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# The long war between Sunni and Shia

*By Olivier Roy*

East of the River Jordan, the defining geopolitical and religious schism in the Middle East pits Saudi Arabia against Iran

**Circles of solidarity: a young girl joins women protesting at the Pearl Roundabout in the Bahraini capital, Manama, in February. The roundabout has since been destroyed by the government**

The strength of the pro-democracy movements in the Middle East is such that, for the first time in the Arab world, revolution has not attached itself to some grand, supranational cause: pan-Arabism, pan-Islamism, socialism, support for the Palestinians, anti-colonialism, anti-Zionism or anti-imperialism. These new movements are patriotic rather than nationalist, taking root in a domestic context and confronting the authorities without accusing them of being puppets of a foreign power.

This is not to say that the great geostrategic fissures have disappeared, but they exist primarily in the minds of the leaderships still in place which, when they haven't been content simply to fight for their own survival (as in Libya or Yemen), have interpreted the revolts in terms of their wider regional implications. This is also true of the Israelis, who, like the Saudi regime in Riyadh, have been concerned only to calculate the likely consequences of the recent unrest. Though the western powers are congratulating themselves on a wave of democratisation that they have encouraged, they, too, are highly sensitive to the geostrategic dimension, as their silence on the repression of protests in Bahrain demonstrates.

What we are witnessing is the emergence of a strange dichotomy, wholly unprecedented in recent times. Until now, all revolutionary movements have worked to the benefit, real or imagined, of a great power or ideology. For a long time, it was the Soviet Union, then Islamism – and we should not forget the role played by the west during the demonstrations that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Now, however, two separate political logics appear to be at work. There is no illustration of this disconnect more striking than the images that came out of Syria on 5 June: on one side, Syrians risking their lives to demonstrate against the government of Bashar al-Assad; on the other, Palestinian refugees in Syria marching, with the encouragement of the authorities in Damascus, to their death at the hands of the Israel Defence Forces on the Israeli border in the Golan Heights. One got the impression that the two groups of demonstrators lived in different countries.

A distinction must be made between countries in which the geostrategic stakes are low, or else under control, and those where the overthrowing of the regime is perceived, rightly or wrongly, as the prelude to wider upheaval. ►



**From the west, silence: in Manama, family members mourn Abdul Ridha Mohammed, shot in the head by state troops at Pearl Roundabout, 21 February**

► In the first group are Tunisia, Libya and Yemen. These three countries are peripheral to pan-regional alliances and conflicts. Tunisia will, in most cases, adopt a largely pro-western line and the country looks towards Europe. Muammar al-Gaddafi has long been isolated in the Arab world. And although Yemen is an important consideration for Saudi Arabia, this is mainly because internal volatility there could spill over the kingdom's southern borders. The paradox here is Egypt. The country is a central actor in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and, for many, that confrontation is at the heart of the tensions that are convulsing the Arab world. Yet the fall of President Hosni Mubarak has had next to no geostrategic impact.

There is no doubt that Egyptian public opinion was very critical of the compliant attitude adopted by the Mubarak government towards Israel and didn't approve of the co-operation between Cairo and Tel Aviv on the crackdown against Hamas, the isolation of the Gaza Strip or the supplying of gas to Israel. Nonetheless, it is clear that the overthrowing of Mubarak will not change things fundamentally.

Even if Egypt remains more open to Hamas and the Palestinians in general, the red line that the peace treaty with Israel represents will never be crossed. What is more, such an opening could help the peace process by bringing Hamas back into the political and diplomatic

fold. The main obstacle to that process lies in Tel Aviv, not Cairo.

**T**he “neutrality” of the events in Egypt also reveals something more profound, which many seasoned observers of the Arab world are reluctant to acknowledge. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, despite its emotional impact across the region, is not a factor in the present political mobilisation in the Arab world and no longer plays a determining role in shaping the foreign policy of Arab states, with the exception of Syria.

The evolution of the conflict will depend on relations between the Israelis and the Palestinians inside the historic borders of Mandate Palestine, not on the policies of Arab states. The Arab-Israeli conflict has given way to that between the Israelis and the Palestinians. One need only look at their discomfort at the new, pro-democracy movements to see that this irritates the Israelis as much it does the Palestinian leadership.

This does not mean that these movements will not have any impact on the conflict. They will, in so far as they are awakening a taste for democracy and non-violence among Palestinians which will, in turn, prevent Israel from declaring itself to be the “only democracy in the Middle East” and the sole bulwark against

terrorism and Islamism. The wave of democratisation has already forced Hamas and Fatah to find an accord because both fear being overwhelmed by a popular movement that would be anything but a third anti-Israeli intifada.

What is uncertain is whether such a development would be accompanied by an Israeli government that is willing to change tack. This isn't the case today. The Israeli right does not want to resume a process that would put the question of borders back on the agenda. The disjunction between this irreconcilable right wing, the evolution of the regional picture and the changing political culture among a younger generation of Palestinians will only exacerbate Israel's international isolation (even if the Israeli right thinks that it is capable of enduring such isolation without too much difficulty as it tries to make the colonisation of the occupied territories irreversible).

Today, the main fracture running through the Arab world – east of the River Jordan, at least – is the opposition between an Arab, Sunni bloc dominated by Saudi Arabia, on the one hand, and Iran, on the other. For the past 30 years, the Saudis have viewed Iran as the main threat in the region and have tried, with varying degrees of success, to mobilise Arab nationalism as well as all forms of Sunni militancy to disrupt Iranian attempts to become the main regional power. In this context, Riyadh considers the

democratic movement that has developed in Bahrain as a double threat: an internal threat, because it undermines the legitimacy of the existing monarchical regime (and, with it, that of the Saudi monarchy) and an external threat, because it threatens a strategic equilibrium hitherto regarded as vital – the opposition between Iran and Saudi Arabia, based on what Riyadh regards as the defining split in the Gulf, that between Sunni and Shia.

Officially, Iran has not exploited this division, because to do so would be to confine itself to a ghetto. The Iranians have instead sought to go beyond the conflict between Sunnis and Shias by presenting themselves as champions of the Arab cause, through their support for the Palestinians and Hezbollah.

In the 1980s, Iran was the big loser from the Sunni-Shia divisions that the Islamic Revolution in the country had done so much to foment. Only the Shia minorities in the Arab world supported Iran (and then by no means unanimously). During the Iraq-Iran war, the Ba'athists relied on a coalition based on Arab nationalism and Sunni pan-Islamism, which allowed them to isolate the Iranians. (Saddam Hussein recklessly destroyed that coalition by invading Kuwait in 1990.)

Iran drew the following lesson from this: it would not be the Islamic Revolution that would advance its cause but anti-American militancy, support for the Palestinians and its new stance as the major regional power, which ensured security in the Gulf in a way that neither the Saudis nor the US had managed. This policy reached its apogee with the war in Lebanon in July 2006, when Hezbollah held its own against the Israelis and its leader, Hasan Nasrallah, appeared as the new champion of the Arab cause. But everything changed with the execution of Saddam Hussein some months later. This was seen as the revenge of the Shias, supported by both the Iranians and the US.

Arab Shias are not an Iranian fifth column: Shias in Iraq and Bahrain have long understood the dangers of becoming instruments of Iran. They are Iraqis and Bahrainis first and foremost and are fighting to be recognised as full citizens of the countries in which they live. But, like Hezbollah in Lebanon, they depend on Iranian patronage in a hostile Sunni environment.

Saudi Arabia is behind the elaboration of a grand narrative that pits Persian Shias against Arab Sunnis and in which all Arab Shias are regarded as Arabic-speaking Persians (as well as heretics, according to Wahhabi doctrine). This is one of the rare instances in which the foreign policy of the Saudi kingdom finds a religious justification – which also explains the ambivalence that Riyadh has long shown towards hardline Sunni movements, from the Taliban to new jihadists in Fallujah. For some time now, the Palestinian question has been



**Positive defiance: anti-government protesters reclaim the roundabout, 19 February**

marginal for the Saudis. It has registered for them only in that it has created a climate in which popular opposition has flourished among Arab peoples.

The real issue, as it is for Israel, is the “Iranian menace”. Here, the prophecy could come true: in denying the Shias of Bahrain full citizenship rights, Saudi Arabia in effect confirms their status as an Iranian fifth column.

### **The real issue for Saudi Arabia is the “Iranian menace”**

Then there is the neuralgic issue of Syria. The Syrians are the Iranians’ main allies in the region and everyone, from the Saudis to the Israelis, would celebrate the fall of the government in Damascus. Yet anxiety reigns, because the consequences of regime change, in this case, are unknowable. The idea of a stable and easily identifiable national interest that would endure while power changes hands can be applied to Tunisia or Egypt. But would it apply to Syria? What would the foreign policy of a post-Ba’athist Syria look like? It is hard to say, because the regional strategy of the Assad family has always been intimately bound up with internal political considerations.

For 40 years, Damascus has followed a strategy of permanent tension with Israel, so as to present itself as the defender of Arab nationalism. But it has also pursued a form of diplomatic realpolitik that has crossed no red lines and has kept several alliances in play at the same time. Bringing the regime down would put an end to this subtle yet stable game and lead to who knows where.

A fear of the unknown paralyses all of the states surrounding Syria – perhaps with the exception of Turkey, which appears to be the only neighbouring country that is preparing for the post-Assad era. It could be that, when the dust finally settles, it will be Turkey that emerges as the big winner from the current convulsions in the region and establishes itself as the new pole of stability in the Middle East. Provided, of course, that it manages to resolve the eternal Kurdish question. ●

*Olivier Roy is professor of social and political theory at the European University Institute in Florence. His books include “The Failure of Political Islam” (IB Tauris, £15.99) and “Holy Ignorance: When Religion and Culture Part Ways” (C Hurst & Co, £20)*

*This essay, written exclusively for the New Statesman, was translated from the French by Jonathan Derbyshire. Read more of Roy’s essays for the NS at:*

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