbent regimes seemed resilient to change. Moreover, the US and the EU seemed less eager to push for democracy in the region. Faced with the successes of the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas at the ballot box and with the failure in Iraq, many Western governments effectively shelved their democracy promotion programmes, focusing instead on outreach and cultural dialogue with the Muslim world.

In sum the period from 2001 to 2011 was marked by three wars – the Iraq War, the Lebanon War and the Gaza War, all of which involved the so-called resistance front, if not directly, then by proxy. The rise of Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas challenged the largely pro-Western and Sunni Arab regional order, but it also exposed a deepening divide between Arab states and Arab societies. Despite rising domestic demands for reform, deep-seated discontent and a wide array of external efforts to promote democratization, Arab regimes appeared to be as stable and resilient as ever. As protests spread from one country to another in 2011, however, the resilience of Arab regimes was once more turned on its head, with significant consequences across the region, as will be described in the next section.

### **3. The Arab Uprisings and regional order 2011-**

#### **3.1 Changing state-society dynamics**

The Arab Uprisings sweeping the region in 2011 gave rise to much optimism as one entrenched dictatorship fell after another. However, three years into the Arab Uprisings, pessimism now seems to reign and observers have referred to sombre metaphors of Arab Winter and Arab Fall for some time (Bitar, 2012; Brumberg & Heydemann, 2013; Cordesmann, 2013; *The Economist*, 2013; Friedman, 2013). Indeed signs of winter abound, including the military's ousting of Morsi in Egypt; the assassination of the left-wing politician Mohammed Brahmi; new protests and polarization in Tunisia and Egypt; violence and near state collapse in Libya and in Syria; and a continuation of façade democratization and political reform making in e.g. Jordan and Morocco. Yet the Arab Spring-Arab Fall metaphor is problematic on several accounts. First the metaphor draws on a European experience related to the short-lived Prague Spring in 1968 against Soviet repression, shoring up the wrong connotations since the Arab Uprisings only concerned opposition to domestic rule (rather than foreign oppression) and were arguably very homegrown. Second, on an analytical level the season metaphor makes it difficult to appreciate the rather mixed and unfinished nature of the Arab Uprisings: We are either supposed to be in spring or in winter, but not somewhere in between. Third, the normative aspect of the metaphor tends to blind the analysis to political changes that cannot be categorized as either positive or negative. As a result, this section will move beyond the metaphor, zooming in on the changes that have already taken place in the relationship between Arab states and societies, and argue that we are left with an extraordinarily mixed and muddy political landscape.

New networks, political parties and intense political debate have emerged in the Arab states undergoing transition. The joy and enthusiasm protesters shared in 2011 have arguably diminished, but public protest itself has survived. A new political culture is emerging in which the opposition takes to the streets when it disagrees with the policies of its political leaders; in which politics are fiercely debated in new networks, associations and political parties; and in which new ways to hold governments accountable are being introduced. This is most evident in Egypt and Tunisia, where power holders are exposed to fierce criticism, debate and ridicule from their opponents at street level, for example in the form of demonstrations, strikes and street art, not to mention in social media, where blogs, Twitter and web-based watch-dog groups are flourishing. Arguably these new forms of street politics and debate can also turn violent

and lead to increased polarization, as is the case in Egypt. They have also been used, however, to hold Arab leaders accountable in new ways. For instance, in Tunisia, Al Bawsala – a new watchdog NGO – has monitored the slow progress of the Tunisian Constituent Assembly, providing documentation on the nature of their work and the widespread non-attendance in the Assembly, thus causing a public outcry in Tunisia. In Egypt the so-called Morsi Meter website kept track of President Morsi's election promises, comparing promises with his first 100 days in office. Holding government accountable in this manner would obviously have been unthinkable during the reign of Ben Ali and Mubarak, but they also show how Arab leaders are on the verge of, and in some cases already have lost, their traditional inviolable status in Arab societies. This applies not only to Tunisia, Libya and Egypt, but also to Syria, where Bashar al-Assad and his inner circle became objects of intense political satire from early on in the protests and demonstrations, being “dethroned” in cartoons, posters, graffiti and the much-acclaimed *Top Goon* series,<sup>5</sup> a trend that would have been unheard of in a Syrian (and an Arab) context prior to the 2011 uprisings.

Although we should be careful not to overstate the drive for, or inevitability of, democracy in the region, one might argue that democracy has emerged as a locally owned discursive framework that all main political actors relate to and speak in terms of, comparable to the way that Arab leaders had to speak in terms of Arab unity and nationalism in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>6</sup> A recent study by the Al-Ahram Center in Egypt and the Danish Egyptian Dialogue Institute show that 80 percent of Tunisians and 90 percent of Egyptians agree that democracy is the best form of government, regardless of whom they voted for. Islamists and secularists might disagree about the role of religion, but they both believe that the state should function according to democratic principles (Lust, Wichmann & Soltan, 2012). In other words, when secularist and Islamist parties collide in Tunisia and Egypt, it is not over whether there *is* to be democracy or not, but over who is democratic and who is not, each side accusing the other of being non-democratic. This can also be seen at a regional level. Two recent significant events in the region – the military intervention in Libya and the expulsion of Syria from the Arab League – have both been carried out with reference to principles of freedom, dignity and democracy. Similarly, when Morsi went to Tehran for the first time in over 30 years to mend relations with Iran, he simulta-

<sup>5</sup> *Top Goon: Diaries of a Little Dictator* a finger puppet show produced and filmed by a professional group of Syrian actors, as well as a Syrian director and musicians, satirised Assad, his family and his inner political circle. Deliberately crossing the line by ridiculing Assad, the show quickly became immensely popular on YouTube. See e.g.: <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/witness/2012/08/2012820111648774405.html>

<sup>6</sup> However, democracy is arguably not as strong or sedimented as Arab nationalism and unity once were.

neously urged all countries to support the Syrian people in their “fight against their oppressors ... and help the people build a democratic system of rule that reflects the demands of the Syrian people for freedom”, much to the dismay of his Iranian host (Morsi, 30.08.2012). These verbal endorsements in the regional and domestic arenas obviously give no guarantee that democracy will materialize in the end, just as it is clear that the different political actors have highly different understandings of what democracy means. But the very fact that democracy has emerged as a locally owned discourse marks a clear difference from the situation that reigned in the region only a few years back, where democracy often was seen as an imposed Western agenda, and where the autocratic incumbents preferred to speak in terms of piecemeal political reforms rather than democracy.

While the new local ownership of democracy is indeed a positive development, recent events in Egypt and Syria in particular point in a less positive direction. In the case of Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood, early on, backtracked on its original promises concerning power sharing, rushed through the Constitution and re-introduced a number of autocratic measures that curbed the freedom of NGOs and freedom of expression. With the ousting of Morsi and fierce persecution of Muslim Brotherhood members, however, the situation has turned from bad into worse. Liberal secular groups are now cooperating with remnants of the old regime and the military, adopting a strong nationalistic security discourse, where democracy and basic rights only seem to play a secondary role (see also Chayes, 2013). In Tunisia, Islamist extremism led to the 2012 tragic assassination of opposition leader Chokri Belaid and later to the assassination of Mohammed Brahmi in 2013. The relationship between the secular opposition and the Troika government has been marked ever since by tension and confrontation, with the secular opposition calling for the resignation of the government and the Constituent Assembly. In both Tunisia and Egypt a deepening divide is visible between secularists and Islamists, fuelled by stereotyping and fear mongering on both sides, precluding inclusion and dialogue, both of which constitute vital elements for building up a democratic political culture.

On a regional level, the evolving civil war in Syria has, above all, halted the positive *demonstration effect* that initially inspired protesters in Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria to emulate what happened in Tunisia. The following three observations indicate that the demonstration effect may in fact be negative:

- The brutal crackdown in Bahrain and Syria has caused pro-democracy groups elsewhere in the region to hesitate before embarking on protests and demonstra-



tions, especially in Jordan and Saudi Arabia, which were the most likely candidates for another Arab Uprising.

- Incumbent authoritarian regimes can now slow down the pace of political change, or put reforms on the back burner all together by pointing to the negative consequences of revolutionary change for stability and the economy in Egypt, Tunisia and Syria, once more arguing for the need of incremental and gradual reforms from above (see also Heydemann & Reinoud, 2011).
- As the Syrian War has evolved, many of these regimes face an influx of refugees, sectarian grievances, jihadist terrorist groups and rivalries with neighbours, which means immediate security concerns can be posed as more expedient than political reforms, playing into the old dilemma between stability and democracy. This is especially true for Jordan and Lebanon, which are experiencing a form of “don’t rock the boat attitude” (see also Hall, 2013; Pelham, 2013), but also for the Arab Gulf states, who are resorting to hyperactivity in the foreign policy arena and are deeply involved in proxy warfare in Syria.

In sum the Syrian War, but also recent events in Egypt and Tunisia, have dampened the positive demonstration effect and enabled the incumbent regimes in neighbouring states to focus on immediate security considerations rather than political reforms. On a state-society level we also see the new governments in power returning to autocratic measures and societies being increasingly polarized between Islamism and secularism. Yet compared to the period prior to the Arab Uprisings, the domestic sphere can now encompass political contestation and debate, governments and political leaders are held accountable in various ways and the barrier of fear has been broken.

### **3.2 Neither ally nor enemy: the weakening of foreign policy posturing and the pro- anti-Western divide**

One of the core issues of Middle East regional politics has traditionally been how to relate to the West (see Barnett, 1995) and many observers have indeed argued that the Uprisings would change Arab foreign policies, making these more radicalized and anti-Western. The new governments in power have to take public opinion into account in a whole new way, thus paving the way for more populist positions on e.g. relations with the West and Israel (Abdo, 2013; Singh, 2013). Nevertheless, we also see indications of a reverse trend, resulting in *less* foreign policy posturing and a weakening of the pro- versus anti-Western divide. In fact, until now, the newly elected governments in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt under Morsi appear to be less pre-occupied with *foreign policy posturing* (and the West) and more with domestic

politics. This is in part a consequence of the fact that an overcrowded domestic agenda overrides regional and foreign policy issues; the new governments are focused on the many pressing tasks related to political transition e.g. constitution-making, elections, turning over the remnant of the old regime and tackling their ailing economies. But it is also a reflection of the fact that the domestic political debate has become democratized and re-politicised in a whole new way as a result of the Arab Uprisings (see also Brown, Ottaway & Salem, 2012; Valbjørn & Boserup, 2012). Prior to the uprisings, Arab governments often used foreign policy as a stage for high rhetoric to divert attention away from domestic politics and societal grievances. With limited domestic debate under authoritarian rule, foreign policy posturing could be used to feign real political debate, or discontented citizens could use foreign policy issues as a less dangerous way of criticising their regimes (see also Salem, 2011; Valbjørn & Bank, 2012). Yet, now that the lid has been taken off the domestic political debate in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, it can be argued that foreign policy posturing has become less important. In these states, issues such as Palestine, Israel and relations with the West have consequently played a rather marginal role in the domestic political debate compared with the pre-uprising period. Certainly the new Islamist governments are cautious about being seen as more independent in their foreign policies than the Mubarak and Ben Ali regimes – this having been less the case for Libya given Gaddafi’s anti-Western positions – but until now they have pursued exceedingly pragmatic foreign policies and are eager to retain relations with the EU and the US (Kauch, 2012; Malmvig & Markus Lassen, 2013). In contrast to initial Israeli fears, Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood have for instance promised to abide by the 1979 Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty, just as the Morsi presidency tactically ‘cooperated’ with Israel in the crackdown on jihadi militants in Sinai. Morsi even brokered the ceasefire agreement between Hamas and Israel in November 2012<sup>7</sup> and flooded a number of tunnels between Gaza and Egypt to the public dismay of Hamas. Similarly, under Morsi, Egypt sought to play the role of regional broker and mediator in Syria, and in unity talks between Hamas and Fatah. Also the coalition government in Tunisia, led by the Islamist party Ennahda, is far from pursuing an anti-Western foreign policy, instead displaying pragmatism and an eagerness to keep relations with the EU and France intact. Tunisia thus hosted the first Friends of Syria meeting in February 2012 and was quick to mend

<sup>7</sup> The Muslim Brotherhood and Morsi are, however, far from having normal relations with Israel. Morsi refused to talk to Israel directly, or even to refer to Israel as such in public speeches. But the Muslim Brotherhood and even the Egyptian Salafi leader Emad Abdel Ghafour seem to tolerate Israel in a way that differs greatly from their views in the past. At the recent World Economic Forum meeting in Jordan, Ghafour, leader of the Al-Watan Party (and founder of the Al-Nour Party), said that “We have no problem with the peace with Israel” (*The Times of Israel*, 26.05.2013).

relations with France despite the unfortunate role the French played during the Tunisian Revolution.

One may in fact argue that the new Islamist parties in power no longer constitute the vanguards of anti-Westernism in the region – that role has, as Lynch contends, “ironically fallen to leftist and liberal opposition movements” who voice the loudest critique of the West when it does *not* intervene in the region (in Syria and Bahrain) and when it does intervene (in Libya and Mali). Many of the liberal and secular factions in Tunisia, Egypt and Syria feel betrayed by the West, in particular by the US, who they perceive as supporting the Islamists only for the sake of stability, once more sacrificing the values of democracy on the altar of security and stability (Lynch, 2013). During John Kerry’s first visit to Cairo in March 2013, it was thus the liberal leaders from the National Salvation Front who refused to meet the Secretary of State and it was a non-Islamist protester who set fire to pictures of Kerry outside the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, reminiscent of Islamist demonstrators in the past. In the wake of the military’s ousting of Morsi and the perceived US support of the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt is experiencing a new wave of anti-Americanism in which protesters are accusing the Obama administration of supporting terrorists and comparing Obama to Bin Laden on posters and on social media, just as General Al-Sisi in his first interview with the *Washington Post* declared that the US “left the Egyptians. You turned your back on the Egyptians, and they won’t forget that” (Washington Post, 03.08.2013; see also Lynch, 2013c; Malmvig, 2013b).

Moreover, although the new Islamist parties are less outspoken in their criticism of the West and even of Israel than many had anticipated, this does not imply that the new Islamist governments are necessarily pro-Western. As US President Obama put it in the wake of the storm against the American Embassy in Cairo in 2012, the Muslim Brotherhood is neither an ally nor an enemy (ABC News). In other words it is neither pro-Western nor anti-Western. What we may see the emerging contours of is rather a kind of third position that resembles, for instance, the foreign policy stance of the AKP Party in Turkey or that of Algeria and Qatar (prior to the civil uprising in Syria). It is also clear that those states that have not yet undergone significant political change still are divided along the pro- versus anti-Western axis, just as foreign policy posturing still prevails, especially in the Gulf states, who continue to use foreign policy activism to divert domestic discontent. The regimes in Jordan, Morocco and some Gulf states thus remain closely aligned with the West, just as Iran and Syria retain, or have even accentuated, their anti-Western stance. However, as of yet, the Arab Uprisings do not seem to have given way to more radical foreign

policy positions, just as the very fault line between pro- and anti-Western states seems to lose its importance, not least in the light of increased sectarian tensions and the Syrian conflict.

### **3.3 The weakening of the resistance front and the conservative-radical divide**

Since 2003, the so-called resistance front has been a dominant force in the region. But with the Arab Uprisings, and not least the Syrian conflict, the soft power and popularity of Iran and Hezbollah are seriously challenged. This is in part because Iran and Hezbollah are less able to exploit the legitimacy gap between state and society and less able to rally the Arab public on foreign policy issues, as discussed above. But it is first and foremost because Iran and Hezbollah have lost popularity and legitimacy as a result of their deep involvement with the Bashar al-Assad regime's violent repression in Syria.

Initially Iran and Hezbollah welcomed the Arab Uprisings, with Iran articulating the demonstrations as a continuation of its own revolution in 1979 and Hezbollah plying protest as part of a wider resistance against Western imperialism. Yet, as the Syrian conflict evolves, Hezbollah and Iran have had to change their official rhetoric on the Arab Uprisings and by the summer of 2013 Hezbollah openly declared that it is fighting in Syria and that "Syria's battle is our battle" (Nasrallah, 25.05.2013). And although Iran officially continues to deny having al-Quds forces on the ground and arming the regime, it does not hide that it provides logistical support and training, just as several sources point to the presence of Iran-led Alawite militias inside Syria fighting alongside the regime and Hezbollah (see e.g. *Washington Post*, 13.02.2013; *New York Times*, 01.06.2013). The steadfast support of al-Assad has had dire repercussions for Iran and especially for Hezbollah. They can no longer claim to be on the side of the 'Arab people' against dictatorial Arab regimes, just as the economic and political ties to the popular Palestinian cause have nearly been broken.<sup>8</sup> Already in January 2012 Hamas and its leader Khaled Meshaal abandoned its headquarters in Damascus, citing the regime's brutal crackdown on its people, and thereby effectively dismembering Hamas from its alliance with Iran, Hezbollah and Syria. Presently it has been reported that Iran has stopped providing USD 30-40 million in monthly

<sup>8</sup> Initially when the Arab Uprisings broke out Khamenei declared his strong support for the uprisings, arguing that "We do not distinguish among Gaza, Palestine, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Bahrain and Yemen. We have supported Palestine for thirty-two years, and they are not Shi'a. It is not an issue of Shi'a or Sunni. It is the protest of a nation against oppression" (Khamenei., 20.03.2011, quoted from Abdo, 2013:1).

aid to Hamas (*Gulf News*, 01.06.2013) and several sources point to the presence of Hamas fighters on the side of the Syrian rebels (see e.g. Hashem, 2013). What would have been unthinkable only a few years ago is now a reality; Hezbollah and Hamas are now effectively opposing each other on the Syrian battlefield.<sup>9</sup>

The loss of Hamas and the direct involvement of Hezbollah forces in fights against Sunni rebels and Sunni jihadi groups have also amplified the sectarian nature of the Iran-Hezbollah-al-Assad alliance. The former axis of resistance has effectively turned into a Shia axis, making it more difficult to appeal to a wider Sunni Arab audience, just as Sunni religious leaders elsewhere in the region have started to refer to the movement as the Party of Satan as opposed to the Party of God' (see e.g. Gursel, 2013). In Lebanon, Hezbollah is also losing ground due to its open warfare in Syria. Hezbollah's battle in Syria is threatening to draw Lebanon into the war, jeopardizing the fragile political security situation in the country. Syrian rebel groups have declared that Hezbollah fighters will have no safe haven in Lebanon and have threatened to attack Hezbollah, and even the Lebanese Army, if Hezbollah does not pull out of Syria. Already in May 2013 two rockets were launched on the Shiite-majority Chiyah neighbourhood in west Beirut and rockets are fired on a daily basis on the Lebanese-Syrian borders. And while Lebanese politicians have hesitated until recently to confront Hezbollah, they are now openly criticising the powerful movement for destabilizing the country. The Lebanese President Suleiman even went as far as indirectly comparing Hezbollah's war with the Bush administration's pre-emptive war in Iraq (*New York Times*, 20.05.2013) and many Lebanese see Hezbollah's fight in Syria as a confirmation of Hezbollah being no more than an Iranian client (Khoury, 22.05.2013), an allegation which only a few years back mostly was put forward by neo-conservative think tanks in Washington (see e.g. Phillips, 2006).

Given these high stakes, one might ask why Hezbollah has chosen to stand by the al-Assad regime and Iran instead of following the path of Hamas, thereby jeopardizing its standing in the Arab world and not least in Lebanon itself. Some analysts point to a sense of duty and gratitude to the al-Assad regime, which helped Hezbollah during the 2006 war with Israel, sending weapons and aid (Hasham, 2013); others point to a sense of regional mission (confronting Israel and the pro-Western Sunni states) and allegiance to Iran (Khoury, 2013). Clearly the Hezbollah leadership – although

<sup>9</sup> Before the Syrian Revolution broke out, Hamas intellectuals were engaged in numerous attempts to ideologically bridge the Sunni-Shia divide, for instance by reconciling the ideas of Hassan al-Banna with those of Ayatollah Khomeini (see e.g. Schenker, 2013).

there might be some internal divergence in the movement – feel that they are engaged in a larger battle over the survival of the resistance front and are accordingly less concerned about Arab public opinion. When I talked to Hezbollah in 2012 and asked about the risk of losing popularity in the Arab street over Syria, the Hezbollah official appeared rather puzzled by the question, answering that Hezbollah was not engaged in a “popularity contest” (Interview February, 2012). Evidently if the regime of al-Assad falls, this will not only reduce the resistance front to two players (Iran and Hezbollah), but Hezbollah will also lose its vital weapons supply line from Syria, while Iran will see its bridgehead on Israel’s northern border severely weakened as a result, thereby lessening its deterrence on Israel. Iran and Hezbollah therefore seem set on the survival of the al-Assad regime and if that cannot be achieved, then with the presence of a strong Alawite militia and/or Alawite enclave inside Syria backed by Iran and acting in much of the same way as Hezbollah in Lebanon.

The geo-political implications of the fall of the al-Assad regime is arguably also one of the main reasons why rivalling Gulf states such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia have become so heavily involved in the Syrian quagmire. Given their traditional rivalry with Iran, the demise of Iran’s only Arab ally will constitute a major strategic advantage to the conservative Gulf states. The Arab public is obviously aware of these geo-political motivations and thus although Iran and Hezbollah have lost much credibility in the region, the double standards of Qatar and Saudi Arabia are indeed often pointed out as well – especially by more liberal and secular groups, who point to the suppression of the uprising in Bahrain and the restrictions on basic civil liberties in Saudi Arabia – and the two states are far from being seen as pro-democracy forces in the region (see also Malmvig, 2012).<sup>10</sup> The Qatar funded Al Jazeera news station has also lost credibility in the region, given its perceived one-sided coverage of the Syrian crisis and its indirect support of Qatar’s foreign policy in Syria (Lynch, 2013). Thus it might be argued that both the resistance front and the conservative monarchies in the Gulf and in Jordan and Morocco all are pressured by the popular demands for freedom and dignity unleashed by the Arab Uprisings, thus making it increasingly difficult for both sides to speak on behalf of the ‘oppressed Arab people’, be that in Syria or elsewhere. In this sense both sides have become status quo powers. Moreover, this also renders the moderate-radical divide a less meaningful device through which to understand the unfolding rivalry between the two sides. With the Syrian crisis and Hamas’ shift in alliance, the rivalry

<sup>10</sup> A 2012 poll by EIMed in Barcelona on Arab opinion and policy makers ranks Iran as the least supportive of the Arab Uprisings, but Saudi Arabia and Qatar do not fare much better and also received low rankings.

between the two fronts takes on a much stronger sectarian dimension, putting the Sunni-Shia rift (rather than positions on the West, Israel or political systems) to the forefront of the battle between the regional powers.

### 3.4 Into the fray: the Sunni-Shia rift

A few years prior to the Arab Uprisings, the Sunni-Shia rift seemed to have somewhat lessened in importance and Sunnis and Shiites appeared to have found a new balance of power in both Lebanon and Iraq. Yet with the new political influence of Islamist parties, the proxy war in Syria and the rapid spillover of sectarian tensions to Syria's neighbours, the Sunni-Shia schism has again come to the fore. The Sunni-Shia split now threatens to become the most important dividing line in the region. As Abdo argues, it may even supplant the traditionally strong fault line between the West and the Muslim world and potentially mobilize Arab societies even more than the Palestinian issue (2013:2). Various local actors are thus propping up the Sunni-Shia rift. From the beginning of the protests, the al-Assad regime has used the sectarian narrative to buttress support for itself and to create fear of the alternative among Syrian minorities, just as Salafi groups in Egypt have used the Sunni-Shia rift to discredit the Muslim Brotherhood and its diplomatic openings to Iran. This has, for instance, led to mob attacks against Shiites and xenophobic rhetoric on social media, a phenomenon previously unseen in Egypt. Moreover, in contrast to the period from 2003-2009, where the Sunni-Shia narrative mainly was used by Sunni Arab governments to discredit Iran and Hezbollah, today it appears that sectarian fear mongering has gained a more popular base. Sectarianism is used not only by Sunni states, but also by leading non-state actors and religious leaders. Leading Sunni religious leaders are now calling for jihad against the Shiites in Syria. The powerful Egyptian cleric al-Qaradawi – who in the past has been supportive of Hezbollah and tried to mend relations between Sunnis and Shiites – is calling on young men to go to Syria and fight.<sup>11</sup> Shiite leaders in turn regularly speak of the Sunnis as the *Takfiris*,<sup>12</sup> and in his May speech Nasrallah declared that the Syrian opposition is composed of Takfiris, who will give up Syria to the US and Israel, thus bringing the resistance under siege (Nasrallah, 25.05.2013). In Syria the sectarian narrative is gaining ground with new

<sup>11</sup> Al-Qaradawi thus argued, “We must all go to purge Syria of this infidel regime, with its Shiites who came from Iran, Southern Lebanon and Iraq”; Qaradawi even confessed that, “I defended the so-called Nasrallah and his party, the party of tyranny ... in front of clerics in Saudi Arabia ... it seems that the clerics in Saudi Arabia were more mature than me” (Al Arabiya, 02.06.2013).

<sup>12</sup> Takfiri means declaring a fellow Muslim an apostate or impure. But takfiris has commonly been used as a denominator for violent Salafi groups and is now being used by the Syrian government and Hezbollah to delegitimizing the Sunni rebels, effectively describing them as Wahabi extremists with undertones of being apostates.

massacres against Sunni civilians in Bayda and Baniyas,<sup>13</sup> with attacks on Shiite villages close to the Lebanese border by rebel forces (O' Bagy, 2013; *Syrian Observer*, 12.06.2013) and with Hezbollah's open involvement in the battle for Qasair.

However it should be stressed that the uprising in Syria did not start out as a sectarian Sunni revolt against an Alawite-based regime; the protest was *not* about sectarian divisions. Rather sectarianism has been amplified by the al-Assad regime and by regional powers who have distributed aid and arms along sectarian lines. From the beginning, the al-Assad regime has thus skilfully instrumentalized a sectarian narrative, helping to turn sectarian conflict into a self-fulfilling prophecy, just as regional powers have pursued their own strategic interest by enhancing sectarian support structures (see e.g. Crisis Group, 2012; Heydemann, 2013; Malmvig & Janus, 2013). The initial peaceful Syrian protests demanding democratic reforms have morphed into an increasingly violent and Sunni-extremist rebellion that includes foreign fighters and al-Qaeda affiliated groups such as Nusra and al-Sham Brigade, who in turn fight against Alawite and Shia militias backed by Iran and Hezbollah.

### **Textbox 2. The power-base of the al-Assad regime**

The Shia element of the al-Assad rule (and the Sunni-Shia dimension of the Syrian conflict) is often exaggerated in popular accounts. Although the regime's inner circle is mostly Alawite (which is an offshoot of Shia Islam), the regime is not based on an Islamist or Shia ideology (as Iran is). Rather it is a semi-secular regime that draws on ideas from Pan-Arab and socialist Baathism, combined with references to Islam, and since the early 00s with some neo-liberal notions. Above all al-Assad's power base has traditionally relied on the repressive and proliferous security apparatus and the personal cult surrounding the al-Assad family (see e.g. Wenden, 1999). Since the Alawites only constitute about 10-15 percent of the Syrian population, the regime has always included and co-opted other religious groups and classes into its power base, notably the Sunni business classes from Damascus and Aleppo, in addition to Christians, Druze and, to a lesser extent, the Kurds. At present, the regime still seems to draw support from some influential Sunni groups, just as there are Alawites and Christians in the opposition, mitigating the Sunni-Shia narrative.

<sup>13</sup> Reports by opposition groups inside Syria estimate that over 200 civilians were killed in Bayda and Baniyas; these reports cannot however be independently verified (see BBC, 28.05.2013, 'Syrian activists document al-Bayda and Baniyas 'massacre').



While neighbouring regional powers have amplified the Sunni-Shia dimension of the Syrian conflict, it is equally the case that Syria's neighbours are increasingly affected by the sectarian spillover from Syria. In Lebanon the political leaders of the various religious groups have until recently strived not to bring the war to Lebanon and the government has officially taken a neutral stand on Syria, for instance by not voting on Arab League resolutions and by not being a member of the Friends of Syria group. The Lebanese Sunni Future Movement has aided the rebels in Syria, while Hezbollah has supported the Syrian regime. Also, minor Sunni-Shia clashes have occurred notably in Tripoli and Sidon. But with the direct implication of Hezbollah in the war, the Lebanese fear that war may erupt inside Lebanon, dragging in external powers, or that state institutions may be locked into long-term paralysis (see e.g. Bitar, 2013; Hitti, 2013).

Iraq is also increasingly feeling the effects of the Syrian War. The presence of Sunni Iraqi fighters in Syria has been reported for some time, but now the fight has been moved to Iraqi ground and a resurgent al-Qaeda is once again striking Shiites symbols and the al-Maliki government (Bitar, 2013). Renewed sectarian killings in Iraq have brought the highest death toll to the country in five years<sup>14</sup> and mainstream Sunni groups still seem eager to contest the Shiite post-Saddam order, hoping that the fall of al-Assad might lead to a similar weakening of their own Shiite government. Sunni militias continue to target the Iraqi Army and security forces and there are now also reports that Sunni mosques and neighbourhoods are targeted by Shiite militias (*New York Times*, 01.06.2013).

In the rest of the Gulf, the Sunni-Shia split is especially felt in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. In Bahrain, Sunnis, wearing badges with slogans saying "No Sunni, No Shia, Just Bahraini", initially joined the Shia protesters in Manama's Pearl Roundabout and demanded political reforms and a constitutional monarchy. Yet, as in Syria, the al Khalifa government has skilfully activated a sectarian narrative, which means anti-Shia and anti-Iranian rhetoric now thrive, nurtured by Saudi Arabia's vested interest in suppressing the uprising and Iran's strong rhetorical support of protesters (see Abdo, 2013:15-18). Also within Saudi Arabia, Shiites continue to be discriminated against and, presently, Shiite clerics in the Eastern province are being jailed on charges of spying for Iran (Schenker, 2013).

While the Sunni-Shia rift obviously is felt mostly in states with significant portions of both communities (Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia), it is clear that

<sup>14</sup> *New York Times*, 01.06.2013, 'As Syrians Fight, Sectarian Strife Infects the Mideast'.

Sunni-Shia divisions also have become more salient on a regional level, dragging in powers who traditionally have not acted as vanguards of Sunni Islam, such as Turkey, Jordan and Egypt, the last having recently experienced a number of mob attacks against Shiites, although these do not make up more than two to three percent of the population. The fact that the Sunni-Shia axis runs alongside the Arab-Iranian rivalry and that the pro-Western versus anti-Western resistance front obviously serves to exacerbate sectarianism makes ample room for the political instrumentalization of sectarian divides. Indeed as we will see below, allegiances that run across these divides are now hard to come by in the region, just as attempts at pursuing more pragmatic zero-problem foreign policies seem to have become almost impossible. There are, however, also new divisions and rivalries within the ‘Sunni camp’, particularly between the Muslim Brotherhood/Qatar and Salafi groups/Saudi Arabia, as will be spelled out below.

### **3.5 The end of pragmatist foreign policy and the emergence of a Salafi-Muslim Brotherhood divide**

Prior to the Arab Uprisings both Turkey and Qatar were to a large extent pursuing the same kind of pragmatic foreign policies that cut across the region’s main allegiances and divisions. Both countries had extensive economic ties to Iran and with the West, and to some extent with Israel. Both were increasingly involved in the Palestinian issue, just as Qatar was heavily engaged in Lebanon and the reconstruction of Shiite neighbourhoods in the aftermath of the 2006 war with Israel. Qatar and Turkey’s foreign policy pragmatism and attempts to befriend all regional players were rarely condoned in the West, but both countries were rather popular in the region and allowed sufficient room to manoeuvre by other regional powers.

In the wake of the Arab Uprisings, however, both countries have thrown their political and economic weight unequivocally behind the uprisings, thereby breaking with their previous foreign policy strategy. This shift in strategy has been felt most clearly in Tehran, where Iranian diplomats feel a sense of betrayal and are openly puzzled by Ankara and Doha’s early and strong support for the Syrian rebels.<sup>15</sup> And as the competing fronts in Syria have become more entrenched, it seems that no major regional power is allowed to pursue the kind of zero-problem policy that Qatar and Turkey once did. This is most evident in the case of Egypt, where since 2012 Morsi in fact sought to pursue a more autonomous, less aligned foreign policy. Morsi

<sup>15</sup> Based on discussions with diplomats, researchers and think tanks in Tehran in November 2012.

reached out to Iran, opening up for economic and diplomatic relations – which were severed in the aftermath of the 1979 Iranian Revolution – thereby departing from its traditionally close policy coordination with Saudi Arabia and Jordan and cutting across the Arab-Iranian rivalry and the Sunni-Shia rift. On Syria, Egypt, under Morsi, similarly attempted to find a middle position. On one hand Egypt is housing the Syrian opposition in Cairo and has, similar to other key Arab states, demanded that al-Assad step down. On the other hand, Egypt has from the beginning favoured a non-military negotiated solution to Syria, kept diplomatic relation with al-Assad's Syria and tried to include Iran in a quartet on Syria together with Saudi Arabia and Turkey.<sup>16</sup> Given Egypt's size and historical role in the Arab world, these attempts to act as a third force could potentially have mitigated some of the region's stark divisions and rivalries. Yet as the regional fault lines in the Syrian civil war have grown stronger, and as the Egyptian leadership has become increasingly consumed by its own domestic agenda and the country's dire economic situation, Morsi was swinging back to the country's old Sunni alliance with Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Jordan. In mid-June 2013, Morsi thus broke off all diplomatic relations with Damascus, urged Western powers to enforce a no-fly zone and condemned Hezbollah's "aggression against the Syrian people" (Morsi, *The Guardian*, 15.06.2013).

Morsi's inability to uphold a more autonomous foreign policy seems to confirm two facts in current regional politics: first, that the regional security environment is locked into several reinforcing zero-sum conflicts, thus leaving little room for pragmatic middle positions and diplomacy; second, that the Gulf states of Qatar and Saudi Arabia continue to constitute the region's main powers and that Egypt has not – yet – re-gained its former regional might. Saudi Arabia's regional influence, founded on skyrocketing oil prices in the 1970s, is of course nothing new, but Qatar's rise to prominence is more recent. With the help of vast natural gas reserves and Al Jazeera, Qatar has in many ways filled a power vacuum in the region and skilfully used opportunities to brand itself regionally and internationally as a hub for education, research and media, just as Qatar has used its economic muscle to broker political agreements or influence key regional actors. In fact under Morsi, Qatar became Egypt's largest donor by far exceeding other external donors such as the International Monetary Fund and the US, providing over USD 5 billion, allegedly without imposing the kind of conditionalities that the IMF and the EU do (Singh, 2013).<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Yet Saudi Arabia was opposed to the inclusion of Iran and never turned up for the meeting.

<sup>17</sup> However, one might speculate if not the Qatari Emir has let the Egyptian President know that Qatar would welcome a policy-shift on Iran and Syria.

Yet Qatar's colossal support to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Tunisia and Syria has given rise to increasing concern and some fear mongering among other states in the region. Saudi Arabia is especially seeking to balance Qatar's political influence in the states of the Arab Uprisings, generally supporting the Salafi groups while Qatar supports the Muslim Brotherhood. In Syria, the two Gulf states are thus engaged in a fierce rivalry and provide different rebel groups with aid, military equipment and training. Saudi Arabia is allegedly supporting the Salafi-leaning rebel groups and Qatar in collaboration with Turkish support for Free Syrian Army brigades close to the Muslim Brotherhood, such as the Farouq Brigades in Homs and the Liwa al-Tawhid in Aleppo.<sup>18</sup> The Saudi-Qatari competition is also played out at the level of the Syrian political opposition, where Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood have dominated the Syrian National Coalition and the transitional government with Hitto as prime minister. Saudi Arabia is now gaining more influence within the newly expanded Syrian National Coalition, according to some Arab observers in an "effort to undermine the dominance of the Brotherhood" (Hassan, 2013; Youssef, 2013).

However, the Saudi wariness over the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood cannot be reduced to a rivalry over regional power between Qatar and Saudi Arabia alone. Concerns about the Muslim Brotherhood must also be seen in light of the Gulf states' own internal security situation and their preoccupation with regime stability and self-preservation. Saudi Arabia has thus traditionally projected its precarious domestic political balance onto the region by sponsoring Wahhabi interpretations of Islam abroad. Moreover, the support for Salafi groups in Egypt, Tunisia and Syria can largely be seen as a continuation of that policy. Yet it is also clear that many Gulf states see the coming to power of the Muslim Brotherhood in several states in the region as a new challenge to domestic order. The recent arrest in United Arab Emirates of over 100 local Muslim Brotherhood members (al-Islah), including 14 Egyptian citizens affiliated with the Brotherhood, reflects the nature of this regional-domestic dynamic. Al-Islah is banned in the UAE, yet it remains the most well-organized actor in the opposition and has recently called for broader elections and political reforms in the UAE. Now it is being charged with subversion and spying for Egypt. In Saudi Arabia the Brotherhood has also voiced some criticism of the Palace and has at times called for political change. Yet the Saudi Muslim Brotherhood has been careful not to overstep any boundaries in order not to jeopardize its future survival in the Saudi

<sup>18</sup> Yet these support structures are arguably difficult to trace, not least because the different brigades and their commanders do not declare themselves as belonging to the Brotherhood (or not). Moreover, it is estimated that there are presently over 100 different smaller rebel groups inside Syria and many of these are known to shift sides, allegiance or financier depending on where the money and ammunition are (see Lund, 2013:10).

Arabia (Boghardt, 2013). Qatar, in contrast, has housed Muslim Brotherhood members in exile, such as the Egyptian sheikh al-Qaradawi and leading Islamist journalists working for Al Jazeera, this being a constant source of tension for the neighbouring Gulf countries well before the Arab Uprisings. Some Saudi analysts argue that they see the growing regional influence of the Muslim Brotherhood as a greater challenge to their regimes than the liberal-democratic quest originally informing the Arab Uprisings the term ‘Muslim Brotherhood Crescent’ quietly circulating.<sup>19</sup> The wording is of course not accidental; by invoking the (in)famous Shia Crescent, the Muslim Brotherhood is indirectly inscribed as a threat on a par with Iran/Shiites, yet without referring directly to a threat or specifying the referent of that threat.

With the change of leadership in Qatar and the ousting of Morsi in Egypt in July, Saudi security concerns may, however, have lessened somewhat. The new leadership in Qatar has already announced that it will soften its support for the Arab Uprisings and for the Muslim Brotherhood around the region. Rumours are also floating that Qatar intends to expel the Egyptian religious leader al-Qaradawi. At the same time, the military ouster of Morsi has paved the way for Saudi Arabia and UAE to enter Egyptian politics once again, and Saudi Arabia has already pledged USD 8 billion to the new military leadership in Egypt, in addition to free shipments of petrol. These recent events have arguably shifted the balance of power between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, the latter likely to pursue a quieter foreign policy in the short term.

However, concerns with the rise (and fall) of the Muslim Brotherhood across the region also point to the continued salience of state-society dynamics for the Middle East security situation and the continued permeability of the Arab state. Thus the Qatar-Saudi/Muslim Brotherhood-Salafi rivalry cannot be understood without taking into account the domestic politics and vulnerability of many of the Gulf regimes, and conversely the rivalries between Salafi parties and the Muslim Brotherhood in, for instance, Egypt must also be seen on the backdrop of Qatar and Saudi Arabia’s patronage. Given the fragile political basis of many regimes in the region, identity politics is likely to shape regional politics in the years to come as well.

<sup>19</sup> Anonymous background interview.

#### **4. Conclusion: fragmentation and war in the Middle East**

Middle East regional security is changing rapidly. The Arab Uprisings and the Syrian civil war are changing not only the relationship between state and society, but also some of the region's core norms and historical divisions. Thus this report has argued that the region's main conflict line between pro-Western and anti-Western states has become less salient, just as traditional popular issues heralded by the resistance front have lessened in importance. This is in part a result of the Arab Uprisings and the fall of autocratic regimes around the region, making it more difficult for Iran and Hezbollah to mobilize Arab societies and exploit the legitimacy gap between state and society. Yet, above all, the Syrian civil war and the rise of sectarianism have put Iran and Hezbollah under pressure. Saudi Arabia and Qatar are actively pushing the Sunni-Shia rift, and with the loss of Hamas and the direct involvement of Hezbollah on the side of the al-Assad regime, the resistance front is increasingly being viewed as 'Shia club' across the region. At the same time the Israeli attacks against Syria and Hezbollah-Iran's sable rattling on the Israeli-Lebanese border now carry the risk of turning the Syrian proxy war into a full-blown regional war.

Combined with the intense polarization of Egyptian society and the recent military takeover, these developments make the region extremely unstable and conflict-ridden in ways not seen since the 1960s. To the extent that Egypt slides into a sustained military dictatorship and the Syrian civil war is allowed to carry on, this instability and level of conflict will jeopardize the positive developments originally set in motion by the Arab Uprisings. We need only to compare the present situation with events a year ago to get a sense of how regional security has deteriorated. In 2011 and early 2012 there was still widespread belief in the potential for more regional integration and cooperative security mechanisms, especially with regard to the role that the Arab League and sub-regional forums such as the Union of the Maghreb or GCC could play. There were equally high hopes for new regional norms evolving on how states could treat their own citizens given the intervention in Libya and in Yemen, and a belief in the spread of protest and calls for democracy to other parts of the region, Saudi Arabia, Morocco and Jordan being potential candidates for democratic uprisings. However, these hopes are being effectively undermined.

The implications for the Europe and the US of these regional developments are significant. With over 90,000 deaths the civil war in Syria alone constitutes a moral

and humanitarian problem, but the Syrian civil war goes well beyond its own borders, affecting key US allies and the political, economic and security conditions of the whole region. Similarly, in the case of Egypt, violent confrontations between pro and anti-Morsi forces also affect the conflict between secularists and Islamists in Tunisia, and the situation in Gaza and among the Palestinians. While the current US administration has sought to correct the overemphasis on the Middle East by previous administrations – though for good reasons – it is clear that leading from behind is becoming increasingly difficult for the US. In the absence of US leadership, regional politics has not been left to homegrown democratic or pragmatic Islamist voices in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya that originally spearheaded the Arab Uprisings, but to authoritarian regimes in the Gulf and elsewhere, which are now shaping and radicalizing the region.

For Europe isolation is even less of an option. Europe's geographical proximity and strong historical and cultural ties with the region make containment difficult and in fact out of line with the EU's strategic goals for the region as laid out in the ENP. Yet although European governments agree on notions of indivisible security and 'shared stability, prosperity and security based on democratic values' as an abstract formula for dealing with the region, how to enact this strategy faced with the many dilemmas of the Arab Uprisings and the Syrian quagmire has until now proven notoriously difficult.

There is a high price to pay, however, for non-decision and half-backed solutions: entrenched authoritarianism, jihadi resurgence, and prolonged sectarianism and violence. The road to Damascus may therefore very well have to go through determined action in Brussels.

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