



Executive Summary

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THE NEW ARAB REGIONAL ORDER: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR U.S. POLICY

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Although the Arab world is in a state of great instability and flux, this monograph argues that a new Arab regional order can be discerned. It is actually made up of two main alliances. One is an anti-Islamist grouping, which came together in the wake of the crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt in 2013. The other is an anti-Shia grouping, which solidified in the wake of the Houthi takeover of much of Yemen in early-2015, but whose interests go beyond Yemen to other Sunni-Shia conflict areas.

Saudi Arabia is a leader in both these alliances. It supported the Egyptian military's ouster of Muslim Brotherhood President Mohammed Morsi because it saw the Brotherhood as a threat not only to Egypt, but also to the stability of the Saudi kingdom. The anti-Islamist alliance includes other Gulf Arab states except Qatar, as well as Jordan, plus many secularists in Tunisia and Libya. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Kuwait have given Egypt billions of dollars of aid since 2013, and Egypt and the UAE have even undertaken air strikes against Islamist targets in Libya. What these countries and elements share in common is their antipathy to the Muslim Brotherhood and like-minded Islamist groups.

The anti-Shia alliance was formed in March 2015 in the wake of the Houthi takeover of Yemen's capital city of Sana and their move south toward the important port city of Aden. Because the Houthis are members of the Zaidi branch of Shia Islam and because they have received military and economic assistance from Iran, the Saudis were particularly alarmed by their advances and their ouster of the Yemeni government, whose leaders fled to Saudi Arabia. In Saudi eyes, the Yemeni conflict was the latest in a series of

proxy wars that Iran has been supporting in the region to bolster the Shias against the Sunnis and extend Iranian influence in the Arab world. Saudi Arabia assembled a broad alliance of Arab countries, such as all of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries—except Oman, Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, and Sudan—and others to support a military campaign against the Houthis.

Countries within these alliances do not always see eye-to-eye on all regional issues, however. Egypt and Saudi Arabia have different views on the Syrian conflict, for example. The Egyptians believe that Islamist factions in Syria are dangerous and that the Assad government should be part of a process that leads to a diplomatic solution to the crisis, whereas the Saudis believe that the main problem is the Assad government itself, which needs to go. Further, the Saudis believe they can manage the Islamist rebels. As for the Yemeni conflict, while many Arab states share the Saudi view that Shia militancy is on the rise, they are not as "paranoid" about Iran as are the Saudis. Furthermore, it appears that many of these states support the Saudi effort for hoped-for economic rewards.

This new Arab regional order has presented the United States with opportunities as well as challenges. On one level, a Saudi-led regional order has the benefit for the United States of working with a country with which it has had close relations since the 1940s. On another level, being so closely associated with Saudi Arabia can be a liability, given some divergence of views on several issues. In Yemen, the Saudis seem to want to defeat the Houthis at all costs, whereas the United States believes the greater threat in Yemen lies with al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, which has

taken advantage of the chaos in Yemen to make gains on the ground. Moreover, Saudi air strikes have led to many civilian casualties in Yemen; this has angered large segments of the Yemeni population. Although the United States has supported the Saudi campaign in Yemen with intelligence and logistical support, it has also supported mediation efforts--with the support of the Omanis and the United Nations (UN) -- to bring about a solution to the crisis.

In addition, there are liabilities for the United States in being perceived as "anti-Shia." The United States has established close ties to the Shia-dominated government in Iraq, which is fighting the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and, in the wake of the Iran Nuclear Deal, may want to seek a new relationship with Tehran if the Iranian government moderates. Moreover, there are many Shia communities in the Gulf region who suffer from discrimination by ruling Sunni elites, and to neglect their situation simply because they are Shia would make a mockery of the U.S. human rights policy. Hence, for strategic, political, and moral reasons, the United States should avoid becoming embroiled in Sunni-Shia disputes as much as possible, and instead use its influence to dampen such sectarian conflicts.

Similarly, there are pitfalls for the United States in siding with secularists against Islamists. Since 1992, U.S. policy has been in favor of the inclusion of all nonviolent groups within societies, regardless of whether they are secular or religious. Despite close strategic ties with Cairo, the United States has not accepted the Egyptian government's designation of the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization, and does not accept lumping all Islamist groups together. For example, the United States has supported successive coalition governments in Tunisia (which have included Islamists and secularists) and is currently supporting UN efforts to broker a peace in Libya that would include both secularists and Islamists.

The monograph argues that the United States is on much safer ground politically in supporting the anti-Islamist alliance when the effort is directed against extremist groups such as ISIL and

al-Qaeda affiliates. All of the countries and factions in the anti-Islamist alliance are also opposed to these extremist groups, and U.S. policymakers should continue to cooperate with the alliance countries on the extremist threat and not take sides in their internal political conflicts.

The monograph also argues that senior U.S. Army officials and U.S. Defense Department officials should provide advice, where warranted, to the national security leadership of these regional countries to build more effective counterterrorism strategies against extremists. It also argues that these officials offer counterterrorism courses to their military officers at U.S. professional military educational institutions, while at the same time continuing to reassure Gulf Arab allies, who are nervous about a resurgent Iran, that the U.S. security umbrella will remain and even be enhanced.

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