

THE MIDDLE EAST IN CONFLICT: THE EMPIRES STRIKE BACK

In consideration of the general instability in the Middle East – the bloody Syrian civil war and its mounting refugee crisis, the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the emergence of ISIL and ongoing fighting in Iraq, and the war in Yemen – the author argues that the geographical map of the region based on the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement is disintegrating. Furthermore, the author argues that the region’s turmoil has to some extent had a spillover effect on the three non-Arab states – Turkey, Iran, and Israel, which further adds troubles to the region. While Israel is largely an outlier, the author posits that Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia will be embroiled in the “increasingly bitter contest for dominance of the Muslim Middle East.”

Dov S. Zakheim*



TURKISH POLICY
QUARTERLY

Spring 2015

* Dov S. Zakheim is the Vice Chairman of the Center for the National Interest and the Foreign Policy Research Institute. He was Under-Secretary of Defense of the US between 2001 and 2004.

The past four years have witnessed a series of convulsions in the Middle East that threaten to overwhelm the nearly century-old legacy of the Westphalia-like, post World War I European order, exemplified by the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement. The relatively short-lived Arab Spring, highlighted by the emergence, and then overthrow of the first-ever Muslim Brotherhood government in the region, was followed in turn by an increasingly violent insurrection in the Sinai. At the same time, the bloody Syrian civil war; the civil war in Yemen, which has rapidly evolved into a proxy war between 10 Sunni states and Iran; the chaos in Libya, which has drawn in the air forces of Egypt and the United Arab Emirates; and the emergence of the brutal Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) all testify to the instability that not only has undermined those five states, but threatens Lebanon, the other Sykes-Picot legatee, and that Churchillian creation, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Left untouched thus far are the traditional kingdoms – Morocco in the west, and the six constituent members of the Gulf Co-Ordination Council (GCC), led by Saudi Arabia.



Also above the fray created by the Arab Spring are the three major non-Arab states in the region – Turkey, Iran, and Israel. Yet they too have not been unaffected by developments in the Arab world, while their own rivalries have further complicated the prospects for restoring stability to the troubled region. And then there are the major non-state actors, all beholden to one or another of the non-Arab outsiders, as well as some of the Gulf States, who have contributed mightily to the region’s ongoing turmoil. Hezbollah and Hamas are both clients of Iran, with Shiite Hezbollah actively fighting on behalf of Iran’s major client, the Syrian Assad regime. The Zaidi Houthis, likewise are supported by their distant Shiite co-religionists in Tehran (Zaidis, known as “Fivers,” differ in a number of theological respects from Iran’s “Twelver” Shia.) For their part, the al-Nusra Front, the initial radical Sunni opponents of the Assad regime, have been the beneficiaries of private Qatari and it has long been alleged, Turkish and Saudi largesse. And then there are the Kurds, neither state nor non-state actor, half-heartedly supported by the Shiite-led, Iranian-influenced government in Baghdad, and the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) government in Ankara, and largely unopposed by either the Israelis or the Iranians.

Further complicating the Middle Eastern scene have been the negotiations between the American led P5+1 (the five permanent members of the Security Council and Germany) and Iran. The Sunni Arabs, again led by Saudi Arabia, have reacted with deep suspicion to what they perceive to be increasingly desperate efforts by the Obama administration to achieve an agreement that, if the initial “Framework” is any guide, has incorporated far more concessions by the West than those offered by Tehran. Israel, in some respects more capable of deterring a nuclear Iran, has nevertheless been far more vocal in its opposition to the agreement, and, in so doing, has drawn closer, albeit informally, to the Gulf States. Moreover, by attacking an Iranian unit in Syria, it has demonstrated that there too, it is more closely aligned with the preferences of the Sunni Arabs than with the Iranian backed Assad regime.

Because it is a Jewish State, in reality if not in formal diplomatic parlance, Israel is essentially an outlier in the increasingly bitter contest for dominance of the Muslim Middle East. The parties to that contest are the two former regional hegemon and, indeed, centuries-old empires, Turkey and Iran, and the relative newcomer to the struggle for regional dominance, the near hundred-year-old Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Because the Middle East is the cradle of Islam, with Mecca and Medina at its heart, and because Turkey once was both home to the Caliph of Islam and controlled the Sunni heartland, while Iran has long been the most powerful champion of Shiism, the competition among the three states is more than political. It is equally a religious-based competition as well, with each country explicitly or implicitly claiming the leadership of the Islamic world.

Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud's Creation

Of the three states, it is Saudi Arabia that has metamorphosed the least over the past century. It has continued to reflect the 18th-century arrangement between Mohammed Ibn abd-el Wahhab, the fundamentalist Nejdi preacher and scholar, and Mohammed Ibn Saud, emir of the Nejdi city-state of Diriyah (near modern Riyadh), whereby the former would legitimate the secular authority of the latter in return for the Saud enforcing Wahhabism as the expression of Sunni Islam in all the territories that came under its control. This alliance, initially cemented by the marriage of Ibn Wahhab's daughter to Ibn Saud's son, gave the Saudis a religious connection that yielded political advantage over other clans on the Arabian Peninsula.

Saudi power, indeed the Saudi state itself, has waxed and waned over the centuries. However, unlike many of the other states in the region, but like both Turkey and Iran, Saudi Arabia was not a European creation. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia was never an empire, nor a continuous monarchy, even a single entity. The country

came into being as a direct result of the efforts of one man, Abdul Aziz Ibn Abdul Rahman Ibn Saud, who began his career as a leader of raiding parties, and controlled no territory to speak of.

Abdul Aziz's road to power was a bumpy one; at the outset of his career, the House of Saud no longer controlled Riyadh and had to flee the Nejd, ultimately living in exile in Kuwait. Abdul Aziz re-conquered Riyadh in 1902 and, after having successfully defeated Ottoman forces that had intervened to oust him, continued his fight to unite the Nejd under his control. He conquered the Hejaz in 1925 and installed himself as the "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques" of Mecca and Medina, which had been under Ottoman control until 1918 and were governed by the Hashemite Sherif Hussein. It was only in 1932 that he created a unified Kingdom in his family's name.

The unification of much of the Arabian Peninsula, even the discovery of oil in 1938, which transformed the hitherto backward Kingdom, did not enable it to exert much influence beyond its borders. Although he had been allied to the British during World War I, and the British recognized his successive conquests, they still controlled the external affairs of the Emirates and Aden that bordered the Kingdom to the east, and heavily influenced the policies of the Hashemite Kingdoms of Jordan and Iraq that were led by sons of the very same Sherif Hussein whom Abdul Aziz had displaced and that bordered the Kingdom to its north and west. The only country on Saudi Arabia's borders that was not, to a greater or lesser degree, a British satellite, was the backward Kingdom of Yemen, ruled by a Zaidi king, whose religious differences with the Al-Saud were reinforced by serial defeats at their hands and the loss of territory to Abdul Aziz.

The Saudis again intervened in Yemen during the 1960s, when they fought a proxy war with the pan-Arabist Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt, the Arab world's leading military power and its political and cultural pacesetter. Riyadh, together with Jordan and Britain, now supported the Yemeni royalists (despite the fact that the ruling Mutawakillite dynasty was Zaidi) with plane loads of arms against the republican forces backed by the secular Nasser; Egypt deployed as many as 70,000 troops in support of the rebels. The war proved a disaster for Egypt, whose weakened state contributed to its devastating defeat by Israel in the 1967 Six Day War. Unlike the Egyptians, however, the Saudis did not send troops to Yemen.

Britain's departure "East of Suez" in the late 1960s, followed by the petroleum price hikes in the aftermath of the 1973 Yom Kippur War and the second round of increases in 1979 accelerated Saudi Arabia's increasing importance as a major Gulf power.¹ Equally important to the Kingdom's political fortunes was the fall of the Shah, also in

¹ The phrase "East of Suez" is used in British military and political discussions in reference to imperial interests beyond the European arena and east of the Suez Canal.

1979, hitherto the US's premier regional ally and surrogate. While the Saudi relationship with Washington dated back to Franklin Roosevelt's 1945 meeting with King Abdul Aziz aboard the warship *USS Quincy*, the rise of the Ayatollahs in Iran cemented that relationship into a true Saudi-American partnership. Finally, the Saudis continued to bur-

nish their ties to Pakistan, particularly with the emergence of the deeply religious General Zia al Huk as that country's strongman. Indeed, in tandem with Zia, Saudi government money helped to finance the Afghan Mujaheddin's war against the Soviets. In addition, the Saudis funded an increasingly larger network of Madrassas in Pakistan, which taught the Saudi-approved version of Wahhabi Islam. By 1990, with Iraq exhausted after its nearly decade-long war with Iran, few questioned Saudi Arabia's increasingly powerful position in the Gulf. With Saddam Hussein's 1991 defeat some eight months after he had invaded Kuwait, Saudi Arabia's position as the leading Gulf Arab state was secure. Indeed, during Operation Desert Storm, the Saudis were at the head of a parallel command alongside that of the coalition of Western armies led by the US.²

“The Obama administration’s effort to reach out to Iran marked a cooling of the [Saudi-American] friendship.”

The close Saudi-American relationship persisted throughout the end of the 20th century and well into the 21st. The Obama administration's effort to reach out to Iran marked a cooling of the friendship, particularly once Washington sought in earnest to reach an accommodation with Tehran over its nuclear program. It called into question not only Saudi Arabia's long-standing policy of grounding its security policy in the relationship with Washington, but also its preeminent role in the southern Gulf in the face of a resurgent, and possibly nuclear, Iran.

A Return to Iranian Hegemony?

The longest continuous monarchy in the Middle East – Iran – had for many years been under British influence. When Britain invaded Iran together with the Soviets in 1941, it forced the abdication of General Reza Khan, who had ruled the country from 1925 after he deposed Ahmed Shah, the last of the Qajar dynasty. In his place the British installed the twenty-two-year-old Mohammed Reza Pahlavi. The end of World War II witnessed Washington's increasing influence in Tehran, and in 1951 the US, supported by Britain, organized a coup against the leftist Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh

² Operation Desert Storm was the codename used for the combat phase of the Gulf War (17 January 1991- 28 February 1991) in which the US waged war with coalition forces from 34 nations against Iraq in response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.

after he nationalized the Iranian oil industry. The coup enabled the strongly anti-Soviet and secular-oriented Shah to assume the role of undisputed autocrat. Moreover, in the aftermath of Britain's withdrawal "East of Suez" in the late 1960s, and with the Nixon Doctrine essentially "offshoring" to the Shah the maintenance of stability in the Gulf, imperial Iran's position in the region became increasingly hegemonic.

The 1979 Revolution sought to undo much of the Shah's political, economic, and social handiwork of the previous two and one half decades. A major by-product of the revolution was bitter hostility toward the US, which was seen as the Shah's major prop, and its ally Israel, with whom the Shah had maintained good, though informal, relations. One domain that Ayatollah Khomeini and his colleagues sought to inherit from the Shah, however, was Iran's regional predominance. Iran never returned the islands of Abu Musa and the Tombs that the Shah had seized from the fledgling United Arab Emirates. Nor did it relinquish its long-standing claim to Bahrain as one of its provinces.

"One domain that Ayatollah Khomeini and his colleagues sought to inherit from the Shah was Iran's regional predominance."

Iran's ability to preserve its regional hegemony was hampered by its break with the US, however. After the revolution, and certainly after the 1979 hostage crisis, Washington was no less hostile to then Ayatollahs than they were to the US. Moreover, the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war cost the Iranians dearly, just as it weakened Iraq's Saddam Hussein, despite his receiving Washington's wartime support.

The irony was that only a few years before the outbreak of the war, Washington military planners had envisaged coming to the defense of Iran in the face of a combined Iraqi-Soviet invasion.

The war did nothing to improve Iran's struggling economy, which was overly dependent on petroleum and seemed impervious to diversification, despite the pronouncements of a succession of presidents and governments. Nevertheless, Tehran undertook to develop both a nuclear weapons capability and increasingly longer range missiles that could serve as weapons delivery vehicles. In addition, Iran established itself as a major sponsor of terrorism, both directly, and through surrogates such as Hezbollah and Hamas, with a reach that became increasingly global.

The aftermath of Operation Desert Storm clearly tilted the Iran-Iraq military balance in favor of the former, especially once the US established no-fly zones over

Kurdistan and the Shiite regions of southern Iraq. At the same time, the Clinton administration's "dual containment" policy, which in 1995 expanded sanctions that had initially been imposed after the 1979 revolution and in 1996 was followed by the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act, also kept Tehran somewhat in check. It did not, however, prevent Iran from continuing its worldwide terrorist operations or from making some progress in nuclear weapons and missile development. Nor did the Clinton policy stop Iran from strengthening its already close ties both with Syria's Hafez el Assad, whose troops fought on the side of the Western/Arab alliance against Iraq, or with Hezbollah, which it co-sponsored with Syria.

Operation Iraqi Freedom, and its chaotic aftermath, totally upended whatever remained of an Iraq-Iran balance in favor of Iran. Indeed, with the emergence of Shiite militias in the Iraq civil war, as well as the increasing power of Shiite political parties culminating in the emergence of Nuri Al-Maliki as Iraq's strongman, Tehran came to exert more influence in Baghdad than any other outside power.

At the same time, Tehran's influence in Damascus likewise had become stronger when Bashar al-Assad succeeded his more cunning father in 2000. So too did Iran's financial and military support for Hamas, which was becoming increasingly important actor in Gaza. When Hamas came to power in Gaza after a power struggle with the Palestinian authority in the aftermath of elections in 2006, Iran became the terrorist organization's virtual sole source of military and economic support. Indeed, already in 2004 Jordan's King Abdullah was warning of the danger posed by the "Shiite crescent" composed of Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Hezbollah-dominated Lebanon.

"It is not unfair to assert that the US has become rather passive in the face of the collapsing Middle Eastern order that began with its own displacement of Saddam's regime."

American relations with Iran remained virtually frozen throughout the early years of the new century. The two countries did have common interests in Afghanistan, where the extremist Sunni Taliban was unremittingly hostile to the Iranian Shiite state. Indeed, Washington and Tehran tacitly cooperated during the early stages of what was called Operation Enduring Freedom. Nevertheless, any prospect of improved relations dissipated, and no arrangements between the two states ever were formalized.

The passage of time, and increasingly tight sanctions, both those approved by the United Nations Security Council and those unilaterally imposed by Washington and other states over all aspects of Iranian economic activity, did not force Iran to cease either its support for terrorism or its nuclear weapons program. Barack Obama's election in 2008, and his explicit desire to engage with America's adversaries, created the prospect for an easing of the sanctions, if not for some sort of reconciliation with the country that leading Iranian religious, political, and military figures still called "the Great Satan."

Obama's refusal to denounce the crushing of the Green Rebellion in the summer of 2009 (in the aftermath of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's election), coupled with his designation of the anti-regime the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (PJAK) Kurdish party as a terrorist organization, was a further signal of his intent to reach some sort of accommodation with Tehran. Shortly after the rebellion faltered, Iran and the US held the first direct substantive talks in decades as part of talks that also involved France, Russia, and the UK. The 2013 election of the reputed moderate Hassan Rouhani significantly increased the prospects for achieving Obama's goal of reaching an agreement to contain the Iranian nuclear program. In November 2014, the P5+1 agreed to a "Joint Plan of Action" which called for a "Framework Agreement" by the end of March and a final agreement three months later. After intense negotiations, a Framework Agreement was reached in early April 2015, with the promise of a final agreement three months later as provided for by the Joint Plan of Action.

Saudi reaction to the accelerating negotiations with Iran culminating in the Framework Agreement was officially muted, but actually was one of great concern. The agreement in no way limited Iran's sponsorship of terrorism, which was of particular concern to Riyadh. During the 1980s, Iranian agents had conducted a series of assassinations of Saudi officials around the world. Some 30 years later, Iranian agents attempted to kill Adel el-Jubeir, the Saudi Ambassador to Washington. Nor did the agreement limit Iran's missile development program, which in the first instance would be targeted against its Gulf neighbors.

There is widespread expectation that should an agreement with Iran be negotiated on the basis of the Framework Agreement, Saudi Arabia will respond in kind. Gulf leaders are convinced that long-standing Saudi financial support for Pakistan was premised in part on a tacit Pakistani agreement to facilitate the Kingdom's development of nuclear weapons. Though Pakistan has disappointed Riyadh by refusing to become involved in the war against the Houthis, its continued reliance on Saudi assistance would indicate that Islamabad would still provide the Saudis with nuclear wherewithal should it be requested to do so. For its part, the Kingdom has been coy about its future intentions.

Other states have also viewed the negotiations with extreme apprehension. Not least among them is Turkey, for centuries the regional hegemon, and, under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, seeking to reassert itself as a major Middle Eastern power in the spirit of its Ottoman predecessor. It is widely believed that Turkey would also seek a nuclear weapons capability in response to an agreement that it perceived enabled Iran, despite all restraints, to continue its weapons development program. But Ankara's ambitions for regional leadership are not merely determined by its nuclear potential. They have been increasingly pronounced since Erdoğan was first elected prime minister in 2003 and then assumed Turkey's presidency in 2014.

“Erdoğan and Davutoğlu felt betrayed by Assad, who they believed had promised to carry out genuine reforms in Syria.”

Erdoğan and the Return of the Ottoman Legacy

Erdoğan, who sprang from humble beginnings to become Mayor of Istanbul to create the AK Party and lead it to power in 2002, initially presided over a Turkish economic boom. When Erdoğan took office in March 2003, Turkey was in the midst of recovering from a disastrous year in 2001 when its GDP declined by 5.7 percent. By 2004, the economy was humming at 9.4 percent growth rate and it continued to show strong growth until 2007, though the economy weakened in 2008, the year of the great worldwide recession, and once again declined the following year. Turkey's economy rebounded in 2010, and showed strong growth the following year (8.8 percent) before slowing down in 2012-13. Overall, however, Erdoğan had presided over a significant improvement in the lives of ordinary Turks, while his increasing emphasis on Turkey's Islamic identity won the strong support in conservative Anatolia.

Erdoğan also slowly moved Turkey away from its previous role as a constant within NATO, both as the Alliance's eastern bulwark against the Soviets during the Cold War, and as a reliable contributor to NATO's overall force posture in the years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Indeed, in the aftermath of 9/11 and the launching of Operation Enduring Freedom, Turkey contributed troops to the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan (ISAF) and took command of ISAF in June 2002. The November 2002 AK Party victory did nothing to change Turkey's commitment in Afghanistan, nor did Erdoğan's formal assumption of power several months later. Indeed, Turkey maintained a force presence in Afghanistan through 2015, and promised to increase that presence in the years to follow.

Still, the first hint of a possible new Turkish orientation was the refusal of the AK Party-majority Parliament to allow the American Fourth Infantry Division to cross Turkey into Iraq, despite a personal plea by Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, whose close ties to Turkey dated back to the 1970s. The vote came as a major shock to the Bush administration, and shattered any American illusions that Turkey could reliably be counted upon whenever Washington called for support.

Turkish foreign policy took a sharp turn when Ahmet Davutoğlu became foreign minister in 2009. Davutoğlu, long known for his advocacy of a greater international role for Turkey, recalling the days of the Ottoman Empire, stressed Turkey's historical place as a Middle Eastern power. He became increasingly critical of Israel, whose ties with Turkey were quite close throughout the previous two decades, and advocated better relations with Syria and Iraq, while maintaining Turkey's long-standing cordial relations with Iran. Needless to say, Erdoğan supported his foreign minister's pronouncements and initiatives.

Turkey's so-called "zero problems with neighbors policy" in the region fell apart with the emergence and subsequent collapse of the Arab Spring. Egypt's generals, and indeed, the eight Arab monarchies, both resented and rejected Erdoğan's attempt to identify with the new Muslim Brotherhood government, which they overthrew in 2013. The rise of ISIL confounded Turkish policy in Iraq; Ankara's consulate in Mosul became the terrorist group's headquarters.

It was in Syria, however, that Turkey's neighborhood policy was shown to be bankrupt. Erdoğan and Davutoğlu felt betrayed by Assad, who they believed had promised to carry out genuine reforms in Syria. Indeed, Davutoğlu asserted that Assad had personally made that promise to Erdoğan on more than one occasion. Once the Turks determined that Assad no longer deserved their support, they threw their weight behind the Syrian rebels, assuming that Assad could be toppled in a matter of months. Ankara permitted radicals to cross its border into Syria. Four years later Assad was still in power, supported by Iran's client Hezbollah, while Turkish aid to radical rebel groups, including Ankara's passivity as ISIL forces crossed its border into Syria, served only to anger the moderate Gulf kingdoms led by Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, both Qatar, and to a considerably lesser extent, Saudi Arabia, stood alongside Turkey in its support of the non-ISIL opponents of Assad's regime, until they yielded to Western and Arab pressure to cut back on their support to the radicals and instead finance and, in the case of the Saudis, train fighters from more moderate anti-Assad groups.

At the same time, Ankara's relations with Israel got no better – they had sunk to a new low after the 2010 *Mavi Marmara* incident. Turkey had previously bitterly

condemned Israel's 2008 war with Gaza – Erdoğan reportedly was furious that he had hosted Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert just a few days before the Israeli operation but received no hint that the attack was soon to be launched. Turkey likewise strongly supported Hamas in its 2013 war with Israel, and consistently pressed for a lifting of Israel's economic blockade of Gaza.

In this regard, Turkey found itself aligned with Iran, Israel's bitter enemy and strong supporter of Hamas, as well as of Hezbollah. Indeed, Turkish-Iranian relations remained as cordial as they had been ever since the Ayatollahs rose to power – unlike the US and other NATO allies, Turkey never even downgraded its relations with Tehran after 1979. Indeed in 2010, Turkey, together with Brazil, attempted to broker an agreement with Iran that would have re-

“It appears as if Washington is prepared to revert to the old Nixon Doctrine of ‘offshoring’ to Iran the role of maintaining stability in the region.”

moved 1.2 tons of low enriched uranium to Turkey, in exchange of enriched isotope for Iran's medical reactor and the hope of holding off additional sanctions against Tehran. The deal did not stop Iranian enrichment activity; it was rejected by the P5+1, led by the US. The Turks felt betrayed by Washington; they asserted that they had been encouraged to negotiate the deal. Turkish efforts were nonetheless welcomed in Tehran, whose economy was feeling the strains of the sanctions that were already in place and would be hurt even more by new ones, that were imposed by the US and EU in 2011 and 2012, respectively.

Iran is Turkey's second largest supplier of petroleum; for that reason, Ankara has proceeded with the utmost caution in matters relating to Iranian activities. Turkey prefers that Iran not acquire the bomb and indeed agreed to station an X-band missile defense radar in its eastern Malatya province. The Iranians were irked by the Turkish decision, but presumably were mollified by Ankara's insistence that the radar would not be used for early warning against missiles targeting Israel.

Turkey and Iran share another foreign policy objective: preventing the emergence of an independent Kurdistan. Both countries currently enjoy good relations with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG); indeed, Turkey let *peshmerga* fighters cross its borders to relieve the beleaguered Syrian Kurds in the battle with ISIL for Kobani and its environs. Neither Tehran nor Ankara will tolerate Kurdish independence, however. Both fear the restive Kurds within their own borders. The Kurds rebelled

against the Persian monarchy several times beginning when World War I was coming to a close. Under the aegis of the Kurdish Democratic People's Party of Iran (KDP-I) the Kurds rebelled again in 1979. Defeated in 1982, with losses estimated as high as 10,000, KDP-I conducted a seven-year insurrection that finally ended in 1996. Another organization, the Marxist PJAK, has continued the fight against the Tehran regime.

“The rift between Turkey and Saudi Arabia may not be anywhere near as wide as between Iran and Riyadh, but it is clearly growing wider.”

Turkey's troubles with the Kurds are both more bloody and of longer duration. Only five of the approximately 20 million Kurds can be found within the territory of the KRG, while some 15 million Kurds reside in southeastern Turkey, with their ranks swollen by near a half million more Syrian Kurdish refugees. For decades Turkey refused to recognize the existence of a separate Kurdish nationality, referring to the Kurds as “mountain Turks,” and Ankara sought unsuccessfully to stamp out a Kurdish insurrection that the Marxist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) launched in 1984. The insurrection has cost the lives of thousands of Turkish soldiers, and tens of thousands of PKK fighters, and has displaced hundreds of thousands of Kurds.

Erdoğan fostered better relations with the Kurds (as well as Turkey's Alevi population), granting them limited cultural freedom, though not the right to teach Kurdish in their schools. He also undertook a peace process with the PKK's imprisoned leader Abdullah Öcalan, who declared a unilateral end to the armed insurrection in 2013. Öcalan and the PKK traditionally had launched their attacks from northern Iraq, prompting frequent Turkish retaliatory incursions. The KRG distanced itself from the PKK fighters (unlike the Syrian PYD, which is affiliated with the PKK), though it claimed it could not control their movements and Öcalan removed his forces from Iraq as part of the peace effort. In addition, PKK fighters joined Turkish supported Syrian rebels in the battle against Assad.

The Triangular Competition for Dominance in the Middle East

For the better part of the past hundred years, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran have maintained correct relations with one another. Friction between any two of them has been relatively short-lived, and it has never descended into armed conflict. That situation is likely to endure at least in the short term.

Nevertheless, the civil wars in Yemen and Syria have pitted the Saudis against Iran and its proxies. The Turks, Saudis, and Iranians each have provided funds and arms to different sides in the Syrian civil war. Saudi Arabia and its allies have played a more overt combat role in the Yemeni civil war, committing air forces, and potential ground troops against the Iranian-backed Houthis. Thus far, Tehran has engaged in a war of words with Riyadh over its bombing runs in Yemen; should the Houthis be driven back, however, the Iranians, already providing assistance to Shiite militias in Iraq, may elect to provide more direct military support to their Zaidi co-religionists. In that case, Saudi and Iranian forces could find themselves shooting at each other. Such a circumstance could in turn give rise to the Saudi nightmare of an Iranian-sponsored uprising in Bahrain and/or its own Eastern province.

The Saudi-Iranian rivalry also underlay the strong exchange of barbs that took place during Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi's April 2015 visit to Washington. Asserting that the Saudi intervention in Yemen had "gone too far," al-Abadi ominously warned that Iraq might next be in the Saudi "radar." His remarks clearly indicated Iraq's concern that the Saudis would follow up "Operation Decisive Storm" in Yemen – recalling the name of the 1991 war against Iraq – to intervene in support of the Iraq's Sunnis against Baghdad's Iran-supported Shiite-led government.

Interestingly, when the Arab League issued its 29 March 2015 statement supporting both the government of the beleaguered Yemeni President Abbed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, and the Saudi-led air strikes against the Houthi rebels, it also referred to interference by foreign powers in Arab conflicts. In this case, however, Secretary-General of the Arab League Nabil El-Araby made it clear that the reference was to Iran, Israel, and Turkey. While Iran was an obvious target, and Israel a usual target, the inclusion of Turkey signaled the deep suspicion that the Saudis and its Arab allies continue to have of Ankara's motives and regional objectives. The Turkish foreign ministry strongly rejected El-Araby's allegation the following day, but in blaming Egypt for El-Araby's statement, it simply demonstrated the width of the Gulf between Ankara and the Arab monarchies in particular, who have established close ties with the Sisi government. The rift between Turkey and Saudi Arabia may not be anywhere near as wide as between Iran and Riyadh, but it is clearly growing wider.

At the same time, the Iranian drive for a nuclear capability is likely to prompt both Turkey, whose relations with Iran are still cordial, and the Saudis to seek a capability of their own, setting off a nuclear arms race that will not cease until the Emirates and Egypt also obtain nuclear weapons. The irony that underlies all these developments is that the US's intervention in Iraq in 2003 was meant to create a new democratic and stable order in the region. In practice it had the exact opposite effect.

The US has recommitted some 3,000 troops to Iraq, far too few to make a real difference to the effective training of a force that has yet to perform adequately on the battlefield after over a decade's worth of training. The US is also conducting bombing runs in Iraq and Syria, though these are far less intense than those it conducted during its two wars with Saddam. And the US is providing some assistance to the Saudis, though this too is rather limited in scope. All in all, it is not unfair to assert that the US has become rather passive in the face of the collapsing Middle Eastern order that began with its own displacement of Saddam's regime.

More than passivity, however, is what appears to be a fundamental change in the US's approach to the Middle East, at least while the Obama administration remains in office. It appears as if Washington is prepared to revert to the old Nixon Doctrine of "offshoring" to Iran the role of maintaining stability in the region. After all, the Administration is prepared to welcome Iran back into what it calls "the international community," with the hope that it will unleash its talented and creative population and revive its economy. At the same time, a friendlier Iran might exert a greater hold on Hezbollah and Hamas, even as it still calls for Israel's destruction.

At the same time, the Administration appears prepared to downgrade its relationships with Israel and Saudi Arabia, even as it has done the same with Turkey. As with Turkey, Washington will not walk away from its security commitments, or indeed its relatively friendly relations, just as it maintained good ties with Saudi Arabia even as it elevated Iran as the Gulf's major power. Nevertheless, those relations will be nowhere as warm as they once were: just as Erdoğan no longer has as a close a connection with President Obama as he once did, so too will the Saudis and Israelis find that Washington's door is open to them, just not as often or as wide.

The Obama Doctrine, which has openly emphasized engagement with adversaries such as Iran, and subtly de-emphasized long standing close ties with Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Turkey, may, of course, amount to very little if the pursuit of an arrangement with Tehran and its nuclear program comes to little. If, however, an agreement such as the one currently contemplated is achieved, there is a serious risk that Iran would recover its once dominant position in the region with few limitations on its behavior, thereby igniting a new and dangerous dynamic not only for the Middle East but for the entire international system.