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To cite this article: Heydemann, Steven and Chace-Donahue, Emelie, "Sovereignty *versus* Sectarianism: Contested Norms and the Logic of Regional Conflict in the Greater Levant", *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 15, No. 60, 2018, pp. 5-19, DOI: [10.33458/uidergisi.525093](https://doi.org/10.33458/uidergisi.525093)

To link to this article: <https://dx.doi.org/10.33458/uidergisi.525093>

Submitted: 15 November 2017
Printed Version: 01 December 2018

Uluslararası İlişkiler Konseyi Derneği | International Relations Council of Turkey
Uluslararası İlişkiler – Journal of International Relations
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Sovereignty *versus* Sectarianism: Contested Norms and the Logic of Regional Conflict in the Greater Levant

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ABSTRACT

The Middle East is experiencing an extended period of turmoil and violent conflict. Two main explanations exist to account for heightened levels of conflict and competition. The first attributes current conditions to the intensification of sectarian polarization in the Arab east; regional dynamics are best explained by identity politics, which serve as instruments of sectarian regimes. The second attributes current conditions to state weakness; states in the Arab east are fragile, lacking effective institutions and suffering from a deficit of legitimacy, allowing state elites to govern in ways that exacerbate social cleavages. We view both these arguments as insufficient to explain patterns and trends in regional conflict across the greater Levant and the Arab east. Instead, we argue that current regional dynamics are best explained in terms of competition to determine whether a regional security order will be governed by the norm of sovereignty or the norm of sectarianism. This struggle plays out in an environment of normative fragmentation, where neither norm is hegemonic. It is unfolding most directly through violent confrontations within states that contain multi-confessional societies and exhibit high levels of cross-border intervention.

Keywords: Sectarianism; State Sovereignty; Order; Ideology; Norms; Regional Conflict

Egemenlik Mezhepçiliğe Karşı: Geniş Levant Bölgesinde Çatışan Normlar ve Bölgesel Çatışmanın Mantığı

ÖZET

Orta Doğu, uzun süredir bir karmaşa ve şiddetli çatışma dönemiyle karşılaşma devam etmektedir. Artan çatışma ve rekabet seviyesini anlamada için iki temel yaklaşıma başvurulmaktadır: İlk yaklaşım açıklamasını, mevcut sorunları doğuda kalan Arap coğrafyasında şiddetlenen mezhepçi kutuplaşmaya dayandırmaktadır. Bu yaklaşıma göre bölgesel dinamikler en iyi şekilde, mezhepçi rejimlerin de aracı olarak kullandıkları kimlik politikalarıyla açıklanabilir. İkinci yaklaşım ise sorunların kaynağını devletin zayıflığına dayandırmaktadır. Bu yaklaşıma bu coğrafyadaki devletlerin kırılğan yapısı, etkili kurumların bulunmaması ve meşruiyet açığı sorunu elitlerinin devleti sosyal bölünmeyi artıran yöntemlerle yönetmelerine imkân tanımaktadır. Bu makale, her iki argümanın da Geniş Levant bölgesi ve doğudaki Arap coğrafyasında yaşanan bölgesel çatışmaların şeklini ve eğilimleri açıklamada yetersiz kaldığını savunmaktadır. Mevcut bölgesel dinamiklerin, bölgesel güvenlik düzeninin egemenlik normuyla mı yoksa mezhepçilik normuyla mı idare edileceği bağlamında ortaya çıkan rekabet ile en iyi şekilde açıklanacağı değerlendirilmektedir. Bu mücadele hiçbir normun egemen olmadığı normatif bir bölünme ortamında devam etmektedir. Bu durum, çoğunlukla farklı dini inanışlara sahip toplumları içinde barındıran ve yüksek seviyede sınır-ötesi müdahalelere sebep olan devletlerde ortaya çıkan şiddetli çatışmalarla gözler önüne serilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Mezhepçilik, Devlet Egemenliği, Düzen, İdeoloji, Normlar, Bölgesel Çatışma

Introduction

Since 2003, the Middle East has experienced an extended period of political turmoil, violent conflict, mass displacement, external intervention, extremism, and growing polarization among regional adversaries. America's invasion of Iraq in March of that year was the zero moment that set these processes in motion. It transformed Iraq from an adversary to an ally of Iran, enabling Iran's resurgence as a major regional power for the first time since the Iranian revolution in 1979. Iran's ascent sharpened perceptions of insecurity among Arab Gulf monarchies. Popular uprisings that shook the region in 2011 amplified and deepened these trends, further destabilizing a regional security architecture that was already under significant strain. As protest movements morphed into violent conflicts in Syria and Yemen, and with renewed violence in Iraq linked to the emergence of the Islamic State (ISIS), Iranian intervention expanded across the Levant and the Arab peninsula, bolstered by the forces of Hezbollah, Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (*al-Hashd al-Sha'bi*), and transnational networks of Shi'a mercenaries. Exploiting instability in Syria and Iraq, Kurdish nationalist movements in both countries escalated their efforts to secure greater political independence. Across the Arab east,¹ revisionist actors with distinct and often conflicting interests had successfully destabilized a regional balance of power that had previously kept their aspirations in check.

In response to the challenges of popular mobilization and Iranian gains, status quo actors, with their own distinct and often conflicting interests, pursued a dual strategy of counter-revolution and containment. Egypt and Saudi Arabia differed in their views on Syria, Russia, and the threat posed by Iran. Yet they aligned in actively suppressing the Muslim Brotherhood (*Ikhwan al-Muslimin*) and other Islamist movements, with Saudi Arabia as perhaps the most determined defender of a pre-2011 regional order that successfully contained both Iran and Sunni Islamist challengers.

As threats from both loomed larger, newly empowered Saudi Crown Prince Muhammed Bin Salman escalated attempts to keep them at bay. Rejecting appeals from the UN, the European Union (EU), and other international actors, Saudi Arabia pressed forward with its military operations in Yemen despite their disastrous humanitarian effects. It also sacrificed the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in its determination to suppress the *Ikhwan*. Saudi Arabia, with support from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Kuwait, pressured Qatar to break its ties to the Muslim Brotherhood and end regional policies it viewed as destabilizing, including support for jihadist elements among Syria's opposition and an accommodationist posture toward Iran. In mid-2017, these Saudi-Qatari tensions led to the splintering of the GCC, with Saudi Arabia and its GCC allies breaking diplomatic relations and imposing sanctions and other punitive measures on Qatar. Punitive diplomacy, however, was only one part of a broader Saudi strategy to preserve the pre-2011 regional balance of power and contain Iranian influence. It intervened militarily in Bahrain in March 2011, intensified its repression of Saudi Arabia's Shi'a communities, supported elements of the armed opposition in Syria, and cultivated anti-Iranian hardliners within the Trump administration.

Only fifteen years after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the century-old state order in the Arab east seemed on the verge of collapse. Indeed, predicting the disintegration of state borders became something of a parlor game, with new imagined maps of how a post-Sykes-Picot Middle East might be organized

1 The term "Arab east" is used here to refer to the Levant states of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq, but also encompasses the Arab peninsula and Iran. It does not imply that all the inhabitants of this area are Arab.

appearing in several major media outlets.² Leading analysts of the Middle East have characterized the region as experiencing a “perfect storm of national and regional instability,” or a “new Arab Cold War.”³ Prominent officials, including former diplomats and ministers, routinely describe the Middle East in terms of a “crisis of regional order,” the breakdown of states, and even “the collapse of order.”⁴

Accounting for Disorder

What explains this dire state of affairs? How did the greater Levant and Arab east reach such a perilous state? Two general explanations have been advanced to account for heightened levels of regional conflict and competition. The first attributes current conditions to the rise of identity politics, specifically, the intensification of sectarian polarization, linked initially to the U.S. invasion of Iraq and then fueled by the Arab uprisings of 2011.⁵ This polarization, and the upsurge in transborder, sectarian identity politics that accompanied it, is expressed through a deepening rift between Shi`a and Sunni Muslims, especially but not exclusively in the Arab east. These rising sectarian tensions play out through the escalation of longstanding competition between the Sunni monarchy in Saudi Arabia and the ruling Shi`a clerics in Iran. A “Shi`a revival” post-2003, and Iran’s intent to consolidate a “Shi`a crescent” from Tehran to Beirut, have been invoked as the driving forces behind this “new sectarianism”—though skeptics have challenged these claims.⁶ Civil wars in Syria and Yemen, as well as Sunni discontent in Iraq, and Shi`a mobilization in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, are cast as both causes and effects of this polarization, both products of and reactions to external intervention by Saudi Arabia or other Sunni regimes, on the one hand, or by Iran or its Shi`a proxies on the other hand.

In this account, regional dynamics are best explained as the expression of identity politics enacted by states that serve as instruments of sectarian regimes. Except in its crudest forms, there is nothing inherently essentialist in attributing regional conflicts to sectarian polarization. Such a view is entirely consistent with an understanding of identity as constructed, and with a nuanced and fluid conception of the ways in which enacting sectarian identities have changed as regimes pursue polarizing strategies to advance their regional interests.⁷ Nonetheless, the causal arrow in these accounts flows from regime identities to state policies.

2 Robin Wright, “Imagining a Remapped Middle East,” *New York Times*, 28 September 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/29/opinion/sunday/imagining-a-remapped-middle-east.html?pagewanted=all>

3 Paul Salem, “Working toward a Stable Regional Order,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol.668, No.1, November 2016, p.36-52.

4 Ahmet Davutoglu, “The Crisis of Regional Order in the Gulf,” *Aljazeera*, 27 July 2017. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2017/07/crisis-regional-order-gulf-170727173842629.html> and Chas. W. Freeman, Jr., “The Collapse of Order in the Middle East,” *Middle East Policy* Vol.21, No.4, Winter 2014, p.61–68. Prior to the Arab uprisings, Paul Salem had astutely focused on what he called a broken regional order. See Paul Salem, “The Middle East: Evolution of a Broken Regional Order”, Carnegie Papers, No.9, Carnegie Middle East Center, June 2008, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/cmec9_salem_broken_order_final.pdf.

5 Daniel Byman, “Sectarianism Afflicts the New Middle East,” *Survival* Vol.56, No.1, 2014, p.79-100.

6 Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*, New York, W.W. Norton, 2007; Geneive Abdo, “The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi’a-Sunni Divide,” *The Brookings Institution, Saban Center for Middle East Policy, Analysis Paper*, No.29, April 2013. Skepticism about Iran’s intent to establish a Shi`a crescent was widely expressed prior to 2011. See Moshe Ma`oz, “The ‘Shi’i Crescent’: Myth and Reality”, *Brookings Institution, Saban Center for Middle East Policy, Analysis Paper*, No.15, November 2007. Since the Arab uprisings and Iran’s growing influence in Iraq and Syria, this view of Iran’s intentions has gained credibility.

7 Fanar Haddad, “‘Sectarianism’ and Its Discontents in the Study of the Middle East”, *Middle East Journal*, Vol.71 No.3, Summer 2017, p.363-382.

State weakness is the second general explanation that has been offered to account for current levels of regional turmoil and the increasing sectarianization of regional politics. In the words of a leading scholar of Middle East international relations, “[i]t is the weakening of Arab states, more than sectarianism or the rise of Islamist ideologies, that has created the battlefields of the new Middle East cold war. Indeed, it is the arc of state weakness and state failure running from Lebanon through Syria to Iraq that explains the current salience of sectarianism.”⁸ It should be stressed that claims of state weakness as the cause of the current disorder in the Arab east are quite different from the common, but mistaken, notion that states in the Middle East are artificial because of their arbitrary origins in colonial mapmaking exercises of the early 20th century. It is not Sykes and Picot who are responsible for state weakness in these accounts — though echoes of their meddling are heard in the background.

Claims of state weakness as a cause of sectarianization are not the same as arguments in which current conflicts are seen as harbingers of an imminent cascade of state collapse. Gause, Kamrava, Byman, and others who attribute regional turmoil to state weakness understand that states, as political units, are not going to disappear anytime soon.⁹ Rather, it is the state elites who privileged their parochial interests over the hard work of nation building, and indulged in poor governance that excluded and marginalized large segments of their societies, who are principally responsible for state weakness in the greater Levant. Feckless leaders have produced flawed states that exhibit a range of deficiencies. These dysfunctions render states vulnerable to both external pressures and the accumulation of domestic grievances.¹⁰ In other words, the state in the Arab east is “fragile.”¹¹ It lacks effective institutions and suffers from a deficit of legitimacy. State elites rule through modes of governance that exacerbate social cleavages and corrode crosscutting bonds of citizenship. They oversee failed development strategies, and, in many cases, have proven unable to provide citizens with economic security or with social and economic mobility.¹² These deficits have magnified the appeal of sectarian identity politics among disgruntled citizens. In turn, state elites exploit and instrumentalize sectarian identities to mobilize popular support, advance state interests, and undermine regional adversaries.¹³

While arguing for the instrumental use of sectarianism, “weak state” accounts of regional disorder go beyond the realist narrative of scholars like Salloukh, who has characterized the new Arab Cold War as “a very realist balance of power contest between two states over regional supremacy.”¹⁴ From a realist perspective, current conflicts are not the product of socio-economic tensions resulting from poor governance — an argument that views sectarianization as the first resort of weak rulers

8 F. Gregory Gause III, *Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War*, Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper, No.11, July 2014, p.1, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/English-PDF-1.pdf> Another scholar who views sectarianization as the product of state weakness is Byman, “Sectarianism Afflicts the New Middle East”.

9 Ariel Ahram, “Territory, Sovereignty, and New Statehood in the Middle East and North Africa,” *Middle East Journal* Vol.71, No.3, Summer 2017, p.345-362; and Ian S. Lustick, “The Absence of Middle Eastern Great Powers: Political “Backwardness” in Historical Perspective,” *International Organization*, Vol.51, No.4, Autumn 1997, p.653-683.

10 Ariel I. Ahram and Ellen Lust, “The Decline and Fall of the Arab State,” *Survival*, Vol.58, No.2, April–May 2016, p.7-34.

11 The literature on state fragility is voluminous. As useful starting points, see Frances Stewart and Graham Brown, *Fragile States*, CRISE, No.3, June 2010; Lothar Brock, et al., *Fragile States*, New York, Polity Press, 2012; and Robert I. Rotberg (Ed.), *When States Fail: Causes and Consequences*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2004.

12 Mehran Kamrava (Ed.), *Fragile Politics: Weak States in the Greater Middle East*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2016.

13 Raymond Hinnebusch, “The Sectarian Revolution in the Middle East,” *[R]evolutions; Global Trends and Regional Issues*, Vol.4, No.1, 2016, p.120-152.

14 Bassel Salloukh, “The Arab Uprisings and the Geopolitics of the Middle East,” *The International Spectator*, Vol.48, No.2, 2013, p.35.

— but simply the most recent manifestation of the “Arab state system’s time-honored geopolitical realities.” Riyadh, Salloukh writes, “deployed sectarianism as an instrument of Realpolitik to rally support within the Gulf countries to its foreign policy vis-à-vis Iran.”¹⁵ From this vantage point, stateness is not a relevant variable. Whether states are weak or not, they use the instruments at their disposal to advance their interests in anarchic regional and international systems. These differences are not trivial, yet in both variants of state-centered accounts of regional dynamics, the causal arrow flows from states to identities.

Sects, States, and the Myth of Fragility

We view both these arguments as insufficient to explain patterns and trends in regional conflict across the greater Levant and the Arab east. Whether states are instruments of sects or sects the instruments of states is an important distinction. It falls short, however, as a starting point for understanding the underlying logic of regional dynamics in the greater Levant today.

Arguments that treat states as instruments of sects have difficulty in explaining shifts in the intensity and expression of sectarian identities, especially moments in which sectarian polarization ebbs and its weight as a driver of regional dynamics diminishes. They offer little guidance in explaining why regimes that self-identify as sectarian might adopt policies to regulate and prohibit activities that express sectarian solidarities, such as the penalties imposed by Saudi Arabia on young men who leave home to join ISIS.¹⁶ They struggle to account for conflicts within sects, such as the Saudi-UAE campaign to destroy the Muslim Brotherhood, or for evidence of accommodation and cooperation across sectarian lines such as the support of Syrian Sunnis for the regime of Bashar al-Assad. They are also challenged by the simultaneous presence of intense sectarian polarization, which might be expected to sharpen sectarian boundaries, and a counterintuitive flexibility in how the boundaries of sectarian identities are defined. Expanding what it means to be Shi`a, for example, to encompass both the Alawites of Syria and the Zaydis of Yemen, requires no small feat of theological gymnastics.

Arguments that treat sects as instruments of states suffer from a parallel set of weaknesses. Manipulation of sectarian identities and solidarities is an exceptionally blunt instrument. Sectarian identities can readily be invoked as a rationale for state behavior, whether mobilization of the faithful, cross-border intervention, or the use of sectarian norms to discipline or threaten regional competitors. As we have learned at great cost, however, whether in the Balkans, the Horn of Africa, or the Levant, such strategies have lasting and often unintended consequences. Sectarianization is a classic Pandora’s Box. It is difficult to manage, target, limit, or reverse. It reshapes patterns of social cohesion, how social norms are applied, and expectations about how sectarian identities are enacted in everyday life. It changes popular expectations about how rulers are expected to behave, creating incentives for autocrats to embrace sectarian strategies to enhance their legitimacy. Left unchecked, it can subsume state-based identities entirely, mocking claims that sectarianization can safely be handled as just another tool of statecraft, or turned on and off like water from a spigot.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Aljazeera, “Jail for Saudis who join foreign conflicts”, 4 February 2014, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/02/jail-terms-saudis-who-join-foreign-fights-20142411202563202.html> (Accessed on 27 May 2018).

Nor do arguments that view sectarianization as the product of state weakness or “fragility” — the result, Fanar Haddad once asserted, of a “century’s worth of failed nation-building” — capture the extent to which the period since 2011 has been marked by ongoing processes of state *strengthening* among a select group of key state actors in the Arab east, along with significant shifts in how regimes are mobilizing and deploying sectarian identities and the ends toward which they do so.¹⁷

In our account, deepening sectarian polarization and the sectarian idiom in which current regional conflicts play out are the result not of state weakness but of long-term state building processes that have been more effective in achieving their principal purpose — regime security and survival — than advocates of the “weak state” position acknowledge. These patterns of state building, we assert, have enhanced specific forms of state capacity in a number of cases, including Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the UAE, Bahrain, and Qatar, as well as Egypt and Turkey. First and foremost among these is the development of institutional capacities associated with internal security and the defense of state sovereignty from regional challenges. The authoritarian survivors of the Arab uprisings in the greater Levant are not fragile states. They are “fierce states,” and becoming more so.¹⁸ In the process, they are acquiring new capacities and competencies and learning new modes of authoritarian governance to cope with a changing configuration of challenges.

Examples of this trend abound. In mid-2017, Saudi leaders overhauled the security apparatus to establish a new body, the Presidency of State Security. Likened to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, this new agency is intended to enhance state capacity to confront security challenges and strengthen the regime’s authority to undertake counterterrorism operations.¹⁹ The security overhaul is just one example of a generalized atmosphere in which state security and containment of Iran’s threats to sovereignty are driving policy in Riyadh. Saudi Arabia has also pursued crackdowns on dissent,²⁰ use of counterterrorism laws to prohibit opposition speech,²¹ increased civilian surveillance,²² and ramped up its offensive against the Muslim Brotherhood.

Along similar lines, the UAE has developed its security apparatus through increased attention to cyber security and surveillance. Authorities have allegedly begun to use the state’s new cybercrime laws as a legal basis for far-reaching civilian surveillance.²³ The state has also pursued sovereignty protection through suppression of oppositional academics, activists, and religious leaders;²⁴ and the fierce repression of any activities believed to be associated with the Muslim Brotherhood.²⁵ Bahrain

17 Cited in Byman, “Sectarianism Afflicts the New Middle East”, p. 85.

18 Steven Heydemann, “Beyond Fragility: Syria and the Challenges of Reconstruction in Fierce States”, Washington, D.C., The Brookings Institution, 2018; <https://www.brookings.edu/research/beyond-fragility-syria-and-the-challenges-of-reconstruction-in-fierce-states/> (Accessed on 1 August 2018).

19 Saudi Arabia Ministry of Interior, “A Number of Royal Orders Issued,” 20 July 2017, https://www.moi.gov.sa/wps/portal!/ut/p/z0/fYzNC0JAFIVfxc0s5V6HIWmpYGjtgkDvZhhsyLG8kzVoj5_avs3h_HwcIKiB2EzuZoLzbB5LbminsVKqTJQ8YS4LzLJqf76Uh0LIKRYB_gPLg-vHkTKg1nOwnwD14F10dbNhgavt_GCjbeQgcE0C2c7vn0bm1XZushur10ZLjDGNJSap0ZbheafmC1yOFUU! (Accessed on 26 May 2018).

20 “Rights Groups Condemn Saudi Arrests as Crackdown on Dissent,” *Reuters*, 15 September 2017.

21 Patrick Wintour, “UN Accused Saudi Arabia of Using Terror Laws to Suppress Free Speech,” *The Guardian*, 4 May 2017.

22 Glenn Greewald and Murtaza Hussain, “The NSA’s New Partner in Spying: Saudi Arabia’s Brutal State Police,” *The Intercept*, July 2014.

23 Joe Odell, “Inside the Dark Web of the UAE’s Surveillance State,” *Middle East Eye*, 27 February 2018.

24 Amnesty International, “UAE: Ruthless Crackdown on Dissent Exposed ‘Ugly Reality’ Beneath Façade of Glitz and Glamour,” 18 November 2014, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2014/11/uae-ruthless-crackdown-dissent-exposes-ugly-reality-beneath-fa-ade-glitz-and-glamour/> (Accessed on 27 May 2018).

25 Eric Trager, “The Muslim Brotherhood is the Root of the Qatar Crisis,” *The Atlantic*, 2 July 2017.

has sought to shore up its national security by revoking the citizenship of dissenters on the grounds of “damage to state security,”²⁶ cracking down with military force and prosecution on dissenters and individuals it believes are supported by Iran,²⁷ and allowing military courts to prosecute civilians.²⁸ In Jordan, we have seen increased security in the form of border protection along the Syria and Iraq borders, and renewed military funding, operational support, and equipment from the U.S.²⁹ Borders often described as artificial are now the focus of policies aimed at strengthening the Jordanian state’s control over its sovereign territory.

These patterns of state strengthening since 2011 amplify the institutional asymmetries that have marked state formation throughout the post-colonial era: Security first, development second. Across the Middle East, they have produced states with the physiognomy of Popeye: Massive security arms on top, a feeble developmental frame below. The only cases in the greater Arab east that deviate from this pattern of state strengthening since 2011 are Iraq, Yemen, and, in part, Syria. Each has become a battleground in which struggles to shape regional order are playing out. In each case, local insurgencies that challenge central authority have become proxy wars for regional balance of power struggles framed along lines we outline below. And in each case, violent conflict has been a leading catalyst of state strengthening in other parts of the region. Yet in their own ways, the experience of each is idiosyncratic, offering relatively little insight into broader patterns of governance and state development in the greater Arab east.

In Iraq, the weakening of central state authority was the result of the US invasion that first destroyed the regime of Saddam Hussein, and then, against the advice of many in the US government, dismantled state institutions that might have tempered the country’s descent into mass violence. In Yemen, as April Alley has argued, President Ali Abdallah Saleh pursued regime security through a strategy that treated state institutions as currency in an ongoing process of bargaining with rivals and allies alike.³⁰ Saleh deployed state institutions and state resources as instruments of regime maintenance, positioning himself as the pivotal figure in a web of coalitional arrangements that even he struggled to hold together. When he was removed from office in late 2011 through a deal brokered by Saudi Arabia, bargaining over the form and content of the Yemeni state shifted to a National Dialogue Process overseen by external actors. Initially successful, the process was unable to reconcile the competing demands of key actors: the thin, dispersed state Saleh had constructed rested on unstable foundations and could not hold once he was out of the picture.

Does Syria belong in this category of failed or failing states? In our view, it does not. Syria has routinely been described as a failed state since its collapse into conflict in mid-2011. There is certainly no disputing the extent to which the Assad regime’s incompetence, dysfunction, brutality, and corruption drove Syrians into the streets in March 2011, sparking one of the most violent and destructive civil wars of modern times. Nor is there much doubt that if state strength is defined according to the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals, Syria will indeed be categorized as a fragile state. However, if we prioritize regime survival as the principal purpose of the Syrian state, it appears far more resilient and less fragile than its

26 Amnesty International, “Bahrain’s Year of Crushing Dissent,” 7 September 2017.

27 Amnesty International, “Bahrain: Government Expels Citizens After Revoking Their Nationality,” 31 January 2018.

28 Katzman Kenneth, “Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy,” *CRS Report*, 15 February 2018.

29 Suleiman Al-Khalidi, “U.S. Delivers Helicopters to Bolster Jordan’s Border Defenses,” *Reuters*, 28 January 2018.

30 April Alley, “The Rules of the Game: Unpacking Patronage Politics in Yemen,” *Middle East Journal*, Vol.64, No.3, Summer 2010, p.385-409.

ranking on an index aimed at measuring economic and social development would indicate. Although our claim might be provocative, and we do not disregard the many dysfunctions it exhibits, the Syrian state cannot readily be defined as weak. After eight years of conflict the Assad regime not only remains in power, buttressed by large-scale external support, it benefits from the loyalty of meaningful segments of Syrian society, continues to regain control over territory lost to the opposition, and has maintained its international standing as representative of the sovereign Syrian state.

The Assad regime has deployed a crude strategy of sectarianization as part of its wartime survival strategy and has seemingly succeeded in doing so — at a horrendous cost. Regional actors intervening in Syria have also made instrumental use of sectarian strategies in their support for the Assad regime.³¹ In neither instance, however, do we view sectarianization as an indicator or effect of state weakness. Even while cynically promoting sectarian norms and practices, the Assad regime aggressively asserts its claim as sovereign authority over all of Syria's territory. Russia and Iran both reference their defense of a sovereign government, and the imperative of defending the Syrian state, as justifications for their intervention in Syria. Both have represented themselves as defenders of international law and acted to protect the Assad regime from accountability for its conduct during war. The regime and its allies, as well as Sunni regional actors such as Turkey, have deployed the idiom of sectarianism for instrumental purposes, yet all sides have insisted on the integrity of the Syrian state as a critical condition for the resolution of the conflict. What the behavior of both sets of actors signal, in our view, is the intensity of normative fragmentation in the Middle East, and the extent to which regional conflicts have come to be organized in terms of a clash between norms of sovereignty and norms of sectarianism.

Contested Norms and the Logics of Regional Conflict

In place of arguments that seek to categorize regional dynamics as structured primarily by *either* identity politics *or* state interest, we claim that current regional dynamics in the greater Levant and Arab east are best explained in terms of competition to determine whether a regional security order will be governed by the norm of sovereignty or the norm of sectarianism. This struggle plays out in an environment of normative fragmentation, where neither norm is hegemonic. It is unfolding most directly through violent confrontations within states that contain multi-confessional societies, and with high levels of cross-border intervention.

As the state order in the Levant came under growing pressure as a result of the 2011 Arab Uprisings, revisionist actors exploited norms of sectarianism to challenge the norm of sovereignty from multiple directions. For some non-state actors, including radical revisionist Islamist movements like ISIS but also more established movements like Hezbollah, the norm of sectarianism offered a chance to break a sovereignty-based regional order dominated by its adversaries. It provided a powerful tool for reshaping regional alliances and overcoming the constraints that had prevented Iran from expanding its regional influence. These threats posed distinct challenges to status quo regional powers who sought both to defend the norm of sovereignty and the state-based regional order that sustained it, and to prevent the expansion of revisionist state actors who sought to remake the regional, state-based balance of power by mobilizing the norm of sectarianism.

31 Marc Bennets, "The Kremlin's Holy Warrior," *Foreign Policy*, 24 November 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/11/24/the-kremlins-holy-warrior-chaplin-putin-russia-turkey-syria/> (Accessed on 25 May 2018).

As in earlier, largely constructivist, accounts of regime behavior in the Middle East, we thus view norms as having both regulative and constitutive effects.³² They establish the boundaries of what is considered legitimate behavior by state elites; express criteria against which Arab leaders can be judged, both by their people and by their regional counterparts; provide an idiom in which regional conflicts can be defined; yet also constitute identities by providing incentives for individuals to conduct themselves in a fashion consistent with the expectations associated with a given norm.

As noted above, we trace the origins of this phase of regional competition to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the extent to which it weakened the steady consolidation of the norm of sovereignty that had been underway following the post-1967 decline of transnational pan-Arab ideologies — the previous, if unsuccessful, challenger to the norm of sovereignty as the organizing framework for regional relations. Consistent with the dynamics evident in that era, it is the status quo actors in the greater Levant and Arab east who now act to defend a regional order based on the norm of sovereignty, and revisionist actors — both state-based revisionists like Iran and non-state, revisionist actors, including Hezbollah and ISIS — who exploit the norm of sectarianism to upend this order.

Other parallels to the period in which Arabism and sovereignty clashed in the Middle East are evident in today's regional dynamics, as well. Military strength has become more important in a region riven by multiple violent conflicts, yet it remains the case that power is determined not only by a regime's ability to wage war but its capacity to wield normative influence by positioning itself, simultaneously, as guardian of communal security and as protector of national sovereignty, whether on its own behalf or on behalf of beleaguered allies. Just as regimes during the Arab Cold War of the 1950s and 1960s employed Arabism as an instrument of regional competition while simultaneously, if more quietly, shoring up their standing as sovereign, today's Arab regimes are similarly ambidextrous. Whether they are principally status quo or revisionist actors does not constrain their ability to make use of both normative idioms in their confrontation with regional adversaries. Foolish consistency, as R.W. Emerson wrote, is the hobgoblin of small minds.

Whether revisionist or status quo, regimes exploit both norms of sovereignty and norms of sectarianism, depending on the context. What distinguishes their behavior analytically — and what reveals the coherence underlying hybrid regional strategies — is not whether regimes exploit one set of norms or another, but the intentions and the strategic purposes for which they do so. Both sets of actors make instrumental use of both norms of sovereignty and norms of sectarianism. Except in the millenarian vision of a group like ISIS, they do not represent exclusive or intrinsically contradictory sets of principles or practices. A regional order can include elements of both. Neither is intrinsically associated with either state weakness or state strength. What distinguishes them is the extent to which Sunni actors view the norm of sovereignty as defending their dominance of the existing, post-pan Arab, regional order, and the extent to which Shi'a actors view the norm of sectarianism as central to their revisionist challenge to this Sunni-dominated regional order.

Thus, Saudi Arabia's security and its regional influence are most effectively enhanced in a Sunni-dominated regional order defined by the norm of sovereignty and able to protect regimes against both domestic and external challenges expressed in the idiom of sectarianism. In contrast, in the current regional context, Iran's security and regional influence are most effectively protected

32 Michael N. Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab Politics: Negotiations in Regional Order*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1998.

by a regional order defined by the norm of sectarianism, which challenges the legitimacy of Saudi Arabia and other Sunni regimes, legitimates its cross-border mobilization of Shi'a identity politics, and justifies its role as advocate and defender of Shi'a, Alawite, and Zaydi communities as well as its use of sectarianization strategies to embolden marginalized Shia populations within Sunni-led states such as Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and, to a lesser extent, Kuwait. This understanding of Iran's use of sectarian norms of practices is in keeping with the view expressed by Iran specialist Suzanne Maloney, who anticipated our critique of more recent literature on regional dynamics since 2011. "The literature on Iran," she notes, "typically adopts divergent explanations of [the role of religion in Iran's regional strategy], either dismissing religion as merely a cynical tool for legitimating state interests or, alternatively, interpreting Islamic evangelism and doctrine as the primary determinants of Iran's international agenda."³³ She argues, instead, for a perspective in which sectarian norms and practices express the interplay of national and sectarian identities, both of which are mobilized in pursuit of a revisionist conception of regional order.

Sovereignty *versus* Sectarianism in the Construction of Regional Order

It is the ongoing Syrian conflict where the struggle between conflicting conceptions of regional order is most acute. It also demonstrates the shortcomings of attempts to explain current regional dynamics as the product of either sectarian identity politics or the instrumental use of sectarianism by weak states. All parties to the conflict have deployed both sectarian and sovereignty-based norms, and have appealed to both sovereignty-based principles of international law and to identity-based appeals to communal security and protection, to legitimate their conduct in one of the most violent civil wars in modern times.

The Assad regime now stands as an exemplar of how a brutal authoritarian regime can effectively manipulate its claims to sovereignty to achieve significant advantages over its rivals. The regime has exploited its sovereign standing for a wide range of purposes: to insulate itself from accountability as it engages in a heavily sectarian campaign of violence against its own citizens; to deny legitimacy to opposition groups it derides as lacking any legal basis for their claims to represent the regime's opponents; to legitimate intervention by Russia and Iran, which routinely characterize their presence in Syria — including their reliance on non-state, sectarian armed actors such as Hezbollah and other Shi'a militias — on the grounds that they are lawfully defending a sovereign government; to secure the funds and materiel needed to sustain its war making capacity; to extract resources from international institutions for humanitarian purposes which it then captures and redistributes in support of its military operations; and to deny autonomy of action within areas under its authority to international agencies managing humanitarian programs. At the same time, the Assad regime has, since the very first moments of the Syrian uprising, pursued an explicit strategy of sectarianization. It has demonized its opponents as Islamist extremists and terrorists, while cultivating the most negative, fear-based forms of what Putnam has termed "bonding social capital" among Syria's non-Sunni minorities to bolster their loyalty.³⁴ Indeed, the regime's reliance on idioms of stateness, sovereignty,

33 Suzanne Maloney, "Identity and Change in Iran's Foreign Policy", Shibley Telhami and Michael N. Barnett (Eds.), *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2002, p.89.

34 Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 2000.

and legitimacy to contrast itself with an opposition it casts in starkly pejorative terms underscores the extent to which narratives of sectarianism and sovereignty are mutually constituted, representing elements of a singular discursive repertoire that neatly obscures its internal contradictions.

The weaving together of this dual narrative — which both revisionist and status-quo actors deploy to advance competing conceptions of regional order — is evident in responses to the rise of the ISIS. The emergence of ISIS as a regional actor in mid-2014, when it surged out of Syria into Iraq, captured the city of Mosul, and established itself as a caliphate, represented a particularly radical expression of the norm of sectarianism.³⁵ ISIS did not reject sovereignty *per se* (nor, for that matter, has Iran), though it disavowed Westphalian norms of sovereignty enshrined in international law. Instead, ISIS sought to replace a Westphalian understanding with its own jihadist-Salafist conception of sovereignty, based on its particular interpretation of Islamic doctrine. It released statements denouncing the Sykes-Picot agreement as an imperialist imposition, and circulated videos showing ISIS forces bulldozing the border between Syria and Iraq — the first step on the way toward the unification of the Muslim world under the Sunni ISIS caliphate.³⁶

ISIS posed an immediate threat to both Saudi Arabia and Iran, which were singled out as targets of harsh sectarian denunciations and threats — Saudi Arabia for having purportedly betrayed Muslims by deviating from the true principles of Islam, and Iran on the grounds of its Shi`a identity.³⁷ ISIS explicitly challenged Saudi Arabia's claim to the leadership of Muslims worldwide as the guardian of the two holy shrines in Mecca and Medina and deployed sectarian norms and practices to undermine the legitimacy of a regime that was itself deeply associated with sectarian forms of identity politics. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia were victims of terrorist attacks claimed by ISIS.

How the two countries responded to the ISIS threat, however, is quite telling. Iran positioned itself as defender of Shi`a communities threatened by ISIS, and pursued an aggressive strategy of transborder Shi`a mobilization to counter an enemy defined not as a challenge to state order in the Levant but in sectarian terms.³⁸ Iranian Revolutionary Guard commanders assumed leadership roles in military operations targeting ISIS in Iraq. Iran funded, trained, and equipped non-state Iraqi Shi`a militias, as well as Kurdish Peshmerga forces.³⁹ Its assertive presence in Iraq made clear Iran's willingness to set aside the conventions associated with norms of sovereignty — which would have required it to subordinate its operations to Iraqi authorities — to confront an existential sectarian threat through means that advanced its interest in strengthening a transborder sectarian regional order that would both defeat ISIS militarily and challenge its Sunni rivals politically.

35 On ISIS' theory of the state and sovereignty, see issues of *Dabiq*, the English-language magazine ISIS, especially issue no 1 in which ISIS sets out its view of the Caliphate and an Islamic state; <http://jihadology.net/2014/07/05/al-hayat-media-center-presents-a-new-issue-of-the-islamic-states-magazine-dabiq-1/> (Accessed on 18 May 2018).

36 *Vice News*, "Bulldozing the Border between Iraq and Syria: The Islamic State (Part 5)", 14 August 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TxX_THjtXOw&t=5s (Accessed 27 May 2018). See also Raffaella A. Del Sarto and Asli S. Okyay, "After Mosul, Are Borders and State Sovereignty Still an Issue in the Middle East?," *OUPBlog*, 17 September 2017, <https://blog.oup.com/2017/09/borders-state-sovereignty-middle-east/> (Accessed on 27 May 2018).

37 See *Dabiq*. See also Jack Moore, "ISIS Threatens Saudi Arabia with Major Attacks, Says 'We Will Strike You in Your Homes,'" *Newsweek*, 9 June 2017. <http://www.newsweek.com/isis-threatens-saudi-arabia-attacks-says-its-turn-will-come-after-tehran-623715> (Accessed on 25 May 2018).

38 William McCants, *ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 2015.

39 Rebecca Collard, "The Enemy of My Enemy: Iran Arms Kurds in Fight against ISIS," *Time*, 27 August 2014, <http://time.com/3196580/iran-kurds-isis-erbil-iraq/> (Accessed on 25 May 2018).

In contrast, since 2011 Saudi Arabia has attached increasing weight to Westphalian norms of sovereignty in its response to ISIS. It has both strengthened the institutions tasked with containing domestic challenges and invested heavily in the stability of the state order in the Levant. Saudi Arabia intervened militarily in Bahrain in March 2011 and expanded its economic and strategic support for Jordan. It also joined the US-led Global Coalition to Counter ISIS to attack the group's presence in Syria and Iraq. On the domestic front, it has deployed the idiom of state sovereignty and security to pursue a harsh crackdown on its own Shi'a minority — including the execution of a prominent Shi'a cleric — accusing Shi'a nationals of disloyalty to the state and acting as agents of Iran.⁴⁰ Saudi authorities also introduced new laws to prevent young Saudis from traveling to join ISIS, formally designated ISIS as a terrorist organization in March 2014, and increased its surveillance of the private banking sector to stop the flow of private funds from Saudi individuals to ISIS.⁴¹ Despite these steps, Western critics of Saudi Arabia continue to accuse it of providing support to ISIS and funding ISIS-affiliated armed groups in Syria.⁴² Saudi authorities, however, reject these claims. Evidence of official Saudi funding to ISIS appears scarce.⁴³ Saudi support for Syria's opposition has largely excluded the most extreme armed groups, and was managed, according to Pierret, with the intent of containing the worst extremes of Sunni sectarianism.⁴⁴

The growing priority that Saudi Arabia now attaches to norms of sovereignty marks a distinct shift from its pre-2011 regional posture. Before the Arab Uprisings, the Kingdom had a long track record as an exporter of sectarianism, in the form of Wahhabist ideology that some view as the inspiration for al-Qaeda and ISIS. By most accounts, Saudi authorities believed that by funding Salafist movements abroad it could mollify Islamist hardliners at home. Yet its use of sectarian practices was a response to the specific configuration of threats it encountered at the time, including challenges from secular Arab regimes, the post-1979 consolidation of the Islamic Republic in Iran, and domestic pressure to shore up its Islamist credentials. Even during this period, however, Saudi policy was very explicitly anchored in a status quo commitment to norms of sovereignty. Nonetheless, as the mass protests of 2011 collapsed into violent conflict, as Iran moved to exploit disorder and project its influence regionally by deploying sectarian practices in pursuit of a revisionist conception of regional order, and as ISIS rose up to challenge the state system in the greater Arab east, Saudi Arabia's turn to norms and practices intended to reinforce a state-centric, sovereignty-based conception of regional order represents a rational response to the specific configuration of threats that it currently confronts.

These distinctive ways in which Iran and Saudi Arabia have responded to regional disorder is evident in their reactions to the upcoming parliamentary elections in Iraq. The elections present a clear confrontation between Iran's revisionist sectarian objectives, and Saudi Arabia's status quo commitment to protecting regional sovereignty. Iran has taken an extra-governmental approach to

40 Sam Wilkin, "Saudi Arabia Cuts Ties with Iran as Row over Cleric's Death Escalates", <https://www.reuters.com/article/saudi-security-iran-idUSKBN0UH01E20160104> (Accessed on 25 May 2018).

41 US Department of Treasury, "Establishment of the Counter-ISIL Finance Group in Rome, Italy," 20 March 2015. <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl10004.aspx> (Accessed on 25 May 2018).

42 For example, see Josh Rogin, "America's Allies Are Funding ISIS," *The Daily Beast*, 14 June 2014. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/americas-allies-are-funding-isis> (Accessed on 25 May 2018).

43 Lori Plotkin Boghardt, "Saudi Funding of ISIS", *Policy Watch*, No.2275, The Washington Institute, 23 June 2014, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/saudi-funding-of-isis> (Accessed on 27 May 2018).

44 Thomas Pierret, "The Reluctant Sectarianism of Foreign States in the Syrian Conflict," *Peacebrief*, No.162, US Institute of Peace, 18 November 2013, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2013/11/reliant-sectarianism-foreign-states-syrian-conflict> (Accessed on 27 May 2018).

pursuing its objectives in Iraq, working closely with the paramilitary units it funds within the Popular Mobilization Forces (*Hashd al-Shaabi*), to turn military success into political power. Iran has aided these paramilitary groups to transform themselves into political entities, which then went on to significant success in Iraq's May 2018 elections due to popular support for their success over ISIS.⁴⁵ Merging paramilitary and political power through extra-governmental channels to support Iraq's Shi'a communities, Iran is asserting sectarianism as a cross-border unifier and regional norm. Moreover, it is coopting the norm of sovereignty by seeking to infiltrate the parliament, which has sovereign decision-making power over the prime minister. Saudi Arabia has responded to the threat Iran poses to Iraqi sovereignty by partnering with the Iraqi government to strengthen security and decrease disorder after the fall of ISIS. Saudi and Iraqi leaders signed several agreements in October 2017, with Saudi Arabia agreeing to invest in the reconstruction of cities in the north, as well as other security, development, and trade deals.⁴⁶ Saudi Arabia also plans to work with community-based organizations in Iraq to increase food security, access to education, and economic development to prevent extremism. While Iran is acting outside government channels, Saudi Arabia is working with the Iraqi government and local communities to increase security and reinforce state sovereignty.⁴⁷

Conflicts over the norms of sovereignty and sectarianism are also taking place in Gulf countries such as Bahrain. The Al Khalifa regime has repeatedly accused Iran of undermining its sovereignty and destabilizing the country by attempting to mobilize the Shi'a majority against the ruling Sunni minority, and by engaging in terrorist activities within the country.⁴⁸ In March 2018, Bahraini security forces arrested 116 people with alleged ties to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard.⁴⁹ In October 2017 it accused Iran of terrorism for its alleged role in the explosion of an oil pipeline.⁵⁰ Bahrain's GCC neighbors have provided economic and political support to the Al Khalifa regime, deeming its economy "too important to fail."⁵¹ The economic and political support is aimed at reducing extremism and increasing the regime's authority, both strategies that Saudi Arabia is also deploying in Iraq to defend the sovereign state system. The Bahraini regime's obsession with countering Iranian influence within the country and the GCC's efforts to save Bahrain's failing economy is indicative of the enduring conflict between sovereignty and sectarianism. As Iranian influence in the Gulf grows, status quo powers are using economic development tools to shore up regime authority and state sovereignty.

45 Majidiyar, Ahmad, "Iran's Iraqi Militia Allies Eye Next Elections to Consolidate Gains, Expel US," *Middle East Institute*, 20 March 2018, <http://www.mei.edu/content/io/irans-iraqi-militia-allies-eye-next-elections-consolidate-gains-expel-us> (Accessed on 27 May 2018).

46 Kathem, Mehiyar, "A New Era Beckons for Iraqi-Saudi Relations," *War on the Rocks*, 2 February 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/02/a-new-era-beckons-for-iraqi-saudi-relations/> (Accessed on 27 May 2018).

47 Ibid.

48 Ahmad Majidiyar, "Manama Says Tehran and its Regional Allies Sponsor 'Terrorist Cells' to Destabilize Bahrain," *Middle East Institute*, 22 January 2018, <http://www.mei.edu/content/io/manama-says-tehran-and-its-regional-allies-sponsor-terrorist-cells-destabilize-bahrain> (Accessed on 27 May 2018).

49 "Bahrain Arrests 116 on Charges of Terrorism, Iran Collusion," *Deutsche Welle*, 3 March 2018, <http://www.dw.com/en/bahrain-arrests-116-on-charges-of-terrorism-iran-collusion/a-42814332> (Accessed on 27 May 2018).

50 Reem Shamseddine, "Bahrain Calls Pipeline Blast 'Terrorism' Linked to Iran," *Reuters*, 11 November 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bahrain-pipeline/bahrain-calls-pipeline-blast-terrorism-linked-to-iran-idUSKBN1DB0NW> (Accessed on 27 May 2018).

51 Luiz Pinto, "Sustaining the GCC Currency Pegs: The Need for Collaboration," *Brookings Doha Center Publications*, 19 February 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/sustaining-the-gcc-currency-pegs-the-need-for-collaboration/> (Accessed on 27 May 2018).

From Sovereignty to Sectarianism and Back Again

The extraordinary levels of turmoil and conflict that have engulfed the greater Arab east since 2011 have created an unprecedented opportunity for Iran and other revisionist actors to exploit sectarian norms and practices to mobilize opposition to a state-based regional order that has empowered conservative Sunni regimes. Iran has marshaled identity politics in a bid to reshape the regional balance of power, consolidating a Shi'a counterweight to the influence of Saudi Arabia and its regional partners. It has pursued these ends through a hybrid strategy that privileges sectarian norms and practices, yet opportunistically exploits norms of sovereignty. Iran thus works to reinforce norms of sovereignty and enhance state institutions in cases like Iraq and Syria, where Shi'a and other non-Sunni actors control state structures. Simultaneously it deploys norms of sectarianism to empower non-state actors including Hezbollah, the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq, and Houthi militants in Yemen. These groups serve to expand and project Iranian power across state borders to confront Sunni adversaries such as ISIS and Salafist armed groups in Syria, and give Iran the capacity to challenge Saudi influence in places like Yemen and Bahrain.⁵² Saudi Arabia for its part works to stabilize a state-based regional order through an equally hybrid strategy, yet one weighted heavily in favor of sovereignty-based norms and practices. To the extent that its defense of a state-based regional order hinges on containing or rolling back Iran and its Shi'a proxies, Saudi tactics will inevitably be inflected by sectarian idioms, and be subject to claims that its policies originate in the sectarian identity of the Saudi regime. Yet its interventions in Syria, inspired in part by an interest in weakening an Iranian client and in part by the aspirational aim of pulling Syria into Saudi Arabia's sphere of influence under a Sunni regime, were animated by an overarching interest in protecting — if not enlarging — a state-led regional order in which norms of sectarianism are subordinate to norms of sovereignty in the management of regional affairs.

Not since the era in which Arabism offered an axis around which challenges to a sovereignty-based regional order could mobilize have states in the region faced challenges on the scale they do today. Environments of normative fragmentation are both cause and effect of heightened competition among actors. They are contexts in which empowered revisionist actors, less constrained by hegemonic norms, can challenge and destabilize an existing status quo. As we've tried to show, however, the appearance of disorder should not obscure the underlying logics that are evident in today's regional conflicts, in which local grievances have become secondary to the struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia to define the terms of regional order.

In our view, the prominence of sectarian norms and practices in this struggle is neither the result of state weakness nor the resurgence of atavistic sectarian identities. It is, instead, the aggregate outcome of two distinct causal events in 2003 and 2011 that empowered Iran to mobilize sectarian norms and practices as a powerful idiom to challenge its main regional rival, Saudi Arabia. As it does, Iran also exploits sovereignty-based norms and practices when they serve its larger, revisionist purpose, as in Iraq. In turn, Saudi Arabia has worked to contain Iran by asserting sovereignty-based norms and practices that affirm the integrity of the state-based regional order that emerged following Arabism's decline in the late 1960s. As it does, it deploys sectarian norms and practices when they advance its

52 On Iran's use of state institutions and sectarian norms and practices to advance a revisionist regional order see Ranj Alaaldin, "How Iran Used the Hezbollah Model to Dominate Iraq and Syria", *New York Times*, 30 March 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/30/opinion/iran-hezbollah-iraq-syria.html> (Accessed on 27 May 2018).

larger purpose. Neither conception of regional order requires abandoning one set of norms in favor of the other. Yet the contrasts in the underlying conceptions of regional order that animate Iranian-Saudi competition are stark. For the former, regional security and influence increase when regional order is defined principally by sectarian norms and practices; for the latter, regional security and influence increase when regional order is defined principally by sovereignty-based norms and practices.

At present, with the Assad regime's looming victory in Syria and the failure of Saudi Arabia's military intervention in Yemen, Iran and the sectarian norms it champions, appear ascendant. Yet all indications are that norms of sectarianism, like norms of Arabism, will eventually be absorbed into and subordinated to norms of sovereignty. With ISIS defeated militarily, and as violence ebbs in Syria and Iraq, norms of sovereignty are poised to reassert themselves. As they do, states will unquestionably bear the imprint of current struggles. As Haddad has noted, what it means to enact sectarian identities has undergone meaningful change since 2003, suggesting that recent levels of sectarian polarization will not be short-lived.⁵³ It also suggests that even as norms of sovereignty reassert themselves, they will do so in ways that accommodate rather than exclude norms of sectarianism, and that accommodate a modified balance of power between Iran and Saudi Arabia, as well.

Ultimately, however, the conflicts that continue to roil the greater Arab east will not cause the state order to collapse. They are unlikely even to cause significant changes in the internal borders of current states. In a global order structured by norms of sovereignty, and in a region in which sovereignty has become increasingly consolidated over the past fifty years, the possibility that current state borders might be redrawn is remote.⁵⁴ The pathway to the reassertion of sovereignty as a hegemonic regional norm will not be smooth. It will not be short. It has already exacted an enormous price from the peoples of the region. For better or worse, however, the logics of regional conflict are pushing the Levant and the greater Arab east toward continuity rather than change in the structure of the regional order.

⁵³ Haddad, "Sectarianism and Its Discontents".

⁵⁴ Nowhere is this more vividly evident than the failed attempt by Iraqi Kurds to secede from the Iraqi state in July 2017. The independence referendum briefly unified an unlikely coalition in defense of Iraq's integrity and sovereignty, including Iran and Saudi Arabia, Russia, Turkey, and the US.