

## **Divided by Common Alignment: Jordan and GCC States in the Arab Winter**

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### Introduction

Despite having a generally common alignment with the Western world, Jordan and the Gulf Cooperation Council states have had widely divergent policy responses to the Arab Winter. These divergences are a result of a combination of domestic sources of legitimacy, colonial heritage, and foreign policy goals that divide these states. The most spectacular recent problem was the confrontation between Qatar and Saudi Arabia over Libya, but policy divergence can be seen in nearly every major conflict of the Arab Winter. The term “Arab Winter” stands for the collapsed states and civil wars that followed either successful or failed revolutions in the Arab world, which are referred to as the Arab Spring. The four major conflicts of the Arab Spring: Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya are the focus of this study. In none of these conflicts are these monarchies all on the same side. The United Arab Emirates and Qatar back opposing governments in Libya, and Oman has maintained firm neutrality on the conflict in Yemen, pointedly refusing to join Saudi Arabia’s coalition. In relation to the Syrian conflict, Oman also maintains communications with the Assad regime, which stands in sharp contrast to the positions held by the rest of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Even when these monarchies back Syrian dissident and rebel movements, they do not uniformly back the same movements and factions. Similar dynamics govern their positions in Iraq. The countries’ very alignment and nature of relations with the United States also tends to differentiate their policy responses to the conflicts of the Arab Winter. Aside from the methodology and the four cases, this paper concludes with some brief reflections concerning the Middle Eastern Arab monarchies and their relationship with the West in general and the United States in particular.

To some extent, this work represents a conversation with some of the concepts of International Relations such as threats, balancing, and bandwagoning. That there are real threat dynamics at play is certain, but these threats are often perceived and constructed. There is nothing inherent about them. For example, by any reading of the recent historical record, the Iraqi Baathists ought to be seen as a serious threat to the Gulf states, but current sentiment tends to see them as victims worthy of support against Iranian aggression. Consequently, this work adds identity as it is currently being constructed and portrayed. In other words, it considers identity as an essential element in understanding the foreign policies of the Arab Middle East’s monarchies, but it does not essentialize it. Saudi Arabia was once aligned with the Yemeni Zayidis against fellow Sunni Egypt, so identity is not destiny in foreign policy but it is important and has influence.

### Methodology

Each major conflict of the Arab Winter is treated as a case, and each case study begins with a discussion of the various stances taken by the Middle Eastern monarchies in question. The presentation of their respective positions is followed by a discussion of the fractures among them. Afterwards, the paper will discuss the reasons for the divisions by focusing on the dissenting states, with the Saudi position being taken as the position being dissented against or supported. Given the central role of Saudi Arabia in the Gulf Cooperation Council, as its largest member in terms of population, wealth and landmass, a dissenting position means that the reasons behind the dissenting country’s position need to be explored. More often than not,

these incidents of dissent stem from a need to balance Saudi influence and maintain good relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran. However, there are other reasons for the dissent as well, including ideology, which somehow never seems to leave the picture. Indeed, Oman’s dissent in Syria and Yemen make it unique among the actors in the case studies. As the only Ibadi state, it has much to fear from the ideologies of Daesh (the popular Arabic term for ISIS is preferred here in order not to legitimate the movement in question) and Al Qaeda, which is freely operating in Yemen. Another outlier is Jordan, who is not a Gulf Cooperation Council member and whose population exhibits a wider ethnic and cultural heterogeneity than the citizen population of other Arab Middle Eastern monarchies.

The final factor is the nature of the relationship between the country in question and the United States. It is often tempting to think of the relationship as one of dependency or subservience, but the reality is far more complex. While there is a clear imbalance of power between the Arab Middle Eastern monarchies and the West, that imbalance hides many complexities and disagreements. After 9/11, these problems began appearing with surprising frequency and the dynamics of the Arab Winter may alter the relationship permanently to one of confrontation and conflict, particularly after the recent events in Paris, Nigeria, and the Sinai. The reflections section addresses some of the ideas proposed by Professor Andrew Bacevich of Boston University, which include the isolation of the Middle East from world politics and international economics (Bacevich, 2015).

The Syrian Civil War

Despite early attempts to portray the Syrian Civil War as an indigenous movement, events and avowals have recently shone a light on the true extent of foreign involvement in the war. The Gulf states and Jordan are no exception in that respect, with the clear dissent exhibited by Oman. At first, the United States claimed that its support for the anti-Assad forces was limited to training civil society activists and journalists (Nixon, 2011). Nowadays, the true extent of that support has come into the open with United States disclosures. In particular, the United States supplied what it calls “moderate” rebels with TOW anti-tank missiles, which were breaking the stalemate in Northeastern Syria (Crowcroft, 2015). The rebels’ success almost certainly led to direct Russian intervention. The open involvement of the United States naturally revived charges of involvement of the US and its allies. However, this involvement does not appear to be either uniform or coherent. Different allies of the United States have diverse priorities in Syria. For the sake of simplicity, the Syrian factions are divided into five groups: the Assad government, the Kurds and other Northern minorities, Daesh, the groups labeled the “Free Syrian Army,” and the non-Daesh Jihadists including, the Al Qaeda aligned Jabhat al Nursa and Ahrar al Sham. The table below shows the divergence between the various states.

Table 1: Arab Middle East monarchies and support for various Syrian factions.

Country	Assad Gov.	Daesh	Kurds	Nat. Council	Other Jihadis
Saudi Arabia	Hostile	Private/Public div.	Neutral	Supportive	Supportive
Kuwait	Hostile	Private/Public div.	Neutral	Supportive	Supportive
Bahrain	Hostile	Private/Public div.	Neutral	Supportive	Supportive
UAE	Hostile	Hostile	Cordial	Supportive	Unclear
Qatar	Hostile	Private/Public div.	Neutral	Supportive	Supportive
Oman	Neutral	Hostile	Friendly	Neutral	Neutral

Jordan	Hostile	Hostile	Cordial	Supportive	Hostile
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In terms of support, Jordan's divergence is due to its particular geography. It is clearly involved in supporting the Southern Front segments of the Free Syrian Army, which include substantial secularist and minority representation, particularly among the Syrian Druze whose lands border Jordan. Consequently, Jordan tends to be more favorable to the Kurds, whose current alignments put them closer to the secularists among Syria's rebels. The Omani dissent is striking in contrast. Oman became the first country to break the Assad regime's diplomatic isolation when its foreign minister visited Damascus with peace proposals (Deutsche Welle, 2015). The only other exception has been the relative hostility of the Emirates to Daesh. Its approach to the organization resembles the Jordanian approach. It participated in United States-led missions against Daesh early on along with Jordan. The reasons behind the relative unity of the Gulf states with the exception of Oman concerning the Syrian conflict may lie in identity politics or "confessionalism." Responding to the attacks on the Southern Suburb of Beirut, a pro-government journalist in Kuwait celebrated the "the soldiers of justice" who carried out the attack on Lebanese civilians (Al-Hadlaq, 2015). That a Kuwaiti journalist writing in a mainstream paper, closely aligned with the government, would celebrate the mass murder of civilians in a densely populated district of Greater Beirut due to confessional difference invites several painful questions about the relationship between confession and conflict. Indeed, a recent report by the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations seems to view confessionalism as serious concern.

### The Iraqi Civil War

The situation in Iraq also differs in several crucial respects from that of Syria. Closely associated with the Syrian civil war, and often regarded to contain elements of the same conflict, the current ongoing civil war in Iraq has seen atrocities unheard of since the collapse of Yugoslavia and Rwanda in the 1990s. The situation in Iraq also differs in several crucial respects from that of Syria. Unlike Syria, Daesh in Iraq appears to have relied heavily on internal dissent, particularly among the cashiered former Iraqi Army, whose soldiers deeply resented losing their jobs and status after the fall of Saddam Hussein. The Daesh operations in Iraq has relied heavily on former Baathist "resistance" forces and have had an operations level alliance with the "Army of the Men of the Naqshabandi Order," which was founded and led by Saddam Hussein's deputy, Izz al Dein Douri. These local forces provided Daesh with a great deal of intelligence as well as the ability to infiltrate Sunni Arab areas in the Northeastern sections of the country. In addition, despite the relatively successful demonization of former Prime Minister Maliki of Iraq, particularly in the Arab media, it has not been possible to do the same with his successor, particularly in the West. While Washington does have some serious disputes with Iraq concerning its relations with Iran and Russia, it does maintain cordial relations with the Shiite-led government in Baghdad. The existence of an elected Iraqi government has made it difficult for the Gulf monarchies to take the stances they have taken with Syria. Jordan and Oman again diverge from the normal stance taken by the Gulf Cooperation Council monarchies. The former faces a serious problem with Daesh infiltration and attacks and can ill afford its own citizens' support for the latter. We can explain Oman's case with Daesh's hostility to pluralism in Islam, a hostility that puts Oman's Ibadi community in a very difficult position.

The remaining Gulf Cooperation Council states' own stances towards Daesh in Iraq reflect a high level of ambiguity. While none of these states supports Daesh in either Iraq or Syria, some of their citizens clearly do, and this has posed a problem for the respective regimes. The

second level of difficulty arises from their fears of Iranian hegemony in the region. These fears reflect the Turkish fear of Kurdish independence and lead to an ambivalent stance on Daesh, one that sees the various Gulf Cooperation Council states deplore and condemn Daesh in public but restrain their response concerning their own citizens' involvement in the movement. . It should be added that these regimes might not necessarily afford a crackdown on private support for Daesh without significantly risking their own internal legitimacy, which often derives from religion. Unlike Syria, there are three main factions in the conflict (the Iraqi government, Deash, and the Kurdish Regional Government), which have shown significant resilience and have relatively clear policies.

Table 2: Arab Middle East monarchies and the Iraqi civil war.

Countries	Iraqi Government	Daesh	Kurdish RG
GCC, excl. Oman	Unfriendly	Private/Public div.	Cordial
Oman	Cordial	Hostile	Friendly
Jordan	Cordial	Hostile	Friendly

If Oman specialists like Joseph Kechichian can explain Oman's dissent in this case by referring to its unique form of Islam, realists and other rational actor model users would point out Jordan, whose Sunni faith has not prevented it from pursuing a rather different policy towards the Iraqi government and Daesh. Again, the role of threat perception seems to be crucial. For whatever reason, Jordan simply does not see Iran as much of a threat as the others see it. There may be reasons linked to Israeli and United States guarantees to Jordan that are not available to the other states. Oman shares control over the Strait of Hormuz with Iran and the country has had a history of cordial relations with both the Shah and the current Islamic Republic. The Shah's troops put down the Dhofar Rebellion in the 1970s, and Oman helped the United States and Iran negotiate their current opening or relations. In some ways, Oman remains the Arab monarchy closest physically to Iran as subsequently possible, it is perhaps most fearful of conflict with the Islamic Republic and its potential to spill over into Oman in the form of refugees and skirmishes. Oman sees the Iranian role in Iraq differently, because Iran has been instrumental in preventing the takeover of Iraq by a movement fundamentally opposed to Ibadi Islam. Nevertheless, it is possible to speak of a GCC position in Iraq, as with Syria. Deviation and dissent remain rare and related to either peculiar geopolitical positioning, as with Jordan, or a particular geography and religious identity, as with Oman. In the case of Yemen, these factors tended to repeat in some ways as well.

The Yemeni Civil War

The popular uprising against Ali Abdullah Saleh was one of the more peaceful Arab Spring revolutions, and despite violent protests, the regime decided to abdicate and Saleh went abroad. Unfortunately, things did not remain Peaceful. Saleh's ultimate replacement, President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, found himself facing a Houthi-led insurgency backed by elements of the former regime. The Houthi's movement is based on the Zayidi Shiite community, which constitutes a majority of the population of former North Yemen but an overall minority in united Yemen of about 35-45 percent. The Houthi movement calls itself the Movement of Believing Youth, and takes its name from the leading family's name. The Houthis had previously fought Saleh, but with Hadi in power, they perceived themselves to be under a severe threat, because of the latter's South Yemeni origins and perceived pro-Saudi alignment. Their own history with Saudi Arabia ran counter to the traditionally close relations between the Zayidi community and Riyadh. North Yemen's Zayidis were aligned with Saudi

Arabia during the 1960s against Egypt and the North Yemeni Republicans. However, the Houthis have now infiltrated Saudi Arabia on more than one occasion and had to be ejected by violent force. Houthi home areas include Saada Province in the northernmost areas of Yemen; their relations with Hadi were sour from the start, as he was seen as an opponent of their movement. In an alliance with Saleh, the Houthis took over the whole of North Yemen and invaded the South as well. They retreated from South Yemen and from Sunni areas in former North Yemen. The Gulf monarchies and other states, including Morocco and Sudan, aided Hadi. Jordan also formed part of that same coalition, but Oman again remained neutral, refusing to participate in an anti-Houthi war that has been legitimized by widespread anti-Shiite and anti-Iranian narratives.

Table 3: Arab Middle East monarchies and the Yemeni civil war.

Countries	Houthis	Hadi’s Regime	AQAP
GCC (excl. Oman)	At War	Supportive	Hostile
Oman	Neutral	Neutral	Hostile
Jordan	At War	Supportive	Hostile

To complicate matters, the war between the Houthi movement and the government opened a wide area to Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which has taken advantage of the chaos to seize wide tracts of land in former South Yemen, including some of the country’s Indian Ocean ports. AQAP’s gains in Yemen resulted from Saudi Arabia’s successful expunging of the movement from its own territory, leading AQAP to flee to Yemen and regroup there. Saudi Arabia’s coalition in Yemen has certainly enjoyed United States support, but despite several months of war, the Houthis were able to force a stalemate. The conflict has been used by Iran as an example of unrestrained Saudi and US aggression and the Houthis have attracted regular sympathetic coverage by the Russian media. As with Syria and Iraq, the Omani government has rejected following Riyadh’s script. Jordan on the other hand, desperately needs Saudi financial help cope with the ongoing influx of Syrian refugees, so it had little choice other than to participate in the Saudi-led coalition. In Yemen, the monarchies had a semblance of unity, but in Libya, Qatar and the UAE are supporting opposing sides, despite Saudi Arabia’s clear preference for the positions taken by the Emirates.

The Libyan Civil War

Qatar’s decision to back the government that lost its mandate in elections in Libya put it at odds with Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and even Saudi Arabia. The war itself can be traced to many factors, including Turkish intervention on behalf of the Libyan Islamist Movement, directed largely against Egypt, whose current leadership is sharply at odds with the regime in Ankara. Nevertheless, the war in Libya is largely of domestic origin. Its causes include the rivalry between Benghazi and Tripoli, the lack of a settlement in Libya concerning issues of ethnic diversity, and the persistence of the municipal militias that fought against the Gadhafi regime. Tripoli, Misrata, and Beni Walid all boast independent militias, meaning that they are prone to reject the sovereignty of the elected Tobruk government. These internal factors, when combined with generous Turkish and Qatari support, enabled the National Conference government to reject turning over the state to the elected government. But in this case, there is a wide divergence between the positions taken by Qatar and that of the other Gulf Cooperation Council members. The point of divergence in policy began with General Sisi’s coup in Egypt. Saudi Arabia and the Emirates supported Sisi because they believed that the Muslim Brotherhood planned to export its model to their respective countries; the Emirates even arrested and tried members of the movement. Qatar, on the other hand, has

maintained close links with the Muslim Brotherhood and its media portrayed the deposed President Morsi as a living martyr. Saudi Arabia threatened Qatar with an air blockade unless it changed its stance in Egypt. While the tiny country changed its policy in Egypt, Libya is another matter. However, the Omani and Jordanian positions in this particular conflict reflect those of Saudi Arabia and see no significant divergence from it.

To make matters more complicated, the war has created opportunities for Daesh in Libya. The Libyan central coast areas centered on Sirte are now under Daesh control, meaning that that the movement has gained a foothold in North Africa, enabling it to strike at Tunisia and Algeria with relative ease. The same vacuum has enabled the re-emergence of Tuareg militias in Southwestern Libya; with western Fezzan now under the control of the Tuareg forces. The former Gadhafi stronghold of Beni Walid is also under the control of forces that reject both the Tobruk and Tripoli governments.

Table 4: Arab Middle East monarchies and the Libyan civil war.

Countries	Tobruk Govt.	Tripoli Govt.	Daesh
KSA	Supportive	Unfriendly	Private/Public div.
Bahrain	Supportive	Unfriendly	Private/Public div.
Kuwait	Supportive	Unfriendly	Private/Public div.
UAE	Supportive	Hostile	Hostile
Qatar	Hostile	Supportive	Private/Public div.
Oman	Supportive	Unfriendly	Hostile
Jordan	Supportive	Unfriendly	Hostile

The Libyan civil war is seeing the Arab Middle East monarchies pitted against each other in an unprecedented way. It has also revealed the role played by the fear of Iran in terms of shaping their policies with regard to the other three main conflicts of the Arab Winter. Unlike Yemen, Iraq, and Syria there is no perception of a common Iranian threat in Libya, so there has been no incentive to unite their perspectives. To that extent, their policies with regard to the Egyptian regime became the guide they used to shape policy in Libya, with those favoring the Muslim Brotherhood siding with the Tripoli government, and those not favoring the Muslim Brotherhood divided among the other players in the conflict.

#### Analysis and Conclusion

In response to the recent attacks in Paris, the Sinai, and Nigeria, Professor Andrew Bacevich of Boston University has suggested isolating the region from normal international relations. Such a policy would mean that the region should be subject to a cordon sanitaire, much like the one that was imposed on the Soviet Union between 1917 and 1941, and arguably during the Cold War, as well as on Russia today (Bacevich, 2015). Were the United States to implement the proposal, it would be catastrophic for the region. Isolating the region would mean that Turkey, Iran, and Russia would carve up spheres of influence in cooperation with powerful regional actors like Israel, Iraq, and Egypt. Under such a scenario, it is hard to foresee the continued power and decision autonomy of the Arab Middle Eastern monarchies save those directly under the protection of a powerful local actor such as the relationship that exists between Jordan and Israel. Oman would also be likely to escape the worst of such a consequence, especially if the transition after Sultan Qaboos takes place smoothly. For Oman, the survival of the state, but not necessarily the system, appears assured. The remaining Gulf Cooperation Council states face a sharp dilemma. They legitimate their rule

by securing the support of the Hanbali-Wahhabi ulema's Salafi wings, and this in turn is leading them to support Islamist forces nearby, particularly those opposed to Shiite and Iranian influence. The alignment of the Zayidi Shiite community with Saudi Arabia during the 1950s and 1960s, and the Shah's alliance with Saudi Arabia during that time as well, both suggest that neither Shiism nor Wahhabism that are predisposed to mutual conflict. The view of the Shia as Rawafid (Rejecters) is largely a product of twentieth century readings of the classical texts of Ibn Tammiya and Ibn Abd el Wahhab that have been embraced by recent movements that reject co-existence with the other. Even when the movements in question are too extreme to support, these countries remain largely divided on reducing support to them. Governments may be reluctant to shut down private support lest such a move brings about destabilization and additional terrorism at home and abroad. But this reluctance bringing friction with Western powers, including outright accusations of indirect support for Daesh in the wake of the Paris and Brussels attacks. It is also feeding friction with China and Thailand as well. While there is a lack of conflict with Turkey and coordination with the Gulf states in Syria, the Melli Gorus form of political Islam differs substantially from the forms of those practiced in the Gulf, meaning that inevitably there will be friction with Turkey as well. All these countries have links with Western and Far Eastern societies being targeted by Daesh and Al Qaeda, and this is raising the dilemma that is represented by Bacevich's arguments. The relationships with the outside world are ultimately leading to the Arab Middle East monarchies to have divergent policies; in other words, they divided by common alignment.

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