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

Gregory Aftandilian

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Gregory Aftandilian

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FOREWORD

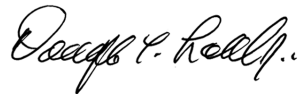
The Middle East is facing a period of great instability and uncertainty. The region is beset with civil wars, sectarian conflicts between Sunnis and Shias, the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and its competition with al-Qaeda, and conflicts between countries and factions opposing and supporting the Muslim Brotherhood and like-minded Islamist groups. The question arises as to whether an Arab regional order can be found amidst these conflicts and, if so, what types of opportunities and challenges does it pose for U.S. interests and policies in the region?

Middle East expert Gregory Aftandilian, the author of this monograph, argues that there is, indeed, a new Arab regional order, but it is essentially two orders: one has arisen in the wake of the tumult in the so-called Arab Spring countries, which has led to conflicts between Islamist political organizations and their opponents; the other is a result of the Houthis takeover of large parts of Yemen, which has exacerbated Sunni-Shia tensions in the region.

Saudi Arabia has emerged as a leader of both the anti-Islamist alliance—supporting the government of Egypt, for example, since the ouster of the Muslim Brotherhood government in 2013—and of the anti-Shia alliance, which is marshalling a number of Arab states to aid Saudi military efforts in the campaign against the Houthis. The author indicates that, while these alliances present opportunities for the United States on one level, particularly because they include many long-standing U.S. friends in the region, they also present challenges for the United States on another level. These challenges include the danger of being

perceived as taking sides in sectarian conflicts as well as in internal political disputes between secular and Islamist political factions.

Mr. Aftandilian cogently analyzes these alliances in the Arab world and offers specific policy recommendations that would serve U.S. interests in the region. The Strategic Studies Institute hopes the findings of this monograph will be of assistance to U.S. policymakers and U.S. Army officers as they deal with this important region of the world.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Douglas C. Lovelace, Jr." in a cursive script.

DOUGLAS C. LOVELACE, JR.
Director
Strategic Studies Institute and
U.S. Army War College Press

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

GREGORY AFTANDILIAN, an independent consultant, scholar, and lecturer, is currently an associate of the Middle East Center at the University of Massachusetts-Lowell, an adjunct faculty member of Boston University and American University, and a Senior Fellow for the Middle East at the Center for National Policy in Washington, DC. He spent over 21 years in government service, most recently on Capitol Hill, where he was foreign policy advisor to Congressman Chris Van Hollen (2007-08), a professional staff member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and foreign policy adviser to Senator Paul Sarbanes (2000-04), and foreign policy fellow to the late Senator Edward Kennedy (1999). Prior to these positions, Mr. Aftandilian worked for 13 years as a Middle East analyst at the U.S. Department of State, where he received the Department's Superior Honor Award for his analyses on Egypt and the Intelligence Community's Certificate of Distinction. His other government experience includes analytical work for the U.S. Department of Defense and the Library of Congress. He was also a research fellow at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University (2006-07) and an International Affairs Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York (1991-92), where he wrote the book, *Egypt's Bid for Arab Leadership: Implications for U.S. Policy*. He is also the author of a number of monographs and articles dealing with Middle East politics and U.S. foreign policy. Mr. Aftandilian holds a B.A. in history from Dartmouth College, an M.A. in Middle Eastern studies from the University of Chicago, and an M.Sc. in international relations from the London School of Economics.

SUMMARY

Gregory Aftandilian examines the new Arab regional order that has emerged in recent years and analyzes opportunities and challenges for U.S. interests in the region as a result of this order. He argues that the new order encompasses two main alliances. The first is an anti-Islamist grouping of countries and factions opposed to the Muslim Brotherhood and like-minded Islamist groups. This alliance emerged in the aftermath of the ouster of Egyptian President Mohammad Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood in July 2013. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait showered the new Egyptian government with billions of dollars in aid because they saw the Brotherhood as a threat. This alliance has expanded to include secular elements in Tunisia and Libya, as well as the Jordanian government.

The second alliance is an anti-Shia grouping that came about in the aftermath of the Houthi (a Yemeni Shia group) takeover of the Yemeni government and large swaths of Yemeni territory. In March 2015, Saudi Arabia was able to muster the support of many Arab Sunni countries to support its military campaign against the Houthis. These alliances, because they are led by and made up of long-standing U.S. friends in the region, may benefit U.S. interests on one level, but they also present challenges to U.S. policy on another. For example, if the anti-Islamist grouping redirects its attention to the fight against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), which is, to some extent, already underway, that will be a positive development. But if this alliance continues to repress nonviolent Islamist groups, it puts the United States in the awkward position of being perceived as playing sides

in these countries' internal politics. As for supporting the anti-Shia alliance, the policy puts Iran on notice not to interfere in countries like Yemen, but it has the potential to harm U.S. relations with the Iraqi government, hinder the possibility of a new relationship with Iran if Tehran moderates its policies, and make U.S. human rights policy problematic if the United States is perceived as anti-Shia.

Aftandilian argues that U.S. policymakers should continue to promote inclusivity of all nonviolent political groups in political systems of the regional countries regardless of whether they are secularist or Islamist, with the understanding that there are limits to U.S. influence in this realm. In addition, U.S. policymakers should continue to avoid taking sides as much as possible in Sunni-Shia conflicts and should use their influence with various countries to dampen such conflicts, as they are a main source of instability in the region and help extremist groups such as ISIL and al-Qaeda exploit these conflicts. He also recommends that the U.S. Army should assist countries in the region in counterterrorism training and operations where possible, but that Army personnel should avoid being drawn into discussions or debates about the Islamist-secularist and Sunni-Shia conflicts.

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

Since the 1940s, the Arab world has witnessed many groupings or alliances. Some have been ideologically driven; others have been based on shared interests, sometimes in opposition to a particular regional or world power. These groupings or alliances have usually been led by a dominant Arab state, though often it has been opposed by its share of detractors. Outside powers have also tried to shape or affect these alliances, but with mixed results.

There is not one Arab regional order as of 2015, but at least two. They have arisen in part due to the tumultuous events in the region over the past several years—including the Iraq War, the rise of Iranian influence in the region, and the Arab Spring. The latter shook the underpinnings of state power in the region and led to the ouster or resignation of several authoritarian leaders, namely Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, Muammar Qadhafi of Libya, and Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen. The rulers of several other countries managed to hold on to power after the countries experienced a period of unrest, but, with the exception of Tunisia, democracy has not replaced the authoritarian systems in these countries. Instead, authoritarianism has returned to Egypt, while Libya, Syria, and Yemen are embroiled in civil war.

The two Arab regional orders today are: 1) an anti-Islamist grouping; and 2) an anti-Shia grouping that solidified in reaction to the Houthi takeover of Yemen's capital of Sana in March 2015, but which extends beyond Yemen to include several Arab countries in which a Sunni-Shia conflict is apparent.

That Iran took advantage of the Iraq War of 2003 to extend its influence among the Shia of Iraq and offer ongoing assistance to various Shia groups in the region has made the anti-Shia grouping of Arab states all the more anxious.

Saudi Arabia has become the dominant player in these two regional orders for the following reasons:

a) With Egypt having turned inward to deal with domestic upheavals since 2011, Saudi Arabia filled a regional leadership vacuum;

b) It came to oppose the Muslim Brotherhood, seeing it as a threat not only to Egypt but to stability in the Gulf region as well;

c) Saudi Arabia saw its northern neighbor, Iran, use unrest in the region—particularly in states like Iraq, Syria, and Yemen with significant Shia populations—as a way to extend its influence, participating in so-called proxy wars;

d) Saudi Arabia's large oil revenues have enabled it to exercise influence in the region, particularly in aiding Sunni states and Sunni elements; and,

e) Its new king seems to believe that the United States is either growing wary of engagement with the Arab world or is hedging its bets on a new relationship with Iran, compelling Saudi Arabia to exercise more forceful leadership in the region.¹

Because Saudi Arabia has been a long-standing ally of the United States, some U.S. policymakers may see this more active and forceful Saudi role in the region as a positive development. After all, the two countries have had a close economic and security relationship since the 1940s, and the United States came to the aid of Saudi Arabia in the 1990-91 Gulf War, when Iraqi forces were at Saudi Arabia's doorstep.

While there are certainly some positive aspects for the United States from these Saudi-dominated regional groupings, there are also some negative aspects, because the United States and Saudi Arabia (and its allies) do not always see eye-to-eye on regional developments. This monograph analyzes these developments and informs U.S. policymakers about ways in which the new Arab regional orders present both opportunities and challenges for the United States.

HISTORY OF THE ARAB REGIONAL ORDER

For a time after World War II, the Arab world was fixated on the idea of unity, perhaps out of a sense that the imperial powers, namely Britain and France, had robbed them of this dream at the end of World War I. As one prominent scholar of the period has noted: “Ever since the second world war, popular political sentiments in the Arab world have been dominated by urgent appeals for Arab unity, while the field of activity between governments and parties has been dominated by bitter rivalry.”²

Even before the rise of Gamal Abdel Nasser as Egyptian (and later Arab nationalist) leader, Egypt saw its main competitor in the region as Iraq, which was supported by Jordan, its fellow Hashemite regime to its west. To counter this Iraq-Jordan alliance, Egypt created a regional bloc encompassing Saudi Arabia and Syria. This was often called the “Triangle Alliance.”³ Prior to the 1958 coup in Iraq, which overthrew the monarchy, Iraq and Jordan were perceived as British client states. When the British created the so-called Baghdad Pact in 1955 – which encompassed Britain, Iraq, Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan and was indirectly supported by the United States – Egypt under

Nasser took the lead in mounting Arab opposition to it. Although Saudi Arabia had close ties to the United States and supported it in the global Cold War, it sided with Egypt in this case because of its antipathy to Iraq and Jordan. Tribal factors may have played a role as well. The founder of the Saudi state, Abdel Aziz Ibn Saud, in the 1920s, had forced the Hashemites out of the Hejaz region of the Arabian Peninsula, which included the Muslim holy cities of Mecca and Medina. The Saudis suspected that the Hashemites still had their hearts set on winning that region back some day.

The 1956 Suez War, launched against Egypt by Britain, France, and Israel in the wake of Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal Company, propelled Nasser into becoming a pan-Arab nationalist hero and leader. With the help of the United States, which was angered that three of its allies had conspired to invade Egypt, especially at a time when the Soviet Union was sending tanks into Hungary to crush an anti-communist rebellion, Nasser was able to turn a military defeat into a diplomatic victory when these forces withdrew from Egypt. From 1956 to 1967, Egypt was the undisputed leader of the Arab world. Nasserist movements and political parties emerged in many Arab capitals, and millions of Arabs listened to Nasser's speeches on the radio.

In 1958, with Syria in the midst of political uncertainty, a group of prominent Syrian Baathists (whose ideology was similar to Nasserism) flew to Cairo to urge a union between Egypt and Syria. Although scholars of this period have noted that Nasser initially was hesitant about the offer, he could not, as the pre-eminent pan-Arab leader, turn down the Baathists' request. Thus, the United Arab Republic (UAR) was born in 1958. That same year, it looked like the UAR

would be able to expand eastward in the aftermath of the 1958 military coup in Iraq, which overthrew the Hashemite monarchy and established a republic under another army colonel, Abdel Karim al-Qasim. However, after an initial flirtation, Nasser and Qasim became bitter enemies despite the outward similarities in their backgrounds. Perhaps it was the age-old rivalry between Cairo and Baghdad that doomed the “romance,” and the fact that Qasim did not want to be under Nasser’s thumb. In any event, Cairo was soon denouncing Qasim as a stooge of the Communists, who were indeed allies of Qasim against the Iraqi Baathists and Nasserists. As for the union between Egypt and Syria, it came to an end in 1961 when a group of Syrian military officers, with the support of certain conservative politicians, staged a coup in Damascus and sent the Egyptians home.⁴

Although these events illustrated that Nasser certainly had his share of detractors, he nonetheless continued to set the agenda in Arab affairs. In the aftermath of the breakup of the UAR, Nasser turned leftward in domestic and regional affairs. At home, he issued a number of socialist decrees that led to the widespread nationalization of industry. In the wider region, he decided to come to the aid of the Yemeni republican forces in 1962 after they staged a coup against the Yemeni monarchy, which led to a civil war in that country. These developments set the stage for a proxy war in the region, as Saudi Arabia, fearing the anti-monarchical and radical brand of Arab nationalism that Nasser was espousing, came to the aid of the Yemeni royalist forces.

Egypt soon became bogged down in Yemen, expending so much blood and money there—at one point involving as many as 55,000 Egyptian troops—

that the conflict was sometimes referred to as “Nasser’s Vietnam.”⁵ Ironically, 4 decades later, Saudi Arabia and Egypt are now on the same side in a new Yemeni civil war. It was only in the aftermath of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war that Nasser was able to extricate Egyptian forces from Yemen honorably, by claiming that such forces were needed to confront a “militaristic” Israel, whose forces had captured the entire Sinai Peninsula in the brief conflict.

The 1967 Arab defeat by Israel (which included heavy Egyptian losses in territory, soldiers, and military equipment) was a humiliating blow to Nasser and his brand of pan-Arab nationalism. Although he stayed on as leader of Egypt until his own death by natural causes 3 years later, he and Egypt never regained the mantle as preeminent leader of the Arab world. Nasser even compromised Egypt’s independence by relying heavily on the Soviet Union for military and political support. By the late-1960s, there were at least 10,000 Soviet military advisers, whose presence soon became unpopular, in Egypt.

Nasser’s successor, Anwar Sadat, never had Nasser’s charisma in regional affairs, nor did he aspire to become a pan-Arab nationalist leader. His foremost objective, after he consolidated power at home and removed the threats against him, was to retrieve lost Egyptian lands from the Israelis. He achieved this through a combination of war and diplomacy, and by switching sides in the Cold War. Sadat and Syrian leader Hafez Assad effectively conspired to embark on a war against Israel in 1973, which caught the Israelis off-guard. Sadat knew that he could not defeat the Israelis but reasoned that, if he could achieve some initial battlefield successes, these could restore Egyptian and Arab pride. He also hoped to draw in the Americans,

who would come to the aid of the Israelis. Although Sadat relied on Soviet airlifts of military supplies during the 1973 War, his goal was to convince the United States that it had to pressure the Israelis to stop the fighting and eventually start a peace process. In this effort, he was able to elicit the support of Saudi Arabia, which led the Arab oil embargo against the United States in late-1973 and early-1974.⁶ Through these efforts, Sadat was able to resurrect the Egyptian-Syrian-Saudi "Triangle Alliance"; this grouping became the dominant one in the Arab world in the mid-1970s. The initial Arab military victories in the 1973 War, plus the Arab oil boycott—which led to the quadrupling of oil prices and the growth of Arab economic power—went a long way in reversing the humiliation of the 1967 defeat and in restoring Arab pride.

But Sadat's peace process goals, which eventually led to the Camp David Accords of 1978 and the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty of 1979, also brought about Egypt's ostracism in the Arab world soon after, as most Arabs saw these actions as removing Egypt from the Arab military equation with Israel. Egypt effectively went on its own, shored up by U.S. financial largesse. But no one Arab state was able to fill the leadership vacuum. Although Iraq, under Saddam Hussein, orchestrated the official Arab boycott of Egypt, it soon became bogged down in a bloody 8-year war with revolutionary Iran, starting in 1980. Syria, which faced internal strife in the late-1970s and the early-1980s from the Muslim Brotherhood, decided to side with Iran in the Iran-Iraq War, which took it out of contention for Arab leadership. As the Arab Gulf States faced the threat from Iran, they generously funded Iraq's war effort when that country's revenues started to run out.

During the 1980s, Egypt, now under the presidency of Hosni Mubarak, slowly re-established relations with most of the Arab states that had broken diplomatic relations with it earlier. These actions were assisted by the fact that Egypt also had assisted Iraq with workers and military advice during the latter half of the Iran-Iraq War. But in 1990, when Iraq invaded Kuwait and Saddam Hussein sought to become the Arab world's new strongman, Egypt started to exercise a leadership role again (in contrast to Iraq). The Egyptian-Syrian-Saudi alliance re-emerged, as all three countries feared Saddam Hussein's ambitions. Egypt was able to use its diplomatic skills to convince a majority of states of the Arab League to condemn the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, and both Egypt and Syria sent troops to Saudi Arabia as part of the coalition forces, led by the United States, arrayed against Iraq.⁷

In the 1990s, in the wake of this Gulf War, Egypt attempted to reassert an Arab leadership role by portraying itself as a defender of the Arab nation—criticizing what it called punitive Western action against the Iraqi people, assisting the Palestinians in negotiations with the Israelis, criticizing Israeli actions in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, and calling attention to the Israelis' purported nuclear arsenal in Egypt's message that the Middle East should be free of weapons of mass destruction. Egypt also portrayed itself as the conduit through which Arab concerns could be passed on to Washington. Such efforts worked for a time in bringing more attention to Cairo, though Egypt never regained the role it had in the late-1950s and the 1960s as the preeminent Arab state.

The Iraq War of 2003 again shifted attention to the Arab east. Although Egypt allowed U.S. military planes and warships to transverse Egyptian airspace

and the Suez Canal on the way to the Gulf,⁸ politically, it believed the war was a mistake. Egypt thought the war made the United States (and Arab countries that had close relations with Washington) a liability in the minds of many Arabs and helped to feed the al-Qaeda narrative that the United States was at war with Islam.

A few years later, sectarian divisions between Sunnis and Shias started to grow in the region, fueled in part by the Iraq War, which had replaced a Sunni-dominated regime in Baghdad with a Shia one. The growth of these divisions was also fueled by Hezbollah's mini-war against the Israelis in the summer of 2006, when Sunni Arab states such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia initially denounced Hezbollah's provocations, only to see their own populations rally to Hezbollah's anti-Israel campaign. Meanwhile, Bashar Assad of Syria denounced Sunni leaders who had been critical of the Syrian-Hezbollah connection.⁹

From 2005 to the end of the George W. Bush administration in January 2009, several leading Arab states such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia faced extremists within their own countries—some of whom were returning fighters from the Iraq conflict—and a political campaign by the United States pushing a so-called “Freedom Agenda,” which aimed to democratize countries in the region. Mubarak came under sustained pressure from Washington for a time, and made some political concessions, such as agreeing to multi-candidate presidential elections. But in the end, he was able to fend off the pressure, effectively using Muslim Brotherhood electoral gains and a Hamas electoral win next door in the Palestinian territories to scare off Washington,¹⁰ while the Saudis effectively told the United States that they would pursue political reform on their own timetable.¹¹

Then, beginning in 2011, the Arab world began to experience internal upheavals as a result of the Arab Spring. Such upheavals led to the removal of several authoritarian leaders, and were supported by the United States, even though the Barack Obama administration, when it first came to office, did not place democratization in the Middle East as a high priority. In this environment, Saudi Arabia, which feared the Arab Spring, became a leader of the conservative status quo, sending troops (along with the United Arab Emirates [UAE]) to help neighboring Bahrain stave off demonstrations calling for political change. Saudi King Abdullah reportedly even had a testy phone call exchange with Obama, admonishing him for supporting the ouster of Mubarak of Egypt.¹²

Sunni-Shia divisions also affected Arab politics. Al-Qaeda seized upon the chaos in Iraq after the 2003 war by taking over disaffected Sunni areas of the country and helping to foment a sectarian war by targeting Shias, playing to Sunni fears of Iran. That many Iraqi Shia factions had close ties with Iran did, in fact, enable Iran to become a prominent player in Iraqi politics. This new Shia assertiveness in Iraqi politics, plus al-Qaeda's efforts to foment sectarian strife, exacerbated Sunni-Shia tensions in the region. Jordan's King Abdullah, for example, warned in 2004 of a "Shia crescent" in the region. Second, when the Arab Spring demonstrations in Syria broke out in 2011 and after several months morphed into a civil war, this conflict took on sectarian dimensions, as the rebels—comprised predominantly of Sunnis—battled Assad's Alawite-dominated regime (the Alawite sect is a branch of Shia Islam). Iran and Hezbollah both came to the aid of the Assad regime, while the Saudis and the Qataris aided the rebels.

More recent developments have also helped fan the flames of sectarianism. When the remnants of al-Qaeda in Iraq moved westward into eastern Syria and became the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and then moved eastward to take over large parts of Iraq in the summer of 2014, Iraq's Shia militias, aided by Iran, were able to help save Baghdad from falling to ISIL. Many analysts believe that ISIL's rapid advance into Iraq was facilitated by Iraqi Sunnis who saw this extremist group as a lesser evil compared to the Shia-dominated Baghdad regime.¹³

Meanwhile, Egypt has been going through a different kind of political tumult. After Mubarak's resignation, power in Egypt passed to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, then to the Muslim Brotherhood, and then back to the military under Defense Minister Abdel Fatah el-Sisi. Libya, after the fall of Qadhafi, has been awash in militias, most of which are allied with Libya's rival governments—an Islamist one in Tripoli and a secular one in Tobruk. Yemen has also experienced political upheavals, leading to the resignation of long-time strongman Ali Saleh in 2012. But his vice president and successor, Abed Rabbu Hadi, was not successful in consolidating his rule, and faced an insurgency by Houthi rebels, who follow the Zaidi branch of Shia Islam, from the north. The Houthis took over the Yemeni capital and other parts of the country in 2015, with the aid of remnants of forces loyal to Saleh. Suffice to say that the Middle East is now in the midst of one of its most unstable periods in modern history.

Because Egypt has been consumed with domestic affairs since 2011, and Syria and Iraq are both in chaos, leadership in the Arab world has now shifted to Saudi Arabia. With their deep pockets because of the country's oil wealth and their more assertive mili-

tary posture, the Saudis have taken the lead in helping form at least two of the region's major alliances. The Saudis know they cannot achieve what they want by themselves and have garnered the support of several countries to advance their agenda. But, as Egypt experienced in the 1950s and 1960s, leadership does not imply compliance by a country's allies on all issues. Overextension, moreover, can become a problem, and differences can and do arise even among friends. The following section explains these new alliances.

THE NEW REGIONAL ALLIANCES AND THEIR DETRACTORS

The Anti-Islamist Alliance.

The political turmoil in Egypt, the Arab world's most populous country, was the catalyst that initially led to a new grouping in that world, which is the anti-Islamist alliance. This alliance cannot be described as strictly a secularist grouping, because there are countries in this alliance, like Saudi Arabia, which are religious states to a large degree. Nonetheless, what brought members of this group together was their antipathy to organized Islamist parties, namely, the Muslim Brotherhood. The alliance was again strengthened by these states' opposition to the more extremist and radical group, ISIL, in the summer of 2014.

Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE were opposed to Egyptian president Mohammed Morsi during his year in power (2012-13) because they saw the Brotherhood as not only destabilizing to Egypt—a cornerstone country in the region—but also potentially bringing instability to their own countries through Brotherhood-affiliated organizations. Ironically, in the 1960s,

when Egypt and Saudi Arabia were bitter enemies, Saudi Arabia gave refuge to Egyptian Muslim Brothers fleeing Nasser's persecutions. But at some point over the past several years (the exact point is a subject of some debate among political analysts), Saudi Arabia turned against the Brotherhood, while the UAE has long harbored misgivings about the Islamist organization. On the other hand, Qatar, which has often bucked the consensus within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, became Morsi and the Brotherhood's principal Arab supporter.¹⁴

When public opposition mounted in Egypt against Morsi in June 2013, culminating in Sisi's ouster of Morsi on July 3 and a subsequent crackdown on the entire Brotherhood apparatus, Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Kuwait supported this development and sent some \$12 billion in aid to Egypt in the months that followed. This substantial assistance allowed Egypt's new administration, led by temporary president and head of the Supreme Constitutional Court Adly Mansour — though Sisi was the power behind the scene — to weather a major political crisis. The crisis culminated in the regime's violent dispersal of two major Brotherhood's protest encampments in mid-August 2013, causing hundreds of deaths, and the suspension of most U.S. military assistance in October 2013. Egypt felt so buoyed by this infusion of Saudi, UAE, and Kuwaiti aid that it even returned a couple of billion dollars that Qatar had sent to Egypt during the Morsi presidency. Over the next 2 years, total Arab Gulf aid pledges to Egypt may have risen to upward of \$20 billion, which dwarfed the annual U.S. assistance of roughly \$1.5 billion (\$1.3 billion in military aid and \$200 million in economic assistance).¹⁵

Outside of the Egypt-Saudi Arabia-UAE-Kuwait grouping, this alliance has included secular factions in Libya (represented by the Tobruk government), secularists within Tunisia, and the Jordanian government. In August 2014, Egyptian and UAE warplanes even attacked militias of the Islamist government in Tripoli, Libya.¹⁶ The Tripoli government includes the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood organization.

Meanwhile, Tunisia's secularists, perhaps galvanized by developments in Egypt in 2013, mounted their own opposition to the ruling Islamist En-Nahda party. After two Tunisian secular leaders (one a trade unionist, the other a politician) were gunned down in the course of 9 months, secularists in Tunisia blamed En-Nahda, not necessarily for the killings, but for creating what they described as a permissive environment for radical Salafi groups to operate. In the autumn of 2013, under this pressure, En-Nahda agreed to a timetable in which it would resign from power in early-2014, and accept a technocratic, caretaker government that would rule until new parliamentary and presidential elections were held later in 2014.¹⁷ In these parliamentary elections, En-Nahda came in second, while the secular Nidaa Tounes party came in first. After some political maneuvering, Nidaa Tounes agreed to take En-Nahda into the government as a junior coalition member. Meanwhile, the Nidaa Tounes leader, Beji Caid Essebsi, won the presidency. Although Tunisia's political crisis between secularists and Islamists ended peacefully—perhaps because the leader of En-Nahda, Rachid Gannouchi, is a much more savvy and astute politician than Morsi of Egypt—Tunisia's democratic success story (the only one to come out of the Arab Spring) has been challenged of late by two significant terrorist attacks against foreign tourists by

individuals linked to ISIL. These attacks (one at a museum, the other at a beach resort) resulted in 60 deaths and caused the cancellation of major tourist bookings and a sharp blow to Tunisia's fledgling economy. These developments have led the Tunisian president to declare a state of emergency in early-July 2015, giving security forces more power and limiting the right of public assembly.¹⁸

Post-Arab Spring Libya has taken a much different course. After the ouster and killing of long-time authoritarian ruler, Muammar Qadhafi, in 2011, the country was beset with numerous problems, chief of which were weak central authority and the proliferation of militias who refused to give up their arms. After parliamentary elections in June 2014, in which secularists won a plurality, two rival governments were established. Militias loyal to each government have been engaged in a series of battles. The only mechanism keeping these two governments afloat has been the decision by Libya's Central Bank to divide the country's oil revenues between them.¹⁹

The United Nations (UN), with the support of the European Union (EU) and the United States, has attempted to foster reconciliation talks between the two rival factions. In July 2015, most Libyan political factions signed a tentative agreement in Morocco, under UN auspices, that would make the House of Representatives in Tobruk the legislative authority and would call for a government of national unity encompassing these factions.²⁰ It remains to be seen if this agreement will be carried out and if the international community is ready to send peacekeeping troops to the country. A complicating factor in the Libyan situation is the presence of ISIL, particularly in the central coastal city of Derna. While both the Tobruk and Tripoli governments consider ISIL a threat – ISIL's brutal-

ity is well-known, after its adherents decapitated 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians in early-2015 in Derna – it is not clear whether having a common enemy will be enough to bring about true national reconciliation.

As for Jordan, the monarchy weathered the Arab Spring and remained in control, though social and political issues continue to fester. Jordan's King Abdullah has embraced countries in the anti-Islamist grouping, like Egypt and Libya's Tobruk government. In April 2015, King Abdullah and his army's chief of staff, Lieutenant General Mashal Zaben, warmly received Libya's controversial General Haftar – allied to the Tobruk government – who was on a mission to see if Libyan forces loyal to that government would be able to be trained by Jordanian forces in counterterrorism and special forces operations. It is not clear what came out of these talks. Jordan's official statement noted only that King Abdullah voiced support for Libya to confront "terrorist" organizations.²¹ The fact that both Jordanians and Libyans have been victims of ISIL attacks – in 2015, ISIL burned alive a Jordanian fighter pilot who was captured after an anti-ISIL mission in Syria – may help to bolster Libyan-Jordanian relations.

This grouping of Arab states, which first came together in opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist political parties, has been strengthened by its common opposition to the more radical and extremist ISIL organization. When ISIL was only in eastern Syria, it was initially seen as one of several extremist groups operating in the Syrian civil war. However, when ISIL expanded its reach in the summer of 2014 by invading Iraq and quickly taking the northern city of Mosul and threatening Baghdad, the region and the world took notice. ISIL's brutality – such as

the persecution of Yazidis and Christians, the beheadings of Western hostages, and the burning to death of the Jordanian pilot—all culminated in a U.S.-led effort to create a large coalition of states from the West and from the region to combat ISIL.²² Many European states were alarmed that significant numbers of disaffected Muslim youths were traveling to Syria and Iraq to join ISIL. Many Arab countries were alarmed that extremist organizations in their own countries were pledging allegiance to ISIL and were fearful that their nationals who had gone to fight in Syria and Iraq were now coming back to undertake terrorist attacks at home, after having been battle trained. A number of Arab countries—such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Jordan—joined the United States in undertaking air strikes against ISIL.²³

In the aftermath of the beheadings of 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians in Libya by ISIL in February 2015, Egypt, under President Sisi, attacked ISIL targets there by air. But Sisi also used this incident to call for the creation of a joint Arab military force to confront such extremist groups.²⁴ He then took the idea to the Arab summit meeting he hosted in Sharm El-Sheikh in late-March 2015, and stated shortly before the meeting began that such a force was needed to “preserve what is left of stability” in the Arab world and because of the “great challenges” facing the region. With Saudi support, the Arab summit endorsed the idea of a joint force “in principle” and later said that it would be made up of 40,000 elite troops and supported by jets, warships, and light armor. Although contributions by Arab states would be voluntary, the Arab League Secretary General said that the proposed force “sends a clear message that the Arab states can agree on a plan to defend themselves.”²⁵ Egypt also hosted sub-

sequent meetings of Arab military chief of staffs to explore this proposal further, but many analysts in the region have expressed doubts that such a force will ever come into being. The last time this idea was proposed was in 1950 in the wake of the first Arab-Israeli War, but nothing came of it. While several Arab states have attacked extremists like ISIL from the air, they have not wanted to send “boots on the ground.”

Despite the opposition of many Arab states to ISIL, the terrorist organization has been able to sell its radical brand to potential adherents, so much so that many extremists in the region have switched their allegiance from al-Qaeda to ISIL. Moreover, ISIL has established a so-called “Islamic Caliphate” in the heart of the Levant and has a sophisticated social media operation. This has helped ensure that its message gets across to millions of disaffected young Muslims, many of whom have become captivated by ISIL’s successes on the battlefield and its very strict interpretation of Islam, which is supposedly modeled on the early Islamic community of the 7th Century. Hence, it is not surprising that countries in the anti-Islamist grouping have also focused on ISIL and its affiliated groups, which have sprung up in the region and become major terrorist hubs. For example, the Tunisians who attacked foreign tourists at the Bardo Museum in March 2015 and at the Sousse beach resort reportedly were trained by an ISIL group in Derna, Libya.²⁶ In Egypt, the terrorist group operating in the Sinai Peninsula, Ansar Beit al-Maqdis, pledged allegiance to ISIL and now calls itself the “Sinai Province.” On July 1, 2015, this group directed a series of coordinated attacks in the north Sinai against regime security forces, leading to scores of deaths.²⁷ This group has also attacked targets in mainland Egypt and, on July 16, 2015, even

launched a successful missile attack on an Egyptian naval vessel off the Sinai coast.²⁸

Who, then, are the detractors of the anti-Islamist group? Within the Arab world, Qatar has played this role by its support for the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, which grew out of the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood. Outside of the Arab countries, Turkey, under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Islamist AKP party, is also an opponent of this alliance. Erdogan sharply denounced the removal of Morsi from power in 2013 and has given refuge to Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood leaders and activists, who were able to escape the crackdown on the organization in the summer of 2013. From Turkey, the Muslim Brotherhood has been able to regroup to some extent and to establish a media center that has broadcast anti-Sisi programs.²⁹ Erdogan has also supported the Islamist government in Tripoli, Libya.

Although the states in the anti-Islamist grouping of states see eye-to-eye on most issues, there seem to be differences on the Syrian question, especially between Saudi Arabia and Egypt. The Saudis see the government of Bashar Assad as the chief problem in that crisis and want him to go. While the Saudis have opposed the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, they have reportedly aided Islamist groups in the Syrian civil war partly because such forces have been the most effective in fighting the Assad regime. The Saudis' antipathy for Bashar Assad is partly personal, partly strategic, and partly religious. Regarding the first, the Saudis have never forgiven Bashar for insulting them in the wake of the Hezbollah-Israel conflict in 2006, when Riyadh opposed Hezbollah's claim to be the champion of the so-called Arab cause against Israel. Strategically, the Saudis see the Assad regime as an Iranian proxy and as part of a wider Sunni-Shia

conflict stoked by Tehran. Since most of the victims of the Assad regime have been Sunnis, the Saudis see Assad's Alawite-dominated regime as carrying on a religious war.³⁰

Egypt, on the other hand, is fearful that a collapse of the Assad regime will pave the way for Islamist groups—including the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, the al-Qaeda-linked Al-Nusra Front, and even ISIL—to take over the country, creating a radical Islamist regime in the heart of the Levant. Egypt's military establishment was alarmed when then-president Morsi called on Egyptians in 2012 to go to Syria to fight with the anti-Assad rebels, fearing "blowback" by returning Egyptian fighters, some of whom have probably joined the extremists based in the Sinai Peninsula. Hence, the Egyptian leadership under Sisi sees Assad as the lesser of two evils and hopes for a political solution to the crisis in which Assad, or at least the Syrian military, is part of the solution.

These differences came to a head during the Arab summit meeting Egypt hosted in Sharm El-Shaikh in late-March 2015. At this meeting, Sisi reportedly read out loud a letter from Russian President Vladimir Putin, a backer of Assad, who advocated a political solution to the Syrian crisis, implying that this was Egypt's policy as well. In response, then-Saudi foreign minister Saud al-Faisal stated, while television cameras were rolling, that the Russians "are a main part of the miseries that affects the Syrian people." Not wanting to get into a public spat with his Saudi benefactors, Sisi thanked Saud al-Faisal for his remarks and then quickly changed the subject.³¹ However, in the aftermath of this controversy, a popular Egyptian talk show host, who is reportedly close to Sisi, said that "Arab oil money from Saudi Arabia and Qatar is also killing the Syrian people." Not to be outdone, a

Saudi journalist responded by noting that the talk show host's "excesses" required action, and implied that the host's message must have had the Egyptian regime's approval "because it is the regime's media."³²

Two months after these diatribes, the new Saudi foreign minister, Adel al-Jubeir, flew to Cairo to hold meetings with his Egyptian counterpart, Sameh Shoukry. The two diplomats did their best to downplay their differences in public, to the point that Jubeir claimed he did not know where "impressions" of discord between the two countries came from, and Shoukry said their policies on Syria "complement" each other. Jubeir emphasized the point that, "we are all seeking to remove Bashar Assad from power," restore "peace and stability in Syria," and "protect the government and military institutions" there "to be able to deal with the challenges after the Assad regime." Shoukry said that Egypt was working with the Russians to convince the Syrian government to take part in a political process involving various factions, while Jubeir said that contacts with Russia aimed to convince Moscow to "give up on Bashar" or to exert efforts to convince him to "give up power."³³

In addition to their differences over Syria, Egyptian and Saudi relations were also strained over leaked discussions in Sisi's Ministry of Defense that revealed derogatory comments about Gulf Arabs by some Egyptian officials. One analyst has noted that such leaks "have generated considerable anger among Egypt's Gulf Arab allies, as has its unresponsiveness to their desire to see consistent economic reforms and greater levels of policy coordination." Moreover, the ascension to power by Saudi King Salman has been "accompanied by a tempering of Saudi policy on the Muslim Brotherhood."³⁴ The new Saudi leadership, in the view of this analyst, "is less zealous in its support

for Egypt's undifferentiated and unrelenting crack-down" on the Muslim Brotherhood. Saudi and other Gulf Arab aid to Egypt may decrease dramatically in the coming years, though in a crisis, it is hard to imagine that the Saudis will allow Egypt to experience the severe economic distress that could threaten domestic stability. One of the reasons Egypt is currently helping the Saudis in the Yemeni crisis—supporting the Saudis' anti-Houthi campaign—is to demonstrate the importance of Egypt to Saudi strategic interests. In essence, the Egyptians see aiding Saudi Arabia in the anti-Houthi struggle as an insurance policy to keep the Saudi assistance going.

Hence, while this anti-Islamist grouping in the Arab world has become one of the alliances in the region, it is not necessarily a coherent one. Part of the problem with this alliance relates to long-standing rivalries in the Arab world; part also has to do with tensions inherent between republican regimes and monarchies, with the latter tending to see religion as part of their legitimacy. Hence, while these countries—or more specifically, their ruling elites may share an antipathy toward Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, the monarchies (or sheikhdoms) do not usually subscribe to the idea of secularism that is prevalent among the ruling elites in so-called republican regimes like Egypt and Tunisia, and among the Libyan factions supporting the Tobruk government.

The Anti-Shia Alliance.

The other major grouping in the Arab world is the anti-Shia coalition, which came together rather decisively in March 2015 in the wake of the Houthi takeover of much of Yemen. The Houthis are members of the Zaidi branch of Shia Islam, whose traditional

homeland is the northern part of Yemen. In September 2014, the Houthis, in the midst of the political chaos that had engulfed Yemen over the past several years, moved south and seized most of Yemen's capital city of Sana. In the early part of 2015, the Houthis then took over the institutions of the Yemeni government, placed Yemeni President Hadi under house arrest, and moved further south toward the port city of Aden. They were aided in these moves by forces loyal to former Yemeni president Saleh, who had resigned from the presidency in 2012 amidst domestic and foreign pressure. When the Houthis appeared poised to take Aden, Hadi and some members of his government, who had escaped to that city, then escaped to Saudi Arabia.³⁵

As a Shia group (though they differ doctrinally somewhat from the mainstream "Twelver" Shias of Iran, Iraq, Bahrain, and Lebanon), the Houthis have received some military and financial aid from Iran, including weapons and munitions, particularly after 2011.³⁶ Although the extent of Iranian aid is unknown and may be exaggerated because Yemen is flush with weapons from previous conflicts, the Iran-Houthi connection has alarmed neighboring countries, particularly Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia has long been concerned about Shia activism in the region, but its worries have been heightened by developments over the past several years—including a resurgent Iran, the emergence of a Shia regime in Iraq with close ties to Iran, Hezbollah militancy in Lebanon, and military assistance to the Assad regime in the Syrian civil war. Another factor is instability in nearby Bahrain, whose Sunni monarchy resides over a restive Shia majority. This led to demonstrations for political change in 2011, prompting Saudi and UAE intervention on the side of the monarchy.

Saudi Arabia is a strict Islamic state that follows the Wahhabi school of Sunni Islam. The Wahhabi doctrine follows the puritanical teachings of its founder, Mohammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, who, in the 18th Century, sought to purify the tribes of the Najd region of supposedly un-Islamic behaviors and received the protection of and formed an alliance with Mohammad ibn Saud, the ancestor of today's ruling al-Saud family.³⁷ The alliance between the descendants of these two leaders has lasted to the present day and, consequently, there is a religious dimension to Saudi political and military opposition to Iranian and Shia groups in general, as some Wahhabi clerics consider the Shia heretics. The Saudis also have a significant Shia population (about 10 percent of the total population of the kingdom), which is concentrated in the important oil-producing region of the eastern province. The Shia of Saudi Arabia long have complained of discriminatory practices by the Saudi government, and there have been periodic eruptions of unrest in their area. The latest were in 2011-12, as some Shia staged demonstrations in line with what was happening elsewhere in the Arab world.³⁸ These demonstrations were put down by force, and the area has been relatively quiet of late, but Saudi officials are always concerned about security in this province, and they see an Iranian hand, whether real or imagined, stoking the flames of unrest.

Ever since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Saudi-Iranian relations have been uneasy to hostile, not helped by the fact that Iran's revolutionary leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, called monarchy incompatible with Islam.³⁹ In essence, Khomeini was saying that the Saudi ruling family was unfit to govern the Islamic holy cities of Mecca and Medina. The Saudis, in turn, saw revolutionary Iran as a threat, and supported Iraq

with billions of dollars in aid in its bloody 8-year war with Iran from 1980-88.

Although by 1990, both Iran and Saudi Arabia opposed Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein and his takeover of Kuwait, this did not mean that their own differences melted away. In particular, the Saudis continued to rely on the U.S. military presence in the region as a protector, whereas Iran saw the United States as its strategic enemy.

It appears that the Iraq War of 2003 set in motion a series of events that led the Saudis (and some other Sunni Arab countries) to be even more concerned about Iran. Although the Saudis did not shed any tears when Saddam Hussein and his regime were overthrown in the wake of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, they came to see Iraq's new leaders, now dominated by the Shia, with alarm. Some Shia groups within the new ruling coalition had received sanctuary and support from Iran over the years. In the aftermath of the war, when Iraqi Sunni insurgents battled the new Iraqi government and coalition forces and al-Qaeda saw an opportunity to exploit Sunni grievances, Iran came to the aid of the Shia militia groups. For a time in 2006-07, Iraq even descended into sectarian warfare, with roaming bands of Sunni and Shia death squads. Under these circumstances, Iran's influence grew even stronger. Hence, from the Saudi perspective, the Iraq War opened the floodgates in Iraq to Iranian influence. As a sign of their displeasure with the new situation in Iraq, Saudis did not send an ambassador to Baghdad despite many entreaties by the United States to do so.⁴⁰

The rise of ISIL in the more recent period (2014-15) has also deepened Iran's influence in Iraq. Because the Iraqi army has proven to be an ineffectual fighting force, the Iraqi government has come to rely on

Shia militia groups to defend Baghdad and take the offensive against ISIL forces. These forces have been aided by Iran's Revolutionary Guards "Quds" force, whose commander was even in Iraq directing the military activities of some of these Shia militias against ISIL.⁴¹ Outside of Iraq, the Saudis see an Iranian hand in stoking other Shia-Sunni conflicts. In Lebanon, the Saudis long have been alarmed by the rise of Hezbollah (now part of the ruling coalition) and Iran's close connection to this militant Shia organization. The Saudis had backed a coalition representing Sunni interests under the leadership of Saad Hariri, son of the former prime minister, Rafik Hariri, a dual Lebanese-Saudi national and businessman who was believed to have been assassinated on orders of the Syrian government in 2005. But that coalition was defeated in the polls by Hezbollah.

Alarming still to the Saudis has been Hezbollah's military support for the Assad regime in the Syrian civil war. Although many Hezbollah soldiers have died in this war, their ongoing assistance in the fight against Syrian rebel groups has enabled the civil war to drag on for years. This military support has been crucial to keeping the regime in power, because its Alawite base is small and has suffered numerous casualties. There have also been reports of Iranian Revolutionary Guard forces, and even some Iraqi Shia groups, fighting on the side of the Assad regime.⁴² Hence, the Saudis see an Iranian-Shia nexus from Tehran to Baghdad to Damascus to Beirut that needs to be opposed, in addition to the Shia in Bahrain as well in its the eastern province. When the Houthis went on the march in Yemen, the Saudis saw this nexus encircling them. From the Saudi perspective, the Yemen crisis was the last straw, because it was in their backyard.

In March 2015, the Saudis were able to assemble a coalition of Arab states to participate in this anti-Houthi military campaign, dubbed Operation DECISIVE STORM. This coalition, representing Sunni-ruled states, included all of the GCC states except Oman—that is, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain—plus Egypt, Jordan, Sudan, Morocco, and Yemen’s exiled government.⁴³ A statement from the Arab Gulf states listed previously, said that the operation was “in response to a request” from Yemeni President Hadi “to protect Yemen from the aggression of Houthi militias.” The statement went on to accuse the Houthis of being a “tool of foreign powers that seeks to harm the security and stability of Yemen,” a clear reference to Iran.⁴⁴

According to various press reports, the Saudis’ military contribution to this campaign is 100 warplanes, plus 150,000 soldiers mobilized near the Yemeni border. The UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Jordan, Morocco, and Sudan have also been contributing warplanes, perhaps 85 in total, though it is unclear which countries have also been participating in airstrikes. Egypt reportedly has deployed four naval ships near the strategically important Bab el-Mandeb Strait that connects the Red Sea to the Arabian Sea, plus air assets.⁴⁵

After several months of airstrikes, this coalition, led by Saudi Arabia, was not very successful in defeating the Houthis. The most success it had was in dislodging the Houthis from the airport and port of Aden in mid-July 2015, allowing some members of the Hadi government to return from Saudi Arabia to the city of Aden. According to various press reports, it appears that many of the casualties from the Saudi-led airstrikes have been Yemeni civilians, and the destruction meted out to infrastructure sites by the

coalition air strikes has exacerbated the humanitarian crisis in the country.⁴⁶ As the poorest country in the Arab world, Yemen was already in dire straits before this war, and is now suffering from shortages of food, water, and medicine. The UN has helped to arrange for a couple of ceasefires in order for international aid to be delivered to the people, but these have been short-lived.

This anti-Houthi or anti-Shia alliance, like the anti-Islamist alliance, is not very coherent. It is likely that some of the Arab countries that joined this alliance have done so to stay in the good graces of the Saudis because of hoped-for financial rewards. Although many of these countries do not like the fact that Iran is meddling in Arab affairs and has come to the aid of various Shia militant groups in the region, they are probably not as paranoid about Iran as are the Saudis.

For example, the Egyptian and Iranian foreign ministers held what appeared to be a friendly meeting on the sidelines of the Non-aligned Movement's gathering in April 2015.⁴⁷ Egypt's participation in the anti-Houthi campaign is more motivated to protect its own economic interests than because of fears of Iran's advances in the region. These economic interests include not only ensuring Saudi largesse, but ensuring the Bab el-Mandeb Strait stays open, because that waterway is on the route for ships going to and from the Mediterranean and the Arabian Seas via the Red Sea and Egypt's Suez Canal, which generates over \$5 billion in tolls a year for Cairo. Although Egyptian President Sisi at the Arab summit in Sharm El-Sheikh said that "Arab problems should be handled by Arabs themselves"⁴⁸—an indirect criticism of Iran—Egypt appears more interested in stopping ISIL and its affiliates than in opposing Iran and its proxies.

That said, Egypt is demonstrating its commitment in this anti-Houthi campaign because it needs to show the Saudis that it can come to their aid in time of need, just as the Saudis helped Egypt during her time of need in 2013, in the wake of its problematic domestic situation. Egypt even prevented its airspace from being used by a Houthi delegation flying to Geneva in June 2015 to participate in UN-sponsored peace talks with the Yemeni government in exile, delaying this group's arrival by a day.⁴⁹ But while Egyptian officials have said publicly that they might consider sending ground troops to Yemen if asked (presumably by the Saudis),⁵⁰ they would be extremely wary of doing so, given their unhappy experience in Yemen in the 1960s.

Outside the Yemen conflict, Egypt and Saudi Arabia differ on the Syrian crisis, despite their best efforts to paper over such divisions. Egypt sees the Syrian civil war not so much as a sectarian conflict, pitting an Iran-supported regime against Sunni rebels, but as a conflict between a secular government and rebel groups that include radical Islamists who want not only to transform Syria but the entire region. While Saudi Arabia and Qatar are on different sides of the anti-Islamist issue with regard to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and some other Islamist groups in the region, they appear to be supporting a broad array of rebel forces in the Syrian civil war. These include Islamist ones that cooperate with Al-Nusra Front, which is linked to al-Qaeda.⁵¹

Jordan may be closest to the Saudis in seeing the Houthi conflict as part of a larger Shia threat. Indeed, it was King Abdullah of Jordan who voiced concerns about what he saw as a "Shia crescent" in 2004.⁵² Nonetheless, with ISIL very nearby in Syria and Iraq, Jordan is probably more concerned about ISIL trying to take over Jordanian territory than he is about the

Shia and Iran. There are hardly any Jordanian nationals who are Shia, the vast majority being Sunni Muslims. Although most Jordanians turned decisively against ISIL after the captured Jordanian pilot was cruelly burned alive in early-2015, King Abdullah still needs to worry about Sunni radicals within his own kingdom.

With the exception of Oman, most of the Arab Gulf states share Saudi Arabia's antipathy and "paranoia" about Iran and Shia groups. They fear that Iran will continue to try to stir up their own Shia communities in an effort to pressure them. The Saudi and UAE intervention in the Bahrain crisis in 2011 was as much an anti-Shia intervention (and an act of protecting a fellow Sunni monarch), than it was stopping another Arab Spring democratization experiment. That said, Kuwait might be in a different position with regard to the sectarian issue, perhaps because Iran is only a few miles away and because Kuwait has done a better job than most other Arab Gulf countries in integrating its Shia population into its society. When an ISIL group bombed a Shia mosque in Kuwait in July 2015, the Kuwaiti government said it was an attack on the entire Kuwaiti nation.⁵³

WHAT HAS BEEN THE ROLE OF THE UNITED STATES IN THESE ALLIANCES?

Regarding the anti-Islamist alliance, at least the issue of the Muslim Brotherhood, the United States has shied away from embracing it. Official U.S. policy is not to lump the Brotherhood together with groups like al-Qaeda and ISIL, and the United States has supported UN reconciliation talks between the Libyan Islamist government (which includes members of the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood) and the secular Tobruk

government. In general, the United States has avoided taking a stand on the Islamist-secularist divide in the region. U.S. policy, articulated first in 1992, is to favor inclusivity of all nonviolent political groups, secular or Islamist, in these societies, and not to appear to be siding with secular groups just because they are secular.⁵⁴

Such a policy has put the United States in a difficult position with regard to Egypt. Although in July 2013 the United States initially called for the release of Morsi from prison and criticized the suspension of the Egyptian constitution—and later criticized in more forceful terms the violent crackdown in mid-August 2013 of the Muslim Brotherhood protest encampments that led to more than 600 deaths in a single day—it also tried to steer a middle course by not calling Morsi's ouster a "coup," because that would have triggered an automatic cut-off of U.S. assistance to Egypt under U.S. law.⁵⁵ Nonetheless, in October 2013, after an interagency review, the United States suspended most military assistance to Egypt because of these anti-democratic developments. This suspension of aid did not lead to a change of Egyptian behavior, however. The combination of Egyptian pride and generous Gulf Arab aid to Cairo contributed to the regime's unrepentant policies against the Muslim Brotherhood as well as against some of its secular critics. In the spring of 2015, the United States decided that rebuilding strategic links to Cairo was paramount and fully restored the suspended aid.⁵⁶ Despite this restoration of aid, the United States never adopted the Egyptian regime's view that the Muslim Brotherhood is a terrorist organization, and the United States criticized quick trials and the meting out of capital punishment sentences against Brotherhood leaders and activists as well as other human rights violations.

Therefore, while the United States is a secular country and most U.S. policymakers are inclined to be personally sympathetic with Arab secularists' fears of Islamist movements—even nonviolent Islamist ones—it has not tried to pick sides in this internal fight between secularists and Islamists. One can argue, however, that by restoring aid to the secular Sisi government, the United States is indeed taking sides. Yet, the decision to restore aid was not undertaken to send a signal about secularism versus Islamism. Instead, it was done primarily to rebuild trust with the government of the most populous state in the Arab world, which has played a pivotal role in the region and is facing a significant terrorism problem. If the United States had such a problem with nonviolent Islamists, it would certainly not have tried to cultivate good relations with the Morsi government during the 2012-13 period.⁵⁷ Indeed, because of these ties, the United States was accused by secular Egyptians of favoring an authoritarian Islamist regime, and because of this perception, U.S. standing in Egypt reached a low point in the summer of 2013 after Morsi was ousted.

If anything, the United States has tried to be neutral in the disputes between Islamists and secularists. Tunisia is a prime example. The United States maintained good relations with the Tunisian government when En-Nahda was the dominant party in the government but then stayed out of the way when Tunisian secularists pressured En-Nahda in the summer and autumn of 2013 to step down from power and agree to a technocratic caretaker government, new elections in 2014, and the drafting of a new constitution. These events all occurred peacefully for the most part—avoiding the violent turmoil that had engulfed Egypt. Although pressure from secularists compelled En-Nahda to give up power, En-Nahda emerged as

the second strongest party in parliament and became a junior partner in the government. The United States praised Tunisia's democratic experiment, increased aid to the country, and exalted its new constitution as the most progressive in the Arab world. Obama received the Tunisian president in the White House.⁵⁸

In confronting violent Islamist extremist groups like al-Qaeda and ISIL, the United States has wholeheartedly embraced the alliance and has taken the lead, in fact, in assembling a 60-member state coalition opposed to ISIL, even appointing a U.S. Army general to coordinate activities in this coalition. Concerning the anti-Shia alliance this approach also has to be parsed out in terms of U.S. policy. Concerning the anti-Houthi alliance, the United States has supported the Saudi effort with logistical and intelligence assistance, according to press reports, and considers Hadi the legitimate president of Yemen. Secretary of State John Kerry, even in the midst of the sensitive nuclear negotiations with Iran, publicly warned Tehran about meddling in the Yemeni conflict.⁵⁹ However, the chief U.S. concern in Yemen is preventing al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and now ISIL from taking advantage of the instability in the country to make gains. Indeed, in the wake of the Houthi advances and the chaos that ensued in Yemen, the United States was compelled to withdraw its Army Special Forces units, which had been aiding the Yemeni counterterrorism effort. The United States has favored a political solution to the Yemeni crisis and thus helped to foster, with Omani diplomats, talks in Oman between the Houthis and the Hadi government.⁶⁰ These talks paved the way for follow-up talks in Geneva, but those talks ended in acrimony in June 2015. The United States has also expressed concern for the growing humanitarian crisis in Yemen.⁶¹

Although the United States has supported the anti-Houthi effort to some degree, it has not supported the broader anti-Shia grouping. First, as a practical matter, the Shia-dominated government in Baghdad is a U.S. ally, and the United States is doing what it can to shore up the Iraqi army to fight against ISIL, while acknowledging that the Shia militias have been more effective in this struggle.⁶² Second, with the recent, successful conclusion of the P5+1 negotiations with Iran over the nuclear issue, the United States is hoping that Iran might become a more moderate country.⁶³ Supporting an anti-Shia stance would wreck any chances of a U.S.-Iranian rapprochement, which might emerge down the road if Iran does indeed moderate. Third, it would be out of character for the United States to take sides in a sectarian conflict, even though some Shia groups, like Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Shia-dominated states, like Assad's Syria, are opposed to U.S. policies. Finally, there are legitimate human rights concerns voiced by Shia in Sunni-dominated states like Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. If the United States decided to drop those concerns merely because they were expressed by the Shia, it would make a mockery of U.S. human rights policy.

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR THE UNITED STATES IN THESE ALLIANCES: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

Given these new Arab alliances, how should the United States react to them in the future? Moreover, what are the opportunities, challenges, and even downsides of these alliances for U.S. policy?

How Should the United States Respond to the Anti-Islamist Alliance?

First, with regard to the anti-Islamist grouping, the United States has had long-standing political, security, and economic relationships with most of these states. The United States should continue its relations with these states, as they serve many broad U.S. policy goals. For example, with Egypt, the U.S. decision to lift the suspension of the military assistance in the spring of 2015 has helped to restore the important U.S.-Egyptian security relationship. This is especially important, given the rise in terrorist activities in the Sinai and elsewhere in Egypt by the ISIL-affiliated group now called the “Sinai Province” but formerly known as Ansar Beit al-Maqdis. The coordinated attacks by this terrorist group on July 1, 2015, in which as many as 70 Egyptian soldiers and civilians were killed, and the temporary takeover of the town of Sheikh Zuweid in the Sinai by the terrorists, underscored the serious nature of this threat to Egyptian security.⁶⁴

Moreover, the restoration of aid to Egypt may work to weaken the conspiracy theory prevalent among Egyptian secularists that the United States secretly made a pact with the Muslim Brotherhood before and during the Morsi presidency to weaken the Egyptian state. Although such a theory sounds far-fetched to American ears, it was widely believed by many secularists in Egypt. Unfortunately, the pro-government Egyptian press hyped up such conspiracy theories. The more the United States can show that it is aiding the Egyptian government in its anti-terrorism campaign, the better the chances that such sentiments will diminish over time.

However, the downside of this support for the Sisi government is that the United States is seen by opponents of the regime as contributing to state repression. The Sisi government has not only gone after the Muslim Brotherhood and declared it a terrorist organization, but it has imposed harsh penalties on those engaged in public protests, journalists who have criticized the government, and secular activists opposed to the restrictions on democracy. As an example, in July 2015, the Sisi government wanted to impose jail sentences on reporters who did not follow the government's own reporting of terrorist incidents. Only when the Journalists Syndicate expressed strong opposition to this proposed law did the government back down, but only partially, saying it would impose large fines on such journalists instead.⁶⁵

The U.S. State Department's criticisms of such anti-democratic policies notwithstanding, the fact that the United States has restored all aid to Egypt has given Egyptian dissidents the impression that the United States is back to its old, Mubarak-era, policies of facilitating this repression or at least looking the other way while gross human rights violations are occurring.

The Egyptian government's repression of the Muslim Brotherhood has also put the United States in a political quandary with regard to this Islamist group. Unlike Egypt under Sisi, the United States has not agreed with the designation of the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization, and it has even allowed a few Brotherhood members to visit the United States over the past 2 years. However, the regime's severe crackdown on the Brotherhood, which has included the incarceration of most of its leaders, has broken up the top-down decisionmaking apparatus of the organization, leading some younger members to engage in violence against the regime or join up with more radical

groups like the former Ansar Beit al-Maqdis. Hence, in a certain way, the regime's crackdown on the Brotherhood has become a self-fulfilling prophecy, because it has driven at least some members of the Brotherhood to commit violent acts⁶⁶ – and violence has been the standard test by which the United States has generally judged Islamist groups as legitimate or illegitimate. In other words, official U.S. policy since 1992 is that the United States will deal with Islamist groups as long as those groups do not engage in violence.

It appears that U.S. officials, in private conversations with their Egyptian counterparts, have raised human rights concerns even while expressing support for Egypt's counterterrorism campaign.⁶⁷ Whether these expressions of concern are having any effect on Egyptian government behavior remains to be seen. President Sisi did remove Minister of Interior Mohammad Ibrahim from his post in early-2015, perhaps because of mounting domestic and international concern about police brutality and other human rights abuses, but it is not clear whether this change at the top is having any effect on actual practices on the ground.

Over the short term, the perception among Islamists that the United States is taking a stand in support of repression of their cadres does not have serious consequences for U.S. policy because it is hard to imagine that the Brotherhood will come back to power anytime soon. However, over the long term, the perception of the United States as tacitly or directly supporting the Sisi government in this repression may pose a serious risk for the United States if the Brotherhood comes back to power down the road. Here, the example of U.S.-Iranian relations may be illustrative. The U.S.-supported coup against Iranian nationalist leader Mohammad Mossadeq in 1953, which resulted in the

Shah becoming an absolute and repressive monarch, may have resulted in close U.S.-Iranian strategic relations for some 25 years, but it all came crashing down in 1979 when the Shah was overthrown.

What about the other states and parties? In the Libyan civil war, the United States has supported the UN's efforts to try to bring the two sides together through mediation. Although the Tobruk government is the internationally recognized government in Libya, the United States understands that it represents only part of the country. Moreover, it is important for the United States to pursue a policy that shows it is in favor of Libyan reconciliation with the exception of terrorist groups, some of which are now affiliated with ISIL. Indeed, ISIL's presence in Derna, Libya, and its attacks against the interests of both the Tobruk and Tripoli governments gives these factions something to cooperate on—that is, working to rid Libya of the ISIL menace. An interim agreement that was concluded in Morocco in July 2015 under UN auspices—allowing the Tobruk House of Representatives to be the main legislative body and bringing the political factions together in a government of national unity—is probably the best option at this point for a long-term solution to the Libyan crisis. Some reports suggest that some EU countries might send peacekeeping troops to Libya if the agreement comes to fruition, and the United States might use drone attacks against ISIL to prevent this terrorist group from derailing the accord.⁶⁸ Both of these measures would be useful, but it remains to be seen how the various factions will deal with the proliferation of militias in Libya. Unless this problem is addressed and there is a buy-in to the agreement from all Libyan factions except for those affiliated with ISIL and al-Qaeda, the agreement will remain only on paper.

Given the recent, tentative accord in Libya, it is important for the United States to weigh in on Egypt and the UAE not to undertake any airstrikes against factions allied to the Tripoli government, as it did in August of 2014. A recent U.S. decision to sell Egypt \$100 million in sophisticated border surveillance equipment should help ease Egyptian concerns about terrorists and weapons being smuggled across the porous Libyan-Egyptian border, many of which have landed in the Sinai to the east.⁶⁹ However, if Egyptian nationals in Libya were again the victims of ISIL's brutality, that would constitute a different situation. Since the United States and its anti-ISIL coalition partners are themselves undertaking air strikes against ISIL in Syria and Iraq, the United States should support such strikes by Egypt if they are, indeed, against ISIL targets in Libya and not against political factions linked to Tripoli.

How Should the United States Respond to the Anti-Shia Coalition?

The United States has already given the Saudis intelligence and logistical support for its anti-Houthi campaign, and has publicly warned Iran not to exacerbate the situation in Yemen by providing the Houthis with weapons. But the United States has come to realize that there are liabilities to the Yemeni conflict.

First, while air strikes by the Saudis and their coalition allies may have freed parts of Aden from Houthi control in the summer of 2015, they have generally not dislodged the Houthis from the other, significant territory that it holds, including the capital city of Sana.⁷⁰ Because air strikes have led to some 3,000 casualties as

of July 2015, many of which have been civilians, being on the side of the Saudis' hardline tactics may have long-term consequences for the United States, especially now that the humanitarian situation in Yemen is so dire. It is not in U.S. interests for the Yemeni people to see the United States as contributing to their hardships. U.S. policymakers should continue to counsel restraint on the part of the Saudis and encourage them to convince the Hadi government-in-exile to resume negotiations with the Houthis, however difficult these may be.

Houthi demands are not unreasonable, provided the Houthis retreat to the northern area of Yemen. These demands include a greater share of government revenues and an end to Salafi Sunni Muslim preachers proselytizing in their region.⁷¹ Although the Houthis have voiced anti-U.S. slogans, they are potential allies in the fight against ISIL and AQAP, similar to the Shia militias of Iraq. A political solution to the Yemeni crisis that would include Houthis in a governing coalition would be an optimal scenario if it results in a more stable Yemen. If stability were to return to Yemen, the United States would be able to reopen its embassy and return its Special Forces units to the country to help Yemeni forces in their fight against AQAP and ISIL. It should be remembered that AQAP has been the most prominent al-Qaeda affiliate, which has launched the most anti-U.S. plots, including those directed at the U.S. homeland. Although the United States has continued some drone strikes against AQAP, killing AQAP leader Nasir al-Wuhayshi in June 2015 by one of these strikes,⁷² its counterterrorism efforts would be much more effective if Yemen stabilizes and U.S. Special Forces were allowed to return.

The nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1 countries, led by the United States, has inadvertently made

the Saudis possibly less willing to compromise over such Shia groups as the Houthis. One unnamed Saudi diplomat told the press in the wake of this nuclear agreement that if sanctions against Iran are lifted, “Iran will try even harder to redesign the region.”⁷³ In the view of such officials, the money that will accrue to Iran with the lifting of sanctions will embolden Tehran to pursue a more assertive foreign policy in the area. Hence, the Saudis may be even less inclined to show restraint in the proxy wars it is now engaged in with Iran. Although Obama, at a Camp David summit meeting with Arab Gulf leaders in May 2015, pledged additional military support to them because of their nervousness about a resurgent Iran, such offers of support are unlikely to eliminate their fears.⁷⁴

When it comes to Iraq, the United States should continue to urge President Haider al-Abadi to make his government more inclusive, by bringing in more Sunnis, but there are limits to what the United States can do. The long-repressed Shia of Iraq, who make up almost 60 percent of the population, are unlikely to give back any real power to the Sunnis. Abadi, while more urbane than his predecessor, Nouri al-Maliki, comes from the same Dawa party, which is a Shia Islamist party that was ruthlessly repressed under Saddam Hussein. Abadi and his supporters, along with other Shia factions, will remain wary of the Sunnis no matter what the United States does or does not do. Until the Iraqi army is able to become an effective fighting force—and that is a large unknown—Abadi will continue to rely on Shia militias (and Iranian support) for his government’s defense. Therefore, over the short term, the United States will be seen in the region as supporting a Shia government in Baghdad, but this perception has been in place since 2003 and is not new.

What the United States can do is work with the Saudis to try to entice some Iraqi Sunni tribes to break from ISIL. Even if the prospect of giving such tribes (or their representatives) a share of national power is unrealistic, perhaps they can be given broad autonomy and an equitable share of national wealth from oil revenues, to address at least some of their concerns about living under a Shia-dominated regime.

As for Syria, what the United States can do to assuage Sunni Muslim concerns is to step up its vetting process of Syrian rebels and assure the Sunnis that the rebels are being trained not just to fight against ISIL, but also against the Assad regime. Such messaging may dispel some conspiratorial beliefs among Sunni Muslims that the United States is secretly cooperating with Iran in Syria to keep the Assad regime in place.

In the aftermath of the nuclear deal, the United States should take advantage of the new goodwill with Iran to discuss a number of regional issues that could, perhaps, dampen the Sunni-Shia conflicts in the wider area. Obama hinted at this approach at a news conference in July 2015, saying that Iran is one of several countries that should be brought into discussions to solve the Syrian crisis.⁷⁵ Although the Saudis may see an Iranian role as disadvantaging their own role and interests in Syria, they may come to realize that fighting proxy wars indefinitely is not in their long-term interest, given that Iran and the Shia populations of the region are not going away. At the same time, it is also not in Iran's long-term interest to fight proxy wars endlessly, as they are a potential drain on resources and limits Iran's influence only to the Shia of the Arab world.

Hence, while the United States should avoid being seen as an anti-Shia power, it should also avoid, as

much as it can, the perception that it will soon become an anti-Sunni power if bilateral U.S.-Iranian relations improve. Instead, the United States should use its new influence with Iran, albeit still limited, and its long-standing relations with Sunni countries like Saudi Arabia to try to mitigate Sunni-Shia conflicts in the region, as such conflicts are a major source of instability in the region today.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE U.S. ARMY

Within these two Arab groupings, there are opportunities and challenges—as well as subjects to avoid—for the U.S. Army. Concerning the anti-Islamist alliance, particularly the alliance against violent Islamist groups like ISIL, states in this alliance have a strong need for effective counterterrorism assistance, because ISIL has established branches in a number of these countries. U.S. Army Special Forces, as was the case in Yemen prior to the U.S. evacuation in 2015, are best equipped to play this role not only in training these regimes' own special forces, but in cooperating with them in counterterrorism operations if asked. Groups like ISIL and al-Qaeda are a threat not only to the Middle East but to other parts of the world, including Europe and the United States. Thus, the U.S. Army, in training indigenous forces, would help protect not only U.S. allies but the U.S. homeland as well.

Because of political sensitivities, it may make more sense to train friendly Arab states' counterterrorism forces in third countries or in the United States, away from the spotlight of their own populations. Whole units could be transported for an extended training period and then brought back to their home countries for operations. In addition, special courses should be

established at professional military educational institutions for army officers from these countries on counterterrorism techniques and the lessons learned from U.S. counterterrorism operations in Iraq. Such courses should also have a strong human rights component in order to impress upon these Arab military officers the dangers of alienating civilians in counterterrorism operations. Without the cooperation of civilians in areas of counterterrorist activity, it is very difficult for governments to obtain the real-time intelligence necessary to capture terrorists in their tracks.

In addition, U.S. Army officers should hold discussions with their counterparts in Arab coalition states about the actual needs of their national armies. Often, for reasons of prestige, many Arab armies want expensive military hardware to try to intimidate their neighbors or to build up their militaries for a potential conventional war. But the trends over the past decade indicate that the greatest threats facing these Arab states are terrorist insurgencies. Therefore, convincing their armies to rely more on military items suited for counterterrorism operations, as opposed to “big-ticket” hardware items that are ill-suited for present needs, should be a high U.S. priority. U.S. Army officers, because of military-to-military relationships—would be best positioned to carry out these discussions in a frank, respectful, and fruitful way.

In July 2015, the United States formally declared Tunisia to be a non-NATO ally. In practice, this means that Tunisia will be eligible for major U.S. defense systems and equipment,⁷⁶ providing opportunities for U.S. Army personnel to train Tunisian army counterparts, particularly in counterterrorism operations. Given the terrorist threat in Tunisia—including killings at two major tourist sites between March and

June 2015 that left a total of 60 dead, Tunisia needs as much help as possible to counter this threat, which has the potential to derail its democratic progress.

At the same time, U.S. Army officers should avoid being drawn into discussions with their counterparts in the anti-Islamist alliance about groups like the Muslim Brotherhood or En-Nahda. As mentioned earlier, the United States has not accepted Egypt's designation of the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization, and is supportive of the UN process that is trying to bring Libyan factions—including the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood—together in the form of a national unity government. While En-Nahda remains a junior member of the governing coalition in Tunisia, some secularists (probably including some military officers) in that country remain deeply suspicious of it. Although U.S. Army officers might hear an earful of complaints from their Egyptian and Tunisian counterparts about the “dangers” posed by such Islamist groups, it would be best to avoid this subject. When discussions about Islamist organizations come up, U.S. Army officers should try to steer the discussion to the more immediate and dangerous threats posed by ISIL affiliates like the “Sinai Province,” which continues to stage terrorist operations in that area and in other parts of Egypt.

Similarly, in terms of the anti-Shia alliance, U.S. Army officers should stay clear of discussions by Arab Sunni officers about the Shia. First, derogatory terms are sometimes used to describe the Shia (and vice versa for Shia officers describing Sunnis), and it would be unseemly and unethical for U.S. Army officers to participate in such discussions. After all, U.S. Army officers would not want anyone to malign their own religious beliefs. Second, participating in such discussions would also imply that the United States is tak-

ing sides in a sectarian conflict, which it should avoid. Third, as a practical matter, the United States has close military ties to Shia-dominated armies as in Iraq, and Sunni-dominated armies as in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt. So, logically, it would not make sense to engage in such diatribes.

There are more legitimate ways U.S. Army officers can reassure their Sunni Arab counterparts of the anxiety many of them feel about Iran and the proxy wars that are part of this Shia-Sunni divide. These anxieties have risen in the wake of the Iran nuclear deal of July 2015 because of the perception held by many Arab Gulf countries that an economically stronger Iran will be even more inclined to pursue mischief in the region. U.S. Army officers can reinforce, to their host nation army counterparts, the messages and pledges from U.S. policymakers that the United States will continue to remain their friend and support them militarily against outside threats. To reinforce these assurances, joint military exercises between U.S. Army officers and their Sunni Arab military counterparts should continue, and even be enhanced, to allay Sunni fears.

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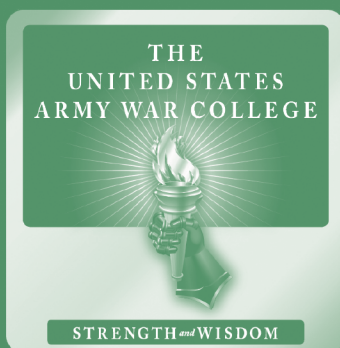
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