Al Noor, the Boston College Undergraduate Middle Eastern Studies Journal, aims to:

- Facilitate a nonpartisan, unbiased conversation within the Boston College community and beyond about the Middle East.
- Provide a medium for students to publish research on the Middle East and Islam.
- Promote diverse opinions and present a comprehensive view of the myriad of cultures, histories, and perspectives that comprise the Middle East.
- Be considerate of the complexity of the region while pursuing the utmost objectivity.
Spanning from an exploration into the factors behind Saudi Arabia’s and Morocco’s starkly different approaches to climate change negotiations, to an analysis of the cultural convivencia between Muslims and Jews in medieval Spain; from a comparison of the legacy of the Arab Spring in Egypt and Tunisia to a discussion of the flaws in the mainstream narrative concerning the Yemeni civil war, the winter 2021 edition of Al Noor examines both celebrations of cultural diversity and toleration and cases in which conflict has won out over harmony.

First, in “Global Problems, Global Solutions,” Morgan Biles dives into the reason that Morocco has embraced international climate change negotiations while Saudi Arabia has been less than enthusiastic in committing to reducing greenhouse gas emissions. While acknowledging the importance of the two nations’ oil reserves, or lack thereof, have on their stance, Biles goes deeper, delving into the ways in which their contrasting experiences with international cooperation in other areas have encouraged or discouraged meaningful engagement in climate change agreements.

Next, Meghan Gorman’s “Conversion and Reversion” explains why Yemen emerged from the Arab Spring with a reversion into authoritarianism. Gorman explores the importance that the two nations’ oil reserves, or lack thereof, have on their stance, Biles goes deeper, delving into the ways in which their contrasting experiences with international cooperation in other areas have encouraged or discouraged meaningful engagement in climate change agreements.

Rounding out the issue, Molly Daunn’s “Delineating Rhetoric from Reality” challenges the dominant narrative surrounding Yemen’s civil war, arguing that the local grievances that have driven the conflict have been ignored in favor of discussions that view the war as part of a broader struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Daunt draws an intriguing parallel to the 1962-1970 North Yemeni Civil War, demonstrating how similar narratives came to dominate in both conflicts.

As the Editor-in-Chief of Al Noor, I want to express how extremely grateful I am to everyone who contributes to the journal’s success. Without the assistance of our staff, the support from Boston College, and the contributions of our authors, Al Noor would not be possible.

Finally, I would like to encourage anyone who enjoyed this issue to check out our website at bcalnoor.org where you can find past issues and more information about our journal. Happy reading!

Raffi Toghramadjian ‘21
Editor-in-Chief

Ella Wooldridge explores the history of the convivencia between Jews and Muslims in medieval Spain. Without ignoring its limitations, Wooldridge gives a clear and provoking account of a period of relative religious tolerance during an era when it was all too often lacking.

Al Noor’s “Conversion and Reversion” challenges the dominant narrative surrounding Yemen’s civil war, arguing that the local grievances that have driven the conflict have been ignored in favor of discussions that view the war as part of a broader struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Daunt draws an intriguing parallel to the 1962-1970 North Yemeni Civil War, demonstrating how similar narratives came to dominate in both conflicts.

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Global Problem, Global Solution
Understanding Differences In Climate Change Negotiation Commitments and Follow Through

In recent decades the international community has sought to counter the problem of global climate change with global solutions. These attempts at international cooperation—represented most notably by the United Nations Conference of the Parties (COP) meetings—have achieved some success, but the nonbinding character of major climate deals means that even after a state commits to an agreement, it is under little, if any, formal or institutional pressure to adhere to its terms. As a result of this dependence on states’ domestic politics, the actual performance of different countries is far from uniform, and often substantially below their commitments.¹ This failure of collective action is particularly dangerous given the devastating impact of global warming. The effects of climate change extend beyond higher temperatures and extreme weather, threatening agriculture, coastal infrastructure, food and water resources, national security, and human health.² Given these...
wide-ranging and time-sensitive implications, the failure of some nations to take meaningful action presents a compelling question: what explains the differences in climate change mitigation commitments and follow-through between states? The Middle East presents a particularly interesting example of this phenomenon, as the region has both the highest GHG emissions in the world and is expected to be particularly hard hit by climate change. In this already hot and dry region, summer temperatures are projected to rise twice as fast as the global average and rainfall levels are already on the decline. Despite the predicted severity of these dangers, several countries in the region are ranked ‘low’ or ‘very low’ in their performances toward their commitments by the Climate Change Performance Index. One country, however, stands out among its regional peers. In 2019, Morocco was ranked as the second best-performing country in the world. Morocco has been noted as a climate leader both for its mitigation efforts and for hosting COP22—the UN’s 2016 climate summit. Morocco’s leadership on the issue sets it apart from the rest of the region, which has been characterized by low-performance scores and a hesitation to approve ambitious targets. Given the less than enthusiastic response of fellow Arab League members such as Saudi Arabia, Morocco’s extensive efforts in global climate change negotiations and mitigation demands an explanation.

Three potential arguments have emerged to explain the disparities in state action to slow climate change: fossil fuel wealth, external and internal problem prioritization, and trust in international systems. I believe the third argument provides the strongest case as it not only explains how states currently conceptualize their role in climate change negotiations, the extent of the commitments it makes, and the degree to which it implements mitigation and adaptation efforts. First, given the focus on reducing the use of fossil fuels in climate change negotiations, the presence—or absence—of GHG producing natural resources can have a significant impact on a state’s negotiating position. Developing countries rich in fossil fuel resources argue that measures focused on reducing greenhouse gas emissions prevent them from accessing the traditional industrialized path of development. It is this point that divides countries with fossil fuel deposits from countries without such resources. Fossil-fuel-rich countries have a strong economic interest in continuing to produce and export fossil fuels, and making firm GHG reduction targets would potentially severely damage their economies. Strong commitments to lowering GHG emissions would eventually mean limiting, if not completely eliminating, an important source of income. Reducing this dependence on fossil fuel extraction would require serious investment in other industries and risk upsetting the status quo established by oil politics. As Larry Diamond argues, oil dependency creates a low-risk culture, because steady profits from oil can be made with little to no risk. The emerging “green energy” options—solar, wind, and hydropower—that could replace fossil fuels require much more risk because of their higher costs, still-developing technologies, and the global path dependency on traditional fossil fuels. Table 1 shows that among the wealthy, oil-producing countries in the Middle East, the most common

INFLUENCES ON CLIMATE POLITICS

This section will analyze three competing arguments on climate change attitude formation: whether states have fossil fuel wealth, the way in which states prioritize various problems both inside and outside of their territory; and, most importantly, a state’s trust in international systems. Often more qualitative than quantitative, attitudes toward climate change can be difficult to accurately measure. For the purposes of this discussion, attitudes and actions will be understood by looking at three components of a state’s response to global warming: its behavior in climate change negotiations, the extent of the commitment it makes, and the degree to which it implements mitigation and adaptation efforts. First, given the focus on reducing the use of fossil fuels in climate change negotiations, the presence—or absence—of GHG producing natural resources can have a significant impact on a state’s negotiating position. Developing countries rich in fossil fuel resources argue that measures focused on reducing greenhouse gas emissions prevent them from accessing the traditional industrialized path of development. It is this point that divides countries with fossil fuel deposits from countries without such resources. Fossil-fuel-rich countries have a strong economic interest in continuing to produce and export fossil fuels, and making firm GHG reduction targets would potentially severely damage their economies. Strong commitments to lowering GHG emissions would eventually mean limiting, if not completely eliminating, an important source of income. Reducing this dependence on fossil fuel extraction would require serious investment in other industries and risk upsetting the status quo established by oil politics. As Larry Diamond argues, oil dependency creates a low-risk culture, because steady profits from oil can be made with little to no risk. The emerging “green energy” options—solar, wind, and hydropower—that could replace fossil fuels require much more risk because of their higher costs, still-developing technologies, and the global path dependency on traditional fossil fuels. Table 1 shows that among the wealthy, oil-producing countries in the Middle East, the most common

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>GHG Emissions (Metric Tons of CO2)</th>
<th>Mitigation Commitment Type</th>
<th>GHG Reduction Commitment</th>
<th>GDP in USD Billions (2018)</th>
<th>Oil Production (thousands of barrels per day)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Algeria</td>
<td>201.69</td>
<td>GHG target below BAU</td>
<td>By 2030: 7% with domestic means; 8% if given external assistance</td>
<td>140.69</td>
<td>1,642</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bahrain</td>
<td>35.04</td>
<td>Actions only</td>
<td>No specific target</td>
<td>37.73</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>272.47</td>
<td>Actions only</td>
<td>No specific target</td>
<td>250.89</td>
<td>608</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>608.68</td>
<td>GHG target below BAU</td>
<td>By 2030: 4% with domestic means; 12% with external assistance (including removal of sanctions)</td>
<td>454.01 (2017)</td>
<td>4,706</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>292.86</td>
<td>GHG target below BAU</td>
<td>By 2030: 13% with domestic means; 14% if given external assistance</td>
<td>225.91</td>
<td>6,456</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>87.41</td>
<td>GHG target (intensity)</td>
<td>By 2030: 20% below 2050 per capita level (equivalent to 5.7 kgCO2 per capita)</td>
<td>369.69</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>32.4</td>
<td>GHG target below BAU</td>
<td>By 2030: 1.5% with internal means; 5% if given external assistance</td>
<td>42.29</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuwait</td>
<td>198.95</td>
<td>Actions only</td>
<td>No specific target (prioritized business as usual)</td>
<td>141.68</td>
<td>2,824</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>28.59</td>
<td>GHG target below BAU</td>
<td>By 2030: 5% with domestic means; 10% if given external assistance</td>
<td>36.64</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libya</td>
<td>153.67</td>
<td>No INDC submitted</td>
<td>No INDC submitted</td>
<td>48.32</td>
<td>904</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>80.22</td>
<td>GHG target below BAU</td>
<td>By 2030: 17% with internal means; 42% if given external assistance</td>
<td>118.50</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oman</td>
<td>106.3</td>
<td>GHG target; fixed level target</td>
<td>No reduction; limit growth to 2% a year (still below BAU)</td>
<td>79.29</td>
<td>980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palestine</td>
<td>No-data</td>
<td>GHG target; from baseline</td>
<td>By 2040: 12.8% of gross domestic product and assuming status quo of Israeli occupation; 29.8% if achieves independence</td>
<td>14.61</td>
<td>No-data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qatar</td>
<td>86.11</td>
<td>Actions only</td>
<td>No specific target</td>
<td>192.01</td>
<td>1,973</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>383.57</td>
<td>Actions only</td>
<td>No specific target</td>
<td>782.48</td>
<td>12,105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>52.2</td>
<td>No INDC submitted</td>
<td>No INDC submitted</td>
<td>40.40 (2007)</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunisia</td>
<td>57.88</td>
<td>GHG target; from baseline (2010)</td>
<td>By 2030: 13% with internal means; 41% if given external assistance</td>
<td>39.86</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>566.81</td>
<td>GHG target</td>
<td>By 2030: 21% from BAU level</td>
<td>765.51</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Arab Emirates</td>
<td>211.29</td>
<td>Non-GHG target and actions</td>
<td>No specific GHG target, but pledged increase of clean energy to 25% by 2021</td>
<td>414.18</td>
<td>5,728</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yemen</td>
<td>34.01</td>
<td>GHG target</td>
<td>By 2030: 1% below BAU with internal means; 1% below BAU with external assistance</td>
<td>28.91</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Paris Accord commitments, GDP, and oil production of Middle Eastern Countries
commitment is not a specific target, but rather a promise of some action. Such actions are often labeled as ‘eco-nomic diversification or adaptation actions with mitigation co-benefits.’ While these states ostensibly promote green development such as energy efficiency or water management, they are not prepared to radically chang-ing their established development dynamics for the sake of reducing or eliminat-ing fossil fuels. However, these mitigation and adapta-tion efforts can have an adverse effect of disguising the impacts of climate change without doing anything to fundamentally counter the real problem. For example, Qatar has started air conditioning soccer stadiums and outdoor shopping centers at exorbitant energy costs, which mitigates the symptoms of climate change by keeping these public places accessible, but results in even higher emission levels.11

Another view of the ‘right to develop’ argues that although development occurred via fossil fuel heavy industrialization in the past, there may be a green alternative to development. For this latter group, assurances of economic assistance from developed nations are a key aspect of climate agreements. Despite any ideological dedication they may have to environmentalism, many states cannot feasibly make the commitments needed to keep warming below 2ºC without external assistance. In the early years of climate agreements, there were debates between developing and developed countries over who should bear the responsibility for funding sustainable growth. However, over the past two decades of negoti-ations it has become standard for these agreements to include funding mechanisms supported by developed countries. All of the Middle Eastern states pledging GHG reduction targets in the Paris Accords, with the excep-tion of Israel, made dual commitments, the first based on what they believe they can accomplish using only domestic-funding, and the second—often significantly stronger commitment—predicated on receiving external funding (Table 1). For these less developed states, green develop-ment presents an opportunity to gain important modern infrastructure, like domestic renewable energy projects, while having the expenses covered by external sources of funding.

Second, the way in which states prioritize problems can impact their attitudes toward climate change mitigation. The structure of the problem itself plays a significant role in the ‘long-term and circular nature of environ-mental problems contrasts sharply with the short term and results-orientated political lives of those in power.’12 Especially in democratic societies, it can be difficult to gain support and funding for environmental issues, when the benefits likely won’t be realized until long after the next election cycle. For authoritarian countries, the problem is largely a question of regime security. For these states, the threat imposed by neighboring countries toward their regime may appear to be more immediate, pertinent challenges than the predicted threat of cli-mate change. Likewise, internal dissent can also hinder a state’s reaction to climate change. Such regimes might argue that organizing mitigation efforts is pointless if there is not a stable regime to enforce it. For example, Iraq’s ongoing civil war prevented it from submitting an Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDC) and Yemen’s domestic conflict makes action highly depauperate. For states looking to the long-term, climate change miti-gation also presents an opportunity to accomplish other policy goals. Countries that want to improve their image often use productive climate change measures to ‘gre-enwash’ their international reputation. For others, the global nature of negotiations may give them a stage to push for strategic objectives outside the realm of climate change. Palestine, for example, set two mitigation targets, the first of which was conditional on gaining an inde-pendent state. Meanwhile, Iran predicated its second, more ambitious, target on external assistance including the removal of sanctions (see Table 4). For these states, climate change mitigation efforts are seen as part of a greater strategy focused on achieving broader national interests. By making stronger commitments, these states may be trying to demonstrate good will and a readiness to cooperate in order to set a standard for future negotiations with international actors.

Finally, given the international cooperation required in climate change mitigation, a country’s level of trust in the international community is a crucial variable. Oil wealth plays an important role, but even some oil-rich states, such as Iraq and Iran, have made concrete and ambitious commitments. Problem prioritization is also salient, but given the compounding impact of climate change, it can-not always explain the seemingly irrational attitudes that lead to doing nothing. A more comprehensive argument incorporates the different ways in which states view and trust the international community. In many ways the debate over the future of the planet is an excellent repre-sentation of the tragedy of the commons. In a low-trust situation, states are unlikely to forgo their own development if they cannot trust that other states will act in a similar manner. With any attempt at col lective action, the risk that other actors will free-load or cheat on the agreement becomes a constant concern. This, of course, conforms to a realist paradigm of inter-national relations, which posts that states will act in their individual interest with little incentive to work together. Without trust in the international community, lasting cooperation—a crucial facet of environmental protec-tion—becomes very unlikely.

Trust in the international systems and framework, on the other hand, facilitates the cooperation needed for success-ful climate negotiations. When institutions have the ability to monitor for compliance and push for transparency, the temptation—and capability—to cheat becomes less likely. For some states, however, international oversight can be viewed as a threat to their sovereignty. For example, dur-ing the 2009 Copenhagen Conference, China refused to accept external monitoring on the grounds of protecting their sovereignty and limiting external interference.13 For authoritarian states in particular, international oversight can threaten the regime’s tight control over society. In response, other states may wonder if they can trust a state who appears to be hiding behind claims of sovereignty. This vicious cycle of distrust can be extremely detrimental to negotiations. If neither state interests nor international institutions can be trusted, then perhaps states can place their trust in international norms. A constructivist paradigm regards state-behavior as shaped by historical precedent that can be changed by new norms. Under this argument, if a state had prior positive experience with international agreements, they are more likely to cooperate with future agreements. On the other hand, states that had negative experiences with international cooperation may become more hesitant to engage, although this is not permanent. Through engagement in international politics, these states may come to share common norms and goals and be more willing to cooperate.

The debate over the future of the planet is an excellent representation of the tragedy of the commons.
“Saudi Arabia’s oil wealth has created a trap that prevents the country from shifting to a more diversified economy”

CAN MONEY SOLVE EVERYTHING?

As a ‘rentier state,’ Saudi Arabia depends on the ‘unearned’ income from natural resources—namely oil and gas—to keep its regime in power and the state functioning. Saudi oil wealth has two key implications for its attitude towards climate change mitigation. First, the immense economic value of Saudi Arabia’s natural resources serves as a strong deterrent against doing anything that would put this source of income at risk. Secondly, the wealth generated by these unsustainable sources of income helps hide the real impacts of climate change in the country. With 16 percent of the world’s proven oil reserves, Saudi Arabia holds the second largest crude oil reserves in the world.10 Oil and gas account for 50 percent of the country’s GDP and makes up 70 percent of the country’s exports.11 Given this, it is hardly surprising that Saudi Arabia’s role in climate negotiations has been characterized by efforts to protect their future revenues. Unlike the United States, which expressed its reluctance toward mitigation efforts by pulling out of the Paris deal, Saudi Arabia—along with the OPEC and GCC coalitions it leads—has worked from the inside to obstruct international efforts. Saudi Arabia has stood against any attempts to move away from fossil fuels. The Saudi Arabian delegation is typically large, vocal, and comes well-prepared to push their agenda. These influential Arab delegations, backed by Saudi Arabia’s oil wealth, which allows them to fund much larger delegations than any other delegation, allows them to have a much more expensive problem to solve, and may even force Saudi Arabia to realize that money cannot solve everything. This vicious cycle can be clearly seen in Saudi Arabia’s response to the issue of water scarcity—one of the major concerns in the region. Rather than enforce strict water usage guidelines, Saudi Arabia and many of its Gulf neighbors have invested heavily in water desalination, a process in which undrinkable salt water is rendered into water safe for human consumption. As of 2016, half of Saudi Arabia’s potable water came from desalination.12 However, desalination is a highly energy intensive process. While desalination has helped Saudi Arabia avoid a water crisis, the Saudis’ approach hides the real cost. Cheap energy made possible by fossil fuels has distorted the perception of water availability, potentially resulting in increased consumption. This, of course, will only incur heavier costs in the future as demand for water increases and scarcity further worsens. Rather than setting the country on a course toward sustainability, the Saudis’ response has all but ensured that the need for energy expensive desalination will only continue to grow. To further complicate the ‘oil wealth’ problem, the high demand for energy within Saudi Arabia diverts possible income into internal consumption. Growing concern over the loss of potential exports has prompted consideration of alternative energy uses. However, Saudi Arabia has experienced considerable difficulty in bringing these green plans into fruition, a problem that has largely been attributed to a “lack of economic viability in the existing utility price regime.”13 The initial costs of renewable energy are often high and may seem, at least in the short term, prohibitively expensive given the availability of much cheaper fossil fuels.

PRIORITYING THE PROBLEMS

The motivations driving Saudi Arabia’s politics are often far from transparent. In his evaluations of Saudi politics, Gregory Gause observes that “those who know don’t speak, and those who speak don’t know.”14 Despite this, the argument can be made that when it comes to the Saudi threat perception, immediacy appears to trump everything else. Climate change in the region might one day threaten regime stability, but more immediate concerns encourage the Saudi regime to seek stopgap measures like air conditioning, food, and energy subsidies, and desalination. Of greater concern to the Saudi regime are civil wars in its neighborhood, the threat of Iran, and the growing loss of oil revenues. As discussed in a previous section, Saudi Arabia is concerned about the ways that the global discussion surrounding climate change and shifting patterns of energy consumption has affected its bottom line. It largely views climate change not as a long-term threat to the environment, but rather as a threat to the current oil market. The declining global demand for oil as its customers shift toward renewable energy and away from fossil fuels, combined with the increasing concern over the Saudi regime’s role in climate negotiations has worked from the inside to obstruct international efforts. Saudi Arabia has stood against the idea of shifting its domestic energy consumption toward renewable sources to free up more of their oil for export. Following the logic of this argument, much of Saudi Arabia’s actions can be explained by the fact that fossil fuels are the easiest and most profitable way to make money in the present. However, despite the significance of this threat to the oil market, the political crises in the region are of greater concern to Saudi Arabia. As Kenneth Pollack wrote, when the Saudis “look at the Middle East around them, they see a region spiraling out of control.”15 Civil wars, refugee crises, terrorists, militant groups, and the regional diffusion of radical ideas have led the Saudis to extend their reach into neighboring countries in order to prevent instability from spilling over their borders. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia shares the constant threat of Iran and the ever-present struggle to counter Iranian influence in the region. Taking a non-interventionist role in their neighbors’ crises could potentially lead to increased Iranian influence on their doorstep, offering their rival the much-desired role of regional hegemon. In the case of the Yemeni civil war, Yemen is “there is no other explanation for Iran’s involvement in Yemen other than to annoy, weaken, or even undermine the Saudis — as strategic leverage or a genuine bid at regime change.”16 Potential spoils of war from civil wars and upheaval in the region threaten both the legitimacy of the authoritarian monarchy and the security of the Saudi state itself. During the Arab Spring, the Saudis spent
Climate change is a global problem that requires global solutions. As Kate O’Neill argues in ‘The Environment and International Relations’, "international cooperation is not only desirable but also necessary to overcome collective action problems, and mitigate the negative effects of interdependence." However, from the perspective of the Saudis, there is little reason to trust international cooperation and international actors, especially at the risk it could impose on their claims of sovereignty.

First, the Saudi experience in OPEC has shown them the trap of collective action. In its early years, OPEC successfully cooperated, benefiting both Saudi Arabia and its other member states. The 1973 oil embargo quadrupled global oil prices and brought greater influence and recognition to member countries. Despite this early success, the group has begun to look and act more like a political club than a true cartel. Agreements go unenforced and rogue members pursue their own interests at the expense of the rest of the group. The goal of driving up the global price only works if each member agrees to the lower production quotas set by OPEC. Despite official allocation rules on the rates of production, the actual production of member countries has not been significantly constrained. If effective cooperation was in place, members would produce quantities matching their designated quotas. However, members overproduced 96 percent of the time, causing OPEC to drop the quotas in 2012. Saudi Arabia’s experience with OPEC has shown them that states will cheat to protect their own interests, even at the cost of profitable benefits in the long term. Having experienced first-hand the unwillingness of fellow oil-producing countries to cut production even when doing so would bring greater profits in the long term, Saudi Arabia has reason to doubt that other countries would follow through on cutting production for the sake of the environment. Furthermore, shifting Saudi Arabia’s economy away from oil production comes with major risks, which Saudi Arabia is unlikely to take on without support from other member states. Members of OPEC are generally heavily controlled by Saudi Arabia in matters concerning the environment, going back to the 1998 Buenos Aires climate negotiations, in which the country was largely blamed for blocking progress on a deal. More recently, however, there have been some indications of Saudi Arabia’s alliances. Despite the Saudi stance against all attempts to move away from fossil fuels, the UAE has stepped forward with what has been described as a more balanced agenda. Similarly, both Qatar and Kuwait have made moves and statements that indicate they are not unconditionally committed to the Saudi line. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia’s approach to climate negotiations shows its distrust of international institutions. Saudi Arabia engages in these negotiations solely out of self-interest; it participates within the framework only to act as a spoiler and prevent strong, effective deals from being reached. Second, as explained in the previous section, Saudi Arabia sees itself as the lone stabilizing force in a region facing instability. It has seen how quickly a country’s internal political situation can change; it can be difficult to trust other countries to adhere to their commitments if they are facing civil war or radical leadership change. Furthermore, the Saudis have seen how even their allies will act to advance their own interests even if doing so comes at the expense of Saudi Arabia. For example, the United States—a dominant actor in the Middle East—placed a priority on disengaging from the Middle East under both the Obama and Trump administrations. Within Saudi Arabia, there are some who believe the United States is abandoning the region just as it is coming apart, leaving Saudi Arabia to pick up the pieces by itself. The Obama administration’s desire to push through the Iran deal was viewed by the Saudis as a betrayal, or at the very least as an ignorant plan that failed to consider the power balance in the region. Combined with some Gulf countries’ willingness to defy the Saudi line, this seems to have demonstrated to the Saudis that even the most dependable allies cannot always be trusted. If they do not believe that they can fully trust their allies, it is unlikely that the Saudis will place their trust in an international regime that includes unknown entities and enemies. Besides having any reason not to trust international cooperation, Saudi Arabia also has to consider the implications that international agreements can have on their internal sovereignty. Signing onto international agreements inherently relinquishes a degree of sovereignty as it indicates foreign influence and ability for global governance to intervene in domestic policies.

No Oil, No Problem?

Unlike Saudi Arabia, Morocco has limited oil interests to protect. Their economy is not dependent on the continued extraction and exploitation of fossil fuel, but rather is threatened by climate change and has the potential institutions to grow from sustainable development. Morocco lacks large reserves of fossil fuels and is heavily dependent on imports to provide its growing energy needs and food security. For Morocco, the desire to act on climate change is twofold. First, the country needs to protect against the severe effects that rising temperatures would have on food security and its agriculture industry. Second, climate change mitigation presents an opportunity for Morocco to accelerate development in its energy industry and potentially become energy independent. While its importance has declined in recent years, agriculture remains Morocco’s primary source of employment, comprising one third of the labor force. Already subject to the whims of the weather, the agriculture is expected to become even more precarious as climate change raises temperature, increases the risk of drought, and creates other conditions that make the crop yields difficult. Whereas climate change mitigation efforts are a threat to the Saudi economy, climate change itself presents an immediate threat to the Moroccan economy. Renewable energy is desirable, not only for its green benefits, but because it would allow traditionally resource-deficient Morocco to make use of its arid land for energy production. Morocco currently imports 90 percent of its energy needs. Recent projects, however, are contributing to the country’s growing energy independence. The Noor Complex Solar Power Plant, for example, is one of the world’s largest solar farms. Equal to the size of 3,500 football fields and capable of providing power for two Marrakesh-sized cities, the Noor Complex is a promising step for a country whose energy demand is doubled over the past 10 years. Even better for Morocco, these
Morocco faces less pressure to finance these green projects as a developing country, Morocco has been eligible for economic benefits in the long run.

**VISION TOWARDS THE FUTURE**

When King Mohammed VI ascended to the throne at the turn of the century, he made promoting Morocco's global image his top priority. In a 2000 speech laying out his foreign policy, the newly crowned monarch said that Morocco's "diplomacy must now by mobilised in order to capitalise on the new... of a democratic and modernist Morocco." In reality, over the past 20 years, Morocco has used its modernization endeavors to distract from its less than stellar advancements in democracy. Frank Schimmelfennig describes this as "conscious role playing" which involves "formally subscribing to, but not really acting according to" the social values and norms or by interpreting the values and norms in the way that is most compatible with their interest in political power.

In the wake of the Arab Spring, Morocco faced protests and calls for reform similar to those that would eventually bring down the governments in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt. In contrast, King Mohammed's government survived relatively unscathed. While monetary support provided by fellow monarchy Saudi Arabia was certainly an important factor, the King's quick response has largely been credited as a key factor in protecting the regime from the worst of the region's tumult. Just a few months after demonstrations in the country began in February 2011, Morocco had announced a draft constitution, which was then overwhelmingly approved by the people. Morocco recognizes that forging relationships with the West is a key objective of Moroccan foreign policy, pursued not as an end itself, but as the long awaited opportunity to advance its relations with the EU with the prospect of an advanced status for the Kingdom. "In 2008, Morocco’s European allies... intending to define themselves as a trusted ally of the European Union, something few of their neighbors or Arab allies can say..." Being a leader on climate change presents the country with a similarly attractive mechanism to appear forward thinking and 'modernize' in the eyes of the international community. Morocco faces great pressure to present itself as a "good child" and "good ally" of European and Western powers, especially if it wants to continue to receive the benefits of aid and privileged treatment from the EU. Morocco has long been a disputed territory and the legitimacy of Western Sahara region is inherently interconnected with the international community, which should not be surprising given their past and current alliances. Not only does mitigating the effects climate change directly benefit Morocco, but by becoming a climate leader they can differentiate themselves as a pioneer and gain the trust and goodwill of the international community. In 2008, Morocco's efforts to draw itself closer to Europe were rewarded when it became the first state to be awarded "Advanced Status" under the ENP. In addition to the economic benefits it provides the country, the prestige of being a close ally to the EU has been a valuable asset for Morocco's international reputation.

Finally, Morocco has re-entrained the international stage to be an excellent opportunity to differentiate and define themselves. As mentioned above, they have been able to define themselves as a trusted ally of the European Union, something few of their neighbors or Arab allies can say. Climate change negotiations have allowed Morocco to take a position of global leadership. Morocco lacks the traditional characteristics of hard power such as wealth or a strong military, but they may have found that environmentalism can be an effective form of soft power that allows them to increase their influence, gain a positive reputation, and assume a leadership role. In hosting the 2016 UNCCC in Marrakesh, Morocco demonstrated their commitment to international cooperation and leadership. They also gained visibility and positive PR through their association with the conference. Perhaps the best way to sum up Morocco's view of their role in the international community is to examine how they described themselves in the INDP for the Paris Accords: "Morocco, driven by its convictions of common but differentiated responsibility, by its belief that humanity shares a common fate and by its commitment to the principle of equity, wishes to pave the way for a global commitment that is responsible and fair, for the well-being of the entire planet." Morocco sees itself as inherently interconnected with the international community, which should not be surprising given their past and current alliances. Not only does mitigating the effects climate change directly benefit Morocco, but by becoming a climate leader they can differentiate themselves as a pioneer and gain the trust and goodwill of the West. Moreover, the knowledge that they share common interests with other countries and have had a successful history of international cooperation enables Morocco's leadership to place their trust in the international community.

"Climate change negotiations have allowed Morocco to take a position of global leadership"
The international community needs to step in sooner, rather than later, to encourage the Saudis and other obstructionist countries to manage climate change more proactively."

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?
Both a country’s negotiating position and its motivation to follow through on climate change mitigation commitments are shaped by a multitude of domestic, economic, security, and psychological factors. Three considerations in particular seem to have a strong influence on a state’s position: fossil fuel wealth, external and internal problem prioritization, and trust of international systems. This third and final argument provides the strongest case because it not only explains how states currently conceptualize their role in climate change mitigation, but also how these roles can be changed to promote a more sustainable future.

One final example of climate change mitigation efforts in Saudi Arabia serves to illustrate both the complexity of the problem and the interrelationship of these various arguments. Small-scale renewable energy projects, mostly in solar and wind, have been promoted in Saudi Arabia since the latter half of the 20th century. In fact, with assistance from the United States and Germany, Saudi Arabia built solar plants to provide electricity for two villages in the 1980s and invested in a new solar plant in 2011. More recently, the country has presented ambitious plans to establish a larger and more diversified energy industry. These plans, however, have remained mostly on paper.

Nuclear energy, which has been heavily promoted as a ‘clean’ energy does not mean that Saudi Arabia will trait to oil and gas production. In this context, investing in ‘clean’ energy does not mean that Saudi Arabia will make efforts to comply with mitigation efforts elsewhere; the desire to profit from fossil fuels despite the global environmental costs remains a top priority. In the case of Saudi Arabia, all three factors that contribute to a state’s reaction to climate change work to prevent ambitious mitigation efforts. First, Saudi Arabia is clearly driven by the easy wealth that comes from oil production. Second, the short-term gains from oil production and the cost of overhauling their economy appear to be a larger consideration than the long-term economic and social costs of climate change. Third, regional cooperation with the GCC and OPEC has proven largely ineffective and Saudi Arabia places their national interests over global interests.

There is some history, however, to indicate that cooperation—such as the US and German solar panels—can be productive. This final consideration may be the most important, because by engaging with it, we can see how circumstances could be changed to encourage Saudi Arabia to participate more productively in the international climate regime.

Climate change is a threat multiplier. Conditions in the region that are bad now are likely to get worse in the coming decades as drought, food insecurity, sea level rise, resource disputes, and climate migrants become ever-present emergencies. Interest in climate cooperation will be required to manage these crises and Saudi Arabia will need global partners to manage the impending crisis. By the time they realize this, however, it may be too late. The international community needs to step in sooner, rather than later, to encourage the Saudis and other obstructionist countries to manage climate change more proactively. Developed countries should commit to investing in green developments in Saudi Arabia and other wealthy, but fossil fuel-dependent countries. These investments should be made despite Saudi Arabia’s wealth. Not only would these investment lower the risks of shifting their economy from fossil fuel dependency by helping build a bridge toward a more diversified economy, they would be a sign of good will and give them a reason to place trust in the international system. There will be those in the international community who are hesitant to work with a country like Saudi Arabia given their authoritarianism and human rights abuses. Some may want any aid to be conditioned on commitments from the Saudis to modernize and liberalize. This, however, is likely to end in a standstill. A better alternative may be to give the financial support first, if only to get the Saudis to the negotiating table. As the Moroccan example demonstrates, positive interactions with the international community can create feelings of shared interests and common goals. The moral dimension of climate change is compelling and ideally states would act on it. However, in reality, economics and self-interest are often far more salient factors in a state’s decision-making process. With this in mind, it is important to understand how the global interest in mitigating the effects of climate change can harmonize with self-interest.

If we desire the Saudis and their Gulf allies to cooperate in the new norm of environmentalism, it must be made clear that it is in their interest as well as the world’s.

ENDNOTES
6. ibid.
15. Swain, and Jägerskog.
19. Luomi, 3.
20. “Climate Change Is Making the Arab World More Miserable.”
22. Swain and Jägerskog.
23. Luomi, 3.
25. ibid
26. ibid, 1
27. ibid, 3
29. ibid.
32. ibid.
33. O’Neill.
34. Luomi.
35. Pollack.
36. Roser.
40. Molina, Irene Fernández. Moroccan Foreign Policy under Mohammed VI, 1999-2014, 2016. 21
42. Molina, 102
45. Molina.
46. ibid
48. INDP Moroccan Goals https://www4.unfccc.int/sites/submissions/INDC/Published%20Documents/Morocco/1/Morocco%20INDC%20submitted%20to%20UNFCCC%20-%20May%202015.pdf
49. Luomi.
50. Swain and Jägerskog, 8.
The Arab Spring was a far-reaching political movement that was predicted to launch historically autocratic Middle Eastern and North African nations into a new era of liberal democracy. The MENA region had long been one of the least free parts of the world and this monumental movement sparked new hope for a democratic future. According to Freedom House, “the fall of longtime leaders and the people’s rising demands for a stronger voice in their own governance have brought new opportunities for reform and democratic transition.” While the processes, catalysts, and immediate results of the Arab Spring were similar across the region, the long-term effects of this movement vary greatly between countries. A comparative study of Egypt and Tunisia clearly illustrates these divergent outcomes. Both countries were traditionally robust states with ethnically homogenous societies and were among
the first to oust their authoritarian leaders from power.

However, despite their demographic similarities and apparently equal opportunity for democratic transition, today the situations in Egypt and Tunisia are drastically different. Freedom House has determined that Egypt is a “not-free” country, giving it a rating of just 22 out of a possible 100 in terms of overall freedom. In contrast, Tunisia is considered a “free” country with a rating of 69. As the Freedom House rankings make apparent, Tunisians today enjoy far more political freedom and civil liberties than their Egyptian counterparts. Both structural factors and individual actors—specifically the respective roles of the military and the characteristics and ambitions of individual leaders—are responsible for the vastly different outcomes in the two countries’ current political systems.

The histories and cultures of Egypt and Tunisia seem to be more similar than they are different, making it difficult to determine why Tunisia was able to successfully consolidate its fledgling democracy while Egypt reverted back to an even more autocratic and repressive regime. A democratic transition begins with the removal of an authoritarian regime and, according to Eva Bellin, ends when “free and fair competitive elections…have delivered two successive alterations of power in the country.”

I argue that the differing characters of the two countries’ militaries is the most powerful explanatory factor for their current political configurations. Egypt has long been characterized by a politically ambitious military. Since gaining independence in 1952, its presidents have all been members of the military and have made little effort to control its scope or political influence. The separation of powers between the military and the state was essentially nonexistent and military involvement in governance was commonplace, a key factor in the eventual failure of the Egyptian Spring. Bellin explains that the military’s involvement in politics helped foster an environment of “general distrust for democracy and an affinity for regime types where the military could exercise oversight.” Although it assisted the president in removing Mubarak from power, the Egyptian military reverted to a more authoritarian stance when it intervened to re-establish order in the country following the Arab Spring uprisings. The military’s quick action in creating a new system following Mubarak’s removal left no power vacuum that could lead to the advent of democracy. The military simply picked up where Mubarak had left off, putting in position to ensure the new—supposedly democratic—system would serve its interests. The Egyptian army tightly controlled the transition process and, when it did not approve of the changes being made, was able to forcefully coopt the movement. Democracy was never the primary avenue to obtaining political power in Egypt, a necessary condition for competitive elections—two of them parliamentary and one presidential. These elections delivered governments headed by two different parties, as preferable to Mohamed Morsi’s government. This further supports the argument that Egypt has a continued affinity for military regimes. There was never a democratic transition. The military’s political problems could, or even should, be solved through the democratic process.

The nature of the Tunisian military is almost completely opposite to that of the Egyptian armed forces. It had been characterized by a long connection to the state, a huge contrast to the large and self-reliant Egyptian military. It had also been relatively apolitical, largely because Tunisia’s presidents embraced a strategy aimed at the military’s marginalization and political exclusion.” In sharp contrast to Egypt, Tunisia’s military was not politically prominent and had been consciously excluded from state functions by past leaders. Therefore, it did not present a roadblock to democratization in the country, but rather helped to facilitate the transition. The military assisted in overthrowing the country’s dictator, Ben Ali, promoting and protecting the civilian’s right to popular protest. More importantly, after Ben Ali had been removed from power, the Tunisian military did not have the strength nor the influence necessary to seize control of the state as the Egyptian military did. Neither military was heavily involved in the current regime’s survival, but they responded to the Arab Spring in radically different ways. In Egypt, the military ultimately intervened in order to reshape the political system in accordance with its own interests, but in Tunisia a power vacuum permitted by the more restrained military marshal pluralism and negotiation as a real possibility. In the absence of a single actor capable of filling the power vacuum left by Ben Ali, political leaders in Tunisia were forced to work with a newfound pluralism. Rather than a military takeover, post-Arab Spring Tunisia was shaped by three main actors: the UGTT (Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail), a labor union federation; Ennahda, a moderate Islamist party; and elites from the time following Tunisia’s independence in 1956 but prior to Ben Ali’s ascension to power.

In both cases, the role of the military was an important factor in whether the Arab Spring would open the door to democracy or close it. As Bellin writes, Tunisia successfully transitioned to a democratic system and “By early 2016, Tunisia had experienced three free and fair competitive elections—two of them parliamentary and one presidential. These elections delivered governments headed by two different parties, as preferable to Mohamed Morsi’s government. The military’s lack of interference in the Tunisian consolidation period allowed for the development of an organic political pluralism that led to democracy. The new government and civil society negotiated a new constitution and representative system for Tunisia without trying to shape this path according to the interests of any single party. In doing so, the Tunisian military was not an obstacle to democracy and worked to build moderate, inclusive policies that would benefit all Tunisians. As The New York Times wrote in 2014 after Tunisia’s first democratic presidential election, “Mr. Ghannouchi is a strong voice against extremism and believes in democracy.” Tunisia struggled against extremism and worked to build moderate, inclusive policies that would benefit all Tunisians. As The New York Times wrote in 2014 after Tunisia’s first democratic presidential election, “Mr. Ghannouchi is a strong voice against extremism and believes in democracy.”

Leaving aside the military’s role, it can still be important to consider the character of the leaders who guide them. Successful leaders can build and channel the necessary popular support during such a vulnerable and uncertain time. For example, Tunisia’s successful democratic consolidation was largely made possible by the moderate and conciliatory political figures that emerged after the fall of Ben Ali. Unlike other transitioning countries, in Tunisia, the “most polarizing cleavage was cultural—Muslim vs. for democracy—rather than ethnic or socioeconomic.” In the absence of leaders on both sides committed to “playing the long game” and forging consensus, transition is viewed as preferable to Mohamed Morsi’s government. The military’s lack of interference in the Tunisian consolidation period allowed for the development of an organic political pluralism that led to democracy. The new government and civil society negotiated a new constitution and representative system for Tunisia without trying to shape this path according to the interests of any single party. In doing so, the Tunisian military was not an obstacle to democracy and worked to build moderate, inclusive policies that would benefit all Tunisians. As The New York Times wrote in 2014 after Tunisia’s first democratic presidential election, “Mr. Ghannouchi is a strong voice against extremism and believes in democracy.”

The role of the military was an important factor in whether the Arab Spring would open the door to democracy or close it.”
"Democratic transition is not a one-size-fits-all process, a fact that is evident in the post-Arab Spring experiences of Egypt and Tunisia." made abundantly clear through his actions and, because of this transparency, he was able to avoid some of the typical pitfalls that curtail the progress toward democracy. Under Ghannouchi's leadership, Ennahda agreed to a political system that incorporated proportional representation and a mixed presidential-parliamentary system of government despite the fact that a first-past-the-post parliamentary system would have better served his party's political agenda. Additionally, in order to save democracy amidst growing political opposition in 2013, Ennahda relinquished its office despite the fact that they had won it democratically.11 However, Ennahda was not alone in its commitment to democracy. Houcine Abbassi, the Secretary General of the UGTT, was also a key player in encouraging the consolidation of democracy in a culturally polarized society. The UGTT remained committed to fostering dialogue and cooperation in Tunisian politics throughout the country's transition: "This kind of transition - a peaceful and broadly accepted democratic election in which defeat is gracefully accepted - stands in contrast to the upheavals elsewhere since the Arab Spring, including the brutal military coup that overthrew President Mohamed Morsi in Egypt."12 Ghannouchi and Abbassi were clearly and unmistakably committed to the authentic implementation of democracy and the leadership and example they provided was an integral part of Tunisia's successful consolidation. In sharp contrast, Mohamed Morsi, Egypt's first democratically elected president, was not keen to establish a trusting, reciprocal relationship with his political opposition. Unlike the Islamist party in Tunisia, Morsi and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood were far from wholeheartedly embracing democracy.13 Morsi's ambivalent attitude toward democracy was detrimental to the possibility of democratic consolidation, and Morsi's corrupt and ineffective government served to reinforce the previously discussed authoritarian leanings of Egypt. Morsi desperately wanted to preserve his own power, a sharp contrast to the more humble outlook of Ghannouchi and other Tunisian political leaders. He placed the agenda of the Muslim Brotherhood ahead of the advancement of democracy, and this choice proved fatal for Egypt's transition. As Michael Totten explains, "Morsi's power grabs, his incompetence, his lunatic politics... were too much for even a nation as conservative and loyal as Egypt."14 While the important role of the military cannot be disputed, it is evident that Morsi's weak leadership and lack of commitment to a successful democratic transition contributed to the military's ability to launch an autocratic reversion; a failure that reverberates throughout the nation today. Morsi's successor and leader of Egypt's 2013 coup, General Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, exemplifies Egypt's inability to escape from authoritarian and militaristic leadership. Democratic transition is not a one-size-fits-all process, a fact that is evident in the post-Arab Spring experiences of Egypt and Tunisia. Social structures, governing institutions, and individual leaders all worked in conjunction to create dramatically different outcomes in the democratic transitions of these two states. Viewed in isolation, these factors do not adequately explain the differences in the two cases, but held together they support a well-rounded and holistic comparative analysis. In attempting to explain why democracy flourishes in some cases while falling victim to autocratic regression in others, it is critical to examine both broader social structures and the behavior of individual actors. Looking to the future, the examples of Tunisia and Egypt can help illuminate what makes a democratic transition successful—and what factors can lead to a return to autocracy. With the Middle East still largely under the control of autocratic regimes a decade after the Arab Spring, these lessons serve as a valuable reminder of both the promise and the peril that attempted democratic transitions can bring.

ENDNOTES
5. Bellin, 17.
15. Bellin.
Art and the Arab Spring
An interview with Sultan Al Qassemi

Al Noor Staff

Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi is an Emirati columnist and researcher on social, political, and cultural affairs in the Arab Gulf States. Al Qassemi is also a prominent commentator on Arab affairs on Twitter. Rising in prominence during the Arab Spring, his tweets became an important source of news, rivaling the major news networks of the time. Sultan is also the founder of the Barjeel Art Foundation, an independent initiative established in 2010 to contribute to the intellectual development of the art scene in the Arab region by building a prominent and publicly accessible art collection. Sultan was an MIT Media Lab Director’s Fellow from 2014 to 2016 and a practitioner-in-residence at the H. Kevorkian Center of Near East Studies at New York University in the spring of 2017. Sultan is currently a Visiting Instructor at Boston College’s Islamic Civilization & Societies Program.

Not content to be pigeonholed into a single field, Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi boasts an impressive resume that includes both extensive knowledge of Middle Eastern art and an expertise in Middle Eastern current events. After beginning to collect art in the early 2000s, Al Qassemi quickly became one of the leading expert on Middle Eastern art. In 2010, Al Qassemi used his experience to found the Barjeel Art Foundation with the goal of managing, preserving, and exhibiting his extensive collection of Modern and Contemporary Arab Art. Around the same time, Al Qassemi became a leading commentator and source of news about the Middle East as the Arab Spring swept across the region. Al Qassemi’s Twitter account provided critical information that often was not available from mainstream media outlets. In recognition of the importance of this work, TIME magazine named Al Qassemi’s account one of the “140 Best Twitter Feeds of 2011.”
In this interview with the Al Noor staff, Al Qassemi discusses both aspects of his careers and the responsibility he feels as a collector of art and as a prominent commentator on current events.

Could you start by telling us a little about yourself and how you became interested in the world of art?

Al Qassemi: At the age of sixteen, in 1994, I went to Paris on a scholarship to study business and I found myself visiting a number of museums and galleries. I began discovering Western art, which is something I had an idea about, especially from history class where we had studied some Picasso paintings, some Goya paintings, but really nothing in depth. I found myself with a student card being able to visit a number of museums, especially the Orsay and the Pompidou, which are modern art museums, early 20th century or mid-20th century art museums. I always wondered whether the Middle East had something similar. And of course in Paris in the 1990s there was little access to Middle Eastern books—especially on art—at least in any language I could understand at that time. So when I went back to the UAE in 1999 after graduating, I started visiting the galleries that were opening in Dubai in the 1980s and 1990s. I acquainted myself with Middle Eastern art. By 2001, two years after I started visiting, I made my first purchase.

Speaking about Arab or Middle Eastern art in general, I was hoping you could walk us through the origins of modern Middle Eastern art.

Al Qassemi: We trace the emergence of modern art in the Middle East to the mid-19th century, so it roughly paralleled what was happening in Europe. Although there were so many other art forms in the Middle East there is embroidery, there is Islamic patterns, and even architecture is considered by many to be a form of art. But I talk about is mostly fine arts, which is also referred to as plastic arts in the Middle East for some reason. The art that I’m interested in emerged because of a variety of factors, amongst which was the Ottoman military. The Ottoman military played an important role because they trained a lot of the soldiers to become cartographers, to create maps, and draw territories. And so a lot of these individuals, upon leaving the military, went and started teaching art, because they had the background. The church also played an important role in a lot of Middle Eastern countries, because the church encouraged the depiction of important scenes from the Bible. Especially in countries that have large minorities of Christian denominations, such as Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Egypt, you had another parallel movement of art.

And finally, the tipping point for me in my class is this very interesting voyage of discovery that the Grand Mufti of Egypt, or the Grand Scholar of Egypt, was sent on by this member of the royal family of Egypt to Italy, to visit museums there. This prince was keen on opening an art school, and he realized that one of the barriers to opening this art school was the position that the al-Azhar, which is the highest authority of Sunni Islam, had taken at this point. So he said, let me send the senior most cleric, after the al-Azhar, on a trip to Europe and let him discover museums on his own. And when he comes back, he will give me his opinion. So this Grand Mufti, called Muhammad Abul, went to Sicily and mainland Italy and visited museums. When he came back, he issued his fatwa. And the fatwa was that art is permissible, in fact it is encouraged. He even called it one of the best tools of learning. He said, as long as you don’t worship the artwork, and the artwork does not take you away from your duties—as long as you fulfill these two requirements—it is fair game. And so that is when art started, and that’s where I start my class, around 1906, 1907, early 20th century.

Could you just briefly walk us through the movements in Middle Eastern art from the time you start your class up through the present day?

Al Qassemi: So once the Grand Mufti came back from Italy and issued his fatwa you started seeing the emergence of figurative art. Because now it was allowed, you could portray figurative art, although there was portrayal before that in many cases. You see landscapes and you see portraiture, you see a lot of similar works to what was seen in Europe and other parts of the world. However, by the mid-20th century, you have two emerging strands. One is the political art form, so 1930s, 40s, and 50s, as the Arab world was agitating for independence from whichever power was occupying that country. You see the emergence of political art, the emergence of artists depicting national symbols, the land, the territory, the flag, the borders, and the independence icons of whichever country, like Saad Zaghloul in Egypt. Also, by the mid-20th century, you see art schools and the most famous of which is Letterism. Letterism in Arabic is Hurufism or Hurufiyah and Hurufiyah comes from the Arabic word Huruf, which means ‘letter’. Hurufism, as a movement was started in Iraq by a woman called Madha Omar. Madha Omar was an instrumental artist, who really laid the foundation for what the Europeans saw as the liberation of the letter from the word. But, also I must say that there is another artist called Jamil Hamoudi, who claimed that he also was instrumental. So, I feel like I should mention both. But, most scholars see that Madha Omar is the individual, who really laid the foundation for that movement.

Now that we’ve gone through a bit of the background history, we would love to move more into questions pertaining to you, yourself, and your work. As a collector, what draws you to a specific piece of art or artist?

Al Qassemi: At one point in time over the past two decades, and I really don’t know when, I realized that I wasn’t buying for myself. I was buying for the public, in some strange way of thinking. I felt like the collection I was building was an educational collection. The goal of this collection ultimately is to be displayed for the public. So, I stopped buying works that I had a preference to or I was attracted to aesthetically—although aesthetics is still an important element—and I started buying works that I felt would add value to the collection or would complete the mosaic of the collection or tell a story. For instance, if I found an artwork that was depicting a certain historical narrative, I would opt for that work rather than a work that I thought looked pretty. I don’t know where that comes from, but I feel like there is a responsibility towards the public that I carry with me when it comes to the collection. And so that is one of the elements or one of the ways that I think, but I also do take advice from a lot of scholars. I have advisors, I have friends, galleries, and they know me.

You develop a reputation over a period of years, and galleries even stop offering me works that they think I won’t buy because they know that we know what Sultan wants, Sultan wants an historical piece. And what is interesting is that I feel like I have a number of people on my side, especially with galleries. They would say for example, Sultan, we realize that we could sell this work potentially for a slightly—not too much, but slightly—higher amount to some other gallery, but we’d rather sell it to you because we know that you are going to display the work. Of course it’s also good for them because that means that you, as a collector, are going to display the work. Some gallery owners and some artists realize the value of a collection that isn’t locked up for ten or twenty years, and a collection that is published, that is displayed online, and that is offered to be loaned at any point in time to any institution.

You are known specifically for focusing on broadening the exposure of women and minority artists, so we’re hoping you could tell us about some of the challenges you had to decide to go down this path in your activities as a collector and what inspires you to continue to focus on this area.

Al Qassemi: I’m interested in representation and underrepresentation. When one thinks of minorities and underrepresented individuals, you should also keep in mind that just because someone comes from the majority it does not mean that they should be overlooked. Everyone should get a fair deal, everyone should have a fair chance for their work to be exposed.  

Sultan Saleem Al Qassemi (Boston College Faculty Director)
"I have a certain degree of influence in the art world, at least in the Middle East, and therefore I bear a responsibility"

I'm also a believer in affirmative action. It goes both ways, right? Affirmative action for minorities and for majorities, so people who deserve their chance should be shown.

But I realize that the issues with women artists in the Middle East—of course, women face challenges in politics and economics and so many different spheres in the world, but with regards to art—women in the Middle East face similar challenges that women in the West and the East face. That is to say that they're under-represented, they're under-documented. When you hear of women artists it is usually the same five or six, and this happens even in America when you ask Americans who do you know as women artists. You find them saying Georgia O'Keeffe—they might mention one or two other artists—and then they sort of have a difficulty with naming other women artists, especially from the modern era.

I realize that my role is to do something about it. I've been pushing for an equal representation—as much as possible, although I'm not a curator—of women artists in the collection. Hence when a curator comes to borrow works, they have the option of picking works by women. And I also try to invest in scholarship by women artists, and to display this work online, whatever I can do. I think that I have a certain degree of influence in the art world, at least in the Middle East, and therefore I bear a responsibility.

And the same thing applies to minority artists in the Middle East and the Arab world. I use the word “Arab” in a great deal of her writing and some of the issues she was facing are not in terms of ethnic value, because I think of Arab Jews, or Armenian Arabs, Turkmen Arabs, who are ethnically Turkish, right? They speak Arabic. They create art in the Arab world. You think of the Amazigh, sometimes known as the Berber. You think of the Kurds. You think of the Persians, the Afghans, the Persians. So all these minorities that lived in West Asia and North Africa whose work isn’t as known as the majority artists. They couldn't tell the ethnicity or the religion, or the background, or even the gender of the artist. I think that modern art can remind us of an era where the minorities in the world flourished, where the Christians weren't as persecuted as they are today, where the Jews lived in Iraq and Syria and Egypt, and Lebanon, and where Sunnis and Shias got along together. In my heart, I'm an optimist. I hope that in my lifetime, this will happen again. And I believe it will happen again. I feel like art is an important way to remind—especially the younger generation—that this was the case and that whatever is happening now is the anomaly.

I was what some people call a "cultural translator," to a certain degree. Again, my academic background is finance or business, not in culture, so I realized my limitations as well.

Staying on this subject, could you describe some of the art that's come out of the Arab Spring? Are there any particular areas within Arab Spring art that you have found yourself focusing on more than others?

Al Qassemi: The art of the Arab Spring really can be divided into many different categories. My favorite art from the Arab Spring, believe it or not, is something that people don't even think of, which is the poetry that came out of the Arab Spring. There is a poem by Ahmed Ibrahim that is basically about the camaraderie between people during the uprisings, which I thought was a beautiful poem and it's part of my syllabus in class. We have to read it, and we have to analyze it.

But, of course, what people recognize as art of the Arab Spring is the graffiti art: the art that appeared in the streets of Cairo, the messages that appeared in Yemen and Syria, and elsewhere. That is an art that didn't appear during the Arab Spring, but I think matured during the Arab Spring. There was graffiti for at least a decade or two before the Arab Spring, but I think it really flourished in that time. Of course, you also have the chanting, that is another form of art. Photography is another form of art that really flourished, although, again, it was in existence for decades before that, but it became a form of documentation at that time.

Social media art, or people using their Twitter or their Instagram to take photos, this was also important and should not be dismissed by the older generation as a form of art making.

You spoke a little bit about camaraderie and social media. How would you say that modern art can be used today to create solidarity and camaraderie between Middle Eastern countries and the West, especially in the era of accessibility via social media?

Al Qassemi: So I believe that modern art—contemporary art as well, but even more modern art—in the Arab world tells a story of unity, a story of shared values. Whether you look at an artwork by an Iranian, or a Turkish person, or an Egyptian, or an Iraqi, whether they were Shi'ite or Sunni, whether they were Jewish or Christian, whatever religion or background they came from, the art really tells the same story. The art was about beauty, the art was about coexistence, the art was about belonging to the same community. I remember when we did an exhibition in Tehran in 2017, we had sent forty paintings from the Barjeel Collection, and we agreed with the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, the TMoCA, that they would bring out forty works from their collection. And what we did was merge the works together. So, you had a room of Arab art and you had a room of Iranian art, and then there was one or two rooms where the works were mashed up together. And because the labels weren't directly under the works, people couldn't tell whether this was an Iranian or Arab artist. They couldn't tell the ethnicity or a religious background, or even the gender of the artist. I think that modern art can remind us of an era where the minorities in the world flourished, where the Christians weren't as persecuted as they are today, where the Jews lived in Iraq and Syria and Egypt, and Lebanon, and where Sunnis and Shias got along together. In my heart, I'm an optimist. I hope that in my lifetime, this will happen again. And I believe it will happen again. I feel like art is an important way to remind—especially the younger generation—that this was the case and that whatever is happening now is the anomaly.
Do you think that such a feeling of solidarity created through art can be parlayed into a greater cultural appreciation between nations?

Al Qassemi: Yes, indeed. When I think of your question, I think of outside the Middle East. So, within the Middle East, we have our own challenges, but also, it’s important to communicate with people in the West. It’s important to communicate with people in the East. We shouldn’t forget our Southern neighbors in Africa, our Eastern neighbors in India. I think it’s important for us to reach out to everybody, and also to receive art from the subcontinent in India, receive art from Africa, receive art from Latin America. We need more cultural dialogue. We need to show off what we have, and we need to receive the cultural production that other countries are creating, whether it’s in architecture, art, photography, painting, or poetry. I think this is an instrumental method that is available to us.

What I would say is, you don’t have to have 20 years in banking to have influence. You can do this as a 20-year-old student in university by sharing works by women artists, going to a museum and rather than sharing the image of a Picasso painting, maybe share an image of an unknown woman artist, maybe share an image of an unknown African artist. That would be—for me—much more interesting than seeing “Starry Night” by Van Gogh, or Les Demoiselle d’Avignon—which is a beautiful painting—or “The Gardens of Giverny” by Monet. These are lovely paintings but you see them everywhere, and I think it’s much more interesting when we sort of take the microscope and look at the other parts of the museum, other parts of cultural creation.

If you could ask our readers to take a look at an artist that you don’t think gets enough attention whose work you’ve worked with, who would you pick?

Al Qassemi: If I had to pick one artist? Wow, that is really tough. I would say the art of the Egyptian revolutionary artist Inji Aflatoun. Her story is such an interesting story because she left everything behind: she left all of her wealth, she left access to power, and she left a life of privilege to make art that matters. She wanted to reflect the proletariat. She wanted to reflect the everyday person. She wanted to reflect women in prison. She wanted to reflect things that are not popular with the elites who collect art. Because the elites who collect art would like to see landscapes and flowers and they would like to see portraits of someone important; that’s what they would like to hang in their rooms.

She left all this access to power and privilege that she had to take up this cause. And she did so until the end of her life in different ways, sometimes more revolutionary, sometimes less revolutionary, but always with a spirit of social justice. And so I like her a lot, and I’m so happy that we were able to collect a number of important works by her, but having said that, I underline that this is not the only artist people should know about. There’s so many other artists and I think it’s important that people first have a broad understanding, and then they focus on a few artists.
Unto you your religion, and unto me my religion

Cultural Convivencia between Jews and Muslims of Umayyad Iberia

Ella Wooldridge

Originally from the United Kingdom, Ella Wooldridge is currently in her final year studying at Trinity College Dublin, Ireland. She studies Ancient and Medieval History and Culture, with an aim to specialise in medieval history in a masters course next year. Ella spent her year abroad at Boston College. Her research interests include late antiquity, religious history, and how the arts and literature can inform historical investigation.

In 750 C.E., the Abbasids took over the caliphate of Islam, ensuring their supremacy by massacring all but one member of the ruling Umayyad dynasty. The survivor, the young Abdurrahman, fled to Al-Andalus, Muslim-ruled Iberia, and took power there. Al-Andalus had been an Umayyad province since 711, having been annexed and settled by invading Berber armies under the aegis of the caliphate. Upon Abdurrahman’s arrival it was a politically and socially disunited nominal emirate populated by Arabs and Berbers, as well as the native Christians and Jews, which he managed to unite under his rule. The resulting Umayyad rule, which promoted social tolerance and cultural vibrancy, created a flourishing civilization in the region for nearly 300 years. The success of this period is surprising considering the multiplicity of opposing religions and cultures operating in the peninsula at the time.
"Jews, while not accepted as fully fledged members of society, were no longer considered pariahs"

However, this cultural eclecticism can also be seen as the very reason for the polity’s prosperity. The Christians, Muslims and Jews managed, somehow, to coexist, if not affectionately then certainly successfully, in a culture of tolerance unique to the pre-modern world. Jews, elsewhere subjected to prejudice and persecution, were treated comparatively tolerantly, and even served cultural and political roles within the regime itself. Christians, Muslims and Jews prospered under this open-minded rule, coexisting peacefully during a period which came to be known as the convivencia. Of course, this period should not be too ideologically—Christians and Jews were still treated as inferior to the ruling Muslim class, but Spain’s exceptional degree of cultural acceptance and religious tolerance was unparalleled at the time, allowing the opposing cultures to live comparatively at ease. The symbiosis of culture between two inherently opposed religions, permitted by the tolerant values of the Umayyads of Córdoba, allowed both religions to influence each other and flourish, creating a successful culture of convivencia between Jews and Muslims in Al-Andalus.

Bernard Lewis in his seminal work Islam and the West sees these eponymous terms as symmetrical. Islam, which constitutes both a religious and socio-political way of life, can be paralleled to the West, where Jews and Christians were called the Al-Andalusians, strict social segregation was simply unheard of, and Jews and Muslims shared during the early caliphate. Menocal asserts that this all-encompassing spirit allowed for the success of the convivencia in Umayyad Iberia.14 This was not, however, the original Muslim intention. They were unable to establish a ‘separate Arab Muslim elite’ due to the settler outlook of the Berbers, who intermarried with the native Iberians. Even during the Berber conquest, administration of the conquered territories was delegated to Jews, showing a close relationship from the start.15 Jews, being a long-suffering minority, welcomed the protection that came with proximity to the ruling classes. It is clear that despite their inherent religious disagreements, Jews and Muslims managed to co-exist and support each other, politically as well as socially, in a rare cross-cultural harmony.

Chejne argues that the Umayyads adopted a policy of ‘scrupulous tolerance.’16 María Rosa Menocal, by contrast, is more realistic, admitting they were ‘extraordinarily liberal’ relative to their age, whilst noting the complexity of their co-existence. Tolerance toward Jews often was not expressly stated, but instead took the form of unconscious acceptance, both of the Jews and of the benefits that could be reaped from cross-culturalism.17 Menocal draws a delicate comparison between the inclusivity and progressivism of the Umayyad’s societal outlook and their aesthetic ideals: the Great Mosque of Dāmascus itself had originally been a Christian church, which Christians and Muslims shared during the early caliphate. Menocal asserts that this all-encompassing spirit allowed for the success of the convivencia in Umayyad Iberia.18 This was not, however, the original Muslim intention. They were unable to establish a ‘separate Arab Muslim elite’ due to the settler outlook of the Berbers, who intermarried with the native Iberians. Even during the Berber conquest, administration of the
Jews were able to operate more freely under the laws of the dhimmī than they were prior to the Umayyad rule.\(^1\) While the dhimmī protected and allotted certain rights—as long as they complied with laws which curtailed many more. For example, they were banned from building religious houses, or from holding official power over a Muslim, although history attests that these laws were not always strictly enforced.\(^2\) However, they were not, despite these leniencies, regarded as equals. The laws established their clearly inferior status, typified by the jizya tax. There are stories of Muslims in Al-Andalus attempting—and failing—to exempt their Jewish friends from paying it, showing at once the amity that developed between the two religions and the severity of discriminatory laws limiting their intimacy.\(^3\) The jizya was priced based on income, at one, two or four gold pieces a year; a significant amount seeing as a ninth century papyrus proves the yearly wage of a farm laborer was only six gold pieces.\(^4\) Despite these limitations and discrimination, Jews were able to operate more freely under the laws of the dhimmī than they were prior to the Umayyad rule, and thus were able to more fully prosper, both socially and culturally. Jews in Umayyad Iberia retained their religion, but culturally assimilated. Menocal even suggests the Iberian Jews had a consciously ‘enthusiastic attitude about Arabization’, adopting elements of Arab culture to further bolster their cultural growth.\(^5\) Jews were permitted to learn Islamic adab, their system of etiquette, but were banned from involvement in Muslim education, meaning they were educated in a combination of Islamic and Hebrew tradition.\(^6\) Jews even began to use Arabic to write about their faith and Hebrew eventually came to be used only for poetry or especially stylized prose.\(^7\) Their parallel modes of education were indispensable to their successful co-existence. They developed an intellectual intimacy that is further proved by contemporary examples of Jews and Muslims studying under the same teachers.\(^8\) This shows that acculturation under the Umayyads was symbiotic. Both accomplished Jews and Muslims contributed to, and profited from, absorption of their respective civilizations.\(^9\) Menocal is careful to assert that this did not dilute either culture, but enhanced them. Jews did not feel this was ‘at odds’ with their identity, but rather served to enrich their already fertile scholarship and arts.\(^10\) This cultural synthesis is embodied in the figure of Hasdai Ibn Shaprut, the Jewish nasi and chief vizier to Abdurrahman III, the first caliph of Córdoba. Highly educated in both the Jewish and Islamic traditions, he used his position of power in the Umayyad court to serve Jewish interests as well as those of the caliph.\(^11\) Hasdai served as the lead diplomat of a delegation to Constantinople in 949 C.E. alongside Recemundus, the Christian bishop of Elvira. The emperor gave them a copy of Dioscurides’ On Medicine as a gift, which Hasdai translated into Arabic.\(^12\) He also used his influence to help the Jewish cause, beseeching Helena, the wife of the emperor, to protect Jews from persecution in the Byzantine Empire.\(^13\) As well as patronizing Hebrew learning, he helped to create a Jewish adab, imitating Muslim practice, but using it to express Jewish communal pride.\(^14\) His pronouncement that Sephardic Jews would decide their own calendar rather than follow the goyim based in Baghdad perhaps his most symbolically important act—was a bid for independence to parallel that of Abdurrahman, who declared himself Caliph in 929, finalizing Al-Andalus’ break from the Abbasids, also based in Baghdad.\(^15\) Of course, Hasdai’s situation was an exception rather than the rule; the position of Jews was still limited by law, even if a blind eye was sometimes turned.\(^16\) However, despite the widespread limitations to Jewish equality, the fact that Hasdai was able to attain such a high place of power and profoundly influence both Jewish and Muslim culture is testament to the success of the convivencia in Iberia, an utterly unique situation in the Middle Ages. However, overly rosy retrospective lenses do not accurately show the contemporary situation in Umayyad Iberia. Historiography on the subject has often been guilty of taking a too idealistic and generalized view. Jewish historiography in particular wanted to find a fully integrated convivencia, and thus has tended to treat the minutiae of the relationship ‘far too sweepingly’.\(^17\) Lewis has tempered this prevailing historiographical tendency, reminding us that tolerance was always limited, often precarious, and sometimes suspended.\(^18\) The career of the Jewish minister Jacob Ibn Jan and his brother Joseph, chronicled by Abraham ibn Daud in the twelfth century, sheds light on the instability of Jewish prominence. Becoming powerful nasi under Almanzor, to the extent of having the privilege of their own eunuchs, they lost favor for refusing to procure taxation ‘by means fair or foul’, and were imprisoned, showing the vulnerability of their position.\(^19\) Similarly, Samuel the Nagid, though serving as vizier under the taifa kingdom of Granada, lived in the inheritance of Umayyad toleration.\(^20\) He was both a political and cultural figure, serving in the army, writing poetry, and contributing to Hebrew scholarship.\(^21\) However, this tolerance was also cut short when Granada fell to the social conflict that defined the taifa period while his son Joseph was vizier, and riots in the city sparked a massacre of the local Jews.\(^22\) Lewis reminds us that even during the Umayyad period, relationships were not ‘black and white’.\(^23\) There was Quranic precedence for anti-Semitism: Jews were exiled from Medina because ‘they opposed Allah and His Messenger. And whoever opposes Allah—then indeed, Allah is severe in penalty’.\(^24\) Ibn ‘Abdun, an Al-Andalus poet, recounts that laws threatened to punish Muslims cleaning up after Jews and Christians, because they were ‘vile’.\(^25\) The theologian and philosopher Ibn Helen, servant to the taifa king Jaume I of Aragon, produced a tract against them in which he refuted the authorship of a piece written by Samuel the Nagid. However, it is importantly the only extant example of vehement anti-Semitism in literature, demonstrating the rarity of such writings.\(^26\) It is also relevant that examples of persecution and racism come most often from either the taifa period—when Al-Andalus was divided into several principalities—or the latter end of the Umayyad dynasty when their civilization was breaking down. Of course, any semblance of convivencia ended with the invasion of the fundamentalist Islamic sects, the Almoravids and Almohads. The peaceful and liberal nature of Umayyad rule is starkly contrasted to the instability of the taifa period, in which the open-mindedness of the convivencia, proving just how special and unlikely the spirit of tolerance the Umayyads had managed to cultivate in the Iberian Peninsula truly was. Jews and Muslims lived together in relative harmony which was impressive relative to the normative cross-cultural interactions of the period. Jews and Muslims shared and learned from their respective customs and languages, in a spirit of convivencia that enshrined principles of toleration, even though it did not embody perfect equality. The unique and special nature of such a culture is clearly demonstrated by the fact that neither the Umayyad’s predecessors nor their successors were able to achieve such convivencia, and nowhere else in the medieval world was as successful at encouraging
cross-cultural toleration. The tolerance of the Umayyad rule created a true culture of convivencia in the medieval Iberian Peninsula, allowing Jews and Muslims to learn from and influence each other’s culture and to coexist in a spirit of peace and openness not seen again until modern times.

ENDNOTES

1. The Qur’an, Surah Al-Kafirun, 109:6
3. Lewis, Islam and the West, 3.
4. ibid.
15. ibid, 191.
17. Chejne, Muslim Spain, 116.
19. ibid, 73.
28. Chejne, Muslim Spain, 97.
31. ibid, 194-195.
32. ibid, 192.
39. ibid. 90.
41. Goitein, Jews and Arabs, 95.
42. Lewis, Islam and the West, 6.
45. Chejne, Muslim Spain, 117.
46. Menocal, The Ornament of the World, 166.
47. Lewis, The Jews of Islam, 106.
48. The Qur’an, Surah Al-Hashr, 59:7
50. ibid, 87.
Delineating Rhetoric from Reality
How the U.S.-Saudi Coalition has Shot Itself in the Foot

Molly Daunt

Molly Daunt is a graduate student at SOAS in London where she is studying for an MA in Near and Middle Eastern Studies with Intensive Arabic. She completed her BA at Oxford in Classics and undertook a scholarship at Princeton last year to continue her work on ancient oral poetry. There she began to pursue Near Eastern Studies alongside graduate level Classics. She is currently working as an Associate Researcher for the Tactics Institute, hosting a webinar on patterns of rhetoric in the past and current Yemeni conflict.

Since the start of its involvement in Yemen, the U.S.-backed Gulf coalition has cited counterterrorism as its top priority. Simultaneously, through support of a Saudi-led narrative of Iranian aggression, it has spurred on an increasingly sectarian conflict that has only bolstered the standing of non-state extremist actors in the Gulf. Using the 1962-70 Yemeni war as a parallel, this paper will highlight the repercussions of a binary, proxy war narrative. Despite local, socio-political grievances at the core of both conflicts, each has been framed as a clash of ideologies between two external actors. From the outset, the past war was conceptualised in binary, ideological terms: the clash of Saudi pro-monarchists against Egyptian nationalists. The current conflict has been similarly portrayed as an external, sectarian struggle between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shiite Iran. In each
A binary, internationalized narrative dismissed Yemeni grievances and understated the strategic interests of each foreign actor. The dissemination of these binary, sectarian narratives obscures the distinction between rhetoric and reality, allowing external actors to leverage the war to their benefit. Some repercussions—such as the prolongation of the war and the dismissal of local grievances—parallel the past 1962-70 conflict. Others—most notably the endurance of terrorist groups in the Gulf, are new, underreporting a worthy closer consideration. This essay will first examine the way in which both foreign and domestic actors have leaned into a divisive narrative of a Sunni-Shia proxy war. It will then address the impact of this narrative on Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Islamic State (IS) in Yemen.

The 1962-70 Conflict:

In September 1962, a military coup deposed the last Yemeni Imam, Muhammad al-Badr, replacing him with the beginnings of a modern state led by Abdullah Sallal. Irrespective of foreign interests that would later dictate the conflict, this 1962 revolution was driven by local, socio-political dissent against an outdated imamate. The Free Yemen Movement (FYM) had made failed attempts to overthrow Imam Ahmad in 1948 and 1955. A build-up of local frustrations, mounting nationalist sentiment and historic societal divisions caused the September coup. Yet from 1965, Malcom Kerr’s ‘Arab Cold War’ concept crystallized this narrative, grouping the war in Yemen into a series of hostilities between Saudi-backed traditional monarchies and Nasser’s Arab nationalists. The West encouraged this rhetoric, whipping up a sense of ideological resistance against a dangerous, socialist encroachment. In reality, Saudi engagement in Yemen was underpinned by key security interests at their southern border. The narrative that came to characterize the war ignored these geostrategic interests, viewing what was essentially a local revolution as part of a regional struggle between Egypt and Saudi Arabia and pandering to both countries’ sectarian rhetoric. Yemenis paid the price, with prolonged conflict and long-term instability.

The Current War:

President Nasser, following Syria’s withdrawal from the United Arab Republic in 1961, a foothold in Yemen was underpinned by key security interests at their southern border. The narrative that came to characterize the war ignored these geostrategic interests, viewing what was essentially a local revolution as part of a regional struggle between Egypt and Saudi Arabia and pandering to both countries’ sectarian rhetoric. Yemenis paid the price, with prolonged conflict and long-term instability.

From Sana’a, Egyptian forces would be well placed to exert economic pressure on the Saudis and to disrupt the British presence in the south. For Saudi Arabia, security at their southern border had long been a primary concern. The northern highlands of Yemen provided a security buffer against Egyptian advances—and more recently against AQAP. From the outset, a binary, internationalized narrative dismissed Yemeni grievances and understated the strategic interests of each foreign actor. A piece by Time magazine, written just weeks after the coup, framed the revolution in global, ideological terms, as a clash between Nasserism and Arab traditionalism. The Yemeni rebels were portrayed simply as an offshoot of Egypt. “No one is quite sure why Sallal was plotting against the Imam, but one theory is that Sallal is a Nasser sympathizer and Nasser hated the Imam for a rude poem he had once written about Arab socialism.”

Beginning in 1965, Malcom Kerr’s ‘Arab Cold War’ concept crystallized this narrative, grouping the war in Yemen into a series of hostilities between Saudi-backed traditional monarchies and Nasser’s Arab nationalists. The West encouraged this rhetoric, whipping up a sense of ideological resistance against a dangerous, socialist encroachment. In reality, Saudi engagement in Yemen was underpinned by key security interests at their southern border. The narrative that came to characterize the war ignored these geostrategic interests, viewing what was essentially a local revolution as part of a regional struggle between Egypt and Saudi Arabia and pandering to both countries’ sectarian rhetoric. Yemenis paid the price, with prolonged conflict and long-term instability.

An Egyptian instructor teaches a Yemeni soldier how to use a bayonet during the 1962-1970 war (Wikimedia Commons)
The internationalization of the conflict has protracted the fighting, raised the stakes, and made it increasingly difficult for the Yemenis to reach an internal settlement. The U.S.-Saudi coalition. They have hitched themselves to President Bush’s ‘War on Terror’ narrative, regularly describing the Houthis as rebels and terrorists. In 2015, Hadi authored a New York Times opinion piece, in which he argued that “My country, Yemen, is under siege by radical Houthi militia forces whose campaign of horror and destruction is fueled by... an Iranian regime determined to dominate the Middle East.” Hadi’s rhetoric directly appeals to the United States’ fear of Iranian expansion via its terrorist militia networks. Especially in the post-9/11 environment, terrorism has been portrayed as a nebulous evil across the Middle East. This broad-brush narrative has enabled smaller actors to frame their local conflicts as part of a global fight against terrorism, a dynamic Yemen has taken advantage of to portray Houthi violence as a threat to Arab Sunni countries and U.S. interests in the region.

On the other side, the Houthis have internationalized the conflict since their first clash with Saudi forces in 2009. In a leaked cable, analysts from the U.S.-based National Democratic Institute posit: “Maybe they drew in Saudi Arabia because they wanted to negotiate with the master rather than the servant.” The Houthis have repeatedly depicted the official Yemeni government as a ‘Saudi-Shiite’ party. Instead, they argue that “Yemen’s Houthis... act largely to secure their own interests in Yemen.” Lastly, the Houthis have explicitly rejected the possibility of installing Shiite, Iranian-style rule. Hussein al-Bukhaiti, a pro-Houthi activist based in Sanaa asserted: “We cannot apply this [Iranian] system in Yemen because the followers of the Shafi’i doctrine [Sunnis] are greater in number than the Zaydis [Shias].” In an ironic twist, the Houthis may still be largely driven out of Saudi Arabia and regrouped in Yemen. During the Arab Spring, it flourished in the region, capitalizing on the unrest and using its insurgent offshoot, Ansar al-Shari$, to capture and retain territory. Over the past decade, the size and strength of AQAP has fluctuated, reaching a peak in 2016 with its seizure of the southern Abyan province. Though it has since weakened, AQAP has been quick to exploit the slightest sign of further destabilization.

Iranian Influence

The perpetuation of this ‘proxy war’ narrative hinges on the exaggeration of Iranian influence. It is widely acknowledged that the Islamic Republic has a pattern of supporting dissatisﬁed, militant groups (most notably Hezbollah) to destabilise US-backed rivals like Israel and Saudi Arabia. In Yemen, Iran has capitalised on instability, making a modest investment in the Houthi cause so as to gain leverage in the region and embroil the Saudis in a protracted war. Yet despite increased involvement after 2014, Iranian assistance is not so great as to signiﬁcantly inﬂuence the course of the conflict.

The narrative of extensive Iranian support is overblown. In reality, meaningful engagement in Yemen would risk jeopardizing Iran’s inﬂuence in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, countries that rank higher on its list of foreign policy concerns. In 2017, the Economist Intelligence Unit commented that it believes the Saudi government “overstated” accusations that Iran “was supplying the rebels with the missiles” or had “direct command of its Houthi proxy.” Instead, they argue that “Yemen’s Houthis... act largely to secure their own interests in Yemen.” Lastly, the Houthis have explicitly rejected the possibility of installing Shiite, Iranian-style rule. Hussein al-Bukhaiti, a pro-Houthi activist based in Sanaa asserted: “We cannot apply this [Iranian] system in Yemen because the followers of the Shafi’i doctrine [Sunnis] are greater in number than the Zaydis [Shias].”

In an ironic twist, the Houthis may have obtained more arms from the Yemeni government itself than any foreign actor. A UN panel from the first year of the war reports that the official Yemeni forces had “potentially lost control of more than 68 percent of the national stockpile during the conflict” to the Houthis. However, with all eyes trained on the Iranians, this loss of arms by the local government has been largely overshadowed: a further example of how thoroughly the proxy war narrative has obscured the conflict’s internal, Yemeni dynamics.

The Terror Repercussions:

In the ongoing struggle, the rhetoric of a clash between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shite Iran has served the interests of all actors and has been widely propagated both inside and outside of Yemen. The implications of this are hugely damaging on two fronts. First, as was also the case in the first Yemeni war, the internationalization of the conflict has protracted the fighting, raised the stakes, and made it increasingly difficult for the Yemenis to reach an internal settlement. Secondly, and unlike in the past, the exaggeration of Sunni-Shia divisions has twisted the war into an increasingly sectarian one, drawing extremist militias into the fray. The propagation of this proxy narrative plays directly into the hands of AQAP and IS in the Gulf. In the early 2000s, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula was largely driven out of Saudi Arabia and regrouped in Yemen. During the Arab Spring, it flourished in the region, capitalizing on the unrest and using its insurgent offshoot, Ansar al-Shari$, to capture and retain territory.20 Over the past decade, the size and strength of AQAP has fluctuated, reaching a peak in 2016 with its seizure of the southern Abyan province. Though it has since weakened, AQAP has been quick to exploit the slightest sign of further destabilization.

It has been far more significant than the Islamic State, motivated by obvious security and oil interests in the Gulf, Saudi Arabia and the U.S. have made momentous efforts to thwart extremist militias in the region. However, as the conflict has dragged on, these efforts have been marred by reports that the coalition has actively recruited, armed, and funded terrorists to join the struggle against the Houthis. A 2019 CNN investigation found that U.S. military hardware has landed in the hands of various AQAP militias.
"It has become increasingly difficult to distinguish rhetoric from reality."

Abu al-Abbas, a Yemeni warlord whom the Trump administration sanctioned in 2017, has received “millions of dollars in weapons and financial support for his fighters” from the UAE. Another commander, known to keep company with confirmed Al-Qaeda militants, was granted $12 million in 2019 by President al-Hadi. For Saudi Arabia, the Houthi threat, imbued with fears of Iranian expansion and the increasingly sectarian dynamics, has been a priority in recent years. The U.S.-Saudi bombing campaign, combined with Houthi efforts to propagate an “occupation” narrative, has increasingly turned public support in favor of the rebels from Gulf states—by prioritizing the Houthi threat—and the United States—by continuing to supply immense volumes of weapons—have actively reinforced AQAP’s standing in Yemen and undermined their own counter-terror agenda.

The propagation of a binary, sectarian narrative has played directly into the hands of Yemeni terror groups, adding an increasingly radical dimension to a war that was motivated at its core by socio-political grievances. The 2018 Houthi movement was largely driven by pragmatic rather than ideological frustrations, notably reinforced AQAP’s standing in Yemen and undermined their own counter-terror agenda.

In conclusion, a narrative of over-idealized, ‘proxy warfare’ has plagued both past and present Yemeni conflicts, obscuring local grievances and disregarding the key geo-strategic interests of foreign actors. It has contorted the ongoing conflict, forcing a diverse array of political undercurrents into a binary, sectarian model. Major external actors, including Saudi Arabia, the United States, and Iran, have perpetuated this interpretation. Internally, Yemenis on both sides have crafted localized narratives to attract international support. As a result, it has become increasingly difficult to distinguish rhetoric from reality and has played directly into the hands of non-state extremist actors, allowing them to capitalize on regional dynamics, sectarian messaging and prolonged instability. Nor is the case of Yemen entirely unique. U.S. policy in the Middle East has had a long history of prioritizing intrusive, militant action over regard for the long-term implications. Reagan’s directives in Afghanistan and Lebanon led to ruthless deconsolidation of the region and created a climate primed for extremism. American embroilment in Iraq has also had damaging repercussions: failing to restore state-capacity and fueling the extremist threat. In Yemen, the U.S.-Saudi coalition is shooting itself in the foot: feeding into a narrative that prolongs the humanitarian crisis, builds on sectarian divisions and undermines their own counter-terror objectives in the region.

ENDNOTES


18. Economist Intelligence Unit. 19. ibid.


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