**Authoritarian “geopolitics” of survival in the Arab Spring**

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The Arab Spring has shaken not only the state and society dimension in the countries of MENA region but also the power of authoritarian leaders that had been ensured for a long period of time. This paper takes a critical look at the issue of how authoritarian regimes reacted to the new political atmosphere produced by the Arab Spring. More specifically, it attempts to identify how geopolitical reasoning influenced the formulation of new strategies designed to promote the survival of authoritarian regimes. It focuses upon the geopolitical reasoning relied upon by Iran and Saudi Arabia that included creating threat-enemy chains in domestic politics, shifting alliances in regional policy, and taking advantage of relations with external actors to gain support for authoritarian rule at home.

**Keywords:** Arab Spring; geopolitics; authoritarian survival; Iran; Saudi Arabia.

**Introduction**

The protests that began in Tunisia and spread to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have revealed a new collective consciousness with profound political implications. These protests stemmed from the demand for change, the search for democratic representation, the fight for political integrity, and opposition to crony forms of neoliberal capitalism. This collective consciousness captured the political imaginations of entire populations throughout the MENA region. However, this is not the first transnational diffusion in the region; MENA has previously experienced transnational currents of Islamism and Arab nationalism. However, this most recent eruption is markedly and unexpectedly different from the earlier expressions of a shared ideological orientation.

The Arab Spring promoted a series of norms that challenge existing structures of power and authority, in addition to highlighting trans-boundary patterns of loyalty in the region. The partial collapse of the established order in the Middle East *–* with respect to political, economic and social dimensions – represents another major shift in a constantly changing international environment. From the perspective of Western liberal democracies, MENA region power structures had long been deemed ‘outdated’ and undemocratic; nevertheless, their abrupt rupture was no less seismic for that being the case.

The Arab nation-state system and non-state actors had been accustomed to coexisting in parallel realms of engagement, although with a certain degree of separateness. This is no longer the case. Instead, state and non-state entities are intermingled and the tension between the two has redefined Arab politics and geography. The Arab Spring put an end to state-society dissociation in a number of ways ranging from regime transformation to civil war. Political issues, especially the different shades of political Islam, dominate economic and cultural realms in the Arab public sphere. Furthermore, Arab nationalism and extremist tendencies have shaped this new public sphere. This emergent consciousness not only provides motivation, solidarity, belief, and strategy but is also mobilizing the publics in Arab countries to launch similar struggles against repressive regimes.

The nature of the emerging regional constellation ignores non-Arab elements and considers them as presenting problems for the Arabs. This creates a less stable environment for regional and international actors whose national interests are affected by developments within the MENA political geography. There is no real place in this new political landscape for the former patron-client relations. The transformative power of the Arab Spring is limited to Arab political geography and did not have direct implications for countries outside this enclosure. The “Arab-Islam” character of the public sphere manifests itself through empowering non-state actors, enabling public mobilization, and limiting the role and influence of problematic nation-state structures in this emerging political geography.

In the wake of the Arab Spring, identified by expert commentators as the most significant uprising of this region in modern history, Arab authoritarianism still persists in various forms. Authoritarian leaders face a range of practical challenges due to this new collective consciousness and the diffusion of universal norms and values in their respective countries. But authoritarian rule, although challenged by the Arab Spring, has pushed back with resolve, sometimes severely. The dynamics of oppressive rule will never be quite the same, despite adapting so far to the movements that comprised the Arab Spring. The pre-Arab Spring regional order - whereby nation-states and territorially limited non-state actors functioned in parallel - was ideal for preserving a hold on power at home and also addressing regional issues. The resistance of authoritarian leaders to change has its roots in decades of experience in managing authoritarian rule, which now desperately needs to develop new strategies if it is to cope successfully with recent geopolitical challenges.

The attitudes of ruling regimes vary, according to their receptivity and resistance to the transformative impact of this new collective consciousness. The Arab Spring is also a learning process in terms of new calculations, recalibration of policies, and development of strategies and tactics to handle the new political atmosphere both for elites and reformist/revolutionary oppositional leaders. In this article, we discuss how policy makers make use of concrete geopolitical reasoning to shape a problem solving agenda designed to facilitate authoritarian survival.[[2]](#endnote-2) We will reinforce the general analysis with a focus on Saudi Arabia and Iran to explain how the leadership in these two countries fashioned a geopolitical understanding oriented around regime survival, maintaining regional alliances, and securing international backing. Saudi Arabia and Iran are of particular interest, because they represent the primary sectarian cleavage in the Middle East, yet nevertheless have discovered that they possess convergent interests when it comes to preserving the stability of their respective regimes and in meeting the threat of Islamic extremism that is part of the Arab Spring aftermath. Although Iran is not an Arab state, it was affected by the Arab Spring. These two countries base the legitimacy of governance on an embodiment of Islamic values, both purporting to be anti-secular religious states.

**An emerging geopolitical landscape**

One of the enduring consequences of the Arab Spring is the transformation of the political imagination present among the masses and linking it to the emergence of a new political landscape. Societal demands have found channels to put pressure on political elites despite the authoritarian tendency to resist public demands. The visits of Arab leaders to Gaza in the aftermath of the 2012 Israeli attacks represented a landmark development in changing geopolitical patterns.[[3]](#endnote-3)

The political geography of the Arab Spring consists of Arab states facing transformation at various levels, the erosion of regional structures, alienation of non-Arab elements, empowerment of non-state actors, and reproduction of old problems in a new context. As a consequence, the Arab political geography faces four substantial tensions. Although this political geography has not been expanded beyond the Arab states, the mental and intellectual universe of the Arab Spring at once transcends and connects to universal norms of rights and good governance. The tension between political geography and the intellectual universe is intrinsic due to the challenges posed by the masses to authoritarian rulers. Another tension emerges via the surfacing of non-Arab elements in this geography, i.e. the Kurds. The political community of the Arab Spring geography has non-Arab elements, but there is a tendency to associate them with Arab issues and avoid their distinct contexts, both current and historical. A third tension emerges due to treating certain countries, such as Turkey and Iran, as peripheral actors and seeking to keep them at bay with respect to so-called Arab issues, yet failing to do so. A fourth tension is the result of the emergence of new challenges in an already complex territorial system of political geography through the empowerment and engagement of non-state actors. The former constellations, such as HAMAS and Hezbollah, struggle to adapt to the changing regional environments, while the Kurds are gaining prominence through semi-state structures and the Islamic State (IS) claims a *de facto* trans-boundary existence.

The emerging geopolitics of this region is being shaped by flexible linkages between state and non-state actors as well as among each other and through a variety of interferences by regional and global external actors. Traditional state actors adopt policies depending on their receptive or rejectionist attitudes towards the transformative impact of the new collective consciousness. Although this may seem, as Valbjorn and Bank argued, reflective of the reformist versus revisionist regional politics of the 1950s[[4]](#endnote-4), the new structure is more like a multi-grouping of shifting alliances reflecting the rise and fall of regimes and non-state actors.

The countries that have undergone political transformations—Tunisia, Libya, Yemen, and Egypt—the ruling elites change their stance depending on domestic power calculations, though the latter two with limited room for maneuver. Bahrain, Morocco, and Jordan have aligned themselves with the Gulf monarchies, mainly Saudi Arabia. The monarchic bloc seems to be a relatively coherent group, considering they are addressing the twin challenges of the Arab Spring and political Islam, while deflecting responses to societal demands via varying strategies of authoritarian rule.[[5]](#endnote-5) The geopolitical positioning of this bloc exhibits this shared perspective. The Gulf region is experiencing a rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, but of diminishing intensity, although with some effects extending beyond the immediate sub-region. Oman remains somewhat isolated in this political atmosphere. Saudi Arabia relied upon a military intervention to prevent a domestic upheaval in Bahrain while Qatar, along with Saudi Arabia, gave material and diplomatic support to the NATO-led military intervention in Libya. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt pursued a military operation in Libya, signaling military capabilities from within, potentially marking a new trend in regional politics.[[6]](#endnote-6)

The complexity of the Saudi Arabia-Qatar rivalry became evident in their attitudes towards Egypt. Qatar supported Muhammed Morsi —who came to power by a democratic election in 2012—while Saudi Arabia supported the General Abdel-Fettah el-Sisi administration, which came to power as a result of a 2013 military coup. Saudi Arabia and their Gulf allies backed the coup in Egypt and provided major financial aid to the new government. [[7]](#endnote-7) Saudi Arabia viewed the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) as under the protection of Qatar and blames the Doha government for using the MB to orchestrate regional upheavals.[[8]](#endnote-8) Saudi pressures resulted in the departure of some Egyptian MB members from Qatar in September 2014, suggesting that Qatar is giving way on matters of regional policy to its larger and more powerful neighbor.

In a number of Arab countries, and in some cases with sub-regional and even regional aspirations, non-state actors are posing increasing challenges to the established order in the MENA, pursuing ideological, territorial, and political goals. The landmark preoccupying current example is the sudden emergence of the Islamic State (IS) and establishment of its control over extensive portions of Syrian and Iraqi territories.  IS is a brutal terrorist conglomerate that uses all possible means to sustain to promote its goals that center upon an expanded presence in Iraq and Syria, and later on, perhaps, elsewhere. The claim to establish a caliphate under the authority of IS should be understood in part as a radical rejection of sovereign states as the basis of political community and legitimate international authority in the Arab world.

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq is a collection of non-state actors that has banded together to oppose IS’s encroachment upon the Kurdish autonomous area that operates within the federal Iraqi structure. Both KRG and IS oppose Assad’s rule in Syria. IS threatens the *de facto* autonomy of Kurds in Rojava (Northern Syria) and the quasi-state Kurdish entity, KRG, in Northern Iraq.[[9]](#endnote-9)

HAMAS and Hezbollah, an older generation of non-state actors, have divergent interests and positions. They maintain a degree of closeness, especially as a result of having Israel as their common enemy. HAMAS distanced itself from Iran and Syria during the Arab Spring and maintained close ties with Qatar and Turkey.[[10]](#endnote-10) Saudi Arabia misleadingly treats HAMAS as part of a wider MB conspiracy to extend their influence in the region. Hezbollah became heavily involved in Syria in order to defend Assad’s regime and later became concerned with extending assistance to the Shia-led central government in Iraq. Hezbollah sacrificed its earlier prestige in Arab public opinion by this effort to defend authoritarian leaders in these two countries, which is generally interpreted as an unabashed exhibition of sectarian solidarity.

Turkey and Iran remain outside the strict ethnic and political geography of the Arab Spring, and yet partially function as members of the intellectual and political community that seems emergent in the new regional geopolitics. They have opposing positions and have aligned themselves with opposing actors in Syria and Iraq. Although Iran is Saudi Arabia’s archenemy, Turkey’s relations with the Gulf kingdom have recently deteriorated. The major source of contention was Turkey’s diplomatic support given to the Morsi government and its criticism of the current Sisi political leadership in Egypt, being critical of its rise to power through a coup and reacting critically to the bloody crackdown of the Muslim Brotherhood. Iran is making an enormous effort to preserve Assad’s power in Syria and backing Shi’ia leadership in Iraq, and at the same time is exerting influence over Hezbollah in Lebanon.[[11]](#endnote-11) Turkey’s decision to side with anti-government forces in Syria has been interpreted by Saudi Arabia as support for the MB.[[12]](#endnote-12) The confrontation is indirect as between Saudi Arabia and Turkey, while Iran and Saudi Arabia are directly at odds in the struggles taking place in Yemen and Bahrain. Israeli policy has been to maintain an arm’s length distance from the developments in the Arab Spring, on the assumption that the ferment will inevitably result in Islamist regimes, which are perceived as lesser-known enemies in the generally hostile Arab environment.[[13]](#endnote-13)

These shifting alliances are visible in the regional restructuring of the positions of each country. The situation in Syria is almost a microcosm of the emerging geopolitics engaging the involvement of all major actors, shifting alliances and continuous revisions of policies. Saudi Arabia and Qatar support different factions in Syria, while Lebanese Hezbollah and Iran back the Assad regime.  Non-state actors are paying serious attention to the situation in Syria. They have surfaced in the security void that exists in Syria and their immediate future depends on the outcome of the struggle there. The various strands of Syrian opposition, including the Kurds, and several extremist groups, are in their battles for existence and power. The necessity of devising self-defense strategies, mobilizing support, finding the resources to fight against the Assad regime have resulted in confusion and frequent struggles among elements of the anti-Assad coalition that refuses to coalesce. Turkey backs the Syrian opposition and now gives sanctuary to more than one and half million refugees. Israel follows the development closely, but has remained mostly on the sidelines despite its evident concerns about the possible emergence of an Islamist and anti-Israeli government in Syria.

The US, the EU, Russia, and China are the most important external actors in this emerging geopolitics. Even though there are different degrees of influence and engagement, overall their influence in this political geography seems to be declining. The potential to externally influence regional politics has substantially decreased, even though there are still multiple roles served by links with external actors – either to help protect or challenge existing governmental arrangements or to contribute legitimacy to the opposed options of political transformation or authoritarian survival. These external actors did not play an overt role in the onset of the Arab Spring although each sought to be positively involved in the aftermath. China is a pragmatic player, cooperating with governing regimes without alienating opposition movements to the extent possible.[[14]](#endnote-14) Russia backs the Assad regime and possesses an undisguised distrust of Western countries, which, in their view, deceived Moscow by misusing the UN mandate in Libya.[[15]](#endnote-15) Russia and China generally invoke the principle of non-interference in sovereign states and are particularly sensitive to the pitfalls of any regime change that is produced by the military exertions of external powers. The U.S. aims to preserve its allies in the region, while simultaneously supporting, at least rhetorically, societal demands for change. This posture was dramatically illustrated by Washington’s at first reluctant acceptance of the 2011 overthrow of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, while two years later remaining silent in the face of a bloody military *coup* against the elected government in the same country. The U.S. supported the Tunisian and Libyan transitions while not diverting its critical gaze during the coercive silencing of oppression in Bahrain.[[16]](#endnote-16) The EU had close political and economic relations with the Arab world as constituted prior to the Arab Spring as a dimension of the community they were seeking to establish in the Mediterranean region. The EU has avoided taking an active role in supporting the struggle in the region for rights, liberty, and good governance.[[17]](#endnote-17) The role EU played in Libya and Tunisia was largely shaped by the national interests and foreign policy outlook of several of its most influential member states, especially France and the United Kingdom.

**Geopolitical reasoning and authoritarian survival**

The new collective consciousness creates new norms of social interaction for regional actors, which in turn redefines the role and legitimacy of borders, creating a new political geography. Political elites feel under pressure to find new ways to justify changes in their positions of authority. The familiar territorial structures of sovereign state face the emergence of new delimitations of territorial identity. The declaration of IS as a state overlapping Syrian and Iraqi borders came as quite a shock to nation-states that considered the realm of political conflict as being either *within* or *between* sovereign states, but not calling into question the previously recognized international boundaries. This cross border or transnational re-territorialization of political community and a new concept of territory challenges the fundamental structure of regional order.

Re-territorialization may occur in a region-making process as "developments which occur when certain territorial entities lose their importance, in favor of other territorial configurations." [[18]](#endnote-18) Although one may raise questions as to whether these types of structures have the capacity to create lasting boundaries, this new type of territoriality certainly calls attention to the tensions between societal and spatial relations and how that may under some conditions subvert existing territorial boundaries. The overall effect is potentially one of an evolving new political geography through gradual institutionalization of the changing dynamics of socialization among regional actors as impacted by these new boundary practices.[[19]](#endnote-19) Although the new territorial entities are surfacing on the periphery of regional geopolitics, they are nevertheless directly challenging the stability of central powers acting within this regional system. They also raise concerns among external actors. Additional to the empowerment of sub-national entities, the geography of the Arab Spring contributes negatively to the erosion of nation-states as well as to the stability of regional organizations.[[20]](#endnote-20)

The authoritarian regimes face major challenges by way of the emergence of this new political geography and its tendency to produce unstable borders. Regime survival requires that state actors have the capacity to protect borders and govern territory, since they are the means and symbols of reifying political power as well as preserving legitimate differences and distinctions. The political elites need to develop a new foreign policy discourse and problem-solving strategy so as confront this redefinition of political geography. The approach of two authoritarian regimes in the region, Saudi Arabia and Iran, has been to “spatialise” their foreign policies in order to counter the diffusion of the transformative impact of the Arab Spring, and ensure that regional geopolitics adheres to a trajectory that reflects their interests and perspectives. Although the practices of authoritarian geopolitics associated with survival under challenge may seem like a new strategy, the roots of this geopolitical reasoning can be traced back to the pre-Arab Spring period, which is now being redefined within these new geographical conditions. In this sense, although the regional context is different, their understanding and interpretation of this reasoning has remained the same.[[21]](#endnote-21) This unconditional prioritization of regime survival leaves no room for flexibility in geopolitical reasoning, but motivates these regimes to oversimplify geographical reality and reproduce familiar geopolitical discourse as well as maintain old foreign policy practices despite the obvious changes in political realities.

**Authoritarian geopolitics of Saudi Arabia and Iran**

The series of upheavals, including civil war in Syria, IS extremism, military coups, authoritarian oppression produce a geopolitical reality that is difficult to convey to the publics in Saudi Arabia and Iran. This is also true for other states in the region. The confusing and turbulent regional stage enables policy makers to fashion geopolitical truths for internal consumption and to justify their foreign policy maneuvers. Policy makers simplify the geopolitical reality, produce and reproduce depictions of allies and enemies, and make these practical concerns major drives and determinants of official policy. Geopolitical reasoning relies on the following: deeply rooted authoritarian resilience relying on experience and coercive practices in controlling domestic politics, understanding the dangers associated with regional politics, and a familiarity with extra-regional actors and contexts. It also takes advantage of resources at the disposal of these two countries.

The geographical reasoning embraces multiple agendas and strategies to shape an authoritarian survival policy to be implemented in relation to different audiences at the domestic, regional, and global levels. While this results in double standards and hypocrisy in policy, authoritarian rulers have few qualms. Authoritarian regimes in the Middle East have a long history of suppressing oppositional forces and dominating domestic politics. In this vein, the foreign policy of authoritarian leaders has been an extension of this unconditional domestic priority of regime survival. International allies have contributed to this goal by both stabilizing a hostile regional environment by way of military intervention in some cases and through training and arms sales in others.[[22]](#endnote-22) Saudi Arabia and Iran have been two prominent authoritarian regimes with the ability to develop patterns of geopolitical reasoning for the consumption of domestic and foreign audiences. They have possess the range of capabilities to give this geopolitical reasoning direct forms of policy implementation.[[23]](#endnote-23) Their unmistakable aim is to preserve authoritarian rule against real and imagined challenges and to avoid any transformative impacts deriving from the Arab Spring.

Geopolitical reasoning enables policy makers to legitimize or at least to rationalize their policies in the domestic sphere. Such a vision entails enemy and threat chains, balanced against the projected support of allies. In this sense, one major concern among these policy makers is the diffusion of transnational values that may generate resistance to authoritarian rule. Saudi policy makers interpreted the Arab Spring as a dangerous development that could potentially be replicated at the domestic level within other countries and in Saudi Arabia as well, and consequently adapted a firm attitude of opposition from the outset.[[24]](#endnote-24) Saudi involvement in Libya, Syria, and Bahrain was presented as necessary in order to secure the Kingdom’s interests, especially connected with regime and regional stability. This reasoning benefits the alleged Saudi role of patron to the Arabs and position as Custodian of Two Holy Cities. The regional role helps to secure authority and legitimacy in the internal domain. They also take advantage of the Wahhabi interpretation of the establishment of Islam in Saudi Arabia, considering the sensitivity regarding the rise of Shia currents in the surrounding regions. In this sense, the greater visibility of Shia rhetoric is useful in magnifying the threat that has emerged within the regional setting. It becomes a policy instrument deployed against their own Shia population, and is also used to condemn all opposition, whether Shia or not, for weakening the government at a time when it is facing a hostile environment.

Iranian policy makers had a short honeymoon period with the Arab Spring, assuming and hoping that the sequence of regional upheavals would eventually lead to the emergence of Iranian-style Islamist regimes in the region.[[25]](#endnote-25) However, when it became clear that the new collective consciousness promotes universal rights, liberties, and good governance, the Iranian establishment distanced itself and started to interpret the popular uprisings as part of an international conspiracy to which it was also being targeted. Their version of the geopolitical stage presented the popular uprisings as terrorist movements and uprisings, inviting civil wars in the Arab Spring countries. The 2009 popular riots in Iran sparked by the controversy surrounding the presidential elections remain a stark reminder of the risks of public unrest in the country. In this light, any tolerance of the diffusion of a transnational struggle for good governance poses a serious threat to the Islamic Republic. Decades of experience in oppressing the opposition have helped the Iranian establishment fine tune their ability to repress and defuse nascent protest movements. The demands for free and fair elections in Iran were reflected in the popular slogan “where is my vote?” [[26]](#endnote-26) The vibrant civil society and search for good governance gained not only momentum but also established a base in Iran. The target audience of the Iranian regime is composed of supporters of the Islamic revolution, and its geopolitical reasoning seeks to ensure their support while oppressing the other, including by brutal means if necessary. Geopolitical reasoning plays a role in justifying the exercise of power in a polarized society, which by its nature also intensifies polarization potentially producing a dangerous escalating cycle of domestic violence. The slogan of the opposition - “No Lebanon! No Gaza! I will die for my country!”-[[27]](#endnote-27) exhibits a certain public awareness of the geopolitical manipulation by the state establishment of the Iranian citizenry.

Geopolitical reasoning in both countries aims to secure as much support as possible from the largest segment of society. The challenge in Saudi Arabia is regionalized, with a fear of an uprising by the Shia community and of a democratizing Islamic movement of the sort associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, while Iran faces a political and, somehow restrained, opposition based on a struggle for political rights and liberties, as well as the hostility of Israel and the West. Iran’s depiction of Sunni extremism as a vital threat to its survival and Saudi utilization of the Shia threat as a divisive factor are mirror images of each other. Despite different enemy-threat chains and different policies, geopolitical reasoning in both countries reflects a considerable degree of similarity in terms of strategies, aims, and preference for coercive tactics to repress the opposition, but there are vast differences in their respective linkages to external political forces.

Geopolitical reasoning becomes a foreign policy practice at the regional level. The strategy is to first set firewalls beyond the borders to prevent any further diffusion of the transformative impact. A second step is to get involved in several countries that are facing popular uprisings in order to help eliminate any threat of political transformation from below. The third step is to create regional blocs for the sake of pursuing a region-wide rivalry. All share the same motive: preventing the regional atmosphere from turning against them internally, and by so doing, posing a challenge to their authoritarian rule at home. As geopolitical reasoning produces geopolitical narratives for consumption in domestic power struggles, it does the same in a more nuanced way when addressing regional audiences. The definition of the regional political environment and designation of enemies and allies serve this purpose.

Geopolitical reasoning is also bound up with what might be called *presentism*, which depicts different versions of reality by continuously re-writing historical engagement and using its own account of reality to validate its position. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia have their own geopolitical depictions of the sectarian divide, corrosive Islamic movements, extremist expansion, shifting alliances, ideological divergences, differing narratives, and protracted transformations. The current level of Iranian engagement in Syria, and Saudi Arabian involvement in Egypt, is the result of the critical importance of controlling the political future of those particular regimes, involvements that follow from their regional geographic reasoning. The significant Iranian support for the Assad regime and Saudi backing of a military coup in Egypt are mainly aimed at creating firewalls in order to restrict as much as possible the inward flow of external influence.

Both paid heavy prices in Syria and Egypt—not to mention the damage wrought by the civil war and the *coup* for these countries—and put their regional clout at risk as a result of these policies that clashed with international values associated with peace and human rights. However, there was virtually no hesitation by either government in pursuing the firewall policy, and each probably would do the same thing in the future if other countries in the region seemed vulnerable to political forces that are seen as threatening. By their own explanation, Saudi Arabia deals with a harmful Islamic current in Egypt,[[28]](#endnote-28) while Iran helps an ally in Syria against terrorist groups and external interventions.[[29]](#endnote-29) The Iranian establishment goes further by claiming a right to defend Shia religious sites in Syria through its help to the Assad regime.[[30]](#endnote-30) Such versions of geopolitical reality heighten geopolitical tensions and increase political violence in the region.

These *status quo* regimes also attempt to manipulate the aforementioned new collective consciousness that seemed in 2011 likely to transform the political geography of the entire region. The justification of Iranian involvement in Yemen and Bahrain was to limit Saudi influence and the related expansion of Wahhabi currents.[[31]](#endnote-31) The Saudi policy of altering the composition of the Syrian opposition, as well as engaging in several other countries militarily and politically is rationalized as an effort to marginalize the MB and block Iranian penetration of the Gulf region. [[32]](#endnote-32) Both Riyadh and Tehran do not hesitate to agitate domestic and regional constituencies with a projected geopolitical war between the two. These geopolitical images support self-depictions as the savior of their allies, reproducing a new cycle of authoritarian patron-client relations in the regional context.

For Iran, *sine qua non* in regional policy means maintaining strong ties with Syria, Iraq, and Lebanese Hezbollah. In the Saudi version, the priority is the Gulf region, Egypt, and other kingdoms in the region, namely Jordan and Morocco. Non-state actors challenge Saudi and Iranian policies while justifying their positions in a number of cases. Saudis help Jordan, Lebanon and Morocco to strengthen their security structures and, through border surveillance in the former two, reinforce the idea of protecting them against intervention by non-state actors. The geopolitical reasoning in both countries fosters a regional role of upholding order, namely promoting a responsible and constructive regional type of stability in the face of irresponsible and destructive threats. Saudi and Iranian attitudes against IS are an example of this sort of presentism. IS diverts attention from the Syrian issue and even fights Assad’s internal enemies, while delegitimizing the Shia-led Iraqi government through its expansion to northern Iraq, thereby demonstrating its inability to exercise sovereign control over its territory. Although IS presently serves Iranian interests in Syria and may foster Saudi Arabian goals in Iraq, both strongly oppose IS presence in Syria and Iraq.[[33]](#endnote-33) In effect, IS extremism takes precedence over the secondary goals of securing sympathetic regimes throughout the region.

Both Iran and Saudi Arabia benefit from a new Cold War atmosphere in the region. It also gives them a chance to secure a position based on the habits and experiences of external international actors during the Cold War era. US-Saudi relations and Russia-Iran-Syria relations reinsert Cold War-style binary divisions in the region.[[34]](#endnote-34) The geography of the Arab Spring is a more challenging one for international actors, forcing them to constantly recalibrate their policies toward the region in ways that make it impossible to sustain coherent polices. Not until IS expansion into Kurdish regions of Iraq and the brutal killing of Kurds did the U.S. develop a strategy and carry out a limited air attack in Iraq in August 2014. The formulation of a responsive U.S. strategy paved the way to the emergence of a U.S. led coalition, backed by key Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia, to fight against IS and for joint air strikes against IS in Syria in September 2014. Although Iran has concerns about the wider political results of U.S. airstrikes in the region, it does not have any problem fighting against IS and is willing lend its support.[[35]](#endnote-35) For the external powers, the duality of protecting old alliance patterns and responding to an emerging situation has led to some controversial policies. Russia did not oppose the UNSC Resolution on the intervention with Libya, yet opposes any comparable interference with the civil strife in Syria. Partially, the Russian position reflects its reasonable anger at being manipulated in 2011 into supporting a limited humanitarian initiative to protect civilians trapped in Benghazi while the actual NATO operation was expanded from its outset to seek regime change in Tripoli, and the overthrow of Qaddafi.

After initial hesitations, the US supported the removal of Mubarak in Egypt but remained silent when Saudi-led military forces oppressed the protests in Bahrain.[[36]](#endnote-36) Again the distinction reflects differing priorities. The U.S. Government did not want to have an unstable atmosphere in Bahrain where it possesses an important naval base, the home of its Fifth Fleet. Saudi Arabia and Iran exploit this duality and the lack of involvement by external actors to justify their geopolitical reasoning, support their regional causes, and preserve their hold on power at home. Despite the policy calculations of international actors, Saudi Arabia and Iran have succeeded in securing consistent international backing for their policies in the region. The alliance or closer relations with the US, Russia, China, and others provide legitimacy for authoritarian rulers; for instance, Saudi Arabia needs US backing in Egypt as the Russian support in the UN Security Council and arms supplies assist Iran in Syria.

**Conclusion**

The geopolitical tremor that preceded the Arab Spring was the Islamic Revolution in Iran, resulting in a national transformation that became a regional event. The Arab Spring, however, transformed the Arab political landscape with its diverse actions and reactions. It launched a new phase of the authoritarian counterrevolutionary reactions in national spaces, i.e. Egypt, Bahrain, Syria and also at regional levels, i.e. Saudi Arabia, UAE, Iran. The roles of non-state actors, the political turmoil in several countries, and the civil war in Syria required national actors to respond via shifting alliances and continuous recalculation of policies. Two counterrevolutionary powers in the region, Saudi Arabia and Iran, are expending more energy and resources than others in order to ensure the survival of their respective authoritarian regimes.

Saudi Arabia and Iran aim to preserve authoritarian rule at home, while continuing their rivalry on a regional scale, and to secure support from external international actors. The collective consciousness that shaped the new Arab Spring geography sets forth public demands relating to human rights and greater economic equity, good governance, and a change in the regional political landscape. While struggling with each other, Saudi Arabia and Iran each defend the *status quo* against the ongoing transformation being experienced in Arab countries. Geopolitical reasoning emerges from their policy calculations in response to the situation, resulting in strategies to ensure the resilience of their respective regimes in a political atmosphere that could turn hostile.

Saudi Arabia and Iran face limits in structuring a region or determining the course of developments in the ways they desire. They are putting the region into disarray and sowing the seeds of longstanding enmity, which may at some point prove self-destructive. Iran has vital interests but not as a part of the new Arab political geography. It put its influence at risk, and as a result its position in the Arab palaces and the street seems to be in sharp decline. Saudi Arabia is an insider and a capable actor in the Arab geography. However, its performance and impact does not match what it wishes to achieve in the region. The Saudi strategy of leading a counter-revolution against the Arab Spring has put it out of touch, and its message is failing to resonate with a number of Arab countries and the Arab masses. For both countries, the strong link between regime survival and geopolitical orientation leads to miscalculations, reduced flexibility in the decision making process, and an inability to adapt to a changing regional environment. It is also uncertain for how long they will be able to oppress public demands at home through coercive methods.

Saudi Arabia and Iran faced challenges on four fronts in their attempt to channel their geopolitical projections to their domestic, regional, and international constituencies. First, they faced the limits of overstretching in the regional environment. The scope of their involvement is beyond their capabilities and has forced setbacks on certain fronts. Second, the change in regional geography is so fundamental that it is difficult to reverse, and the new non-state actors are likely to survive for the foreseeable future. Third, the chance of Cold War style patron-client relationships with international actors is smaller than ever. They have succeeded only in creating unreliable and suspicious partnerships with external powers, who are likely to be highly selective, and opportunistic in their regional maneuvers, lacking the ideological fervor and coherence that existed during the Cold War. Fourth, the geopolitical reasoning and problem solving agenda has not improved the domestic standing of either government. The ultra securitized approach towards domestic opposition continues to be the only possible means for maintaining power.

Saudi and Iranian geopolitical reasoning has lost consistency at the domestic, regional, and international levels. To their surprise, they have found themselves in a position of urgently needing to cooperate with one another in response to Islamic State expansion into Iraq. Although one may argue that they did not intend to provoke sectarian divisions, the loss of consistency in their policies converged with the narrative of rivalry along sectarian lines. One may assume certain setbacks on a number of regional issues but the escalation of regional rivalry on sectarian grounds limits the prospects for common ground. As the victims of their own policy directions, cooperation or rapprochement is also an unlikely prospect in the short- to medium-term. They are likely to recalibrate polices based on shifting interpretations of policies and interests. However, the ultimate priority in both instances is regime survival and any tactical adjustments would aim only at securing domestic authority.

**Notes on Contributors**

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**Notes**

1. \* Corresponding author. Email: bulent@sabanciuniv.edu [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. See, Tuathail, “Theorizing Practical Geopolitical Reasoning,” 601 ‒ 628. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Tunusian, Qatari, Eyptian and Turkish high level delegations visited Gaza in 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Valbjørn and Bank, “The New Arab Cold War,” 3-25. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See, for example, Samaan, “Jordan’s New Geopolitics,” 15-26; and Benchemsi, “Morocco,” 57-69. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See, Roberts, “Behind Qatar's Intervention in Libya.”; Dabrowska, “Saudis Response.”; and Kirkpatrick and Schmitt, “Arab Nations Strike in Libya.” [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Sager, “Challenging Times for Saudi.” [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See, Roberts, “Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood,” 84-94. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Author interview with Dlawer Ala'Aldeen, President of Middle East Research Institute, Washington DC, 24 August 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Author interview with a Senior HAMAS official, Istanbul, June 12, 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Parchami, “The ‘Arab Spring’,” 35-52. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Noureddine, “Debate.” [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Edwards and Jones, “Missing the ‘Devils’,” 399-415 [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Sun and Zoubir, “China’s Response,” 2-20. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Allison, “Russia and Syria,” 795‒823 [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. See, Gerges, “The Obama Approach,” 299‒323; and Ambrosio, “Democratic States,” 331‒346. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Perthes, “Europe and the Arab Spring,” 73-84. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Scholte, *Globalization: A Critical Introduction.* [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Popescu, “The Conflicting Logics,” 420. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. For a similar discussion see, Keating, “Europeanism and Regionalism,” 1-22. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Tuathail and Agnew, “Geopolitics and Discourse,” 79-80. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Brown, *International Politics.* [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Aarts and Nonneman, *Saudi Arabia.*; and Ramazani, *Independence without Freedom*. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Steinberg, “Leading the Counter-Revolution.” [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Author Interview with Trita Parsi, Washington DC, 29 August 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Khalaj and Khalaf, “Reformists Take.” [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. McCants, “Islamist Outlaws.” [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. “Iran Favors.” [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Dagher, “Fighters, Flowing to Syria.” [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Sen, “Proxy War.” [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. “Saudi King Warns.”; and Gladstone, “Hassan Rouhani Hints.” [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Tudoroiu, “The Arab Spring,” 304-320 [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Cooper and Schmitt, “Airstrikes by U.S.”; and Krever, “Iran's President.” [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Ambrosio, “Democratic States,” 304-320.

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