



## Pressing Middle East Geopolitical Issues for the Incoming Administration

- A complex interplay involving three key dynamics – waning authoritarianism, the Sunni-Shia conflict, and Islamist insurrectionism – is driving the geopolitics of the Middle East. This creates, in essence, a multi-player struggle between competing Muslim actors.
- The growing geosectarian struggle between (Sunni) Saudi Arabia and (Shiite) Iran for leadership of the region undercuts efforts to stabilize states that are in chaos and the need to confront violent extremism.
- Numerous intra-Sunni struggles are also in play – notably between Saudi Arabia and Turkey, given its imperative to project power into the region. Meanwhile, Riyadh is clashing with jihadist groups like Daesh (ISIS/ISIL) over "ownership" of their shared Salafi belief system.
- The United States must carefully navigate this increasingly dense minefield to establish a balance of power between the principal regional powers: Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia.

## SUMMARY

### INTRODUCTION

In the past six years, much ink has been spilled in efforts to make sense of the commotion triggered by the Arab Spring. Multiple conflicts related to democratization, Islamist militancy and ethno-sectarian struggles are simultaneously raging throughout the Arab-majority region. Many within the epistemic community who study the region have grappled ceaselessly with

these developments, but largely in piecemeal fashion. Very few attempts have been made to provide a holistic assessment of the various dynamics driving the geopolitics of the region.<sup>1</sup>

This policy brief advances a comprehensive model to explain these seemingly disparate developments in the Middle East. It makes the case that regional turmoil stems



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from three broad and mutually reinforcing trends: the ongoing decay of authoritarian regimes, escalating geosectarianism and the proliferation of jihadism, particularly among those claiming to espouse ultra-conservative Salafist beliefs. Autocratic meltdown has accentuated the underlying and long-standing power struggles between Saudi Arabia and Iran, as well as insurrectionist Islamism.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, the weakening of state authority has provided both Iran and its Shia allies and Daesh and other jihadist forces with opportunities to expand their footprints throughout the region.

This brief will begin with an appraisal of post-Arab Spring dynamics, followed by an examination of the growing momentum of Sunni-vs.-Shia and intra-Sunni conflicts amid the weakening of Arab states. The brief will discuss ways that Daesh and other jihadist forces have benefited from both of the foregoing trends, finally providing a forecast of the evolving geopolitical situation in light of these drivers and distilling policy recommendations.

### AUTOCRATIC MELTDOWN

The movement once dubbed the "Arab Spring" quickly gave rise to the term "Arab Winter."<sup>3</sup> Both terms were based on a pre-supposed outcome of the uprisings that broke out in early 2011. Arab masses felt that a revolution was underway, and the rest of the world – especially in the West – saw what they wanted to see: Democracies emerging in the planet's last major strongholds of authoritarianism.

Subjective preferences clouded the judgment of most observers, who missed objective realities on the ground. A few, however, argued immediately that what was happening was not a revolution and that the process would not lead to democracy – at least not for decades.<sup>4</sup>

Although democracy remains extremely elusive, the ensuing years have shown that autocracy is also struggling to survive. Indeed, the Arab states that were not thrown into chaos by the uprisings of 2011 have not witnessed dramatic change since that time, and some states have seen the return of authoritarianism. This is because very few of the old regimes collapsed completely – Yemen and Libya being the two isolated examples.

In Egypt, the regime (which in this case refers to the military-led system of governance) did not actually fall with the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak in February 2011.

Likewise, in Syria, the Assad regime not only survives but is currently resurgent. Even in Tunisia, the birthplace of the Arab Spring and the state with the most advanced government overhaul, significant remnants of the old regime remain in place. And, thus far, none of the region's monarchies have been deeply impacted or transformed by the events that began in 2011.

That said, not all is going well for the surviving autocracies. Under President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi, the region's largest Arab state, Egypt, is having a hard time stabilizing its political

economy. Great uncertainty lingers as to what will happen in energy-rich Algeria – the largest North African state – in the fast-approaching post-Bouteflika era. In Saudi Arabia, a steep plunge in oil prices, an unprecedented domestic political transition, and the responsibility to manage regional chaos have strained capacities. And, despite its battlefield successes, the Assad regime in its current form is untenable in Syria.

Each Arab government is at a different stage of evolution, but the common denominator is that autocracy is in meltdown. What happens to Saudi Arabia – which we will examine in greater detail – will be very telling of the regional situation as a whole: A weakening of the Saudi polity is bound to exacerbate the pandemonium. In essence, the Arab world continues to hollow out.<sup>5</sup>

In Libya, Yemen, and Syria – the three major battle spaces of the region – violence will likely continue for years to come, despite internationally backed diplomatic efforts. Every time there is a major meeting of the warring sides, media reports tend to create the impression that the parties in these various conflicts may soon come to an understanding of sorts to reduce the level of violence.<sup>6</sup> Upon closer inspection, however, it is clear that, while the fighting may ebb and flow, conflict will define these countries well into the foreseeable future. In fact, the radius of conflict is very likely to expand, engulfing other countries as well.

There are several broad reasons for this:

1. Stalemate is the common characteristic of the wars in Libya, Yemen, and Syria. No faction has been able to overwhelm the other(s).
2. In each of these countries, the conflict is multi-sided, and each camp is internally divided.
3. The various warring factions have little incentive to seriously pursue a settlement.
4. Few arrestors, meaning strong states capable of containing the conflict, exist to prevent geographical expansion of the violence.

**The common denominator among Arab governments? Autocracy is in meltdown. What happens in Saudi Arabia will be a key indicator of the regional situation as a whole. In essence, the Arab world continues to hollow out.**

Saudi Arabia is the only major Arab power that has any ability to influence events beyond its borders. Traditionally, this sort of influence has been tied to the Kingdom's financial coffers, which are now strained by the plunge in oil prices and the growing number of issues on which the Saudis are compelled to spend. Moreover, and the procurement of tens of billions of dollars' worth of state-of-the-art Western weaponry notwithstanding, the Saudis remain militarily weak, given the lack of human resources needed to project power.

For this reason, Riyadh has been trying to piece together an “Islamic Military Alliance” since October 2015, but with little success. Egypt can provide military forces, but it remains financially dependent on Saudi Arabia in light of its fragile economy and numerous political and security issues within its borders. Therefore, Cairo has no appetite for involvement in foreign conflicts.

**The radius of conflict that now encompasses Libya, Yemen, and Syria is unlikely to diminish for several years and, in fact, is liable to expand.**

For some time, the only real power in the region has been Turkey, but its participation in an alliance is problematic, as well. For one thing, despite its Sunni Muslim identity, Turkey is a non-Arab player. It also has been bogged down in Syria, battling Kurdish militants, Daesh, and Iranian influence there. Following the failed coup attempt in July 2016, Turkey became increasingly inwardly focused and, thus, even more constrained from taking decisive foreign policy action. Ultimately, there are no major forces in place to block the growth of – let alone reduce the size of – the ungoverned spaces in the Middle East.

The countries that, to varying degrees, are vulnerable to greater chaos and bear close watching are Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Tunisia, and Algeria.

## GEOSECTARIANISM

The principal intra-Muslim struggle – that between the Sunni and Shiite branches of Islam – is being waged on a geopolitical scale.<sup>7</sup> While originally a religious schism, the divide assumed territorial and political dimensions during the Middle Ages. Contemporarily, Saudi Arabia leads the largely Arab Sunni camp, which is struggling to counter a rising Iran; the latter heads a bloc of Shia state and non-state actors. The key battle spaces in this rivalry are Iraq, Syria, Lebanon (where Hezbollah is active), Yemen (where the al-Houthi movement carries the Shiite flag), and the Shia-majority areas in northeastern Saudi Arabia.

The Saudi Kingdom at this moment finds itself at a unique crossroads in history – and therefore is extremely vulnerable.<sup>8</sup> As the only major Arab state not to be thrown into chaos by the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia has been forced to confront the various threats to the Arab body politic from both the sectarian “other” and the “self.” Consequently, the kingdom finds itself fighting on multiple fronts. On one front, it seeks to prevent further erosion of state power in the Middle East and to block the path of various non-state forces – including jihadists, Muslim Brotherhood-style Islamists and secular democrats – trying to leverage the situation. Meanwhile, the Saudi monarchy is going through an historic leadership transition at home, while also confronting a new reality of financial weakness and a divergence of interests with the United States, traditionally its major-power patron.

Under these tremendous strains, Riyadh has placed a priority on combating the threat from Iran and its Arab Shia allies – underscoring a trend that we have labeled “geosectarianism,” a modern expression of the age-old Sunni-Shia rivalry. Saudi Arabia’s heavy involvement in the wars in both Syria and Yemen – which constitute the Kingdom’s northern and southern flanks – clearly demonstrates that the Saudis perceive the threat from the sectarian “other” as far greater than that from the “self.” By seeking the ouster of the Assad regime and reversal of gains made by Yemen’s Houthis, Saudi Arabia has shown that it views Daesh as a much lesser threat than Iran. Consequently, the Kingdom’s policies have aggravated the geosectarian polarization of the Middle East, which in turn has aided the growth of the jihadist movement.

In addition to the Sunni-Shiite rivalry, a number of intra-Sunni conflicts have also emerged. Daesh is challenging Saudi Arabia over ideological “ownership” of their shared Salafist beliefs.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia and Turkey are competing for leadership of the Sunni Middle East. Despite their common goal of toppling the Assad regime in Syria, Turkey and Saudi Arabia are not allies; they are competitors with conflicting imperatives and visions of what the region should look like in the future.

The core rivalry in the geosectarian sphere is, however, that between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which have been at odds since the founding of the Islamic republic in Tehran in 1979. Throughout the 1980s, this struggle

manifested in the form of the Iran-Iraq war, which left a million dead and billions of dollars in economic devastation. Iraq launched the war with backing from Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf Arab states in order to undermine Iran’s clerical regime in its infancy. While the hope was to contain the Iranian Revolution, Saddam Hussein’s decision to invade Kuwait in 1990 created conditions under which Iran was able to expand its geopolitical footprint.

The 1991 Gulf War and 12 years of ensuing sanctions severely weakened Iraq, costing its status as a buffer state that prevented Iran from projecting power into the wider Arab world. By the time of the U.S.-affected regime change in Baghdad in the spring of 2003, Iraq had been transformed in Iran’s eyes from a threat to an ally. For Saudi Arabia, the rise of a Shia-dominated post-Baathist republic seriously undermined the regional balance of power, and Riyadh has been openly bitter with Washington for facilitating this critical shift.

There were limits to Saudi Arabia’s willingness to back the Sunni insurgency in Iraq between 2003 and 2008, as it sought to avoid upsetting Washington. More important, Saudi Arabia discovered that backing Sunni insurgents could not reverse the rise of the Shia; instead, it would aid the growing Iraqi node of the al-Qaeda network, which eventually became the Islamic State of Iraq (a predecessor to Daesh). The fact that jihadists benefit from Saudi Arabia’s need to counter Iran and its Shia allies constitutes a full-blown strategic dilemma for the Kingdom.

On the eve of the Arab Spring, the view from the Iranian window could not have looked better. U.S. forces were on their way out of Iraq, leaving Iran to consolidate its gains in the form of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's second term. In nearby Lebanon, In mid-January 2011, Hezbollah – aided by Syria, long the major Arab state ally of Iran – toppled the pro-Saudi government led by Prime Minister Saad Hariri through a realignment of political blocs in parliament. At the time, it appeared that Iran had all but realized its dream of creating a contiguous sphere of influence on its western flank, extending to the Mediterranean.

Furthermore, Iran was elated by the outbreak of the Arab Spring, which triggered the meltdown of autocratic regimes in the Arab world and created more room for the expansion of Tehran's influence. Iran set its eyes on Bahrain, an island nation in the Persian Gulf just a stone's throw from Saudi Arabia's energy fields and Shia-majority provinces. A Shia-led uprising in Bahrain's capital, Manama, in March 2011 threatened to topple the pro-Saudi Sunni monarchical regime. Bahrain had always been a bridge too far across the Persian Gulf for Iran, and this uprising created the space for Iran to play in the Arabian Peninsula. However, Saudi Arabia – recognizing it could not rely on the United States to defend its national security interests – made the unprecedented move of sending ground forces beyond its border and forcefully quelling the civil agitation in Bahrain.

Iran did not have the intelligence presence in Bahrain to help the

Shia majority succeed in toppling the al-Khalifa royal family. Far more important, Iran was unable to focus on the Arabian Peninsula because the Arab Spring movement had spread to Syria, threatening Tehran's ally in Damascus. That civil uprising quickly turned into an armed insurrection, greatly due to the Syrian government's brutality in efforts to contain the unrest. By late 2011, Iranian leaders were extremely worried that Assad could be toppled in what had become a full-blown civil war supported by a good chunk of the country's Sunni majority.

Ironically, from Iran's point of view, Iraq had been an implacable foe while Syria was a stable ally; now Iraq was firmly in the Iranian camp, but Syria was at risk of becoming an enemy state. The loss of Syria would pose a security threat for Iran, disconnecting it from its premier proxy, Hezbollah. Its nascent gains in the Shia-dominated polity in Iraq would be threatened by a Sunni minority there, which would have the advantage of strategic depth in a Sunni-dominated Syria.

Although the Saudis were generally worried about the Arab uprisings, they saw the rebellion in Syria as a godsend – a unique opportunity to punch a critical hole in the Iranian sphere of influence. Saudis and their allies quickly backed Syrian rebels, adding to what was already a sectarian conflict, and Salafists began to dominate the rebel forces. However, jihadists of various stripes (Daesh, Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, and others) soon came to dominate the rebel landscape. This was a key turning point for Iran;

it shaped American perceptions to such a degree that the Obama Administration in August 2013 backed away at the last moment from military action against the Assad regime, despite verified use of chemical weapons by Damascus.

This reluctance angered Saudi Arabia, but the Obama Administration's decision to open talks with the government of then newly elected Iranian President Hassan Rouhani added insult to injury. Consequently, Saudi Arabia eventually decided to pursue an assertive foreign policy independent of the United States. Its efforts are a case of "too little, too late," but they also underscore the dearth of good options for Riyadh.

By the time Saudi Arabia decided to go its own way, Daesh had already emerged as a major threat. This allowed Iran to shape American perceptions about shared interests between Washington and Tehran concerning transnational jihadism. Moreover, there is the geopolitical conundrum: The more Saudi Arabia confronts Iran, the more it empowers jihadists, allowing groups like Daesh to exploit the geosectarian battle space. In other words, the Saudi kingdom cannot successfully confront the ethnic and sectarian "other" when it also is at war with the "self."

#### *Intra-Sunni Struggles*

The problems within the "self" are not limited to jihadists, but also more mainstream, non-state actors like the Muslim Brotherhood. The most damaging part of the struggle with the "self" concerns the disagreements within the regional Sunni camp –

between Saudi Arabia and Qatar and, much more significantly, with Turkey.

Turkey has been promoting a democratic model and prefers that Brotherhood-style Islamists come to power. However, democracy and participatory Islamists pose a challenge for Saudi Arabia. Riyadh is unable to put forward an alternative model to help stabilize the Middle East, however, it cannot export its own political system – a hybrid between absolute monarchy and quietist Salafism.

**The most damaging aspect of the struggles within Sunni Islam involves disagreements between Saudi Arabia and Qatar – and much more significantly, between Saudi Arabia and Turkey.**

Yemen is the one country where Saudi Arabia did try to manage changes to the regime, engaging in unprecedented military intervention after erstwhile ally and former President Ali Abdullah Saleh sided with the Houthi movement. Riyadh has failed to achieve its objectives of restoring Saleh's successor to power, and its ability to manage the failed state of Yemen have been further undermined. Worse, fighting the Houthis is creating more space for al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) to extend its tentacles, while Saudi Arabia is already struggling against Daesh activity within the Kingdom.

It is important to note that Daesh, through its attacks against Shia mosques in Saudi Arabia as well as in Kuwait, is insidiously exploiting

Riyadh's geosectarian strategy to advance the jihadist cause. Daesh is shaping the perception that Riyadh and jihadists are of like mind when it comes to fighting Shia. But Saudi Arabia cannot afford to alienate Arab Shias and push them into Iran's welcoming arms; therefore, it must protect them. Doing so, however, not only provides Saudi Shias with leverage against the regime, but also pits the government against fellow Salafists. To stop Daesh attacks on the Shia, Saudi authorities have to crack down on Salafists who are enabling Daesh to operate in the Kingdom. Daesh seeks a rupture between the Kingdom and its Salafist establishment; thus, it is important to understand that although Daesh is targeting Shias, it is using them as a means to go after the real prize: Saudi Arabia.

Iranian leaders understand this logic. While they see Daesh as a threat, they also are aware that the transnational jihadist movement poses a greater threat to Saudi Arabia than Iran, and welcome the sight of Riyadh's entanglement in these complex realities. Saudi Arabia, cognizant of its position, is frustrated that it has no good options. With the U.S.–Iran nuclear deal in place, Saudi Arabia's sense of vulnerability has grown.

Saudi Arabia has no choice but to continue to fight on both fronts and try to keep its two wars from reinforcing one another. Conversely, Iran is brimming with confidence and planning to use an expected influx of oil cash to support the Assad regime. Saudi Arabia sees Syria as the one place where the probability

of undermining Iranian influence is greatest.

Given these diametrically opposed imperatives, the Saudi–Iranian struggle is likely to increase exponentially, with Syria as the epicenter of geosectarianism and jihadism for the foreseeable future.

#### *Political Forecast*

Intra-Sunni differences,<sup>10</sup> the constraints of the Iran-led Shia camp,<sup>11</sup> and the U.S. need to manage radical actors on both sides signal that the geosectarian conflict in the Middle East will continue for decades to come. The Levantine-Mesopotamian landmass will be a long-term battle space where none of the major factions will be able to overwhelm the others. The Shia factions will retain power in the region, despite critical losses in Syria, while the Sunnis continue to struggle with the sectarian "other" as well as the jihadist manifestations of the "self."

Intra-Sunni competition and the demographic predicament of the Shia within the wider geopolitical context, combined with the United States' imperative to re-create a regional balance of power, will entrench two emerging realities for the foreseeable future:

- First is the battle for leadership of the Sunni-majority Middle East (and by extension the wider Muslim world), which involves not only states such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey, but more importantly, jihadist non-state actors – Daesh in particular.



- Second is the fact that, despite its losses in Syria and Iraq, the Iran-led Shia camp is now firmly enmeshed in the regional fabric.

On the Sunni side of the divide, Turkey is constrained by a number of internal and external factors; it also faces unprecedented competition from an alliance of players on the Arabian Peninsula, led by Saudi Arabia. Russian intervention in Syria has created an added challenge for the Turkish imperative to manage its southern flank (recall that during the Ottoman era, no Arab power could challenge the Turks with regard to leadership of the Sunni world).

The rise of insurrectionist non-state actors further undermines traditional Sunni powers' ability to push Iran back into its Persian home world. If anything, the rise of transnational jihadism has created a convergence of Iranian/Shia interests with those of the Americans and wider international community, which makes it even more difficult for Tehran's opponents to contain its rise.

Despite commanding the numerical majority, massive financial muscles and strong international standing, Saudi Arabia and its Arab allies appear fearful of Iran's international rehabilitation in the wake of the nuclear agreement. It is hardly a coincidence that Saudi Arabia decided to escalate matters with Iran by executing a prominent dissident Shia cleric in early January 2016 and snapping diplomatic ties with Iran – mere days before the sanctions on Iran were lifted. Saudi Arabia's behavior correlates directly to the

degree of vulnerability it feels, given the United States' move toward a détente with Iran.

Washington's core argument to Saudi Arabia and its Arab allies is that engaging Tehran and locking it within international diplomatic structures is the best way to ensure that Tehran does not threaten the region. From the Obama Administration's point of view, this strategy was likely to suffice; besides, the United States seeks a balance of power to manage an increasingly chaotic Middle East.

As far as the Arabs are concerned, Iran was already a subversive force, even while under sanctions; unencumbered, it will have even greater capability to exploit weaknesses in the Arab world. As for the balance of power, that is exactly what Saudi Arabia and its allies wish to avoid because such a policy means the Americans recognize Iran as a stakeholder in an increasingly weak and inchoate Arab world.

It is important to note that while Arabs see Iran as a major threat, they also are concerned with the encroachment of Turkey. Saudi Arabia and its allies are well aware that the Turks' willingness to align with them tactically in efforts to topple the Assad regime in Syria is a means toward expanding Turkey's footprint in the region.

The sum total of all these factors means the Sunnis will not roll back Iranian/Shia regional influence in the foreseeable future. However, that is only one half of the geosectarian equation. Iran and the Shia may hold

their ground, but they are unlikely to expand. Shia geopolitical power has more or less ceased to grow; in fact, it is declining with the acute weakening of the Alawite state in Syria and the increasing problems faced by Haider al-Abadi's government in Iraq, particularly given the collapse in oil prices. If Damascus falls and the Alawite-dominated state is reduced to the status of a non-state actor fighting in Syria, the Shia will have suffered a serious blow.

### JIHADISM

The rebellion in Syria weakened the Iranian/Shia position, but this should not be mistaken as a gain for the Sunnis. Ultimately, we will witness regime collapse, not change. Barring a negotiated regime change in Damascus (which is excruciatingly

Sunni militias (most of whom are of one jihadist or Salafist persuasion or another) from establishing a new order in which minorities fear not just loss of sovereignty, but genocide.

Should a loose alliance of various rebel factions take Damascus, they would begin to turn their weapons against one another for power – similar to what happened to the “Mujahideen” alliance in Afghanistan after it toppled the Marxist stratocracy in the early 1990s. In many ways, this is already happening with rebels fighting Daesh and the alignment of Jabhat al-Nusra (which now calls itself Jabhat Fatah al-Sham) with various nationalist jihadist groups, in particular Ahrar al-Sham – thus exacerbating the battle space complexity.<sup>12</sup> Various militias are highly unlikely to find a way to share power with their state-actor patrons (Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Jordan) because they have competing interests that will aggravate matters even further.

**In Syria, remnants of the regime's military will likely devolve into an insurgent movement, seeking to prevent an assortment of Sunni militias from establishing a new order that could mean loss of sovereignty and genocide for Alawites.**

difficult to realize, given the geosectarian polarity), it is very likely that there won't be a Syrian regime for years to come, should the Assad regime itself collapse. In large part, that is because the remnants of what we now call the regime's military – backed by Hezbollah and Iran, along with Shia fighters mobilized from many Muslim-majority countries – will not go quietly.

They likely will devolve into an insurgent movement with the goal of preventing an assortment of

In short, the war in Syria is likely to grow far worse in the months and years ahead. Significant spillover is already occurring in each of the four countries bordering Syria. Turkey and Jordan will not be able to escape deteriorating security situations. Iraq and Lebanon (the former moreso than the latter) already are in great turmoil; however, their demographic makeup, which favors the Shia, will serve as an arrestor limiting the spread of violence.

The outcome of this convoluted conflict will be a long-term stalemate

in which the two sectarian camps alternately will deliver damaging blows, but with neither able to muster a knock-out punch.

The greatest risk is that, while these two factions exhaust each other, transnational jihadists (Daesh, al-Qaeda and/or some third new force) will be exploiting the geosectarian struggle as they seek to recruit new ideological followers.<sup>13</sup> Although jihadists are a threat to the Shia, their involvement also poses an opportunity that Iran will exploit, while also focusing on reviving its domestic and international positions in the wake of the nuclear deal.

The one military force that could degrade or even destroy Daesh has belonged to Turkey, but Ankara was reluctant to step up to the plate even prior to the coup attempt in July 2016; Erdogan's political purge and restructuring of the armed forces afterward made it even more difficult for Turkey to do anything more than play a supporting role in the anti-Daesh effort.

For the Turks, Kurdish separatism in Turkey and Syria poses an immediate threat that must be put down. That said, Turkey cannot afford to ignore the fire on its southern flank – and now spilling over into its territory – in the form of Daesh attacks. Therefore, at some point and regardless of its subjective preferences or even its post-coup realities, geopolitical realities will draw Turkey more heavily into the Syrian conflict. Already, we are seeing Turkey have to deal with Iran and Russia, which seek to preserve as much of the Assad regime

as possible; and with Saudi Arabia, which does not want to roll back Iranian influence in the region at the cost of empowering the Turks.

Meanwhile, two parallel wars have been taking place in Syria: the U.S.-led efforts to degrade Daesh and the Islamist-led rebellion against the al-Assad regime. While the air campaign has not had great success in dislodging Daesh, a rebel coalition dominated by Salafists and jihadists has suffered losses from the regime, which has benefited from Russian and Iranian backing. These two trends will likely lead to a situation in which Washington, working to empower “moderate” rebels, will be caught between nationalist and transnational jihadists.

It has long been apparent to close observers that international efforts to topple the Alawite-dominated regime in Damascus would amplify the geosectarian struggle in the Middle East and allow for jihadists to dominate the Syrian war.<sup>14</sup> At the present moment, the United States and allies in the West and Middle East are engaged in a major military effort to “degrade and destroy” Daesh, which has taken control of large swathes of the Sunni-majority areas on both sides of the Iraqi-Syrian border and claims to have re-established the caliphate.<sup>15</sup> But while the spotlight currently is on Daesh, there are many other types of jihadists in Syria that must be faced for years and perhaps decades to come.

Indeed, a good portion of the anti-Daesh rebel landscape in Syria is of a jihadist persuasion of one

form or another.<sup>16</sup> Even the Syrian Revolutionaries Front, led by the Free Syrian Army – the “moderate” rebel coalition that Washington relies on in the fight against Daesh and eventually against the al-Assad regime – has jihadists within its ranks. It also allies with such forces as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFaS), which only recently severed its official ties with al-Qaeda.<sup>17</sup> JFaS has played a lead role in many of the successes the rebels have had against the al-Assad regime.<sup>18</sup>

JFaS initially allied with Daesh, at a time when that group still referred to itself as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). However, their break-up weakened al-Qaeda’s influence in Syria.<sup>19</sup> JFaS is much smaller than the renegade Daesh and comprises mostly Syrian fighters and commanders, who have been pulled simultaneously in the direction of transnational jihadism and the nationalist struggle of the more mainstream rebels. In different theaters across the country, JFaS’s decision to fight alongside the relatively “moderate” rebel factions (both against Daesh and the al-Assad regime) has had an ideological impact on the group, causing it to display more pragmatic behavior.<sup>20</sup> Ultimately, this means the fight against Daesh will remain very difficult, given that “moderate rebels” remain elusive.

To the extent that these “moderate rebels” do exist, they represent a weak force (for example, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Front), which is why JFaS has played a leadership role in the offensives that have dealt major setbacks to the al-Assad regime. For

this very reason, the Obama Administration in 2013 began a process of reaching out<sup>21</sup> to “moderate Salafists-jihadists.”<sup>22</sup> That effort gained little traction, however; navigating this landscape is a complex and risky undertaking – one that will require a fine-toothed comb.

Seven years ago, retired Gen. David Petraeus – then head of the CIA – best explained the problem.<sup>23</sup> He described it as the lack of “rigorous, granular, nuanced” intelligence on jihadists. At the time, Petraeus was addressing the problem that impeded Washington from distinguishing between reconcilable and irreconcilable Taliban in Afghanistan. While that effort has not yielded the desired results, the principal idea driving the initiative was that those Taliban who would part ways with al-Qaeda could be amenable to negotiations with the West.

Stated differently, the focus in Afghanistan was about working with nationalist jihadists in order to fight al-Qaeda’s transnational jihadism. In Syria, the situation is far messier. Daesh is the main transnational jihadist actor and JFaS (while pursuing a nationalist agenda) has disassociated itself from al-Qaeda in name only. In tangible terms, the fight is against entities such as Daesh and al-Qaeda; however, what the attempt is really to combat the ideology of transnational jihadism, which is much broader than either of the two groups.

As in Iraq in the 2000s, the United States will likely end up aligning with Salafist and jihadist types whose ambitions do not extend

beyond the Syrian nation-state. Their Syrian nationalist outlook could be leveraged to defeat those who seek to do away with the borders in the region. Accepting the framework of international boundaries, while necessary, will not be enough to contain these actors. This is where the limits of what the United States and the West can do are easily seen.

In the long run, only Muslims themselves can effectively combat extremist Salafism and jihadism.<sup>24</sup> An ideational struggle that will span generations will require moderation among Salafists and jihadists.<sup>25</sup> For now, Daesh – despite battlefield reversals – remains entrenched in the cross-border battlespace<sup>26</sup> of Syria and Iraq.<sup>27</sup> Its ability to fight on multiple fronts in the Levantine-Mesopotamian landmass and rule a substantial piece of geopolitical real state largely along the Euphrates River Valley has demonstrated that it has a multi-divisional and conventional military force.

Furthermore, Daesh's ability to launch transcontinental terrorist attacks in Europe is indicative of a sophisticated intelligence apparatus. But most important is its ability to exploit fault lines in the Middle East – with autocratic meltdown and geosectarianism the two most important ones. Meanwhile, Daesh has demonstrated an ability to exploit the migrant crisis in insidious ways while playing on European concerns over extremism within local Muslim communities. But perhaps most of all, Daesh is leveraging Islamism and the lack of democratization in the post-Arab Spring Middle East.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. It is essential that policymakers appreciate the strategic geopolitical context underpinning the various tactical developments in different countries. Understanding how autocratic meltdown, geosectarianism and jihadism shape the regional logic will minimize the risks of costly, unintended consequences. This triangular framework provides for a more holistic perspective on the growing number of moving parts in the region; applying it to policy decisions can help in navigating an increasingly hazardous battle space. Most important, however, these three drivers shaping events speak to the constraints of the United States. This is useful in identifying the narrow menu of realistic options from which policymakers must choose.

**Understanding how autocratic meltdown, geosectarianism and jihadism shape the regional logic will minimize the risks of costly, unintended consequences for policy decisions.**

2. Decisionmakers on foreign policy issues need to pull themselves out of the day-to-day minutiae. A much higher altitude is required to understand how autocratic meltdown, jihadism and geosectarianism intertwine with each other in complex combinations and permutations. It is critical to understand how regime collapse and the geosectarian conflict between Sunnis and Shia (led respectively by Saudi Arabia and Iran)

are creating greater operating space for Daesh, al-Qaeda, and other jihadist forces. In this way, policymakers can more effectively formulate strategies to limit further erosion of security and stability in the region.

**Washington should use its influence with Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia to get rebel groups to turn their guns toward Daesh... [placing] them in a far better position to force Assad to step down.**

3. Little can be done in the near term about the growth of ungoverned spaces resulting from the meltdown of autocracies in the Arab world. However, it is not inevitable that geosectarian rivalries and jihadism must continue to benefit from the growth of ungoverned spaces. Washington can use its influence with Saudi Arabia and the leverage it has gained with Iran in the aftermath of the nuclear deal to de-escalate their moves against each other, recognizing that this rivalry is poisoning the regional atmosphere. The United States will need to re-establish some form of the geosectarian balance of power that was upset by the 2003 invasion and regime change in Iraq.
4. Daesh has used the geosectarian conflict to elevate itself to the status of a quasi-state actor. De-escalation of the Sunni–Shia tensions alone, however, will not be enough to defeat Daesh, especially since the trend of regime meltdown

cannot be reversed. Therefore, it will be essential to uproot Daesh from its core turf in Syria. The Trump Administration will have to focus on shaping a critical mass of ground forces needed for this task.

5. At present, the United States relies primarily on Kurdish militias to fight Daesh on the ground in Syria. This strategy has produced only meager results, while also upsetting U.S.–Turkish relations. To truly take the fight into Daesh’s core territory, Washington needs Sunni Arab partners who have focused their energies against the Assad regime. Washington should use its influence with Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia to get the various rebels to turn their guns toward Daesh. This would give them greater territorial control and place them in a far better position to force Assad to step down.
6. Because Iran exercises considerable influence with the Shia-dominated federal government in Iraq, the United States must view Tehran as a partner in that region. Greater U.S.–Iranian coordination in Iraq will help in rolling back Daesh. It also will create the conditions needed for an effective ethno-sectarian power-sharing arrangement. Washington has engaged Tehran with regard to Baghdad in the past – during the late years of the U.S. occupation – which resulted in stabilizing the

al-Maliki government. The Trump Administration must get Iran to press its Iraqi Shia allies to turn battlefield alignments with Sunnis against Daesh into a political settlement.

7. Although already engaged in a balance of power strategy in the region, Washington needs to be far more nuanced in its efforts to deal with the region's various stakeholders. U.S. strategy has depended heavily upon Turkey assuming the role of a lead regional player. However, the United States has been struggling to arrive at an understanding with Turkey on combating Daesh as well as managing Syria – and by extension, the wider region. The July 2016 coup attempt in Turkey threw U.S. planners into disarray. With the Turks assuming an increasingly independent stance in pursuit of their own national interests, the Trump Administration will have to be creative in order to maintain a close working relationship with the Erdogan regime.
8. Currently, most of the major Syrian rebel forces subscribe to some form of Salafism and/or jihadism. These forces need to be brought into the political mainstream – something the United States cannot do on its own. The United States will need to work with Turkey on this, while also enlisting the aid of Qatar, which has had close relations with the Islamist Syrian militias.

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