



# DURHAM MIDDLE EAST PAPERS

ISRAEL AND THE COUNTERREVOLUTIONARIES:  
GAUGING TEL AVIV'S EVOLVING REGIONAL  
ALLIANCES AFTER THE ARAB UPRISINGS

**Jonathan A. Hoffman**  
Durham Middle East Paper No. 102

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INSTITUTE FOR MIDDLE EASTERN AND ISLAMIC STUDIES

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*“What is happening in practice with Arab states has never happened in our history, even when we signed peace agreements. In practice, cooperation in different ways and at different levels isn’t necessarily above the surface, but what is below the surface is far greater than at any other period in Israel’s history. It is a huge change.”<sup>1</sup>*

Benjamin Netanyahu, 2017.

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His work has been featured in Middle East Policy, Open Democracy, Responsible Statecraft, and other platforms. His research focuses on Middle East geopolitics and political Islam. Twitter: @Hoffman8Jon.

## INTRODUCTION

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The Middle East has witnessed an unprecedented high-level rapprochement between the state of Israel and the regional regimes that have sought to quell the tide of popular activism that erupted during the 2011 Arab Uprisings. The shared desire of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), post-2013 Egypt, and Israel to dominate the regional balance of power and return to the pre-uprisings status quo has resulted in a burgeoning ad-hoc alliance. This “Counterrevolutionary Bloc” (CRB) is also predicated on shared geopolitical and security concerns, and is opposed to the other two primary

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ad-hoc regional alliances that have emerged: the bloc represented by Qatar and Turkey who have both sought greater independence in their foreign policies, and that of Iran and its regional proxies/allies. This metastasizing “entente” between the three Arab states of the CRB and Israel is informal and driven by political and military elites. It is argued herein that Israeli political and military elites continue to perceive the currents released by the 2011 Arab Uprisings in the same manner as elites in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt: as a serious threat to their national security and regional interests. As will be shown, Israel has worked hand-in-hand with the Arab states of the CRB in the joint effort to squash calls for democracy and popular legitimacy; crush political Islam; and push back against rivals Turkey, Qatar, and Iran.

Revolutions are central to world affairs and the construction of contemporary international order, and the 2011 Arab Uprisings are no different.<sup>2</sup> By abruptly altering the political landscape and challenging the existing status quo, revolutions can “cause sudden shifts in the balance of power, alter the pattern of international alignments, cast doubt on existing agreements

and diplomatic norms, and provide inviting opportunities for other states to improve their positions.”<sup>3</sup> Moreover, revolutions also challenge existing conceptualizations of political and social order and often inspire peoples across national borders, threatening the authority and legitimacy of elites in other countries as well. Due to this challenge to the existing status quo and the geopolitical restructuring that often takes place

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following revolutions, they can serve to dramatically increase the intensity of security competition between the new revolutionary regime and other states, as well as between third party countries who often fear that a rival state could “take advantage of the revolution in order to improve its own position.”<sup>4</sup> This heightening of both domestic and foreign threat perceptions becomes particularly acute when, instead of a single revolutionary episode, a revolutionary wave – groups of revolutions with similar objectives – rapidly emerges and several surrounding states witness mass mobilization in rapid succession to one another.<sup>5</sup> Such a phenomenon, as evidenced during the 2011 Arab Uprisings, can serve to considerably alter a region’s strategic landscape.

It is within this dramatically altered strategic landscape that the “Counterrevolutionary Bloc” (CRB) consisting of Israel, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and post-2013 Egypt has materialized. Counterrevolution refers to the policies and efforts pursued by status quo powers “designed to prevent revolutionary movements that have already gained some momentum from coming to power.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, counterrevolutions represent “collective and reactive efforts to defend the status quo and its varied range of dominant elites against a credible threat to overturn them from below.”<sup>7</sup> However, since revolutions can also alter the international political landscape via geopolitical restructuring, counterrevolution must therefore be understood as more than just an active opposition to revolutionary mass mobilization from below.

Indeed, counterrevolution must also be thought of as the process by which status quo powers hedge against those states that seek to capitalize on the upheavals in order to challenge existing norms and structures and advance their own geostrategic interests. Such a counterrevolutionary ethos – which often results in the generation of alliances with other states centered around regime

preservation and power projection – should therefore be thought of as a collective endeavor to contain three principal threats: normative, ideological, and strategic.<sup>8</sup> It is this collective counterrevolutionary endeavor that serves as the foundation of the CRB in the Middle East following the eruption of regional mass mobilization in 2011.

Despite the absence of official diplomatic relations between the state of Israel and the two Gulf Arab states of the CRB – Saudi Arabia and the UAE – political and military elites within each of these countries have come to view expanded collaboration in the wake of the Arab Uprisings as a lucrative strategy for the advancement of mutual strategic interests at both the domestic and regional levels. Unofficial cooperation between these states before the Arab Uprisings – which primarily centered around shared antipathy for Iran – was predominantly conducted behind-the-scenes in order to avoid popular backlashing amongst Arab publics. However, in the period following the eruption of regional mass mobilization in 2011, these relationships have grown exponentially and are becoming increasingly overt in nature as political and military elites in each of these countries continue to perceive the currents unleashed by the uprisings as an existential threat to their interests. As suggested by the quotation above by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, this cooperation is unprecedented both

in terms of degree and publicity. The matter of Palestine – which has traditionally served as a serious point of regional contention and therefore a barrier to rapprochement – has largely been abrogated as political and military elites in these countries continue to prioritize regime interests above anything else. Therefore, this high-level cooperation should not be viewed as organic bottom-up normalization between the Zionist state and Arab publics, but rather a top-down imposition by which popular opinion and the objections of the Palestinian people are sidelined. In other words, this superficial “normalization” is one of political convenience between governmental elites that has its foundations in the overbearing shared priorities of regime preservation and regional power projection.

Critical to the formation of this ad-hoc coalition was the central role played by the United States, particularly under the Trump administration. Indeed, the efforts of all CRB actors have converged in their joint desire to influence Washington in favor of their regional policies, and the U.S. continues to push for “top-down” normalization with Israel in the region that sidelines popular Arab will and the plight of the Palestinians. The persistent external support provided by Washington for the counterrevolutionaries has granted them near-impunity in the pursuit of their respective domestic and regional policies. Undergird by firm support from the United States,

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this expanding alliance has already begun to influence several major regional flashpoints, including the ongoing rift within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the blockade of Qatar, the sidelining of the Palestinian issue and the introduction of the United States’ proposed “peace plan” for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the fallout after the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, the Saudi-Iran and Israel-Iran rivalries, the role of political Islam within the region, the regional prospects for democracy, and more. Understanding the role of unwavering American support for these actors is therefore paramount to comprehending the new regional reality that has emerged in the nine years since the 2011 uprisings. The purpose of this research is to examine the roots of this ad-hoc alliance, how it is dramatically reshaping the region’s strategic landscape in the period following the Arab Uprisings, the central role of the United States, and the durability of this partnership moving forward.

### *Israel, the Counterrevolutionaries, and the Arab Uprisings*

The tide of mass mobilization unleashed during what is now termed the “Arab Uprisings” threatened to upend the regional status quo that has for decades violently suppressed calls for political, economic, and social reform. The origins of the “Counterrevolutionary Bloc” (CRB) began with the allied effort of Saudi Arabia and the UAE in 2011 to quell these popular uprisings. Their purpose was two-fold: to prevent a popular democratic paradigm from emerging and preserve the regional authoritarian status quo, and to prevent their adversaries from gaining geopolitically through the vacuums that would emerge following the collapse of the various longstanding autocrats. Of particular concern for these regimes was the initial empowerment of popular Islamist groups, especially the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and its various regional offshoots, whom they view as an existential threat to their own domestic authority and legitimacy.<sup>9</sup> For example, both this fear of democracy and popular political Islamist movements is why these states fervently supported the 2013 military coup in Egypt that removed MB President Mohamed Morsi and installed General Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, who would then join in their counterrevolutionary campaign. The primary objective of this new counterrevolutionary bloc would be to preserve the status quo by crushing any and all calls for change, both secular and Islamist alike.

Israel viewed the eruption of popular protests and the forces that they could unleash in a similar, pessimistic fashion. This is due to the fact that Israel is also a status quo power in the sense that it too fears the emergence of popular democratic paradigm, the power vacuums that would emerge if established autocrats were overthrown, and the possible rise of political Islamist groups in their wake. The Arab Uprisings were threatening to Israeli political and military elites because they shook the “foundations of Israel’s reliance upon a regional status quo that, even before the invasion of Iraq [2003],” had long served the interests of the Zionist state.<sup>10</sup> In other words, the interests of Israel’s political-military elite were challenged because they “depend, in very large measure, on the maintenance in power of undemocratic Arab regimes,” for democracy in the Arab world “would be a grave threat to Israel’s regional dominance and freedom of action.”<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the approach of the Israeli political-military elite was overwhelmingly realist and counterrevolutionary in nature in order to preserve preexisting regional power structures that have largely operated in their favor.

Israeli presents itself as a haven for democracy within a “tough neighborhood” of authoritarianism and inherent violence and backwardness. For example, Israel’s first prime minister David Ben Gurion once said “we [Israel] live in the twentieth century, they [Arabs] in the fifteenth,” and stressed that Israel

represents a “modern society...in the midst of a medieval world.”<sup>12</sup> Israel is “not a Middle Eastern state, it is a Western state,” he once claimed.<sup>13</sup> A similar message has been echoed by Former Defense Minister of Israel Ehud Barak has often referred to the country as “a villa in a jungle,” and an “oasis fortress in a desert” to describe Israel’s relationship with its Arab neighbors.<sup>14</sup> In his book *A Place Among Nations: Israel and the World*, current Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu argues that “violence is ubiquitous in the political life of all Arab countries. It is the primary method of dealing with opponents, both foreign and domestic, both Arab and non-Arab.”<sup>15</sup> As Avi Shlaim has argued previously, such a worldview as espoused by these officials has “translated into a geostrategic conception” in which the Zionist state is “permanently locked into an alliance with the West against the ‘backward’ East.”<sup>16</sup>

However, despite the rhetoric espoused by these figures, it is argued herein that Israel remains averse to the prospects of democratic transition within the Middle East and actually benefits from the lack of democracy in the region for several reasons. First, Israel fears that popular governments in the region accountable to their people would be more demanding in the fight for Palestinian rights and a genuine settlement to the Israel-Palestine conflict. Arab public opinion remains firmly in support of the plight of

the Palestinians. Although the 2011 uprisings were spurred by demands for political, social, and economic justice, the symbolism of Palestine was often on display during these demonstrations: “sympathy and support for the Palestinian cause was a common feature of the popular demonstrations as clearly manifested in the waving of Palestinian flags and scarves, in their slogans, and in the pronouncement of their spokesmen.”<sup>17</sup>

The possibility of a popular government coming to power in a country such as Jordan – where the Hashemite regime rules over a Palestinian-majority population – was cause for great alarm among Israel’s elite. Second, Israel benefits from a lack of democracies in the region when attempting to garner external support. By portraying itself as a Western country devoted to democracy in a neighborhood of authoritarianism and backwardness, Israel aims to present itself as the most – perhaps only – regional state actor capable of working with other Western democracies. However, if other countries were able to establish themselves as functioning democracies, Israel fears that they may prove to be attractive new allies for Western states in the region.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, from the viewpoint of Israel’s political-military elite, stability is “procured by working with dictators whereas democracy is associated with uncertainty and high risks.”<sup>19</sup>

“THIS FEAR WAS EXPRESSED BY FIGURES SUCH AS BENJAMIN NETANYAHU...”

Israel was also concerned by the possibility of possible popular political Islamist groups coming to power in the vacuums created by the downfall of different regimes. As Amour explains, the Israelis were concerned that regime collapse in places like Egypt – and possibly Jordan – and their replacement with more Islamist-aligned powers could alter the balance of power in the region whereby these states assume a much more hostile foreign policy towards Tel Aviv, or even annul previous peace treaties.<sup>20</sup> Popular political Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood – and its offshoots, such as Hamas – remain profoundly opposed to Israel and its policies concerning both the Palestinians and the broader region, and the thought of this organization ascending to power alarmed elite circles in Israel.

This fear was expressed by figures such as Benjamin Netanyahu, who warned it was possible “Egypt will go in the direction of Iran,” and another official stating “when some people in the West see what’s happening in Egypt, they see Europe 1989...we see it as Tehran 1979.”<sup>21</sup> Therefore, a reversal of the status quo and the emergence of regional democracy in either a secular or more religious form was viewed as anathema to the interests of the Israeli elite, just as it was to elite circles in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and post-2013 Egypt.

In addition to their shared desire to quell the tide of popular activism in the region, the other central element to the rapprochement between Israel and the Arab states of the CRB following the uprisings has been their combined efforts to preserve geopolitical dominance and hedge against shared state adversaries who sought to benefit from the revolutionary wave. Of particular concern for these regimes was the perceived expansion of Iranian influence in the years following the uprisings.<sup>22</sup> This apprehension became especially acute following the outbreak of civil war in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen and the proliferation of different Iranian-supported entities. The signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) between Iran and the P5+1 in 2015 compounded this sense of alarm within elite circles of the CRB. In conjunction with this fear of perceived Iranian expansionism was the shared indignation within the CRB for the more independent foreign policies undertaken by Qatar and Turkey concerning the Arab Uprisings.

Throughout the uprisings and their aftermath, both Qatar and Turkey sought to carve out their own distinct foreign policies and expand their influence by primarily supporting the Muslim Brotherhood and its regional offshoots. In direct contrast to the policies adopted by the CRB, the support given to the Brotherhood by Qatar and Turkey represented a significant threat to both the domestic and regional interests of the counterrevolutionaries. As will be illustrated below, Israel has worked concomitantly with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and post-2013 Egypt not only to preserve the regional status quo, but also hedge against those states that sought to alter the regional balance of power.

### *Evolving Alliances of Convenience*

There have been myriad indications of a strategic, high-level rapprochement between Israel and the three Arab states of the CRB following the wave of revolutions that swept throughout the region in 2011. This is despite the lack of formal diplomatic relations between the Zionist state and the two Gulf states of the CRB – Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The evolving entente between these counterrevolutionary actors is unmistakably evidenced in the discourse adopted by political and military elites in these countries. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has continued to openly reference these increasing ties, claiming that Israel’s ties with Arab states are “improving beyond imagination.”<sup>23</sup> Further, he has publicly argued that shared interests between Israel and these Arab states has led the latter to “recognize that Israel is not their enemy,” and “overcome their historic animosities and build new relationships, new friendships, new hopes.”<sup>24</sup> Likewise, Israeli Intelligence Minister, Israel Katz, has openly called for greater cooperation with the Gulf Arab states in security and other areas based on common interests.<sup>25</sup> Similar statements emphasizing cooperation have been made by Arab elites. UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash has publicly called for greater Arab openness to Israel and criticized the policy of Arab states not having contact with Israel.<sup>26</sup> Abdullah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, UAE Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, tweeted an article published by *The Spectator* magazine arguing that a “reformation” is currently taking place within Islam through the formation of an “Arab-Israeli alliance.”<sup>27</sup> This was then retweeted by Israeli PM Netanyahu, who added “I welcome closer relations between Israel and many Arab states. The time has come for normalization and peace.”<sup>28</sup>

In addition to these public statements emphasizing cooperation, there have also been a number of more tangible examples of this evolving alliance. Security ties between Israel and the Arab states of the CRB have increased dramatically throughout the post-uprisings period. Instances of direct military cooperation include the participation of the Israeli and UAE air forces in training exercises with various other countries in 2016, 2017, and 2019.<sup>29</sup> Coupled with these training exercises have been coordinated military operations between Israel, Egypt, and the UAE in the Sinai Peninsula. The UAE has provided military personnel to help train Egyptian ground forces, while Israel has provided extensive air support and intelligence assistance for the ground operations.<sup>30</sup> Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu has also threatened to directly intervene militarily in support of Saudi Arabia and the UAE if Iran were to block the Bab el-Mandeb strait off the coast of Yemen, which links the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, in Egypt, Israel has been conducting a covert air campaign against militants in the Sinai Peninsula in coordination

with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi.<sup>32</sup> In their joint efforts against the militants, Israel has allowed the Egyptian military to deploy into areas that defy the security appendix of the Camp David Accords.<sup>33</sup> This is in addition to the shared disdain between the El-Sisi regime and Israel for Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

Egypt remains wary of Hamas due to its roots in the Muslim Brotherhood, has kept the Sinai border crossing with Gaza largely sealed off and has begun building concrete walls around the strip, and has coordinated with Israel in the deconstruction and flooding of the vast tunnel networks running between the Gaza Strip and the Sinai.<sup>34</sup> Direct security cooperation between Egypt and Israel will likely increase now that Tel Aviv recently began exporting troves of natural gas to Cairo, in what has been described by Israeli Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz as “the start of the most significant cooperation ever between Israel and Egypt, in energy and economy, since the peace treaty.”<sup>35</sup> Such direct security and economic cooperation serves to also help uphold the peace treaty between these two countries, which keeps money flowing from the U.S. into the Egyptian military’s pocket.

There has also been a notable increase in the transfer/sale of security systems from Israel to the Gulf states of the CRB. However, since there are no official relations between Israel and the Gulf Arab

states, concrete statistics concerning security assistance – and trade more generally – are not recorded and are often difficult to quantify. Despite this, according to a 2018 report by the Tony Blair Institute, the estimated volume of indirect exports – in which security assets delivered via third party countries or corporations would be included – is considered to be roughly \$1 billion annually, which would make the Gulf the third-largest Israeli export market.<sup>36</sup> There have been numerous reports of behind-the-scenes exports of security assistance from Israel to both the UAE and Saudi Arabia. To help with their campaign in Yemen, Israel has reportedly provided the UAE with drones and granted them access to the “Israeli-built Eros B satellite system and its high-resolution imagery.”<sup>37</sup> Israel has also reportedly sold drones to Saudi Arabia via South Africa in 2016.<sup>38</sup> Also significant are the allegations that the Israelis have been helping Saudi Arabia spy on and track internal dissidents, including slain journalist Jamal Khashoggi. A lawsuit filed by Omar Abdulaziz, an associate of Jamal Khashoggi, follows parallel suits by journalist, activists, and others charging that the Israeli ‘NSO Group’ helps Saudi Arabia in its campaign to silence Saudi dissidents both at home and abroad.<sup>39</sup>

Formal and informal meetings and consultations between high-profile Israeli and Arab elites have also grown considerably over the past several of years. For example, in

October 2018, the Chief of Staff of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), Lt. General Gadi Eisenkot, met with his Saudi counterpart, General Fayyad bin Hamid al-Ruwayli, on the sidelines of the U.S. government-sponsored Counter-Violent Extremist Organizations Conference, in what was “the first-ever publicized meeting between high-ranking Israeli and Saudi officials.”<sup>40</sup> Later in 2018, both the head of Israel’s Labour Party, Avi Gabbay, and Israeli Foreign Minister, Israel Katz, visited the UAE to discuss regional security issues and Arab-Israeli relations.<sup>41</sup> A central topic at these two gatherings was how to combat what Katz referred to as “the Iranian threat.” Indeed, a major facilitator of the increase in formal and informal contacts between Israel and the Arab states of the CRB has been the joint desire of these actors to coordinate a collective response to the perceived broadening of Iranian regional influence. Immediately following the signing of the JCPOA in 2015, Netanyahu reportedly met directly with Emirati leaders in Cyprus to discuss how to tackle Iran.<sup>42</sup> Such meetings have continued and have increasingly been facilitated by the U.S. under President Donald Trump. For example, in December 2019, the White House convened a meeting between Israeli National Security Advisor, Meir Ben-Shabbat, and the Emirati Ambassador to the U.S. Yousef al-Otaiba to discuss countering Iranian influence in the Middle East and the possibility of advancing a non-aggression pact between Israel

and the UAE.<sup>43</sup> Perhaps the greatest U.S. effort to help assemble an anti-Iran coalition was by bringing together Israel, the Arab states of the CRB, and other regional/global actors for the 2019 Warsaw Conference in Poland. Originally billed by U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo as a conference meant to combat “Iran’s influence and terrorism in the region,”<sup>44</sup> the assembly was a first of its kind: a formal, publicly-recognized congregation of Israeli and Arab elites, as well as other global powers, in the attempt to present a unified front within the broader Middle East.

Notably absent from the 2019 Warsaw Conference were Qatar and Turkey. As previously mentioned, all actors within the Counterrevolutionary Bloc resented and sought to push back against Turkish and Qatari support for the Muslim Brotherhood and its acolytes during and after the regional uprisings. Angered by their more “adventurist” foreign policies, the Arab states of the CRB instituted a land, air, and naval blockade of Qatar in 2017 (still in place today), and denounced Turkey’s regional strategy as imperialist and an attempt to “reinstate the Islamic Caliphate.”<sup>45</sup> Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman described Turkey, Iran, and the Muslim Brotherhood as the “triangle of evil.”<sup>46</sup> The Israelis have similarly found themselves on the same side of this geopolitical divide as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and post-2013 Egypt. Indeed, Israel too has sought to hedge against both Qatar

and Turkey, albeit to less of an extent than its coordinated efforts with the Arab states of the CRB to impede Iran’s regional activities.

Following the blockade of Qatar, several Israeli political and military officials took to Twitter and other media outlets to express their support for the action. Michael Oren, former Israeli ambassador to the United States, wrote “new line drawn in the Middle Eastern sand. No longer Israel against Arabs but Israel and Arabs against Qatar-financed terror.”<sup>47</sup> Avigdor Lieberman, former Israeli Defense Minister, described the rift as an “opportunity for cooperation” between Israel and the Arab states that instituted the blockade in their joint efforts against “terrorism.”<sup>48</sup> Similar notions were echoed by the Director-General of Israel’s Intelligence Ministry, Chagai Tzuriel, who described Qatar as a “pain in the [expletive]” of the “pragmatic” Sunni camp (here referring to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt), and former chairman of the Labour Party, Isaac Herzog, who argued Qatar “funds terrorism against the Western world and Israel in particular.”<sup>49</sup> Roughly a month after the launch of the blockade, Netanyahu called for the closure of Qatari-based Al-Jazeera’s Jerusalem office, echoing Saudi, Emirati, and Egyptian arguments that the platform and its journalists “incite violence.”<sup>50</sup> Qatar also remains home to multiple leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood – including its spiritual guide Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi – who continue to be resoundingly critical of Israel’s policies towards the Palestinians and Arab rapprochement with the Zionist state. Important to note, however, is the level of pragmatic engagement between Israel and Qatar over the situation in Gaza.

As Clive Jones argues, “its protestations of Qatar’s support for a range of militant groups notwithstanding, Israel knew that Qatar had an influential role to play in the Gaza Strip, not least in the payment of salaries to Palestinians and the funding of infrastructure projects...while previously Qatar was accused of sending money and material to Hamas, it remained the only actor whose immediate largesse was of a magnitude sufficient to prevent the total collapse of the Gaza economy following the September 2018 announcement by the Trump Administration that it was ceasing all aid to the United Nations Work and Relief Agency (UNWRA).”<sup>51</sup> Therefore, as opposed to the active coordination with the Arab states of the CRB, Israel’s engagement with Qatar should instead be viewed as a form of wary cooperation driven by the necessity to prevent total collapse of the Gazan economy.

Like the Arab states of the CRB, Israel has also increasingly found itself at loggerheads with Turkey over its regional policies. In addition to its support for more Islamist-aligned actors during and after the uprisings, Turkey continues to regularly condemn Israel’s subjugation of the Palestinians,

accusing the country of genocide and behaving like a “terrorist state.”<sup>52</sup> Turkish officials have also begun levying strong criticism at both Saudi Arabia and the UAE for their neglect of the Palestinian cause and cozying up to the Israelis.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, similar to Qatar, multiple leaders and members of the Muslim Brotherhood have fled to Turkey after the regional crackdown against the organization, and many of these individuals continue to advocate for their cause while in exile.<sup>54</sup> In response, Israel has echoed the claims made by its Arab allies that Turkey’s agenda in the region is “imperialist” in nature.<sup>55</sup> Israeli officials have accused Turkey of allowing Hamas to recruit in and plan attacks from Turkish territory, and has lobbied the U.S. to sanction Turkey as it has Iran for its alleged support for “terrorism” in the region.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, following Turkey’s announcement of a maritime agreement between Ankara and the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya which seeks to create an exclusive economic zone from Turkey’s southern Mediterranean to Libya’s northern coast, Israel and Egypt have launched the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EGMS) in order to combat what they view as Turkish aggression.<sup>57</sup> This has culminated in, for the first time in history, the Israeli military formally labeling Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s regional policies as a challenge to Israeli interests in its 2020 annual intelligence report.<sup>58</sup>

The burgeoning rapprochement

between Israel, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and post-2013 Egypt is most evident in the approach being undertaken by the three Arab states concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Elites within the three Arab states of the CRB have been the primary drivers behind attempts at top-down, high-level “normalization” with the state of Israel that ultimately sidelines popular Arab opinion and the objections of the Palestinian people. In other words, due to the shared political concerns among Israeli, Saudi, Emirati, and Egyptian elites in the wake of the uprisings the issue of Palestine has come to be viewed by these actors as nothing more than impediment to the advancement of their mutual agendas. As Palestinian activist Kamel Hawwash argues, “our [Gulf] Arab brothers...have stabbed us in the front and the back, abandoning us politically while embracing Israel.”<sup>59</sup>

This “embrace” – which is designed to bypass both popular sentiment and a genuine settlement to the Palestine question – is most evident in the measures adopted by Saudi Arabia under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS). The Crown Prince made global headlines when, in an interview in the U.S. with *The Atlantic*, he openly recognized the right of Israelis to “their own land,” stressed that the two countries share common interests, and expressed his desire for further cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Israel.<sup>60</sup> During this same trip to the U.S.,

**“THE SAUDI GOVERNMENT HAS ALSO RECENTLY EMBARKED ON AN INTERNAL ARREST CAMPAIGN...”**

MbS reportedly attended a closed-door meeting in New York with the heads of several U.S.-based Jewish organizations where he allegedly blasted the Palestinians, arguing that “in the last several decades the Palestinian leadership has missed one opportunity after the other and rejected all the peace proposals it was given. It is about time the Palestinians take the proposals and agree to come to the negotiations table or shut up and stop complaining.”<sup>61</sup> While it is difficult to verify the veracity of these reports, the message portrayed fits with the current broader stance of the Arab states within the CRB towards the Palestinians. The Saudi government has also recently embarked on an internal arrest campaign against Saudi nationals and Palestinian and Jordanian expatriates over charges of being affiliated with Hamas.<sup>62</sup>

In May 2019, the Saudi newspaper *Makkah* published a list of 40 Islamic figures around the world who it characterized as “terrorists” influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood. Among them were Hamas founder Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, former leader Khaled Meshaal, current leader Ismail Haniya, and the groups military commanders Mohammad al-Deif and Yahya al-Sinwar.<sup>63</sup> Other Saudi media outlets, bloggers, and columnists have also increasingly begun lambasting Hamas, accusing it of being an agent of Iran, Turkey,

and Qatar, while encouraging Israel to defend itself against “terrorism.”<sup>64</sup>

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu himself has recognized the success of this high-level “normalization” with Arab elites without having to make meaningful concessions to the Palestinians. Netanyahu has stressed that while previous Israeli leaders attempted to strengthen Israel’s international standing with “dangerous concessions [vis-à-vis the Palestinians], including uprooting communities [referring to Israeli settlements]...that hasn’t happened – and won’t happen,” with him.<sup>65</sup> He proclaimed that “the exact opposite is happening...we are getting the world’s support, including many in the Arab world, through our strong and steadfast standing,” and argued that Israel believes in “peace out of strength” and “alliances born out of Israel’s value as a technological, financial, defense, and intelligence powerhouse.”<sup>66</sup>

This, he asserts, is how peace will be achieved. Netanyahu has also used this rapprochement to help bolster himself domestically, proclaiming after his March 2020 election victory “we have turned Israel into a great country, we have developed international relations that did not exist with Arab and Islamic countries, and with international and Arab leaders, who are more than you can imagine. Believe me when I say that we will conclude peace treaties with Arab countries,

as more important details are lying beneath the surface...I am the only one who is capable of achieving this, and no one else can.”<sup>67</sup> Following the formal announcement of the U.S.-sponsored “peace deal” in 2020 (discussed below), Israel and the Arab states of the CRB would once again demonstrate that their overbearing objectives regarding the Palestine issue concern only the advancement of their own counterrevolutionary political agendas in the form of further promoting efforts towards this top-down, high-level “normalization.”

### *The Role of the United States*

The United States perceived the 2011 Arab Uprisings as a threat to their geopolitical interests in the region and have therefore adamantly supported the Counterrevolutionary Bloc in their efforts to quell popular mobilization and push back against those who sought to capitalize on the revolutionary wave. Despite the rhetoric of democracy promotion and a supposed “pivot to the people” by the Obama administration following the spread of mass mobilization in 2011, this report argues that the U.S. maintained its traditional realist approach to the region predicated on two foundational pillars: the support for sustainably compliant authoritarian regimes, and staunch support for Israel. In other words, in spite of its public rhetoric, the U.S. “moved to secure its interests by steering the Arab Uprisings towards courses of action that best suited these interests,” and only changed tactics by siding with the revolutionary forces when it became clear that certain dictatorships were collapsing.<sup>68</sup> Although the Obama administration often deployed liberal rhetoric toward the uprisings, the U.S. “sought to undermine the Arab revolutions either directly or through local allies.”<sup>69</sup> Adopting a counterrevolutionary approach similar to that of the CRB, the United States sought to maintain the status quo within the Middle East from which it has historically benefited. This approach was best demonstrated by several key early developments: the continued support for Ben Ali in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt until the last minute; the refusal of the administration to label the 2013 military overthrow of Mohamed Morsi as a coup in order to circumvent the U.S. Foreign Assistance Act; the tacit condoning of the GCC effort to squash the uprising in Bahrain; and the ignoring of calls for change within states such as Saudi Arabia or the UAE. Therefore, it is necessary to look beyond public discourse and examine tangible U.S. policies.

It is with the election of Donald Trump in 2016 that U.S. support for the Counterrevolutionary Bloc becomes both more overt and intense, and it is here that American-CRB relations are systematized. The U.S. under the Trump administration has demonstrated plainly that it supports the CRB regimes in their domestic and regional pursuits for power. Trump has cast the full weight of American economic, diplomatic, and military might behind the efforts of the CRB. This has included, among other things, visits to Israel and Saudi during his first foreign trip as president; the praising of Egypt’s President El-Sisi as his “favorite dictator”; the declaration of a national emergency in order to push through Congress \$8 billion in weapon sales to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Jordan; the approval of the transfer of sensitive nuclear technology to Saudi Arabia; and the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile system to both Israel and Saudi Arabia.<sup>70</sup> Following the announcement of the CRB blockades on Qatar in 2017, Trump signaled his

support for the action by tweeting “so good to see the Saudi Arabia visit with the King and 50 countries already paying off. They said they would take a hard line on funding extremism, and all reference was pointing to Qatar.”<sup>71</sup> He also tweeted “during my recent trip to the Middle East I stated that there can no longer be funding of radical ideology. Leaders pointed to Qatar – look!”<sup>72</sup> The U.S. under Trump has also taken a strong stance against Iran: Trump withdrew from the 2015 JCPOA nuclear accords with Iran, reimposed comprehensive sanctions on the country, has deployed thousands of U.S. troops to Saudi Arabia as a warning against the Islamic Republic, and approved the military operation that assassinated the head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps’ Quds Force, Qassem Soleimani, which was reportedly facilitated with the help of Israeli intelligence.<sup>73</sup> The manifestation of the CRB has itself simultaneously presented Washington with another instrument through which it can contain and isolate Iran. Moreover, Trump has demonstrated his staunch support for Israel through the formal recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights; his proclamation that the U.S. no longer considers Israeli settlements in the West Bank as a violation of international law; and the formal recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital and the subsequent order directing the U.S. embassy to relocate to the city.<sup>74</sup> This is in addition to the administration’s issuance of a domestic executive order designed to silence dissent and activism directed at resistance to Israeli policies within U.S. academic institutions.<sup>75</sup>

The efforts of all CRB actors have converged in their joint desire to further influence decision making in Washington, particularly through various lobbying efforts and an attempt to sway knowledge production in favor of their counterrevolutionary policies. Beginning with the Arab states of the CRB, direct efforts to lobby Washington have increased exponentially over the past several years: the UAE has spent \$46.8 million on U.S. lobbyists since 2017, and Saudi Arabia spent nearly \$27 million on lobbyists in 2017 alone.<sup>76</sup> This is in addition to millions spent to influence knowledge production in the U.S., particularly through the funding of different D.C. think tanks. Indeed, the amount of money that has been pumped into these organizations is profound, for example: in 2016 the Middle East Institute (MEI) received \$2 million from Saudi Arabia and \$20 million from the UAE; in 2017 the Center for American Progress (CAP) received \$1.5 million from the UAE; and in 2016 the Center for a New American Security received \$250,000 from the UAE.<sup>77</sup> Particular individuals that occasionally write for these think tanks are also often directly funded, such as Fahad Nazer who wrote several articles for MEI and received \$7,000 per month from Saudi Arabia.<sup>78</sup> At a higher level, a strong relationship has reportedly emerged between Trump’s advisor and son-in-law Jared Kushner and both Saudi Arabia’s Mohammed bin Salman and UAE’s

**“...THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES IN PARTICULAR HAS EMERGED AS THE LOBBYING POWERHOUSE...”**

Muhammad bin Zayed.<sup>79</sup> MbZ is said to have played a large role in lobbying Washington on behalf of MbS in Saudi Arabia following his appointment as Crown Prince, portraying him as the future of the country.

As noted above, the United Arab Emirates in particular has emerged as the lobbying powerhouse among the Arab states of the CRB. In 2018 alone, the UAE enlisted over 20 different firms – who were paid \$20 million for their services and conducted over 3,000 official political activities on the behalf of the Emirates – to lobby for its interests.<sup>80</sup> These firms contacted more than 200 Congressional offices, 18 different think tanks, myriad mainstream media outlets, and gave nearly \$600,000 in campaign contributions to U.S. politicians.<sup>81</sup> These efforts were designed to promote the domestic and regional policies of the CRB. For example, one such organization – Policy Impact Strategic Communications – received \$225,000 to create a series of documentaries attacking Qatar and U.S.-Qatari relations, entitled “A Dangerous Alliance.”<sup>82</sup> One individual in particular has made headlines for his efforts to influence U.S. policy at the highest levels. According to an AP News investigation, George Nader, president and editor of Middle East Insight and an advisor to the United Arab Emirates, has handed out a

“series of large political donations to U.S. lawmakers considering targeting Qatar.”<sup>83</sup> This included a wire transfer of \$2.5 million to Donald Trump’s fundraiser, Elliot Broidy, through a company in Canada.<sup>84</sup> After receiving this money, Broidy sponsored a conference on Qatar’s alleged ties to Islamic extremism, during which Republican Congressman Ed Royce announced he was introducing legislation that would brand Qatar as a terrorist-sponsoring state. Royce was then given \$5,400 in campaign gifts – the maximum allowed by law – from Broidy.<sup>85</sup>

George Nader is also mentioned in the Mueller Report, which was the official report investigating Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. While it is not the purpose of this research to debate the controversies surrounding the 2016 presidential election, it is worth mentioning the forceful efforts of the CRB to infiltrate Trump’s inner circle. According to *The New York Times*, shortly before the 2016 election three individuals gathered at Trump tower to meet with Donald Trump Jr., the president’s eldest son.<sup>86</sup> The three individuals were George Nader, an emissary for Crown Prince MbS and MbZ; Joel Zamil, an Israeli specialist in social media manipulation; and Erik Prince, the former head of the private security contractor Blackwater. Nader reportedly “told Donald Trump Jr. that the princes who led Saudi Arabia and the UAE were eager to help his father win election as president,” and Zamil offered the services of his company which “specialized in collecting information and shaping opinion through social media.” The plan involved, according to the report, “using thousands of fake social media accounts to promote Mr. Trump’s candidacy on platforms like Facebook.” While the aftermath and success of this meeting are heavily contested, the event draws attention to the great lengths the counterrevolutionaries have gone to in the effort to influence U.S. policy making.

Like the Arab states of the CRB, lobbying in Washington is also a vociferous strategy undertaken by the Israelis. Infamously known as the “Israel lobby,” formal and informal Israeli lobbying efforts in Washington have long been documented. In their seminal book *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt describe the Israel Lobby as “a loose coalition of individuals and groups that seeks to influence American foreign policy in ways that will benefit Israel.”<sup>87</sup> The Israel lobby is not a centralized, hierarchical organization with a defined leadership or membership, but rather a loose network of groups and individuals that seek to influence U.S. policy in a pro-Israel direction. Core organizations of the lobby include the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), the American Jewish Committee, and many others. The lobby also encompasses think tanks such as the Washington Institute for Near East Policy

(WINEP), the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies (FDD), and the Middle East Forum (MEF), and includes individuals at various neoconservative think tanks such as the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), the Hudson Institute, etc. The lobby exercises its power via campaign contributions, knowledge production designed to mold public and official opinion (books, articles, op-eds, etc.), and discrediting and marginalizing those with different views. A key component of the lobby consists of evangelical Christians – especially so-called Christian Zionists – and includes figures such as Pat Robertson, John Hagee, Billy Graham, and Joel Rosenberg.

The influencing efforts of the Arab states of the CRB and Israel have increasingly begun to merge, particularly as Saudi Arabia and the UAE have started using their strategic rapprochement with Israel to gain additional leverage over Washington. As Michael Stephens has previously argued, “the UAE and Saudi Arabia appear to be preempting U.S. policy by sounding notes that will find favor with pro-Israel, anti-Iran, and anti-Islamist legislators in Congress.”<sup>88</sup> Elements of this strategy can be seen in the rhetoric used by MbS in recent U.S.-based interviews with CBS News and *The Atlantic*. In the attempt to advance the agenda of the CRB, the Crown Prince deliberately invoked soundbites to appeal to such officials: stating that the Israelis have the right to their own land; calling Iran’s

Ayatollah Khamenei worse than Adolf Hitler; and arguing that Saudi Arabia stands for peaceful Islam against radicals such as al-Qaeda, Daesh, and even the Muslim Brotherhood, whom he argues are attempting to use the façade of democracy to build a “Muslim empire.”<sup>89</sup> Another significant development is the direct courting of different elements of the Israel lobby by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Many of the organizations and think tanks lobbied by the UAE, via the 20 different firms mentioned above, were well-known entities connected to the Israel lobby. Indeed, federal filings show that there was repeated outreach from these Emirati lobbyists to the American Jewish Committee (AJC), the Anti-Defamation League, the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, WINEP, AEI, and others.<sup>90</sup> Leaked emails between the UAE’s ambassador to the United States, Yousef al-Otaiba, and FDD Senior Counselor John Hannah also demonstrate a remarkable level of backchannel cooperation between the Emirati ambassador and the Foundation for Defense of Democracies.<sup>91</sup> The correspondence between these two individuals exhibited mutual animosity and condemnation for the policies of Iran, Qatar, and Turkey.

Beyond the courting of these organizations and think tanks, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have also begun cultivating relationships with high-profile Christian evangelicals

based in the United States. Christian evangelicals represent not only a central component of the Israel lobby, but also a significant segment of U.S. President Donald Trump's voter base. In November 2018, Saudi Arabia hosted a delegation of Christian evangelical leaders in the kingdom where they were greeted by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir, Saudi ambassador to the U.S. Prince Khalid bin Salman, and secretary-general of the Saudi-funded Muslim World League Mohammed al-Issa.<sup>92</sup> The delegation was led by Christian-Zionist leader Joel Rosenberg, and included individuals such as Mike Evans, founder of the Jerusalem Prayer Team, who describes himself as "a devout American Christian-Zionist leader." This delegation was hosted by the United Arab Emirates before traveling to Saudi Arabia. A similar delegation – again led by Joel Rosenberg – would visit the kingdom once more in September 2019, and included Rev. Johnnie Moore (co-chairman of President Donald Trump's Evangelical Advisory Board), Larry Ross (former spokesman for evangelist Billy Graham), and others.<sup>93</sup> In January 2020, the secretary-general of the Saudi-financed Muslim World League, Mohammad al-Issa, led a delegation of senior Islamic scholars in an unprecedented visit to the site of the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland, and was accompanied by representatives of the American Jewish Committee (AJC).<sup>94</sup> The previous year, al-Issa held talks with

Trump advisor Jason Greenblatt at the White House, where they reportedly discussed issues related to "terrorism and extremism."<sup>95</sup> These coordinated efforts represent the utmost desire of the Arab states of the CRB to curry favor with Christian evangelicals in the U.S. and tap into this powerful demographic.

An illustrative case of the profound impact of these new relationships is the extent to which individuals affiliated with the Israel lobby went to support Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman following the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, Turkey. Following the assassination, Josh Block, then-CEO of the lobbying group The Israel Project, took to Twitter and called Khashoggi a "radical Islamist terrorist ally who was close to Osama bin Laden, ISIS, Hamas and wanted to overthrow the Saudi ruling royals, who oppose Sunni terrorists, sponsored by Turkey and Qatar, as well as Iran's Shia terrorist armies and allies."<sup>96</sup> James Dorsey, an associate at Israel's Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, warned that a weakened Saudi Arabia due to the Khashoggi incident would "undermine Arab cover provided by the kingdom for Trump's efforts to impose a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that would favor Israel at the expense of the Palestinians."<sup>97</sup> Even if MbS did order the killing of Khashoggi, Haaretz commentator Tzvia Greenfield argued that "it is necessary to treat

the suspect with kid gloves," adding that "for 50 years we've prayed for a key Arab leader who agrees to sign a significant pact with Israel. Such a leader [MbS] has finally arrived."<sup>98</sup> Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu himself expressed these concerns, stating "what happened in Istanbul is nothing short of horrific, but it's balanced by the importance of Saudi Arabia and the role it plays in the Middle East...because if Saudi Arabia would be destabilized, the world, not the Middle East, will be destabilized."<sup>99</sup> U.S. President Donald Trump formally declared his stance in a White House press release entitled "Statement from Donald J. Trump on Standing with Saudi Arabia," where he expressed unwavering support for the kingdom: "Representatives of Saudi Arabia say that Jamal Khashoggi was an 'enemy of the state' and a member of the Muslim Brotherhood...In any case, our relationship is with Saudi Arabia. They have been a great ally in the fight against Iran. The United States intends to remain a steadfast partner of Saudi Arabia to ensure the interests of our country, Israel, and all other partners in the region."<sup>100</sup>

The U.S.-sponsored "peace deal" released by the Trump administration in early 2020 represents the most recent manifestation of the coordinated CRB lobbying efforts designed to influence Washington's policies within the Middle East. Billed as the "deal of the century," the proposed deal is skewed heavily in favor of Israeli interests and was constructed without the participation of any Palestinian representatives. Instead of a genuine settlement attempt to the Israel-Palestine conflict, the reality is that the plan involves "creating a non-contiguous, non-sovereign entity without removal of any of the existing illegal Israeli settlements, which are to be recognized, 'legalized,' and annexed to Israel, as is the Jordan River Valley."<sup>101</sup> In short, the plan offered the Palestinians a "truncated and dismembered archipelago of Bantustans connected by bridges and tunnels and subservient to the Israeli state."<sup>102</sup>

Despite the biased foundations of the proposed deal, what is perhaps most significant is the positive reaction to the plan by political and military elites within the Arab states of the CRB. The announcement of the plan – which was delivered by President Donald Trump and Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu at the White House – was attended by representatives from the UAE, Bahrain, and Oman. Netanyahu praised their attendance: "what a sign it portends – I was going to say 'of the future' – what a sign it portends for the present."<sup>103</sup> Following the debut of the plan, the Saudi Foreign Ministry expressed "appreciation for Trump's efforts and support for direct peace negotiations under U.S. auspices."<sup>104</sup> Similarly, UAE ambassador to the U.S. Yousef al-Otaiba claimed that the plan "offers an important starting point for a return to negotiations within a U.S.-led international framework," and the Egyptian Foreign Ministry urged Israelis and Palestinians to "carefully study" the proposal.<sup>105</sup> More

critical in their response was Qatar, with a statement announced by their state-run Qatar News Agency claiming the country “appreciates the endeavors of President Trump and the current U.S. administration to find solutions for the Palestinian-Israeli conflict,” but stressed that “peace cannot be sustainable if Palestinians’ rights in their sovereign state within the 1967 borders, including East Jerusalem, and the right of return are not preserved.”<sup>106</sup> Both Turkey and Iran rejected the deal outright, and Turkish President Erdogan lambasted the Gulf Arab states over their support for the proposal.<sup>107</sup>

### **Conclusion and the Road Forward**

The ad-hoc counterrevolutionary alliance between Israel, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and post-2013 Egypt continues to advance at an exceptional rate and is dramatically reshaping the regional political landscape. With their shared counterrevolutionary ethos, political and military elites within these countries will continue to fight against those who seek to alter the regional status quo. The efforts of these counterrevolutionaries remain undergird by firm support from the United States. With the Washington-backed Counterrevolutionary Bloc at the helm of regional agenda-setting, the problems and grievances that originally led to the 2011 Arab Uprisings are likely to not be solved and will arguably be further exasperated. The question is, however, will this ad-hoc “entente” between the Arab states of the CRB and Israel last? This coalition remains susceptible to both endogenous and exogenous shocks. Normalization with Israel – without a genuine settlement to the Israel-Palestine conflict – remains opposed to by the vast majority of the populace in the region.

If protests were to spread amongst the citizenry of these Arab states against such open forms of cooperation and the sidelining of the Palestinian cause, it may require these governments to recalculate in the efforts to subvert internal opposition. Popular uprisings leading to regime change within one of these countries (or other countries within the region) could also alter the strategic calculi of the counterrevolutionaries. Moreover, a change of leadership within the United States could also alter Washington’s approach to this rapprochement. The upcoming U.S. Presidential elections in November 2020 could possibly remove the Trump administration from office, dealing a blow to the CRB by losing an ally that has been so overt in his support for their agenda. Nonetheless, even if there is a change in U.S. rhetoric towards the region, realist policies will likely continue to dominate as the United States seeks to preserve the regional status quo from which it has historically benefited. For the time being, Washington and the counterrevolutionaries remain in lockstep in their efforts to dominate the Middle East.

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