

Geography, Resources and the Geopolitics of Middle East Conflicts

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For most of its modern history, the Middle East has been besieged by international conflicts. Since the early nineteenth century, European powers have competed to colonise the Middle East's territories in an attempt to control its natural resource and geostrategic location. Almost two centuries later, the region finds itself embattled in another round of intense crises in which both super and regional powers compete for territorial influence. The once stable region became an arena for violence in the aftermath of the popular uprisings of the 2010s, and what started as peaceful demands for democracy and freedom soon metamorphosed into civil and regional wars in many areas. The rise of violent change and the counter violent quest to maintain the status quo has been closely tied to the region's resources. In an attempt to understand the role of geography and resources in the region's crises, I ask the following questions: Which resources have been exploited in the ongoing crises? How did these resources complicate and impact the transformations that have come about? And what changes characterise the post-uprising moment?

The chapter first highlights the different resources of power in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, noting that mineral and economic wealth, demography and geographic location are three resources that helped shape the conflict. It investigates how these resources were exploited during and after the mass protests that have swept the region since 2010. As the analysis explores the geopolitical characteristics of the post-uprising moment, I argue that the chaotic transitions from the status quo brought about or intensified two significant changes: the mushrooming of non-state political armies, and the reconfiguration of regional and international alliances. Finally, the limits of these resources as well as states' inefficiencies in exploiting their assets at different moments are discussed with some concluding remarks on the region's future.

Resources and Power in the Middle East

Most writings on state power in international relations focus on material power, in particular economic output and military spending. Demographic power is often folded into those two measures as scholars contend that states with large populations can raise a significant workforce to produce more goods and fill the ranks of strong armies.^[1] While these theories have yielded fruitful insights into our knowledge of international dynamics, confining the role of population to that of production machines overlooks how human resources interact during times of instability to affect change.

Instead of focusing only on fossil and mineral wealth, this chapter adopts a broader view of resources that pays attention to the demographics and geostrategic power of regional parties. The analysis takes into account the degree to which a state exploits its share of these resources and how this has impacted its influence within the region. Most Gulf States enjoy high economic revenues from their oil-based rentier economies. Other countries are rich in their demographic component. While most of the Middle East features what is often referred to as a 'youth bulge', few countries have enjoyed strong institutions be they rooted in the state or civil society. Where these institutions existed, they acted as a bedrock for less chaotic transitions during acute moments of upheaval. Egypt, Morocco, Algeria,

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Turkey, and Tunisia are good examples where strong institutions applied the brakes against uncontrollable change. Finally, countries with geostrategic resources are those that enjoy a central geographic location that when coupled with a relatively well-educated population and economic power can play an extensive role in the political dynamics of their neighbourhoods. Turkey and Iran have been successful in mobilising their resources and expanding their influence in the post-uprising era.

Economic Power

The region is home to some of the world's most important natural resources, especially fossil fuels. In 2015, Arab countries, which constitute only 5.2% of the world's population enjoyed 55.2% of the world's oil reserves and 27.5% of the world's natural gas reserves (Joint Arab Economic Report 2015). Yet the region suffers from internal economic imbalances with its overall wealth. Most of the natural energy assets are concentrated in the Arab Gulf and fewer in North African countries. And discrepancies exist between oil-rich and non-oil rich states, as well as within the oil-rich camp. This is reflected in country rankings on global economic indicators. For instance, the 2016–2017 Global Competitiveness Report shows that the region's economic achievers, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar, rank at 16 and 18 respectively (Global Competitiveness Report 2016–2017, 4). While Israel and Turkey, two non-oil rich countries ranked at 24 and 56, respectively, higher than Saudi Arabia (29) and Iran (76). Egypt ranked at 115 while Yemen ranked last at 138.^[2] These imbalances indicate that few oil-rich countries were able to move from rentier to productive economies.

The region is also home to some of the highest rates of income inequality in the world. Recent studies find that in the Middle East, income accruing to the top 10% income share reaches 61%, and the top 1% share exceeds 25%, compared to 20% in the United States, 11% in Western Europe, and 17% in South Africa (Alvaredo and Piketty 2014). Not only has the region been a relatively high-inequality place, but economic opportunities have been limited to a select number of individuals. Research on stock markets in Bahrain, Lebanon, Egypt, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates shows that the largest 20 companies in each country were not listed on the stock exchange (Ghassan Omet 2005). By and large, the biggest companies' boards of directors have been staffed with high-ranking government officials and royal family members (Ghassan Omet 2005). These indicators are telling when examining the extent to which average citizens have access to state resources, especially revenues from hydrocarbon wealth or other rents-based enterprises.

In addition to limited access to resources, citizens in the region face inefficient bureaucracies with rampant corruption levels. According to one report by Transparency International, government officials, tax officials and Members of Parliament are seen as the most corrupt groups in the region (Global Corruption Barometer 2016). The skewed distribution of resources, coupled with limited access to economic opportunities and corruption impacts people's preferences during times of instability, making the once socially-prohibited choices more acceptable and legitimated.

Demographic Power

One of the region's strongest assets is its young population. According to the 2016 Arab Human Development Report (AHDR) young people between the ages of 15 and 29 make up nearly a third of Arab countries' population, and another third is below the age of fifteen (Arab Human Development Report 2016: Youth and the Prospects for Human Development in a Changing Reality). The percentage will probably be higher if one adds the youth in non-Arab highly populated countries such as Iran and Turkey.^[3] The share of this age category is considered the highest demographic percentage in the history of the region. And compared to earlier generations, the current youth strata are better educated, more connected and healthier (Arab Human Development Report 2016). These attributes make them seeds for development as well as destruction.

Economic development has often been tied to the availability of a well-trained, able population. But the Arab region is characterised by some of the lowest employment-to-population ratios in the world. MENA has been outpaced by other developing regions in terms of employment ratios. Figures from the International Labour Organisation show that the ratio has remained relatively constant between 1995 and 2015, rising from 44.1% to 46.8%. This figure is below the global average of 59.2% and lags behind the South-Eastern Asia and Pacific region 66.9% and sub-Saharan

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Africa's 65.0% in 2015 (Dimova, Elder, and Stephan 2016, 20). Youth in particular remain a challenged group when it comes to employment. While the global youth unemployment rate stood at 13% in 2014, the Middle East and North Africa regions witnessed the highest youth unemployment rates – 28.2% and 30.5%, respectively (International Labour Organisation 2015).

Politically, the majority of populations living in the region do not enjoy freedoms or security. Arab youth express a deep sense of discrimination and exclusion. They are insufficiently represented in public life and have no meaningful say in the shaping of policies that influence their lives (Arab Human Development Report 2016). At the same time, they are increasingly connected to the world through digital media. The MENA region ranks second in the world by number of daily YouTube video views, and the Gulf countries of Bahrain, Qatar, and UAE enjoy a 100% smartphone penetration to overall population, which is higher than the percentage for the US.^[4] This discrepancy between capabilities and opportunities present the region with a dilemma; on one hand, it has the human resources needed for development, but on the other, the very same source can feed destructive conflicts. As more demographic groups have access to education and global exposure to better quality of life standards, demands for change are harder to meet by inefficient and corrupt governments.

Geo-Political Power

Geopolitics is the analysis of geographic influences on power relations in international relations (Deudney 2006). The strength of a nation and its chances of survival are dependent to a great extent on geographic factors: location, size, shape, depth, climate, population and manpower, natural resources, industrial capacity, and social and political organisation (Boland III 1992). The strategic position and military potential of a nation depends on its location with respect to the major land and sea trade routes, and the development and extent of its external transportation system (Boland III 1992). Iran and Russia are two land powers, while Turkey and China enjoy more geopolitically advantageous territories because they are land and maritime powers. The limited access of land powers to maritime passages put constraints on their abilities to project influence. In the Middle East, the strategic significance of Turkey is in part a function of its location as a land bridge between Europe and Asia, and as a land barrier across the only outlet of the Black Sea. Egypt's geostrategic power emanates from its central location in the heart of the Middle East serving as a bridge between Africa, Asia, and Mediterranean Europe. Morocco enjoys significant maritime assets but is limited by its location on the outer part of the region. Iran's mountainous terrain had protected it from invasion for most of its history, but also limited its capacity to project power and influence. Historically, it has been more influential when its neighbouring countries face deep political crises. Its influence has been pending its ability to accrue significant wealth and military might or to exploit the weakness of its neighbours (Friedman 2016). This may explain the increasing role of Iran after the US invasion of Iraq and the collapse of Syria following the post-uprising civil war.

The Arab Uprisings and Resources: Blessings or Burdens

The mass political mobilisation that started in Tunisia in December 2010 brought to the fore deeply rooted calls for better governance, transparency and democracy. Governments' poor economic and political performance and failure to put sound distributive policies in place brought millions to the streets in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria. In other instances, exclusionary policies based on sectarian divisions alienated the majority of the population and prompted calls for regime change as in Bahrain. Five regional powers, all economically-rich, have followed interventionist policies in countries where uprisings erupted. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE, Turkey, and Iran meddled in the domestic politics of the six uprising countries. At the same time, the demographic and geographic assets of uprising countries played significant roles in shaping and limiting regional and international interventions.

To the extent that countries enjoyed developed institutions prior to the uprisings, regional and international interventions have been limited. In Egypt, Saudi Arabia supported Salafi groups while both Qatar and Turkey supported the Muslim Brotherhood. Turkey saw in the Muslim Brotherhood a vehicle that can market and replicate the Islamist neoliberal model of the Turkish ruling Justice and Development Party. Turkey's support for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt contributed to the rise of Islamists to the apex of power. But the Brotherhood's success was short-lived and the experience of Islamists in government soon came to an end with the aborted presidency of Mohamed Morsi.^[5] Despite the presence of regional and international interests to shape Egypt's future, foreign

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political intervention has been diluted by the interests of state institutions, especially the military which managed to build a coalition with other state institutions such as the police and the judiciary to prevent an overhaul of the state (Brown 2013, 2012). In Tunisia, the balance of power in civil society did not reflect a similar strength for Islamists as in the Egyptian case; a more secular civil society in Tunisia made Islamists' quest to rule less tenable. And when the lessons of the Muslim Brotherhood's ouster in Egypt reverberated through the region, the UGTT, Tunisia's labour union, emerged as the strongest institution that mediated through the country's tumultuous transition (Chayes 2014).

In other countries, mass protests had a more devastating impact on state and society. In Libya, the economic assistance soon shifted to a direct military intervention, while in Syria and Yemen foreign intervention was indirect through assisting militant groups. In Libya, where the demographic composition lacked strong institutions and was characterised by tribal divisions, the transition from the Qaddafi regime became protracted and violent. Both the Gulf petro dollars and the international quest for the country's oil resources played a role in the further fragmentation of the state. As the transition failed to produce a unified government, regional powers diverged on their support for local militias and ultimately supported two governments in the east and west parts of the country (Matar 2015). Petro-dollars also played a role in the Syrian conflict. Despite the relatively high levels of education of the population, the absence of strong state or civil society institutions opened the door for extensive intervention from the Gulf governments, Turkey, and Iran. Turkey, backed by Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE, facilitated the passage of foreign fighters through its borders. Iran on the other hand leveraged its influence on the Syrian Regime and Lebanon's strong Hezbollah to provide a steady stream of soldiers, arms and logistical support to the Assad regime.

In Yemen, the petro dollars of Saudi Arabia and UAE sustained the mobilisation against former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh for long months. Despite the tradition of Saudi influence over politics in Yemen, Saudi influence had its limits as Saleh was able to mobilise significant sectors of the well-armed population, and later exploit sectarian divisions to resist a complete transition of his regime. In Bahrain, both economic resources and geographic location made the uprising short-lived. The Gulf countries led by Saudi Arabia swiftly acted to prevent a movement that brought calls for regime change into their neighbourhood. That the Bahraini movement had a sectarian profile, which threatened a direct Iranian intervention into the Arab Gulf states, facilitated a unified position from the Gulf rulers against it.

The geography of instability plays a role in the duration of conflicts as well as chances for stability. While Tunisia's less strategic location has helped protect its domestic politics from interferences from regional and international powers, its borders have been challenged by arms transfers and militia movement from Libya. The porous borders often facilitate the transfer of arms and human power as in the case between Yemen and Oman,^[6] as well as the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza strip.

Regional Changes in the Twenty-First Century

Old Armies and New Armies

The decades of independence movements in the twentieth century brought about the rise of national armies in Middle Eastern politics. Fighting against colonial or invading powers, national armies led state-building processes. Conversely, the post-uprisings violence bears significant challenges to the states' institutions of force. In their efforts to defend social groups and reshape a new geopolitical map of the region, armed militias mostly target national standing armies.

The mushrooming of non-state armies finds ready supply of abled bodies in the disaffected youth. Economic dissatisfaction, political exclusion and ideological appeal are three factors that have contributed to the successful recruitment of young men and women into militias that pepper the military landscape of the region. Lack of employment opportunities is one indicator of the failure of national economies to respond to the economic needs of younger generations. The average rate of participation of youth in the workforce is close to 24%, which is the lowest regional average in the world. Meanwhile, the youth unemployment rate is the highest in the world, reaching almost 30% (Arab Human Development Report 2016). The shift to neoliberal economics that preceded the uprisings put limits on the state's provision of services, especially in terms of employment and housing. As a result, large numbers

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of urban residents have turned to the informal sector to make a living. And much of the informal employment has been physically and socially situated in an illicit world of violence and impunity (Davis 2009). With the collapse of states or decline in their abilities to provide law and order, venues of cooperation were made available among underground groups with their access to illegal trade routes and political militias. The product of this collusion has been well-organised networks that engage in illicit activity and carry on functions similar to mini-states including governance of territories under their rule, and conducting foreign-policy-like activities such as negotiating, baiting and providing security.

Political militias with sound funding from strong patrons, provide attractive employment opportunities for the impoverished and needy. Iran remains one of the biggest patrons of armed militias in the region. According to some reports Iran spends between \$100 million and \$200 million per year on Hezbollah, \$3.5 billion to \$15 billion per year in support of Syria's Assad Regime, \$12 million to \$26 million per year on Shiite militias in Syria and Iraq, and \$10 million to \$20 million per year to support Houthi rebels in Yemen (Howell 2015). While Iran's financial support of armed militia's remains an estimate, US reports show that the US has spent about \$1 billion over the Syrian crisis up till 2015.

On another level, the mobilisation effect of the uprisings ignited interests for political participation, but such political aspirations have not been met by dynamic and adapting political organisations. In countries undergoing political transition, youth show more interest in politics relative to older age-groups (Arab Human Development Report 2016). But retrenchment of old political elites, practices, and political organisations have increased the lack of confidence of young people in the democratic process. Compared with other social groups, this limits their participation in elections, thus deepening their deprivation. Lack of opportunities to improve the standard of living and authoritarian encroachments on political, economic and social freedoms produce conditions of possibility for adopting violence as a means for change and/or colluding with violent groups that promise better economic and/or social conditions.

But democratic institutions by themselves are not a sufficient condition for the prevention of violence. Ideological appeals that rely on violence as a means for change remain an attractive recruitment method for armed groups. Tunisia, the most successful case of democratic transition among the six uprising states, is the country of origin for the highest number of foreign fighters who migrated to Syria (Trofimov 2016). Extreme religious ideologies have been gaining ground and attracting not only the most economically needy or educationally limited but also the brightest.

Reconfiguration of Regional and International Alliances: New Alliances or Renewed Alliances

The uprisings burst at a time of relative regional political stability. Internationally, the US enjoyed dominance over most of the region's capitals. The Gulf countries and Egypt had been close US allies for decades, and the war on terror enabled the superpower to consolidate intelligence cooperation with Tunisia, Morocco, and Yemen. Russia on the other hand was losing much of its appeal – at least on the popular level – in two of its traditional allies: Libya and Syria. While Syria maintained some level of military relations given the Russian military base in Tartus, Libya's abandonment of a nuclear armament project was the result of successful negotiations with the UK and the US (Jentleson and Whytock 2006). The gradual shift towards market economy in the previously socialist-leaning Arab countries facilitated warming up to the US. The notable exception has been the failed US intervention in Iraq, which Iran is credited with making an unsuccessful adventure. Regionally, the Gulf countries remained a source for economic assistance to most troubled Arab economies including Egypt, whose military provided assurance for security against possible Iranian encroachment. As the uprisings' earlier calls for democracy and freedom metamorphosed into chaotic transitions, the upheaval disrupted stable relations, led to preference divergence among traditional partners and deepened grievances that were less pronounced under the status quo. The political shifts not only intensified the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, but also empowered the Russian role and set fractures into the US-led alliances.

The US-led alliance which traditionally included Egypt, the Gulf monarchies, and Turkey has been tested by the political reconfigurations of the post-uprising moment. On one level, the Egyptian and Gulf positions have diverged on the crisis in Syria and Yemen. Egypt not only opts to refrain from the interventionist role played by Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, and Turkey, but also has kept communication channels open with the Assad regime. The Egyptian

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policy of restraint was even more pronounced in the Yemeni crisis where Saudi Arabia has been leading its first regional war. Egyptian-Saudi Relations have strained over the Egyptian military's decision to play a minimal role in the war against forces led by Ali Abdullah Saleh and the Houthis in Yemen.^[7] The Yemeni crisis exposed the limits of Saudi power and increased Iranian influence over more territories in the region. While the war may help build stronger state institutions in Saudi Arabia, the more immediate negative repercussions are evident in the country's economic position. According to reports, the Saudi government tight-fisted its budget for 2016, reflecting scaled-back revenue expectations and lower spending on subsidies because of sinking oil prices and the war in Yemen. The kingdom has been witnessing its first deficit in almost two decades (Habboush 2015). The kingdom is also losing some of its relative leverage in global oil markets due to its decision to forgo its historic role of swing producer and actually ramp up production despite increase in global oil output.^[8] Meanwhile, Iran's ability to alter the balance of power in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon is now extended to Yemen. In each of these cases, Tehran was able to spread its influence by cultivating non-state actors and militant groups, and exploiting the fears and grievances of religious minorities, namely Shiite Arabs (Sadjadpour and Ben Taleblu 2015). Iran's influence has been possible during times of fragmentation and governments' political weakness. Iran also benefited from its nuclear deal with the West, as well as from cooperation with Russia especially on the Iraqi and Syrian crises.^[9]

On another level, US-Turkish relations have been strained by their diverging positions on the Kurdish involvement in Syria, especially the fight against the radical forces of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Turkey, powerhouse of the Middle East and NATO member, has relied on its strategic position and pragmatist foreign policy to maintain open channels with warring sides. It has maintained strong relations with Saudi Arabia without alienating Iran. It has mobilised against the Assad regime yet still was able to rebuild broken bridges with Russia. Its effort to work with both Iran and Russia to find a political solution to the Syrian crisis threatens a lesser impact for the US and its Gulf allies.

As old alliances fracture, new ones are bound to emerge. The positioning of Iran in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen, its rapprochement with Russia and Turkey, in addition to increasing economic relations with European counterparts following its UN nuclear deal, are threats to Israeli's security as much as to Saudi Arabia's. Iran, with its nuclear deal has more access and opportunities to emerge as a global player. While its relationship with the US may be more in doubt under the new Trump administration and increasing right-wing populism in the US, its relationship with Europe is a much smoother sail. That both Saudi Arabia and Israel see a common enemy in radical violent religious movements such as ISIL but a much bigger enemy in the rise of Iran, may produce conditions of possibility for enhancing security cooperation between the two states, albeit on a more covert level.

Conclusion: The Region in the Post-Uprising Moment

Numerous writings have claimed the failure of states as a result of the uprisings and how they have led to destruction, yet such analyses may be missing an important aspect in the emergence of violent actors: the role of strong capable states in creating these irregular militias. The strength of armed militias could not have endured but for sustained support from patron states. Iran fostered Hezbollah and al-Hashd al-Shaabi in Iraq. The emergence of ISIL, Jabhat al-Nusra and other militias that are active in Syria could not have been possible without the opened borders of Turkey, Lebanon, and Iran, logistical support from Turkey and the US and funding from all of the above. Wielding an unmistakable will and power, the Turkish government kept its borders between Europe and Syria accessible to thousands of foreign fighters. With the fall of the Qaddafi regime in Libya, stashes of arms were lifted from the North African embattled state to the conflict in Syria. The flow of human bodies across the Turkish and Iranian borders was paralleled by adequate funding from oil-rich countries, all under the supervision of the US and Russia.

While the region's conflicts have highlighted the irregular armies model and its impact on the destruction of nation-states, the region still experiences the old pattern of irregular armies that fight to establish nation-states. That Kurdish forces fighting in Syria is a case in point. Their fight against ISIL not only aims to curry favour with the US, but is also a campaign to showcase its nationalism and capability of statehood.

The uprisings exposed the extent to which ideational sources, in particular religious rhetoric, wield power over

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demographic groups especially the youth in the region. The political mobilisation of the uprisings may have given power to radical political groups, but it did not create them. The jihadi ideology has existed since the mid-1970s, and despite some efforts to eradicate it, it persevered for various domestic reasons, with external military intervention in the region providing further stimulation (Pape 2005).

Youth are also the victims of wars and violence. More than 13 million children, equivalent to around 40% of all school-age children in the region, are being deprived of a school education because of conflict. Current estimates indicate that the number of inhabitants living in countries vulnerable to conflict in the Arab region is expected to rise from around 250 million in 2010 to over 350 million in 2020 (Arab Human Development Report 2016: Youth and the Prospects for Human Development in a Changing Reality).

The Arab uprisings may have exposed the extent to which the current interests of regional and international parties diverged from old contracts/alliances but the uprisings have not created them. Egypt's re-alliance with Russia has been fuelled by its military's desire to diversify sources of armament beyond the US. Turkey's re-orientation towards Iran, Russia, and Islamic states in Central Asia reflects a deep interest to direct its economic and geostrategic power to gain influence in neighbouring Asia and not to confine its movement to European and Western circles. The post-uprising moment may bring geography more power to bear on political configurations in the Middle East than before.

Notes

[1] For more on how state power is measured in the International Relations literature see (Kennedy 1987; Mearsheimer 2014).

[2] The World Economic Forum defines competitiveness as the set of institutions, policies and factors that determine the level of productivity of an economy. For more on the indicators see (Global Competitiveness Report 2016–2017)

[3] The United Nations defines youth as individuals of ages 15–24 years, but the Arab Human Development Reports (ADHR) 2016 report employs a wider definition of youth, which stretches across ages 15–29 so as to reflect the prolonged transitions to adulthood faced by many young men and women in the Arab region.

[4] These three Gulf countries rank higher than the US at 80% penetration to population. For more on the digitisation of the MENA see (Benni *et al.* 2016).

[5] The Muslim Brother's failure to build a lasting coalition from the revolutionary forces in addition to its challenging of state institutions increased public discontent. The Islamist president Mohamed Morsi was ultimately removed by the Egyptian military in the wake of another mass mobilisation in the summer of 2013. For more on how the Muslim Brotherhood managed challenges while ruling Egypt, see (Hanna 2013).

[6] Some reports indicate that the porous Omani borders with Yemen have been used as safe routes to transfer arms from Iran to Yemeni militias fighting Saudi Arabia. For more on US claims about Oman's role in the Yemeni crisis, see (Bayoumy and Stewart 2016)

[7] In Yemen, the transition soon gave way to a civil war where opposing sides sought support from the regions' oil powers. Refusing to give up on his political power, the country's former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, a long-time ally of the US and Saudi Arabia aimed to boost his position by playing the sectarian card and inviting Iran into the Yemeni crisis.

[8] In addition, US shale oil production is putting limits to Saudi Arabia's power. For more on Saudi Arabia's financial challenges see (Daiss 2016).

[9] Both Iran and Russia reflected stronger support for their allies, a trait that is much appreciated by most regimes in the Arab world whose domestic legitimacy is not only in doubt but also in flux after the uprisings. Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force (IRGC-QF) Commander, Qassem Soleimani, reportedly said: 'We're not like

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the Americans. We don't abandon our friends' (Sadjadpour and Ben Taleblu 2015).

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