

Shifting Alliances in the Middle East

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Summary by Jai Wynn

In the past decade, the Middle East has been rocked by several tumultuous events. The large-scale protest that came to be called the Arab Spring; the civil wars in Syria, Libya and Yemen; and the U.S. invasion of Iraq have all served to destabilize the region. The result is an ever-changing system of regional alliances and alignments. Regime security is the key driver behind the fluid system of alliances in the Middle East, and Arab rulers remain obsessed with ensuring the security of their ruling elites.

The primary objective of alliances in the Middle East is not to ensure bilateral pacts. Rather, the main objective is to build up transnational support for ruling elites to prop themselves up against perceived threats. This causes even more issues as rulers constantly build up their militaries to protect themselves and shock their neighbors into doing the same. However, economic aid and security are also crucial to several Middle Eastern nations. This forces nations like Jordan and Morocco to take part in the war efforts of other Gulf nations. The main concern of such nations is not terrorist threats, but remaining in the good graces of more wealthy and powerful nations in the region.

Ideational threats are every bit as dire as material ones in the eyes of the regimes. This was seen in some of the more violent crackdowns during the Arab Spring. As protests turned into conflicts, regional powers declined into chaos, creating a new power vacuum. Saudi Arabia, an economic power in the region, along with Qatar and other nations in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), intervened all across the Middle East and North Africa. Their roles both supported revolution in some nations and worked against it in others, mainly those in the GCC itself. Yet even in coalitions like the GCC, different ideological preferences in regards to which groups to support undermined these alliances.

The rapid changes in the regional balance of power led to several nations rising and falling in terms of regional domination. Qatar's support of the Muslim Brotherhood was behind its chance to rise, but as the Muslim Brotherhood began to decline, so did Qatar's influence. Saudi Arabia's backing of the many Salafi movements in the region gave it a brief breath of regional dominance, but those same movements would soon take an anti-Saudi tone. Syria remains locked in a civil war, and Israel is undergoing another campaign into the Gaza Strip. Iran looks to be the next nation to step up, and while the U.S.-Iran relationship is improving, Iran still causes worries for its neighbors in the region. The U.S. has sought improved relations with Iran, but by no means has it abandoned the other Middle Eastern nations, especially Israel.

The GCC remains tied together even as its members bicker among themselves and the threat of the Islamic State (ISIS) looms large over all. The various states and regimes all have different security priorities that undermine an effort to form an effective coalition against ISIS. ISIS poses a threat to be sure, but to many Middle Eastern nations, it is but one of several. For Turkey, the main threat is the Kurdish Workers' Party; for Egypt and the United Arab Emirates it is the Muslim Brotherhood; and for Saudi Arabia and Iran, it is each other. In each case, the states in the Middle East do see alliances as a key part of their own regime's security.