

Sectarianism and the Politics of Hate

Playing with Fire: Trump, the Saudi-Iranian Rivalry, and the Geopolitics of Sectarianization in the Middle East

Danny Postel¹

Assistant Director
Middle East and North African Studies Program,
Northwestern University

Nader Hashemi

Director, Center for Middle East Studies
Associate Professor, Middle East and Islamic Politics,
Josef Korbel School of International Studies, University
of Denver

The Risk of an Escalatory Cycle

Sectarian conflict has been on the rise in the Middle East in recent years. From the catastrophic wars in Syria and Yemen to the volatile assemblages of Iraq and Lebanon, Sunni-Shiite relations are at a breaking point. The Saudi-Iranian regional rivalry is a key driver of this poisonous process.

At the beginning of every year the International Crisis Group (ICG) issues a list of “10 Conflicts to Watch” around the globe. Second on its list for 2018, behind only the standoff with North Korea, was what it calls the “US-Saudi-Iran rivalry,” underscoring the central role Washington plays in this dangerous game.² The rivalry, according to the ICG, is “enabled and exacerbated by three parallel developments: the consolidation of the authority of Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi Arabia’s assertive

Crown Prince; the Trump Administration’s more aggressive strategy toward Iran; and the end of the Islamic State’s territorial control in Iraq and Syria, which allows Washington and Riyadh to aim the spotlight more firmly on Iran.”

This US-Saudi strategy – with key supporting roles played by Israel and the United Arab Emirates³ – involves “multiple forms of pressure to contain, squeeze, exhaust, and ultimately push back Iran,” say the ICG, while noting that “Tehran and its partners still appear to be in a strong position”:

“The Bashar al-Assad regime, backed by Russian air power, is prevailing in Syria. Across Iraq, Iran-linked Shiite militias are entrenching themselves in state institutions. In Yemen, Tehran’s relatively small investment in backing the Houthis has helped them weather the Saudi-led campaign and even launch missiles of unprecedented range and accuracy into Saudi territory.”

“Despite demonstrating its resolve to confront Iran and its partners,” the ICG notes, “Riyadh has been unable to alter the balance of power”: “Forcing [Lebanese Prime Minister Saad] Hariri’s resignation backfired, not just because he later withdrew it, but also because all of Lebanon united against the move and Hariri then inched closer to Lebanese President Michel Aoun and Hezbollah. In Yemen, Riyadh turned the Houthis and former President Ali Abdullah Saleh against each other, but in doing so further

¹ Danny Postel is Assistant Director of the Middle East and North African Studies Program at Northwestern University and is the author of *Reading Legitimation Crisis in Tehran*. Prickly Paradigm Press, 2007. Nader Hashemi is Director of the Center for Middle East Studies and Associate Professor of Middle East and Islamic Politics at the Josef Korbel School of International Studies, University of Denver, and the author of *Islam, Secularism, and Liberal Democracy: Toward a Democratic Theory for Muslim Societies*, Oxford University Press, 2009. Together they are co-editors of three books: *The People Reloaded: The Green Movement and the Struggle for Iran’s Future*, Melville House, 2011, *The Syria Dilemma*, MIT Press, 2013, and *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*, Hurst Publishers, 2017.

² INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP. *10 Conflicts to Watch in 2018*, 2 January 2018: www.crisisgroup.org/global/10-conflicts-watch-2018

³ On the roles of Israel and the UAE, see Adam ENTOUS. “Donald Trump’s New World Order,” *The New Yorker*, 18 June, 2018: www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/06/18/donald-trumps-new-world-order

fragmented the country and complicated the search for a settlement and a face-saving Saudi exit from a war that is enormously costly not only to Yemenis but also to Riyadh's international standing." "With so many flashpoints, and so little diplomacy," the ICG concluded, "the risk of an escalatory cycle is great." "Any move," the organization admonished, "could trigger a broader confrontation."

The IGC issued this warning five months before the Trump Administration announced the US withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), or Iran nuclear deal, in early May 2018. That policy move both reflected and deepened the strategic turn toward isolating and confronting Iran – and makes war significantly more likely.⁴ Trump had signalled this turn a year earlier, during his May 2017 visit to Riyadh. The lavish ostentation of the occasion, along with the spectacles of the sword dance and the glowing orb, dominated media coverage, but Trump's Riyadh address made a decisive and consequential statement. He emphatically endorsed the Saudi-Emirati claim that Iran is the main (if not indeed sole) source of the region's problems and must be stopped in its tracks.⁵

The monarchs and autocrats assembled in Riyadh savoured what they heard from the new American President, and took it as a green light to pursue their repressive policies – both domestic and regional – with Washington's approval.⁶ This is a recipe for disaster in an already fragile regional equation. There has been a dramatic rise in sectarian conflict in the Middle East, particularly since the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq.⁷ By embracing the Saudi narra-

tive, putting the likes of John Bolton and Mike Pompeo at the helm of US foreign policy, and now scrapping the Iran nuclear deal, Trump is throwing fuel on the fire of the sectarianization process gripping the region.⁸

The Saudi-Iranian War of Narratives

But the sectarian narrative – specifically the spectre of a 'Shia crescent' or 'Iranian snake' – has been gaining traction since the 2003 toppling of Saddam Hussein and the concomitant emergence of Shia-majority rule in Iraq. Jordan's King Abdullah gave expression to these anxieties in 2004. As Ian Black (then with *The Guardian*, now a visiting senior fellow at the LSE Middle East Centre) summarized: "King Abdullah of Jordan coined a controversial phrase that still resonates powerfully in the Middle East: there was, he argued, a "Shia crescent" that went from Damascus to Tehran, passing through Baghdad, where a Shia-dominated government had taken power and was dictating a sectarian brand of politics that was radiating outwards from Iraq across the whole region."⁹

Leaked diplomatic cables revealed that in 2008, the Saudi kingdom repeatedly exhorted Washington to "cut off the head of the snake" by launching military strikes on Iran.¹⁰

Iran has reinforced this narrative: Ali Reza Zakani, a member of Iran's parliament and a confidant of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, has bragged that three Arab capitals – Baghdad, Damascus and Beirut –

⁴ See Trita PARSİ. "Why Trump's Strategy for Iran Is Likely to Lead to War," *The Nation*, 23 May, 2018: www.thenation.com/article/why-abandoning-the-iran-nuke-deal-is-likely-to-lead-to-war/; Amanda ERICKSON. "How Trump's Iran deal decision may lead to war," *Washington Post*, 11 May, 2018: www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/05/11/how-trumps-iran-deal-decision-may-lead-to-war/

⁵ See Roula KHALAF. "The Saudi seduction of Donald Trump," *Financial Times*, 23 May, 2017: www.ft.com/content/8e181a22-3fbd-11e7-9d56-25f963e998b2; Ishaan THAROOR. "Trump embraces the Saudi vision for the Middle East," *Washington Post*, 22 May, 2017: www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/05/22/trump-embraces-the-saudi-vision-for-the-middle-east/. Adam Entous shows that Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Israel had been manoeuvring in close coordination to push for this policy turn for several years, and Trump's election opened the door for them to steer Washington sharply in the direction of confronting Iran. See ENTOUS. "Donald Trump's New World Order."

⁶ See "Bahrain follows Trump trip with dissent crackdown," AFP, 1 June, 2017 www.al-monitor.com/pulse/afp/2017/06/bahrain-unrest-politics-us.html; Javier E. DAVID. "US-Saudi Arabia seal weapons deal worth nearly \$110 billion immediately, \$350 billion over 10 years," CNBC, 20 May, 2017: www.cnbc.com/2017/05/20/us-saudi-arabia-seal-weapons-deal-worth-nearly-110-billion-as-trump-begins-visit.html; Mehdi HASAN. "Donald Trump's Words Are a Green Light to Dictators and Torturers Around the World," *The Intercept*, 22 May 2018: <https://theintercept.com/2018/05/22/trump-torture-bahrain/>

⁷ See Nader HASHEMI and Danny POSTEL (eds.). *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*, London: Hurst Publishers, 2017, especially the chapter "The Sectarianization of Geopolitics in the Middle East" by Bassel SALLOUKH.

⁸ See Nader HASHEMI and Danny POSTEL, "Iran, Saudi Arabia and Modern Hatreds," *New York Times*, 15 May, 2018: www.nytimes.com/2018/05/15/opinion/iran-saudi-arabia-and-modern-hatreds.html

⁹ Ian BLACK. "Fear of a Shia full moon," *The Guardian*, 26 Jan 2007: www.theguardian.com/world/2007/jan/26/worlddispatch.ianblack

¹⁰ Ross COLVIN. "Cut off head of snake Saudis told U.S. on Iran," Reuters, 28 November, 2010: www.reuters.com/article/us-wikileaks-iran-saudis-idUSTRE6AS02B20101129

“have today ended up in the hands of Iran and belong to the Islamic Iranian revolution” and predicted that Sanaa would soon follow.¹¹ This notion of Iran controlling four Arab capitals, hyperbole notwithstanding, has hit a major nerve in the Sunni Arab world.

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has claimed that Tehran’s goal is “to control the Islamic world.” Referring to the Shia political theology of the Islamic Republic, he asked: “How can I come to an understanding with someone, or a regime, that has an anchoring belief built on an extremist ideology?”¹² In interviews with Western journalists, the Crown Prince has repeatedly compared Iran’s leaders to Nazi Germany. “I believe the Iranian supreme leader makes Hitler look good,” he told Jeffrey Goldberg. “Hitler didn’t do what the supreme leader is trying to do. Hitler tried to conquer Europe... the supreme leader is trying to conquer the world.”¹³

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, in turn, claims that “the key driver of violence” in the region is an “extremist ideology promoted by Saudi Arabia” – namely, Wahhabism, which he calls a “theological perversion” and a “death cult.” “Over the past three decades, Riyadh has spent tens of billions of dollars exporting Wahhabism through thousands of mosques and madrasas across the world,” Zarif wrote in the *New York Times*.¹⁴

Then there is the figure of Major General Qassem Soleimani, commander of the al-Quds brigade of Iran’s elite Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), who looms large in what we might call the contemporary anti-Shia imaginary: for many Sunni Arabs he embodies, in his transnational exploits, the menace of the Iranian hegemon on the rise.¹⁵

Indeed, anti-Shia sentiment across the Middle East (and even in parts of the Islamic world with virtually no Shia communities, such as Malaysia) is at an all-time high. As Fanar Haddad observed in 2013: “[T]he *vocabulary* of anti-Shiism in the Middle East has changed dramatically over the last 10 years. Shiites who used to be accused of ethnic otherness are now being cast as outside the Muslim community itself. Exclusion on doctrinal grounds was a mostly Saudi exception in the framing of Shiism. It is now increasingly becoming the regional rule.”¹⁶

The sectarian narrative – specifically the spectre of a ‘Shia crescent’ or ‘Iranian snake’ – has been gaining traction since the 2003 toppling of Saddam Hussein and the concomitant emergence of Shia-majority rule in Iraq

As Alexandra Siegel noted in 2015: “From fiery sermons disseminated by Salafi televangelists to gory videos circulated by the self-proclaimed Islamic State, sectarian narratives and hate speech are on the rise across the Arab world. As the conflicts in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen rage on, hostile messages and violent images circulate 24 hours a day through both traditional and social media channels. While the use of sectarian language is hardly a new phenomenon, dehumanizing anti-Shia and anti-Sunni

¹¹ Amal MUDALLALI. “The Iranian Sphere of Influence Expands Into Yemen,” *Foreign Policy*, 8 October, 2014: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/10/08/the-iranian-sphere-of-influence-expands-into-yemen/>

¹² “Iran is seeking ‘to control Islamic world,’ says Saudi Arabian prince,” Associated Press, 2 May 2017: www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/02/iran-is-seeking-to-control-islamic-world-says-saudi-arabian-prince

¹³ Jeffrey GOLDBERG. “Saudi Crown Prince: Iran’s Supreme Leader ‘Makes Hitler Look Good,’” *The Atlantic*, 2 April, 2018: www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/mohammed-bin-salman-iran-israel/557036/; see also Dexter FILKINS. “A Saudi Prince’s Quest to Remake the Middle East,” *The New Yorker*, 9 April, 2018: www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/04/09/a-saudi-princes-quest-to-remake-the-middle-east

¹⁴ Mohammad Javad ZARIF. “Let Us Rid the World of Wahhabism,” *New York Times*, 13 September, 2016: www.nytimes.com/2016/09/14/opinion/mohammad-javad-zarif-let-us-rid-the-world-of-wahhabism.html

¹⁵ See Martin CHULOV. “Qassem Suleimani: the Iranian general ‘secretly running’ Iraq,” *The Guardian*, 28 July 2011: www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jul/28/qassem-suleimani-iran-iraq-influence; Dexter FILKINS. “The Shadow Commander,” *The New Yorker*, 30 September, 2013: www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/09/30/the-shadow-commander; Ian BLACK and Saeed KAMALI DEGHAN. “Qassem Suleimani: commander of Quds force, puppeteer of the Middle East,” *The Guardian*, 16 June 2014: www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/16/qassem-suleimani-iraq-iran-syria; Samia NAKHOUL. “Iran expands regional ‘empire’ ahead of nuclear deal,” Reuters, 23 March, 2015: www.reuters.com/article/us-mid-east-iran-region-insight/iran-expands-regional-empire-ahead-of-nuclear-deal-idUSKBN0MJ1G520150323

¹⁶ Fanar HADDAD. “The language of anti-Shiism,” *Foreign Policy*, 9 August, 2013: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/08/09/the-language-of-anti-shiism/>

slurs are increasingly making their way into common discourse.¹⁷

The case of Yusuf Al Qaradawi epitomizes this trend. The prominent Egyptian cleric and spiritual guide to the Muslim Brotherhood has advanced a series of anti-Shia polemics in recent years that have fuelled sectarian animus in the Middle East. He has asserted that Shiites are “heretics” who seek to “invade Sunni society” and claimed that Iran’s clerics want to “eat the Sunni people.”¹⁸ Iran’s role in Syria has provided fertile ground for this message. The cleric’s access to al-Jazeera, where he hosts a regular programme, has given these views a mass audience.

Anti-Shia hatred has found its most extreme expression in the political theology of the so-called Islamic State, or ISIS.¹⁹ The ideological architect of the Islamic State’s virulent anti-Shiism was Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. A jihadi journeyman and sectarian entrepreneur from Jordan, Zarqawi engineered the 29 August, 2003 attack on the Imam Ali shrine in Najaf, Iraq – one of Shia Islam’s holiest sites – which killed more than a hundred people.²⁰ Zarqawi declared “all-out war” on what he called the “crafty and malicious scorpion” of Shiism and called on Sunnis to rise up against Shia “snakes” across the Middle East.²¹ Zar-

qawi’s focus on targeting the “near enemy” (the Shia) as opposed to the “far enemy” (the Americans) led to tensions between the Jordanian and the leadership of al-Qaeda, whose Iraqi branch he headed.²²

Wars of Position

The regional policies of both the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (in Yemen) and the Islamic Republic of Iran (in Syria) are causing horrific carnage and have engendered deep resentment. Since 2015, Saudi Arabia has committed unrelenting atrocities in Yemen – bombing hospitals, schools, markets, weddings, funerals and residential areas, killing thousands of civilians.²³

Iran, for its part, is deeply complicit in the war crimes of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, which include deliberate starvation, bombing of medical facilities and residential buildings, and the inveterate use of chemical weapons.²⁴ Whereas for years the Islamic Republic concealed the extent of its involvement in Syria from the Iranian public, it now openly celebrates it.²⁵ In addition to deploying its own IRGC forces, Iran has arrayed a massive transnational flow

¹⁷ Alexandra SIEGEL. *Sectarian Twitter Wars: Sunni-Shia Conflict and Cooperation in the Digital Age*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 20 December, 2015: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2015/12/20/sectarian-twitter-wars-sunni-shia-conflict-and-cooperation-in-digital-age-pub-62299>

¹⁸ Ian BLACK. “Unholy row,” *The Guardian*, 25 September 2008: www.theguardian.com/world/2008/sep/26/middleeast; Richard SPENCER. “Muslim Brotherhood cleric calls for Sunni jihad in Syria,” *The Telegraph*, 02 June 2013: www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10094590/Muslim-Brotherhood-cleric-calls-for-Sunni-jihad-in-Syria.html

¹⁹ See Hassan HASSAN. *The Sectarianism of the Islamic State: Ideological Roots and Political Context*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 13 June, 2016: <http://carnegieendowment.org/2016/06/13/sectarianism-of-islamic-state-ideological-roots-and-political-context-pub-63746>; and Fawaz A. GERGES. *ISIS: A History*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016.

²⁰ Mary Anne WEAVER. “The Short, Violent Life of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi,” *The Atlantic*, 8 June, 2006: www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2006/07/the-short-violent-life-of-abu-musab-al-zarqawi/304983/; Bobby GHOSH. “Twelve years on, remembering the bomb that started the Middle East’s sectarian war,” *Quartz*, 28 August, 2015: <https://qz.com/476191/remembering-the-bomb-that-started-the-middle-east-s-sectarian-war/>. On the phenomenon of sectarian entrepreneurs, see Marc LYNCH. “The Entrepreneurs of Cynical Sectarianism,” *Foreign Policy*, 13 November, 2013, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/11/13/the-entrepreneurs-of-cynical-sectarianism/>; Toby MATTHIESEN. “Sectarian Identity Entrepreneurs,” *Maydan*, 17 November, 2016: www.themaydan.com/2016/11/sectarian-identity-entrepreneurs/

²¹ “Al-Zarqawi declares war on Iraqi Shia,” Al Jazeera English, 14 September 2005: www.aljazeera.com/archive/2005/09/200849143727698709.html; Anton LA GUARDIA. “Zarqawi rails against Shia ‘snakes,’” *The Telegraph*, 03 June 2006: www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/1520211/Zarqawi-rails-against-Shia-snakes.html; “Zarqawi in his own words,” BBC News, 8 June 2006: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/5058474.stm

²² See Fawaz A. GERGES, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2nd Edition 2009; Emily HUNT. *Zarqawi’s ‘Total War’ on Iraqi Shiites Exposes a Divide among Sunni Jihadists*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 15 November, 2005: www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/zarqawis-total-war-on-iraqi-shiites-exposes-a-divide-among-sunni-jihadists; Daniel BYMAN and Jennifer WILLIAMS. “ISIS vs. Al Qaeda: Jihadism’s Global Civil War,” *The National Interest*, 24 February, 2015: 304 <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/isis-vs-al-qaeda-jihadism-s-global-civil-war-12>

²³ “Human Rights Watch says Saudi-led air strikes in Yemen are war crimes,” Reuters, 11 September, 2017: www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-rights/human-rights-watch-says-saudi-led-air-strikes-in-yemen-are-war-crimes-idUSKCN1BN0B0

²⁴ On Iran’s role in Syria, see Danny POSTEL. “Theaters of Coercion,” *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas*, Fall 2016: <https://democracyjournal.org/magazine/42/theaters-of-coercion/>

²⁵ Thomas ERDBRINK. “Iran, Once Quiet About Its Casualties in Syria and Iraq, Now Glorifies Them,” *New York Times*, 9 July, 2016: www.nytimes.com/2016/07/10/world/middleeast/iran-once-quiet-about-its-casualties-in-syria-and-iraq-now-glorifies-them.html

of Shia fighters into Syria to defend the Assad regime: Shia militias from Iraq, Shia mercenaries from Afghanistan and Pakistan, and of course Hezbollah in Lebanon, which has its own reasons for crossing the border to defend Assad but does so in close coordination with its Iranian patrons.²⁶ These fighters are engaged in staggering levels of violence. More recently, Iran has been engineering population swaps along sectarian lines to fortify the Assad regime.²⁷

This extreme brutality has hardened the sectarian fault lines in the region. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran bear responsibility for this abhorrent state of affairs.

Conclusion

The bad news is that sectarian enmity and conflict in the Middle East have soared to perilous levels. The good news is that there is nothing necessary or inevitable about this state of affairs. Contrary to the new conventional wisdom in Western capitals and media circles, which would have us believe that the violence convulsing the Middle East today is the result of “ancient hatreds” or primordial, trans-histori-

cal forces, and thus intractable – a lazy and convenient narrative steeped in Orientalism – the fact is that the sectarianization of the region’s politics is a recent phenomenon and can be reversed.²⁸

Turning the tide of sectarianization will be no small task, to be sure. Once unleashed and cultivated, once lodged into hearts and minds, identitarian hatreds can take on a life of their own and become self-fulfilling prophecies.²⁹ The 2011 Arab uprisings, which swept across the Middle East and North Africa a mere seven years ago, remind us that sectarian passions are far from the only ones that can surface and mobilize the people of the region. There is a revisionist tendency to project the violence and chaos prevalent today back and retrospectively imagine the Arab uprisings as sectarian in origin, or as having inevitably ushered in the region-wide sectarian bloodbath we see now. On the contrary, the 2011 popular uprisings in Bahrain, Syria, and Yemen, for example, were decidedly cross-sectarian in their composition and non-sectarian in their slogans, demands and agendas. They *morphed* into sectarian conflicts over time – principally as a result of deliberate regime strategies and the counter-revolutionary interventions of regional powers.³⁰

²⁶ See Hassan HASSAN. “The rise of Shia jihadism in Syria will fuel sectarian fires,” *The National*, 5 June, 2013: www.thenational.ae/thenationalconversation/comment/the-rise-of-shia-jihadism-in-syria-will-fuel-sectarian-fires; INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP. “Lebanon’s Hezbollah Turns Eastward to Syria,” 27 May, 2014: [www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Lebanon/153-lebanon-s-hizbollah-turns-eastward-to-syria.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Lebanon/153-lebanon-s-hizbollah-turns-eastward-to-syria.pdf); Ari HEISTEIN and James WEST. “Syria’s Other Foreign Fighters: Iran’s Afghan and Pakistani Mercenaries,” *The National Interest*, 20 November, 2015: <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/syrias-other-foreign-fighters-irans-afghan-pakistani-14400>; Fariba SAHRAEI. “Syria war: The Afghans sent by Iran to fight for Assad,” BBC News, 15 April 2016: www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36035095; Scott PETERSON. “Iran steps up recruitment of Shiite mercenaries for Syrian war,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 12 June, 2016: www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2016/0612/Iran-steps-up-recruitment-of-Shiite-mercenaries-for-Syrian-war; Ali ALFONEH. “Tehran’s Shia Foreign Legions,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 30 January, 2018: <http://carnegieendowment.org/2018/01/30/tehran-s-shia-foreign-legions-pub-75387>

²⁷ See “Silent Sectarian Cleansing: The Iranian Role in Mass Demolitions and Population Transfers in Syria,” Naame Sham report, May 2015: http://www.naameshaam.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Silent_Ethnic_Cleansing_in_Syria_NaameShaamReport_ENGLISH_May20151.pdf; Martin CHULOV. “Iran repopulates Syria with Shia Muslims to help tighten regime’s control,” *The Guardian*, 13 January 2017: www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/13/irans-syria-project-pushing-population-shifts-to-increase-influence; Lina SINJAB. “Iran Is Building a New Source of Shia Influence Inside Syria,” Chatham House, November 2017: <https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/iran-is-building-a-new-source-of-shia-influence-inside-syria>

²⁸ In the introduction to *Sectarianization*, we identify 1979, 2003, and 2011 as the turning points in the congealing of the region’s sectarian fault lines. See “Introduction: The Sectarianization Thesis,” in Nader HASHEMI and Danny POSTEL (eds.). *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*. See also the interview with us in *Jadaliyya’s* “New Texts Out Now” series, 8 August, 2017: www.jadaliyya.com/Details/34479/New-Texts-Out-Now-Nader-Hashemi-and-Danny-Postel,-eds-Sectarianization-Mapping-the-New-Politics-of-the-Middle-East

²⁹ We borrow the formulation of the “cultivation of hatred” from the late historian Peter Gay. See Peter GAY. *The Cultivation of Hatred*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1993, the third volume of his five-volume study *The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud*.

³⁰ For detailed case studies of how this process unfolded in Bahrain, Syria, and Yemen, see the following chapters in Nader HASHEMI and Danny POSTEL (eds.). *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*: Toby MATTHIESEN. “Sectarianization as Securitization: Identity Politics and Counter-Revolution in Bahrain”; Paulo GABRIEL Hilu PINTO. “The Shattered Nation: The Sectarianization of the Syrian Conflict”; Stacey PHILBRICK YADAV, “Sectarianization, Islamist Republicanism, and International Misrecognition in Yemen”. On the regional counter-revolutionary process, see Madawi AL-RASHEED’s chapter, “Sectarianism as Counter-Revolution: Saudi Responses to the Arab Spring”; Jean-Pierre FILIU. *From Deep State to Islamic State: The Arab Counter-Revolution and its Jihadi Legacy*, London: Hurst Publishers, 2015, an updated and expanded edition of which was recently published in French with the felicitous title *Généraux, Gangsters et Jihadistes: Histoire de la Contre-Révolution Arabe* [Generals, Gangsters, and Jihadists: A History of the Arab Counter-Revolution] Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2018.

But things can change very quickly. Although most of the popular uprisings were crushed, thwarted, or upended, the conditions that gave rise to them in the first place remain in place or have worsened, setting the stage for future upheavals.³¹

Yet the picture remains inescapably bleak. This is a moment of deep authoritarian retrenchment across the region: the dictators are back in charge and have learned how to adapt and survive.³² This sordid state of affairs is bolstered and reinforced by Western policy. The monarchs, autocrats, and oligarchs of the Gulf feel they have a wind from the West at their backs and a green light to corner Iran. If they get their way and provoke a military confrontation, it will wreak havoc on the region and intensify sectarian animosities to unfathomable levels.³³

Western governments must stop fuelling this lethal sectarianization process. They must discontinue the policies that encourage its principal regional purveyor, Saudi Arabia, in its belligerent behaviour. Washington and London provide critical support to the Saudi coalition in its cataclysmic war in Yemen and are complicit in its ongoing and amply documented atrocities, including war crimes.³⁴ “In one strike alone, we were able to verify that U.S. bombs were used to attack an entire residential building, leaving scores of children and families killed,” Samah Hadid,

Amnesty International's director for Middle East campaigns, told the *Los Angeles Times*.³⁵ “The UK refuses to call out the [Saudi-led] coalition's massive violations of the laws of war in Yemen, even though the coalition continues to unlawfully kill Yemeni civilians, strike weddings, and bomb homes,” writes Myrto Tiliadaki of Human Rights Watch.³⁶

“Instead of providing logistical and military assistance to coalition forces that have committed serious violations, these influential members of the international community should seek to hold perpetrators of such violations to account,” said James Lynch, Amnesty's Deputy Middle East and North Africa Director.³⁷ “There is no reasonable explanation by states such as the US and the UK that would justify their continued support and irresponsible arms flows to the Saudi Arabia-led coalition, when there is extensive evidence that these have resulted in enormous harm to Yemen for the past three years,” says Amnesty International's Middle East research director, Lynn Maalouf.³⁸

The work of de-sectarianization will be an uphill battle and could require decades.³⁹ To be sure, there are pockets of cross-sectarian activism and inter-sectarian dialogue underway across the region. But those vital efforts will remain consigned to the margins until the bombs stop falling.

³¹ On this point, see Gilbert ACHCAR, *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising*, London: Saqi Books, 2013, especially the “Conclusion: The Future of the Arab Uprising”; ACHCAR, *Morbid Symptoms: Relapse in the Arab Uprising*, London: Saqi Books, 2016; Andrew ENGLAND and Heba SALEH, “How the Middle East is sowing seeds of a second Arab spring,” *Financial Times*, 4 March, 2018: www.ft.com/content/a6229844-1ad3-11e8-aaca-4574d7dabfb6?segmentid=acee4131-99c2-09d3-a635-873e61754ec6

³² See Steven HEYDEMANN and Reinoud LEENDERS, “Authoritarian Learning and Authoritarian Resilience: Regime Responses to the ‘Arab Awakening,’” *Globalizations* 8:5 (2011), 647-653; Marc LYNCH, “How Arab authoritarian regimes learned to defeat popular protests,” *The Monkey Cage* (Washington Post blog), 25 August, 2016: www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/08/25/how-arab-authoritarian-regimes-learned-to-defeat-popular-protests/

³³ See Zack BEAUCHAMP, “What Trump's threatened war with Iran would actually look like,” *Vox*, July 23, 2018: www.vox.com/world/2018/7/23/17602480/trump-tweet-iran-threat-war and Juan COLE, “How the Neocon Plan to Destabilize Iran Will Blow Back on the United States,” *The Nation*, July 26, 2018: www.thenation.com/article/neocon-plan-destabilize-iran-will-blow-back-united-states/

³⁴ “US aiding Saudi ‘war crimes’ in Yemen: Congressman,” al-Jazeera English, 17 November 2017: www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/11/aiding-saudi-war-crimes-yemen-congressman-171116150400085.html; Amnesty International, “Disappearances and torture in southern Yemen detention facilities must be investigated as war crimes,” 12 July 2018: www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/07/disappearances-and-torture-in-southern-yemen-detention-facilities-must-be-investigated-as-war-crimes/

³⁵ Nabih BULOS, “It's the world's worst humanitarian disaster. But it's rarely ever discussed,” *Los Angeles Times*, 15 June, 2018: www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-yemen-forgotten-20180615-htmstory.html

³⁶ Myrto TILIANAKI, “Will Boris Johnson's Departure Prompt New UK Diplomacy?” Human Rights Watch, 10 July, 2018: www.hrw.org/news/2018/07/10/will-boris-johnsons-departure-prompt-new-uk-diplomacy

³⁷ AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, “Yemen: UN inquiry needed as civilian lives devastated six months after Saudi Arabia-led coalition began airstrikes,” 25 September 2015: www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/09/yemen-un-inquiry-needed-as-civilian-lives-devastated-six-months-after-saudi-arabia-led-coalition-began-airstrikes/

³⁸ AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, “Yemen: The forgotten war”: www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/09/yemen-the-forgotten-war/

³⁹ For an insightful and instructive comparative perspective, see Timothy D. SISK, “Conclusion: Peacebuilding in Sectarianized Conflicts: Findings and Implications for Theory and Practice,” in Nader HASHEMI and Danny POSTEL (eds.), *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*.