

# The Geopolitics of Iran



**Mr. Karim Emile Bitar**

*Senior Fellow at the « Institut de relations internationales et stratégiques » (IRIS)*

**01 APRIL 2015**

A conference organised by the RHID

Conference centre  
Campus Renaissance  
Rue Hobbema 8  
1000 Brussels

Welcome from 16:30

Registration: [www.rhid.be](http://www.rhid.be)

Reprinted by permission: Col. (R) Jean-Michel LÉONARD © Centre for Security and Defence Studies - 2010

**Brussels, Wednesday, April 1, 2015**

**Royal Higher Institute for Defense**

## THE GEOPOLITICS OF IRAN

**Karim Emile Bitar**

Director of Research at IRIS

Editor of L'ENA hors les murs

Associate Fellow at the GCSP



# D-DAY ?

« The past is never dead, it's not even past »  
William Faulkner



Lausanne's Hotel Beau rivage at dusk, March 31, 2015



1923 Conference at Lausanne's Hotel Beau Rivage, carving up the Ottoman Empire

# THE GEOPOLITICS OF IRAN

- D-Day ? The Lausanne Nuclear Talks: towards a major paradigm shift?
- Can an **Iranian nuclear deal** save Obama's Foreign Policy Legacy?
- Iranian paradoxes: Islamic Revolution & Secularized Society, Opposition to US policies and and pro-Western sentiment...
- The specificities that render Iran unique: Shiism and its clerical institutions, Persian Nationalism, Anti-Imperialism
- Geopolitical Trends in the Middle East
- The Middle East in the age of ISIS, **Medievalism and Postmodernity**, Globalisation and Identity Politics
- Iran and the Arab Revolutions: a failed attempt at steering them
- What went wrong? Fragmentation, **State Collapse**, Rise of Non-State Actors
- From Al Qaeda to ISIS: Iran and the **Global War on Terror**
- **Culture Wars**: The intense polarization and the Battle of Ideas in Iran and in the Arab World
- The Sunni-Shiite Rift, **Sectarianism** and its uses by regional powers to further their geopolitical ambitions
- The New Middle East Cold War: Iran, Saudi Arabia and their **proxy conflicts** in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and Bahrain
- US Retrenchment ? **EU irrelevance** ? The never-ending debate on Western **interventionism**
- Putin's Line in the Sand: **Russia's interests** in the Middle East:
- Towards a **competitive multipolarity**?
- **Syria's Tragedy: No End in Sight**

# OBAMA'S RISKY GAMBLE

7:44 PM Sunday

## Barack Obama's gamble on the future of Iran

By Edward Luce

At stake is the idea that talking to your worst enemies makes sense



President Barack Obama is poised to take the biggest foreign policy gamble of his presidency. Ignoring opposition at home, and near unanimous dissent in the Middle East, he looks likely to push ahead with an Iran nuclear deal in the coming days. His bet is that the world's most hardline theocracy can be induced to change for the better. Over time Iran's silent majority will gain sway over their ayatollahs.

At stake is the idea that talking to your worst enemies makes sense. Mr Obama's bet on diplomacy could hardly differ more from George W Bush's world view. Yet they share a weakness — the belief that one inspired move can transform the game. Mr Bush thought he could implant democracy in the Middle East by toppling its most brutal autocracy. Mr Obama hopes to create stability by engaging its most dangerous regime. In American football they call this a 'Hail Mary' pass. Will Mr Obama's fare any better?

MORE FROM THIS SECTION

4

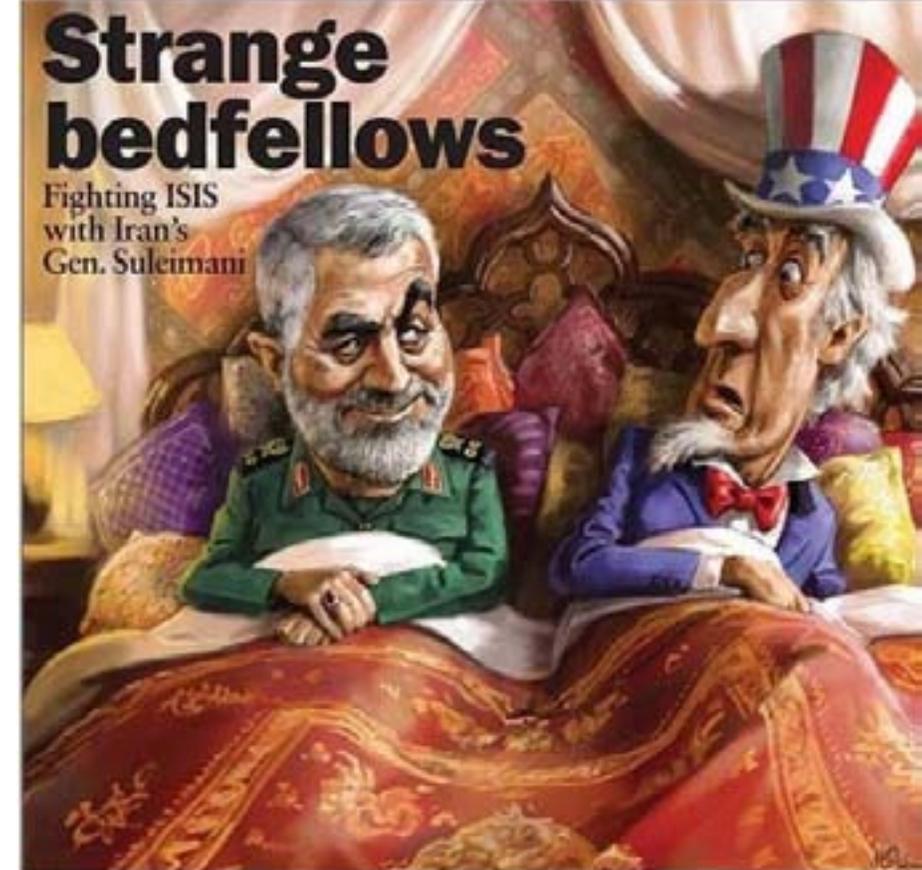


# THE WEEK

THE BEST OF THE U.S. AND INTERNATIONAL MEDIA

## Strange bedfellows

Fighting ISIS with Iran's Gen. Suleimani



ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT EVERYTHING THAT MATTERS

WWW.THEWEEK.COM

# Can an **Iranian nuclear deal** save Obama's Foreign Policy Legacy?

- Israel and Saudi Arabia's interests converge and they will join forces to try to torpedo the Iranian Deal
- But both the Obama and Rouhani administrations have a vested interest in the success of the rapprochement
- Public opinion in the West and Iran support an agreement
- If it goes through, the US-Iranian nuclear deal would constitute a major paradigm shift and put an end to 35 years of animosity
- Saudi panic is understandable: US and Iran's long-term interests converge
- Can the Saudis go it alone?
- Can the US obtain Iranian concessions on other dossiers? (Syria, Lebanon, Iraq...) Not so sure
- **The Iranian-Saudi conflict will remain the defining factor** in the coming years



Middle East and Africa

The Economist January 18th 2014

Negotiating with Iran

## A big gap to close

Some supporters of the Iran deal doubt there will be a long-term pact

AFTER several weeks of unexpectedly hard and often tetchy bargaining, six world powers and Iran reached an agreement on January 12th that sets out the details of a "joint plan of action" (JPA) to freeze Iran's nuclear programme for six months. The implementation of the JPA, originally negotiated in November, will begin on January 20th. Verification that Iran is sticking to its side of the interim deal will come from the UN's nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) through



stepped-up inspections and monitoring. In return, Iran will begin to receive, in monthly instalments, some \$4.2 billion in seized assets held in Western banks; some minor financial

sanctions will also be suspended. However, the clock is now ticking on efforts to achieve a comprehensive long-term pact. Even supporters of the interim deal rate the

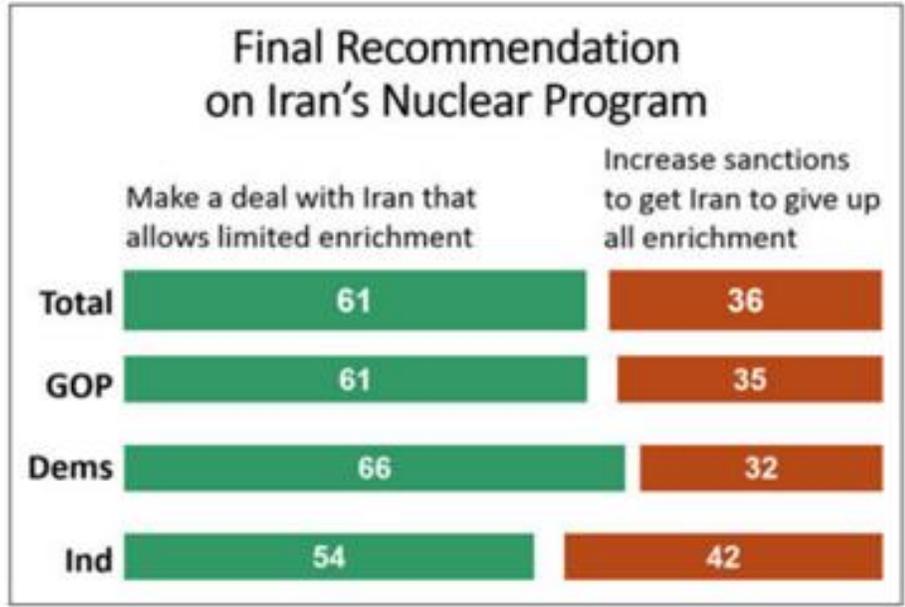


# US PUBLIC OPINION AND THE IRAN DEAL

What Americans really think about an Iran deal - TI  
 www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/mookey-cage/wp/2015/03/...early-think-about-an

top What Americans really think about an Iran deal

were the exception: They favored more sanctions by 58 percent.



(Program on Public Consultation and Anwar Sadat Chair for Peace and Development)

While the survey was taken just before Netanyahu's speech, it had been widely reported that Netanyahu has opposed a deal. His opposition does not appear to have had an effect on survey respondents. The percentage of

# ISRAELI INTELLIGENCE AT ODDS WITH BIBI

the guardian

## Secret cables reveal Israel's spies at odds with Netanyahu on Iran

- Documents cast doubt on claim of nuclear capability
- Leaked dossier comes in run-up to key US speech
- South Africa's intelligence role also in spotlight

Seumas Milne  
Ewen MacAskill  
Clayton Swisher

Benjamin Netanyahu's dramatic declaration to world leaders in 2012 that Iran was a year away from making a nuclear bomb was contradicted by his own secret service, according to a top-secret Mossad document.

It is part of a cache of hundreds of dossiers, files and cables from the world's major intelligence services - one of the biggest spy leaks in recent times.

Franchising a cartoon of a bomb with a red line to illustrate his point, the Israeli prime minister warned the UN in New York that Iran would be able to build nuclear weapons the following year and called for action to halt the process.

But in a secret report shared with South Africa a few weeks later, Israel's intelligence agency concluded that Iran was "not performing the activity necessary to produce weapons".

The report highlights the gulf between the public claims and rhetoric of top Israeli politicians and the assessments of Israel's military and intelligence establishment.

The disclosure comes at a tense moment between Israel and its staunchest ally, the US, which has roared in the support of Netanyahu's address to the US Congress on 1 March.

The White House fears the Israeli leader's anticipated inflammatory rhetoric could damage sensitive negotiations between Tehran and the world's big powers over Iran's nuclear programme. The deadline to agree on a framework is

in late March, with the final settlement to come on 30 June. Netanyahu has vowed to block an agreement he claims would give Iran access to a nuclear weapons capability.

The US president, Barack Obama, will not meet Netanyahu during his visit, saying protocol precludes a meeting so close to next month's general election in Israel.

The documents, almost all marked confidential or top secret, span almost a decade of global intelligence traffic, from 2006 to December last year. They have been leaked to the al-Jazeera investigative unit and shared with the Guardian.

The papers include details of operations against al-Qaeda, Islamic State and other terrorist organisations, but also the targeting of environmental activists.

The files reveal that:

### Spy cables

A huge leak of documents from many of the world's major spy agencies including Israel's Mossad, Russia's FSB, America's CIA and from South Africa, the UK, France and many more

Page 14-15

● The CIA attempted to establish contact with Hamas despite a US ban.  
 ● South Korean intelligence targeted the leader of Greenpeace.  
 ● Barack Obama "boasted" the Palestinian president to withdraw a bid for recognition of Palestine at the UN.  
 ● South African intelligence spied on Russia over a controversial election seat candidate deal.

The cache, which has been independently authenticated by the Guardian, mainly involves exchanges between South Africa's intelligence agency and its counterparts elsewhere. It is not the entire volume of traffic but a selective leak.

One of the biggest beneficiaries is Iran's Mossad. But there are also documents from Russia's FSB, which is responsible for counter-terrorism. Such leaks of Russian material are extremely rare.

Other spy agencies caught up in the leak include those of the US, Britain,

Continued on page 15

## PHYSIOGRAPHY OF IRAN



- “To understand Iran, you must begin by understanding how large it is. Iran is the 17th largest country in world. It measures 1,684,000 square kilometers. That means that its **territory is larger than the combined territories of France, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain and Portugal** — Western Europe.
- Iran is the 16th most populous country in the world, with about **70 million people**. Its population is larger than the populations of either France or the United Kingdom.”
- **Iran is a fortress.** Surrounded on three sides by mountains and on the fourth by the ocean, with a wasteland at its center, Iran is extremely difficult to conquer. This was achieved once by the Mongols, who entered the country from the northeast. The Ottomans penetrated the Zagros Mountains and went northeast as far as the Caspian but made no attempt to move into the Persian heartland.”  
**STRATFOR**

# IRANIAN PARADOXES

- Islamic revolution and Secularization
- Anti-Imperialism and Westernization
- Opposition to the Mullah vs « Rally-Round-The-Flag Effect
- Slow Economy could prompt Iran to make concessions vs National Pride
- A Deal would only start a long game. Carrots and sticks would remain in place
- The paradigm shift would only come several years later



# IRANIAN CIVIL SOCIETY AND IRANIAN DIASPORA



Negar نکار @NegarMortazavi

6m

Did u know? Iran has one #Oscar: Separation by Asghar Farhadi won best foreign film 2012. And Golden Globe and BAFTA.



Kenneth Roth @KenRoth

FIFA presses Iran to end its "intolerable" ban on women watching football matches in stadiums. [trib.al/pwxFT9X](http://trib.al/pwxFT9X)



07/03/2015 13:08



# IRAN'S HARDLINERS

شؤون إيرانية @iranianaffairs

34m

آية الله يزدي، الذي تم اختياره اليوم رئيسا لمجلس خبراء القيادة الذي من صلاحياته عزل (نظريا) وتصيب ولي الفقيه



24 4

“Ayatollah Mohammad Yazdi, a former head of the judiciary known for his strong opposition to Iran’s pro-democracy movement, won 47 of 73 votes in the Assembly of Experts, well ahead of rival Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the influential former president and supporter of Mr Rouhani who is allied with pro-reform groups”



جريدة السفير @assafir

53m

إيران تفتتح خط إنتاج مكثف لصواريخ "قديس" بعيدة المدى [assafir.com/article/407693](https://assafir.com/article/407693)



230 11



# RELIGION AND POLITICS IN IRAN

- Secularization of Iranian Society
- When religion becomes the official State ideology, many people turn away from religion
- Secularization of the Iranian State itself ?
- Even in a theocracy, it is ultimately the State that decides the place of religion not the other way around.



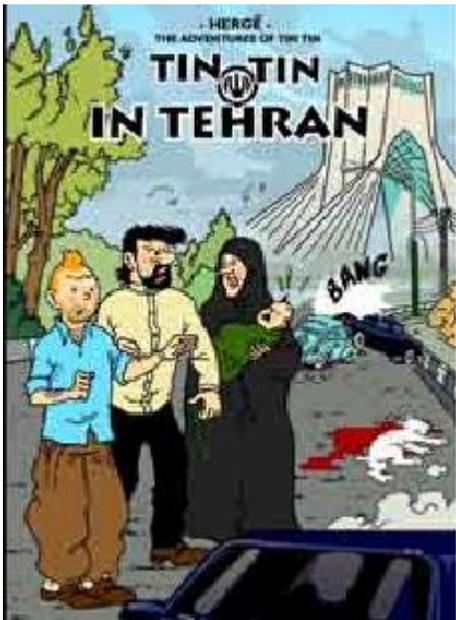
# IRAN ON INSTAGRAM: RICH KIDS OF TEHRAN vs POOR KIDS OF TEHRAN



- Rising inequalities
- Rentier Economy

- Shah Nostalgia?
- Patterns of Change and Continuity
- The Ancien Régime and the Revolution
- Iran has changed considerably
- But Nationalism is a constant factor

- « Since its inception, Iran has had a global dimension: it was born an Empire »  
Rohani advisor

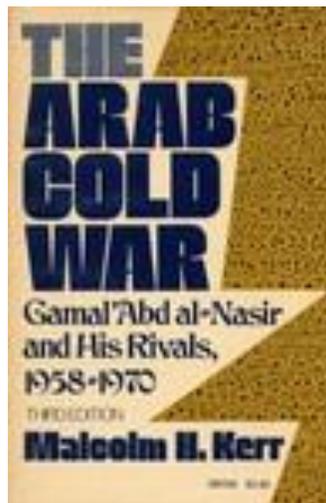


# The New Middle East Proxy Wars: Iran vs Saudi Arabia



“The best framework for understanding the regional politics of the Middle East is as a cold war in which Iran and Saudi Arabia play the leading roles. These two main actors are not confronting each other militarily; rather, their contest for influence plays out in the domestic political systems of the region’s weak states. It is a struggle over the direction of the Middle East’s domestic politics more than it is a purely military contest. The military and political strength of the parties to civil conflicts, and the contributions that outsiders can make to that strength, is more important than the military balance of power between Riyadh and Tehran.”

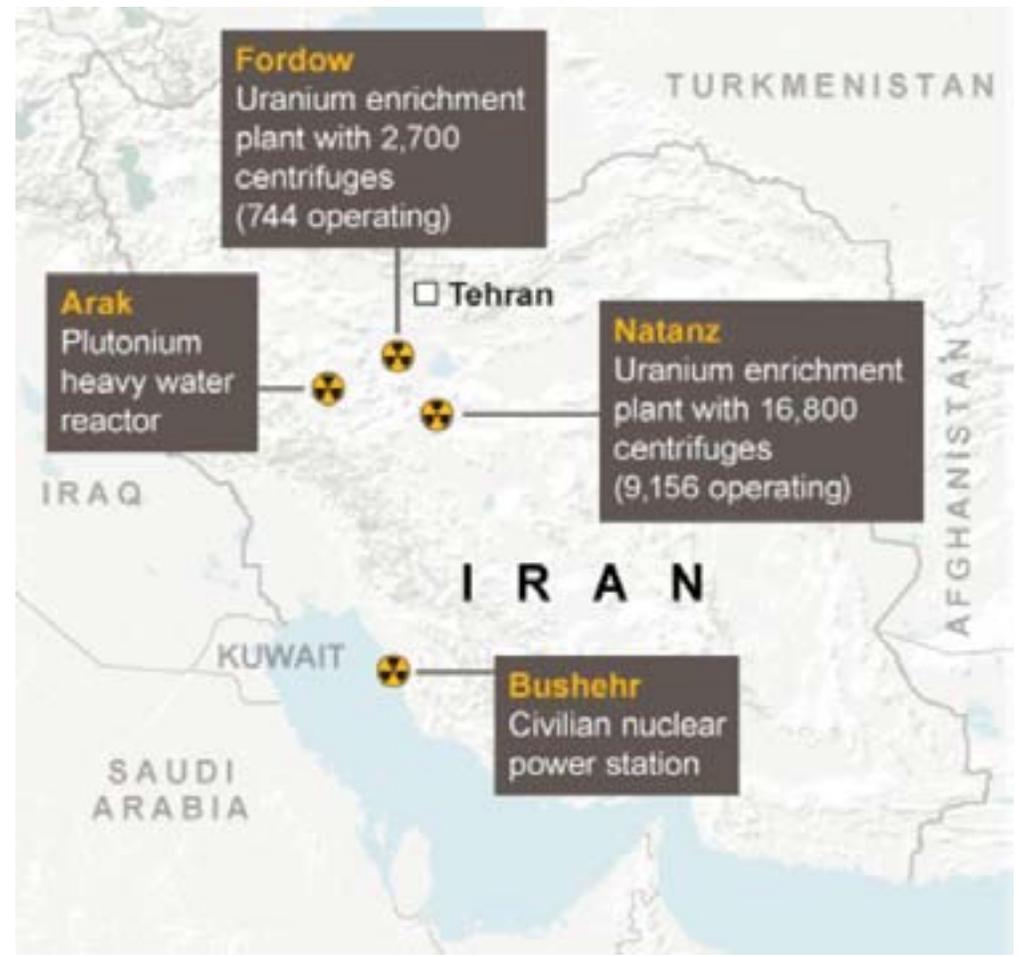
**F. Gregory Gause, III**



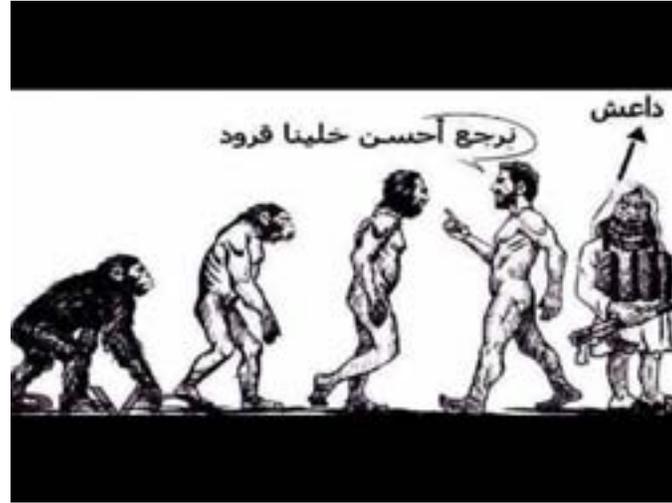


- The rising regional influence of Iran
- The roots of Saudi panic
- Consequences in Iraq, in Syria, in Lebanon, in Yemen, in Bahrain





## The Rise of ISIS



- One of the most ominous developments of the past decades
- Defeating ISIS will take a very long time
- ISIS is a symptom of long-festering diseases: authoritarianism, corruption, mismanagement, Security States, bad governance...
- The frontiers and the very existence of several Near Eastern Nation-States are now in jeopardy

## The Rise of Iranian Influence



- After the 2003 Iraq War, Iran has emerged as a key regional power, gaining invaluable ideological and strategic depth in the Arab World
- Current developments and the rapprochement with the US are likely to increase Iran's capacity to project power in neighboring countries

The Big Pharaoh retweeted



Koert Debeuf @koertdebeuf

2m

In Syria Iran has taken over the Intelligence & large parts of the army. In Iraq it created an alternative army. Lebanon has Hezbollah. #pt



# Diminishing US influence and leverage throughout the region



- Iran and US Retrenchment
- Putin's line in the sand and his determination to protect his interests at all costs, in Syria as in Ukraine
- Declining US influence on its own allies
- The US and the Sunni / Shiite rift
- Was the Iraq War the Swan Song of US MidEast power?



Puppetmasters who no longer pull the strings

## The persistent «double standards» accusation

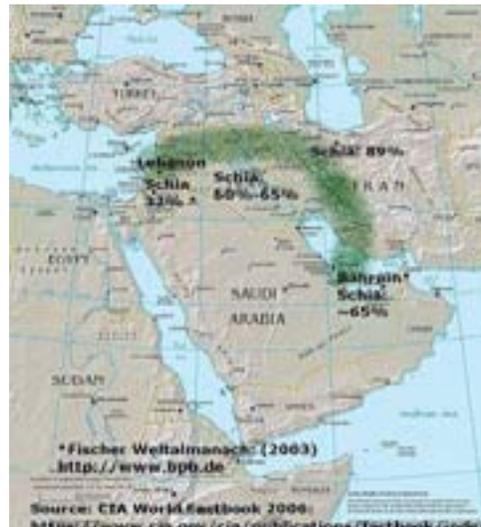


“The Arab awakening is a tale of three battles rolled into one:

- **people against regimes;**
- **people against people;**
- **and regimes against other regimes.”**

Hussein Agha and Robert Malley

Nowhere is this more evident than in **Syria**: all three dimensions are **forcefully present**, simultaneously



# THE RISE OF IRANIAN INFLUENCE IN BAGDAD POST 2003



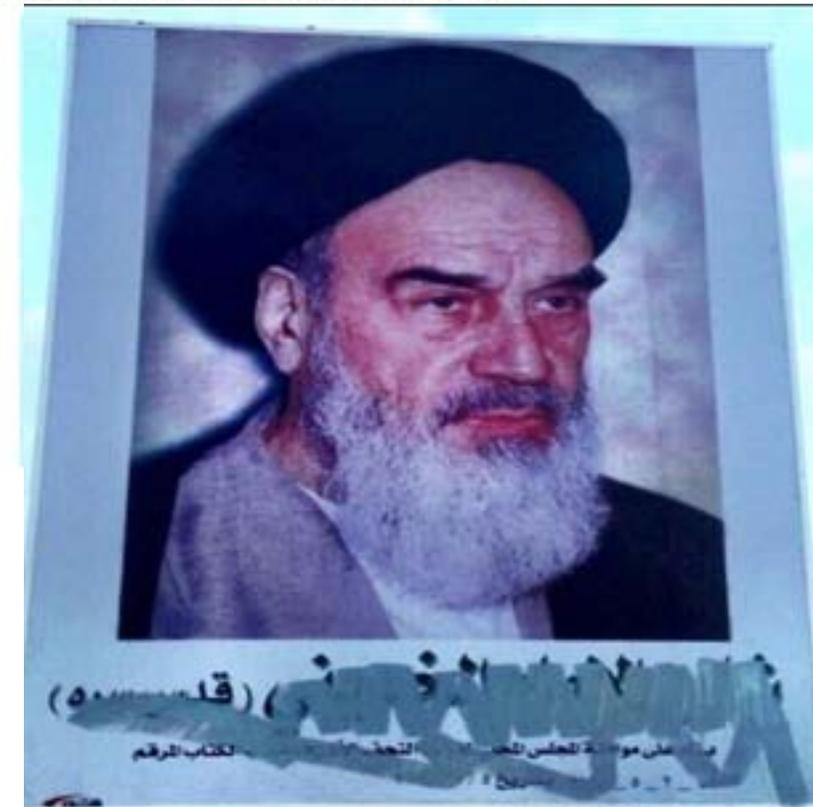
## SUNNI RESENTMENT



Joyce Karam @Joyce\_Karam

8m

#Iran's Khomeini poster vandalized in Najaf #Iraq. [twitter.com/hayder\\_alkhoei...](https://twitter.com/hayder_alkhoei...) [pic.twitter.com/Uhd1jkVG7u](https://pic.twitter.com/Uhd1jkVG7u)



Iran and Shia militias

# The Shia crescendo

BAGHDAD, DAH'YA AND TEHRAN

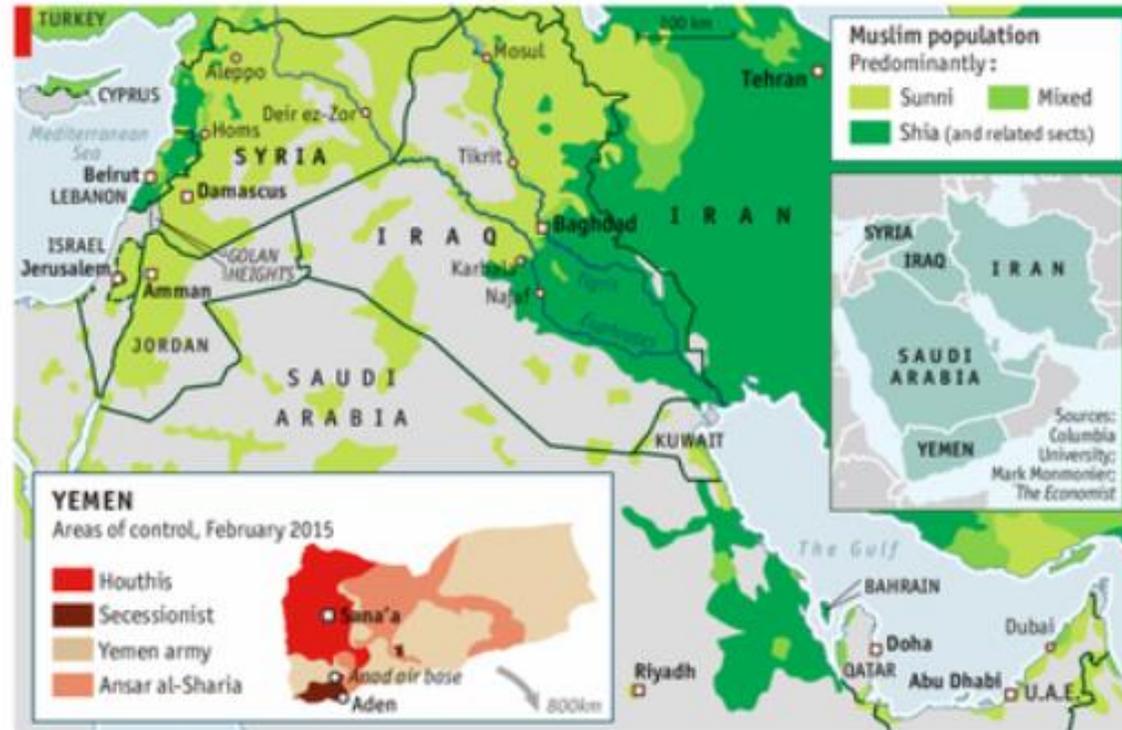
Shia militias are proliferating in the Middle East

LITTLE more than a decade ago King Abdullah II of Jordan sounded a warning that America's toppling of Saddam Hussein in Iraq would lead to the emergence of an Iranian-influenced "Shia crescent"—code for Iranian expansion—from Lebanon to Saudi Arabia. His words were dismissed as alarmist. Now, though, that vision might be coming about. As Arab states have broken up, the void has been filled not only by the Sunni jihadists of Islamic State (IS) but also by

the makings of a transnational Shia force backed by Iran.

Iran's allies are propping up Bashar Assad in Syria, halting the advance of IS in Iraq and

spreading Iranian influence in Yemen. More important is that once-disparate armed groups are now communicating and fighting side-by-side, giving the



- While both ISIS and Iran are gaining in influence, the United States is no longer as influential as it used to be, and its traditional Arab allies are crippled by divisions
- Christians and other ethnic and religious minorities are facing **a massive and unprecedented threat**
- **Iran and the strategic vacuum**
- **The consequences of the 2003 Iraq War**

Confusion of US Foreign Policy



Arab Word crippled by divisions



Christians and minorities threatened



# IRAN AND THE SYRIA CONFUSION

- US light interference vs Russian/Iranian massive interference
- **US allies have their own conflicting agendas** (Israel, Qatar, KSA, Turkey, Jordan)
- Syria is the ultimate Catch 22 for the US
- The red line fiasco

THE GLOBAL EDITION OF THE NEW YORK TIMES  
COMMENTARY LETTERS



# The Persistence of **Core US Strategic Interests** in the Middle East and North Africa

- Israel's Security
  - Keeping MENA oil and gas flowing to world markets at reasonable prices
  - Minimizing Terrorism Risks
  - Preventing Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and other WMD
  - Promoting pro-American liberal participatory political systems, if and only if this objective does not clash with the other core interests
- «A constant trade off between moral aspirations and practical strategic realities» Walt

## HOW DOES IRAN FIT IN?



# Patterns of Change and Continuity in the **US / Saudi Relationship**

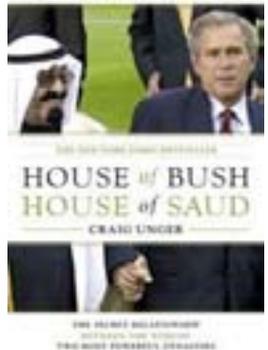


An ailing Franklin Roosevelt met Saudi Arabia's founding king, Abdul Aziz, aboard the cruiser *Quincy* in the Suez Canal.

- A Strategic Alliance (between a liberal democracy and a absolutist monarchy) that has endured for 7 decades
- Whither the Quincy Pact ? Is the 'Oil vs Security' Equation still Pertinent?
- The geopolitical consequences of the Shale Gas Revolution



- Saudi Arabia remains the **largest US Foreign Military Sales (FMS) customer** with active and open cases valued at around \$ 97 billion
- Saudis feel vindicated because they had predicted that the Iraq War would considerably strengthen Iran
- **Saudi anger at Barack Obama:** Rapprochement with Iran, non-intervention in Syria...



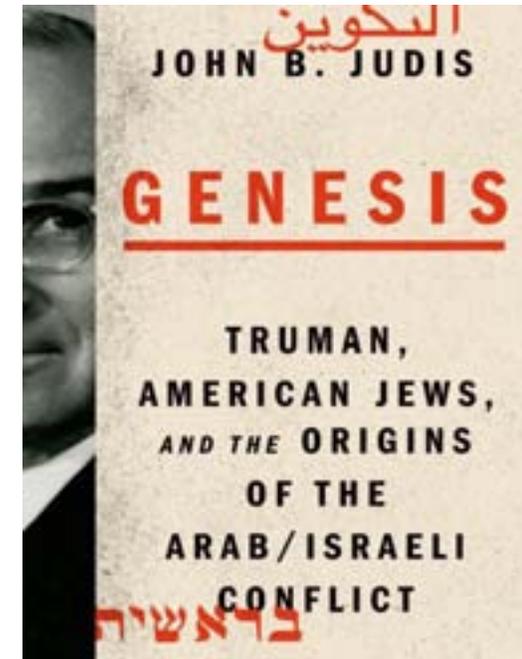
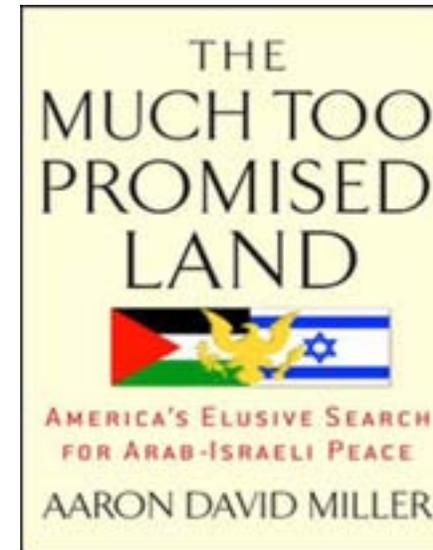
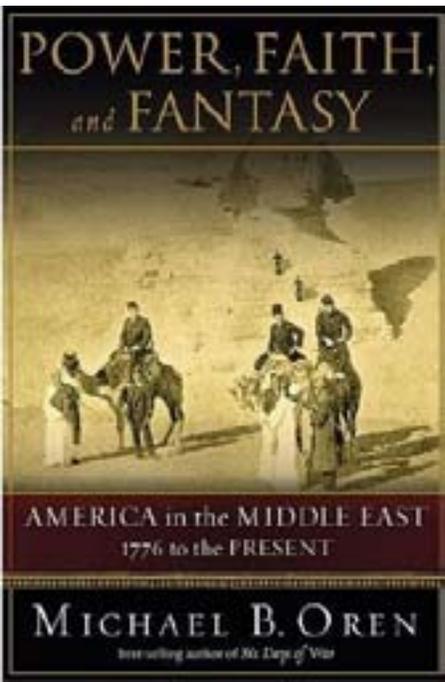
# AN UNEASY RELATIONSHIP



# Patterns of Change and Continuity in the US / Israeli Relationship



- The largest cumulative recipient of US aid in the past 70 years
- \$ 118 billion since 1949
- Military Aid and Technology Transfers have never been stronger than today
- The Obama – Netanyahu Difficult Relationship
- The Debate within the American Jewish Establishment (AIPAC, J Street...)
- 70 % of US Jews voted for Obama while 85% of Americans living in Israel voted for Romney
- Rand Paul and the Rise of a non-interventionist wing within the GOP
- Can Israel continue to be "America's aircraft carrier in the Middle East"? (Jesse Helms)
- The United States-Israeli Strategic Partnership Act of 2013
- Changing Public perceptions of Israel





# Are Iran and Israel Trading Places?

By **ABBAS MILANI** and **ISRAEL WAISMEL-MANOR** APRIL 11, 2014



Email



Share



Tweet



Save

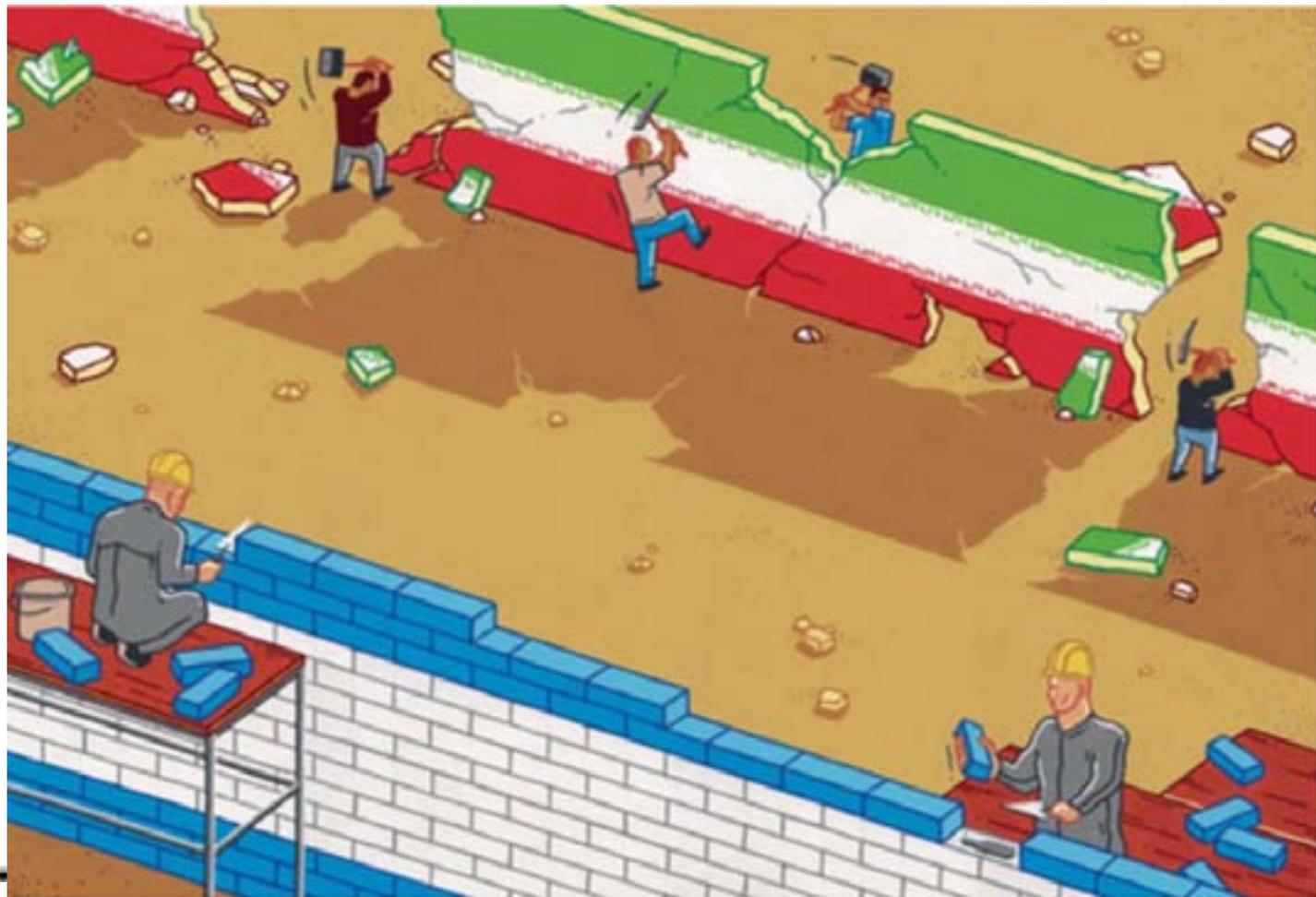


More



STANFORD, Calif. — Although the Israeli and Iranian governments have been virtually at war with each other for decades, the two countries have much in common.

Both are home to some of the oldest civilizations on earth, and both are primarily non-Arab states in a mostly Arab region. In the 1950s, David Ben-Gurion's Israel and Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi's Iran were bastions of secular nationalism; the shah pushed authoritarian modernization, while Ben-Gurion advanced a form of nonreligious Zionism. Only after the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran did radical Islam all but eclipse this



# ISRAEL AND THE RISE OF IRANIAN INFLUENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The world this week

February 28th 2015



# Benjamin Netanyahu's Long History of Crying Wolf About Iran's Nuclear Weapons

WORLD | MIDDLE EAST

## Imminent Iran nuclear threat? A timeline of warnings since 1979.

Breathless warnings that the Islamic Republic will soon be at the brink of nuclear capability have been made for decades. Here is a chronicle of predictions.

By Scott Peterson, Staff writer | NOVEMBER 8, 2011

### 7. Israel's one-year timeframe disproved: 2010-11

Despite reports and intelligence assessments to the contrary, Israeli and many US officials continue to assume that Iran is determined to have nuclear weapons as soon as possible.

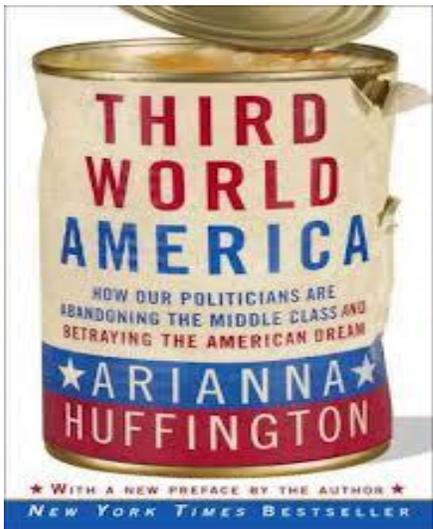


- Iran is “three to five years” away from reaching nuclear weapons capability, and that this threat had to be “uprooted by an international front headed by the U.S.” **1992**
- “If Iran were to acquire nuclear weapons, this could presage catastrophic consequences, not only for my country, and not only for the Middle East, but for all mankind... the deadline for attaining this goal is getting extremely close.” **1996**

# HOW IRAN BENEFITED FROM US OVERREACH UNDER BUSH

## The Constraints on Obama's Foreign Policy and the 'Light Footprint' Doctrine

- **Financial Constraints:** Iraq and Afghan wars (including medical costs) ended up costing \$ 7 trillion and drove record deficits
- A **war-fatigued public opinion:** only 9 % of Americans supported an intervention in Syria
- **Congressional Constraints** and the capping of Executive War Powers: the debates over the Libya War Powers Act and the Syria vote in Congress

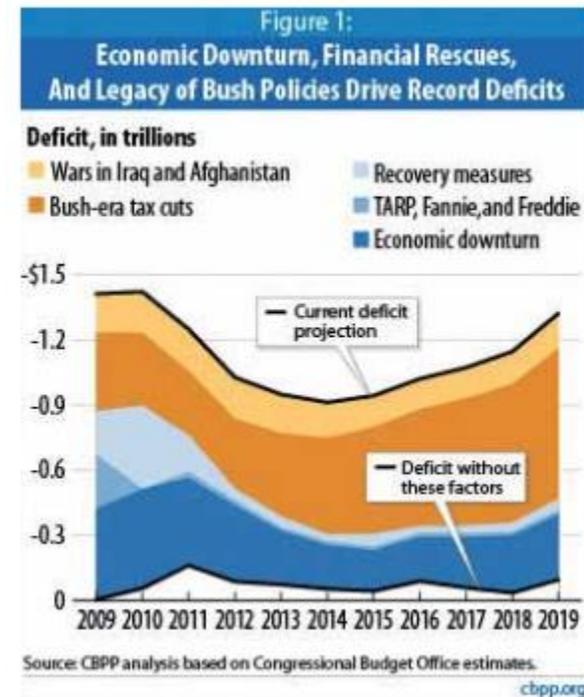
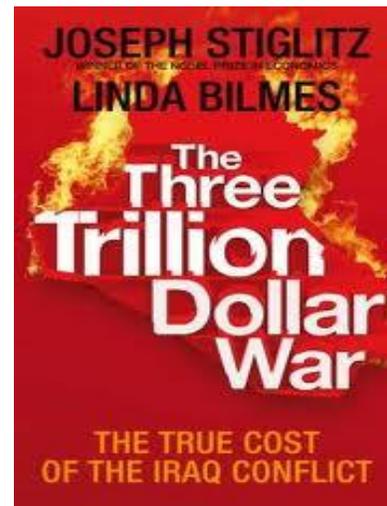


- **The urgency of Nation-Building at Home:**
  - Inequalities and the New Gilded Age, Decaying infrastructures, healthcare, poverty...
  - Primacy of Domestic Politics

### The 'Light Footprint' Doctrine:

An attempt to solve the contradictions between end and means

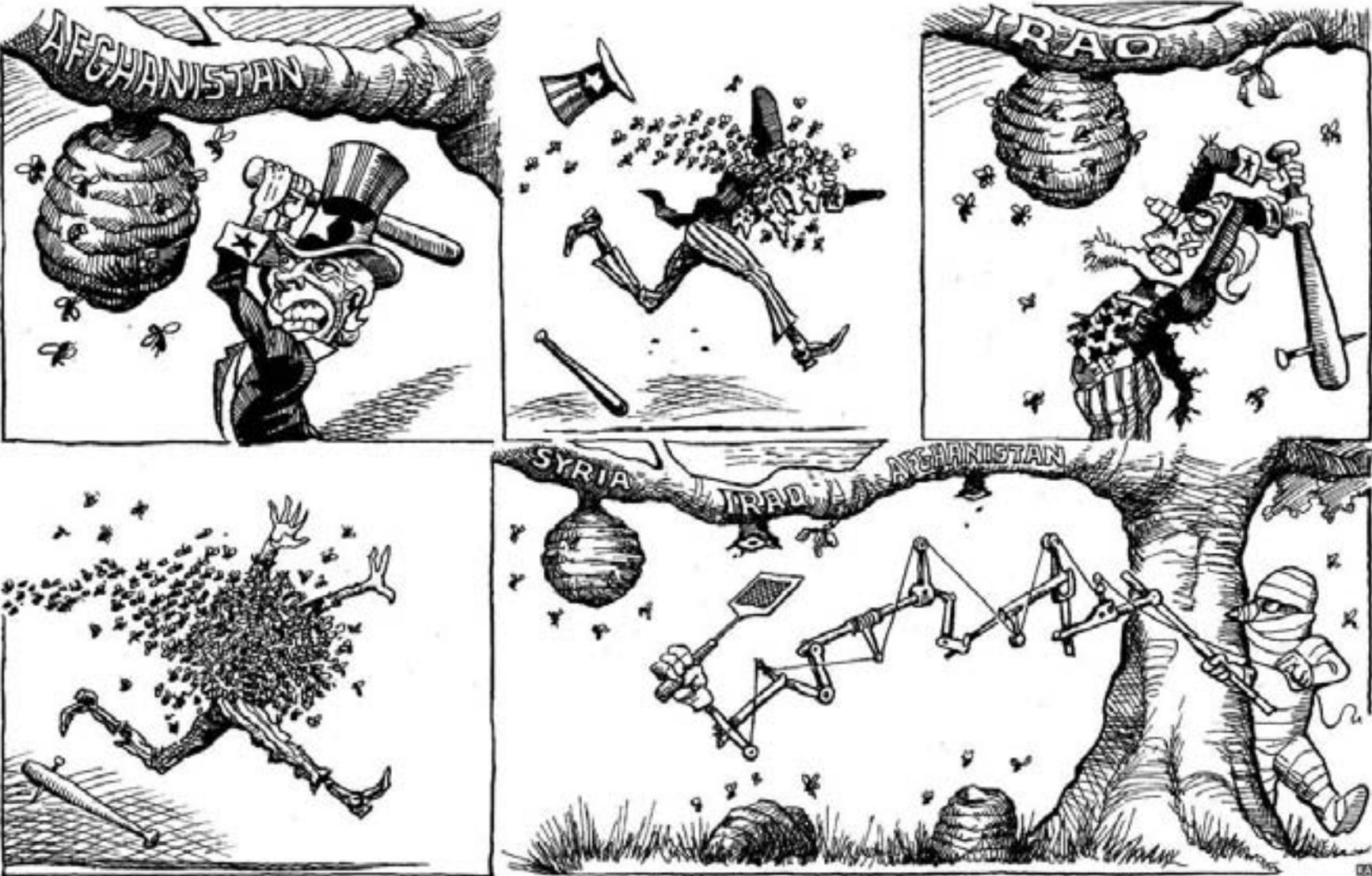
- Multiplication of Drone strikes ( Obama = Bush X 10)
- Covert Operations (Syria, Yemen, Pakistan...)
- Cyberwar (Stuxnet and its impact on Iran's nuclear centrifuges...)
- Outsourcing and privatization of war (PMSC...)



## FREE HANDS FOR TEHRAN ?

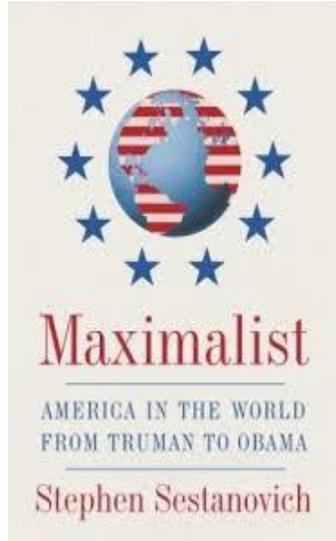
The Economist's Cartoonist, Kal, illustrated the understandable risk-aversion that followed the Afghan and Iraqi fiascos

The world this week The Economist August 31st 2013



# US Foreign Policy from Maximalism to Retrenchment: Iran benefited from both

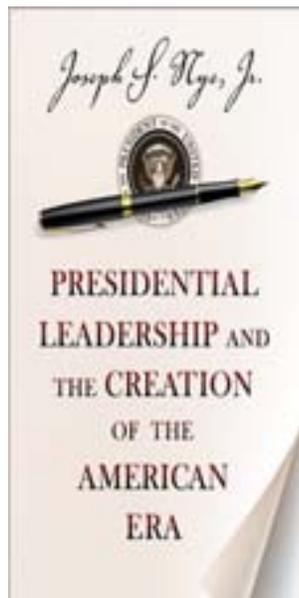
- Historians Arthur Schlesinger Sr and Jr argued that US History and Domestic politics go in cycles of conservatism and progressivism
- In a recent book, Stephen Sestanovich argues that **US Foreign Policy oscillates between Maximalism and Retrenchment**



- **Maximalists** believe in using US power to shape the world, they increase military budgets, are willing to risk war to attain their goals, they are all interventionists and some are also unilateralists:
  - Harry Truman, JFK, Lyndon Johnson, Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush Jr
- **Retrenchers** are risk-averse and conscious of budgetary constraints and of the limits of hard power, they prefer negotiations (Nixon & China), they opt for multilateralism and they focus on 'Nation-Building at Home':
  - Dwight Eisenhower, Richard Nixon, Jimmy Carter, Barack Obama
- **Mixed:** George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton
  - Joseph Nye argues that '*transactional*', not '*transformative*' presidents were perhaps the most effective
  - **Maximalism can bring great US successes (Reagan) or huge US failures (GW Bush in Iraq)**
  - **The failures always bring forth periods of retrenchment:**  
Korean war led to Eisenhower's retrenchment, Vietnam to Nixon's retrenchment, Iraq to Obama's retrenchment
- **The Arab Revolutions occurred in a period of US Retrenchment, with a war-weary US Public Opinion and and a risk-averse president**
- **Iran benefited from Bush's errors, consolidated its position under Obama**



CFR fellow, Columbia IR Professor  
Ex Reagan & Clinton administrations official



Soft Power Theorist Joseph S. Nye Jr

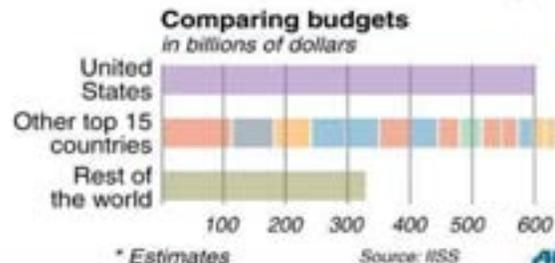
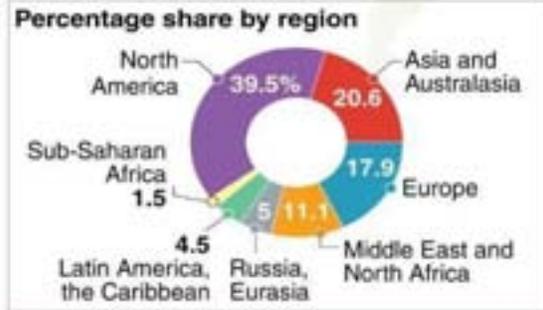
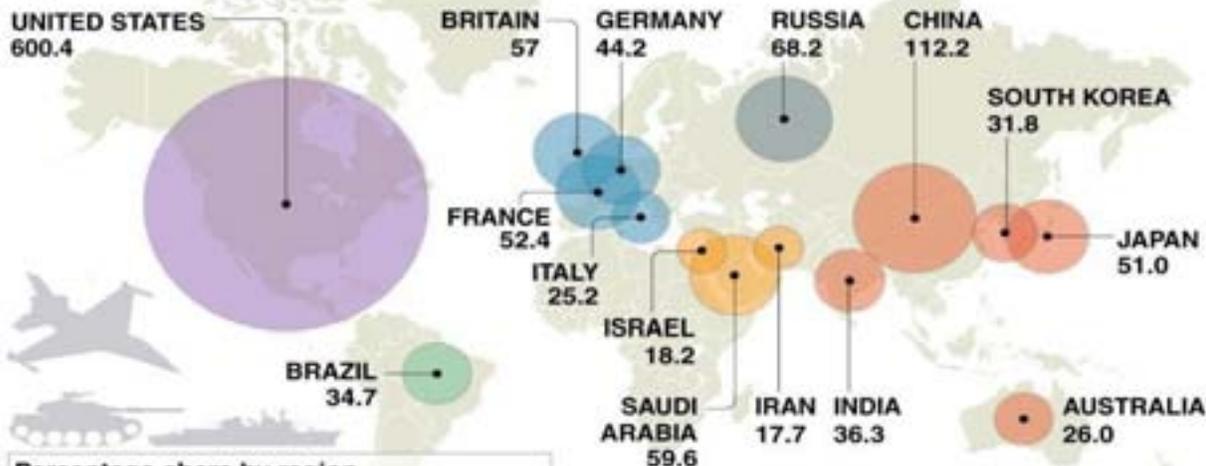
## OVERHYPING THE IRANIAN THREAT ? IRAN'S DEFENSE BUDGET

### US RETRENCHMENT DOES NOT MEAN ISOLATIONISM AND DOES NOT NECESSARILY TRANSLATE INTO US DECLINE

#### Defence budgets across the world

Budgets are rising for the first time in five years

Top 15 military budgets 2013\* in billions of dollars



- Decrease in Military Budget should not be overinterpreted
- **US is NOT disengaging from the Gulf**
- Pivoting toward Asia is easier said than done
- «The US strategic position in the world remains remarkably favorable. Americans often forget how secure the US is, especially compared with other States. **The Core Sources of US power remain highly robust**»
- **«The US routinely blows minor threats out of all proportion: Iran has a defense budget of about \$ 10 billion (less than 2 % of what the US spends on national security)**

**Stephen Walt**

# THE 15 MOST POWERFUL MILITARIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The Middle East is undoubtedly one of the world's least predictable regions. To make sense of the ongoing conflicts, we have compiled key elements that comprise the 15 strongest militaries in the Middle East according to a ranking published by Global Firepower. Quality of equipment, training, and professionalism of each military is not taken into account.

 = Middle East leader

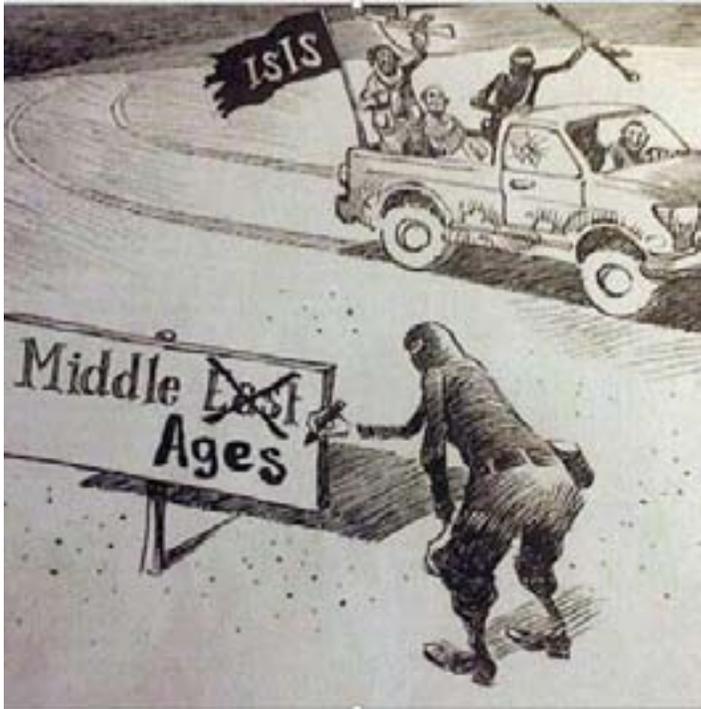







COUNTRY	OVERALL RANKING	ACTIVE PERSONNEL	TANKS	AIRCRAFT	NUCLEAR WARHEADS	SUBMARINES	BUDGET
TURKEY	1	410,500	3,657	989	0	14	\$18,185,000,000
ISRAEL	2	176,500	3,870	680	80-200	14	\$15,000,000,000
EGYPT	3	468,500	4,767	1,100	0	4	\$4,400,000,000
IRAN	4	545,000	2,409	481	0	31	\$6,300,000,000
SAUDI ARABIA	5	233,500	1,095	652	0	0	\$56,725,000,000
SYRIA	6	178,000	4,950	473	0	0	\$1,872,000,000
UNITED ARAB EMIRATES	7	65,000	545	444	0	0	\$14,375,000,000
YEMEN	8	66,700	1,260	181	0	0	\$1,440,000,000
JORDAN	9	110,700	1,321	246	0	0	\$1,500,000,000
IRAQ	10	271,500	357	212	0	0	\$6,055,000,000
OMAN	11	72,000	215	101	0	0	\$6,715,000,000
KUWAIT	12	15,500	368	101	0	0	\$5,200,000,000
BAHRAIN	13	13,000	180	105	0	0	\$730,000,000
QATAR	14	11,800	90	72	0	0	\$1,930,000,000
LEBANON	15	131,100	318	57	0	0	\$1,735,000,000

# The Middle East in the age of ISIS, **Medievalism and Postmodernity**



- Contemporary antinomies
  - Twitter and the beheadings
  - Primitive savagery and high-tech sophistication: postmodern medievalism?
  - Universalism and tribalism
  - Globalisation and identity politics
  - Ebola, ISIS, gruesome murders, rabid sectarianism: **The New Middle Ages?**
  - Analogy unfair to the Middle Ages, says leading French historian
- **Children of Bin Laden and children of Quentin Tarantino...**



## Comment l'Etat islamique s'inspire d'Hollywood dans ses vidéos

Obs | Par Le Nouvel Observateur | Publié le 23-09-2014 à 10h12 | A+ A- 🌐

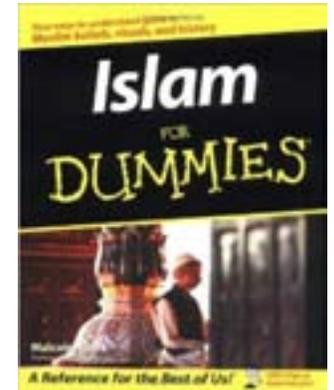
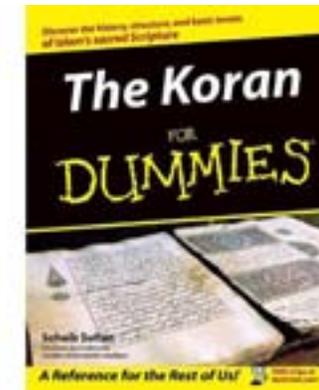
L'Etat islamique utilise une scénographie "soignée" inspirée de la "culture populaire occidentale" pour faire passer ses messages de terreur.



# Profile and motivation of ISIS recruits

- How 'Islamic' is the 'Islamic state' ? What role does religion play?
  - « Religion plays a role not as a driver of behaviour but as a vehicle for outrage and, crucially, a marker of identity »
  - Other factors : Psychology ? Sex ? Violence? Ideology? Nihilism?
- Foreign Legions: Lost Souls, Children of the West waging war against the West in the name of an Islam about which they know very little
- **23 % of foreign recruits are converts**
  - “**There is no zealot like a convert**” : Converts to Islam were involved in 31 per cent of Muslim terrorism convictions in the UK between 2001 and 2010
- More than 80 % come from middle or upper-middle class
- Large number of Atheist families
- Radicalization in prison
- A sense of emotional and moral outrage
- Iraq war, Guantanamo, Syria and Sunni Humiliation

“There was never really discussion about texts,” the French journalist and former hostage Didier François told CNN’s Christiane Amanpour last month, referring to his captors. **“It was not a religious discussion. It was a political discussion.”**



On the eve of their departure for Syria, two Birmingham youth ordered these books on Amazon

# Iran and the Arab Revolutions



Tunisia, January



Egypt, February



Libya, March



Yemen, April



Syria, May

# What's a revolution? Take it from the revolutionaries

## Acceleration of History:

“There are decades where nothing happens; and there are weeks where decades happen” **Lenin**

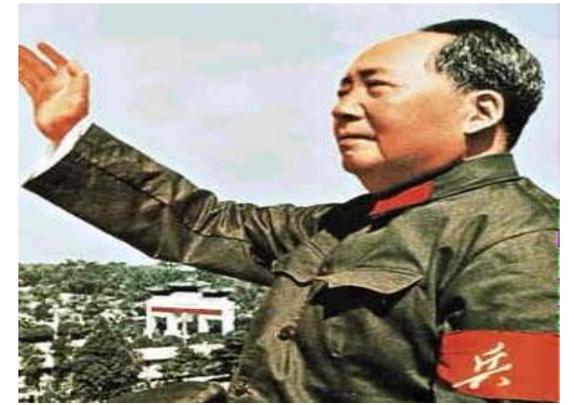


## Revolutions confiscated:

«Those who launch revolutions are always the cuckolds of history. »  
**Daniel Cohn-Bendit**

## Long and violent processes:

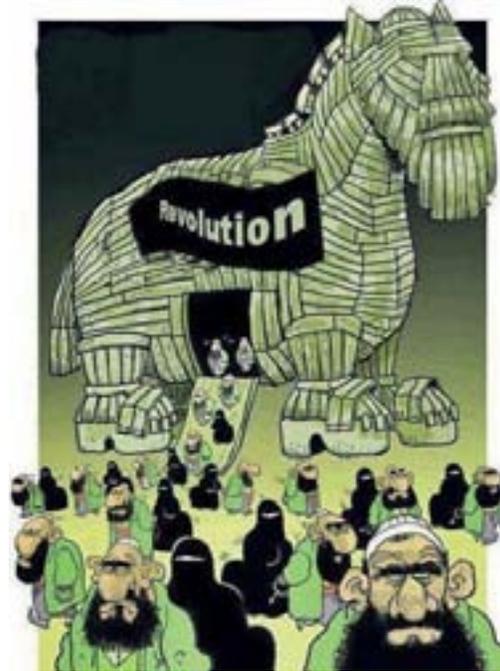
“A revolution is **not a dinner party**, or writing an essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery; it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous. A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows another.” **Mao**



# A revolution confiscated?



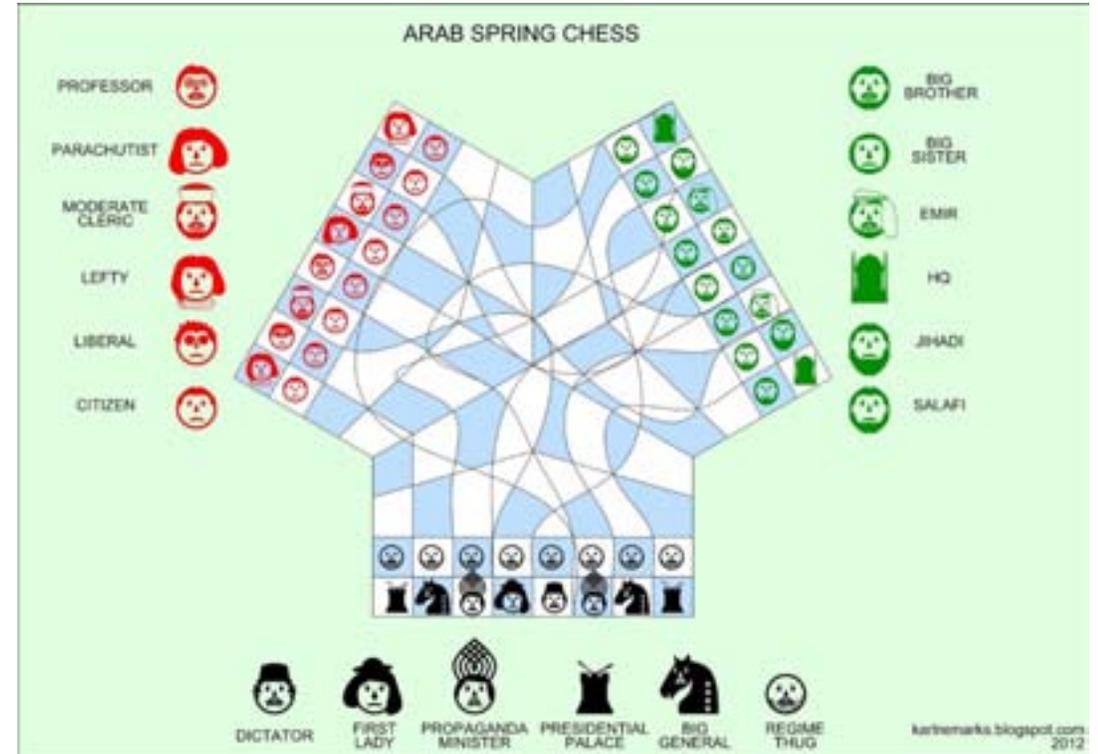
# Was the Revolution a Trojan Horse for Radical Islam?



- The Arab Revolutions and the Islamic Revolution
- Is there any truth to the cliché: «From the Arab Spring to the Islamist Winter»?
- Political Islam after the Arab Spring: myth and realities
- The old regimes' Faustian pact with the islamists
- A new role for the Salafis



# The forces at play



## THREE PLAYERS CHESS GAME

- The Armies
- The Islamists
- Civil Society Liberals and Progressives

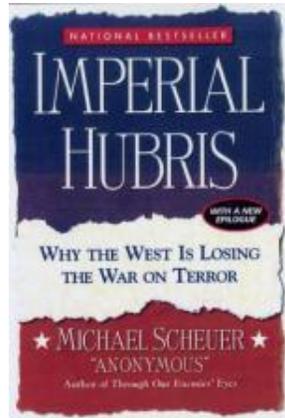
# Fragmentation, **State Collapse**, Rise of Non-State Actors

- Several countries on the verge of full-scale disintegration
- Centrifugal Forces and Weakening of Central Authorities
- **Non-State Actors setting the agenda:** Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya...
- End of Sykes-Picot? The entire territorial framework born following the demise of the Ottoman Empire is beginning to shatter
- **« Statisation of armed groups and militiaisation of States »** (Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou)
- Hyper-centralized States have collapsed, few structures to rebuild social cohesion
- The monopoly of violence and the legitimacy questions
- States who have weathered the Arab Spring drew the wrong lessons and hardened repression, the police states are back in force



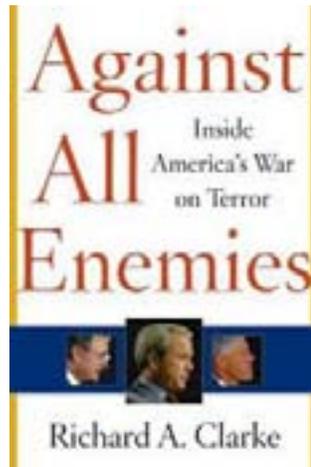
# From Al Qaeda to ISIS: The **Global War on Terror** and its Discontents

- 11 years after the invasion of Iraq, the so-called 'Islamic State', an organisation more radical than Al Qaida controls large swaths of territory
- The GWOT led to the expansion of radical Islamist militancy
- The unmitigated failure of George W. Bush's War on Terror
- The absence of a coherent Obama Strategy to «degrade and ultimately destroy ISIS»: reviving a failed logic

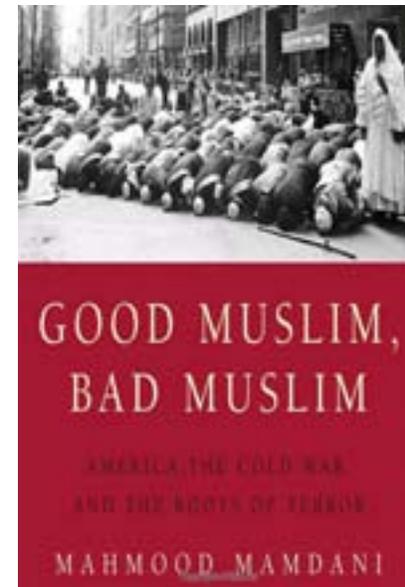
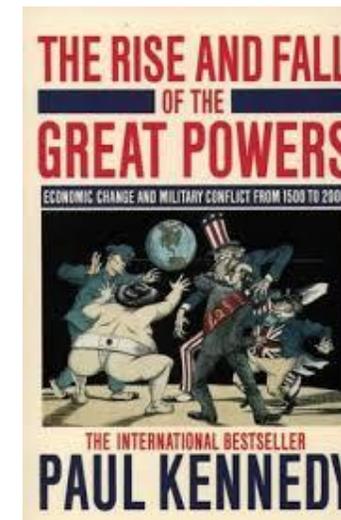


- In 2000, George W. Bush was elected on a program promising «Compassionate Conservatism» and a «Modest Foreign Policy» (an implicit condemnation of Clinton's Kosovo intervention)
- Bush's actual Foreign Policy ended up being a reaction / overreaction to 9/11
- Paul Kennedy: Hubris and Imperial Overstretch are always among the main causes of the Decline of the Great Powers
- Is Obama's Foreign Policy an overreaction to Bush's overreaction?

- Can terrorism, a tactic, be defeated militarily?
- Is the War on Terror Sustainable Financially? (destroying a 30.000 ISIS pickup truck costs \$ 500.000)
- The unintended consequences of the GWOT
- The **ambivalence of US allies**



- The privatization of War, PMSC industry
- GWOT as never-ending war
- An ever-expanding list of enemies
- Moby Dick going after Captain Ahab
- The return of « Culture Talk »

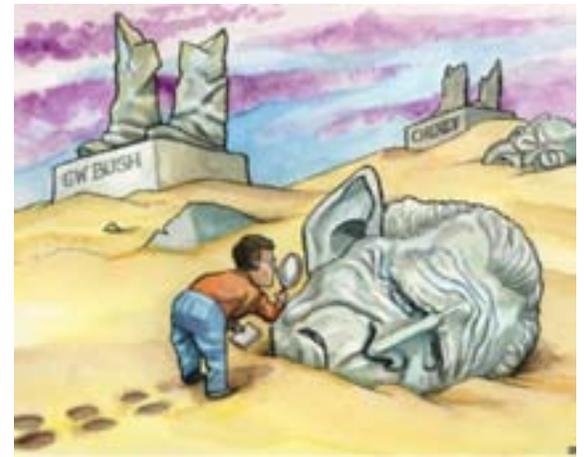


## The Consequences of the GWOT on Europe and the US

“Beware that, when fighting monsters, you yourself do not become a monster... for when you gaze long into the abyss. The abyss gazes also into you.” [Friedrich Nietzsche](#)

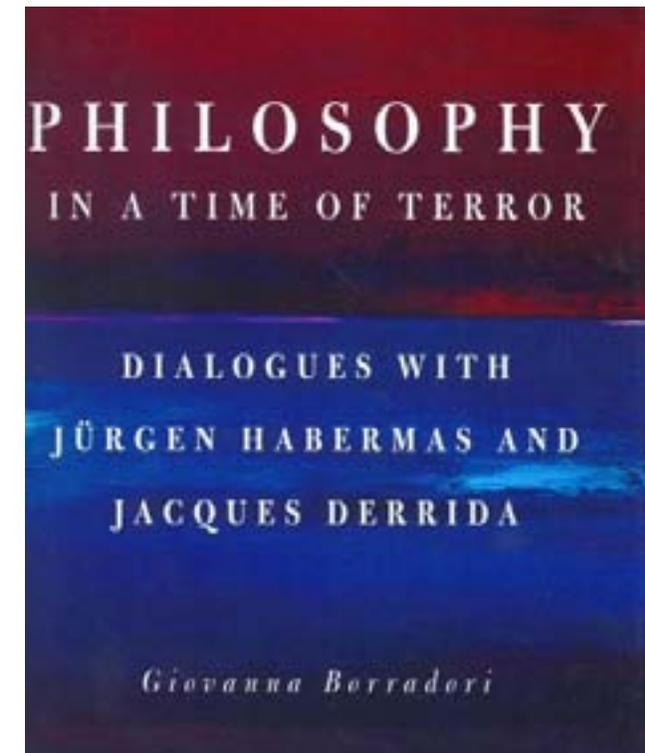
The Patriot Act, Civil Liberties and the Torture Debate

**“America cannot have an Empire abroad and a Republic at home.” Mark Twain**



## The Consequences of the GWOT on the Middle East & North Africa

- **The Logic and Rethoric of the «War on Terror» have benefited, been internalized and adopted by most Arab dictators** (Assad, Saleh, Qaddafi...) and are still prevalent in today's Egypt...
- The GWOT as an alibi for domestic repression
- RAND Study : **Only 7 % of terrorist groups have been defeated militarily**



# Culture Wars: The intense polarizations and the Battle of Ideas within the Arab World



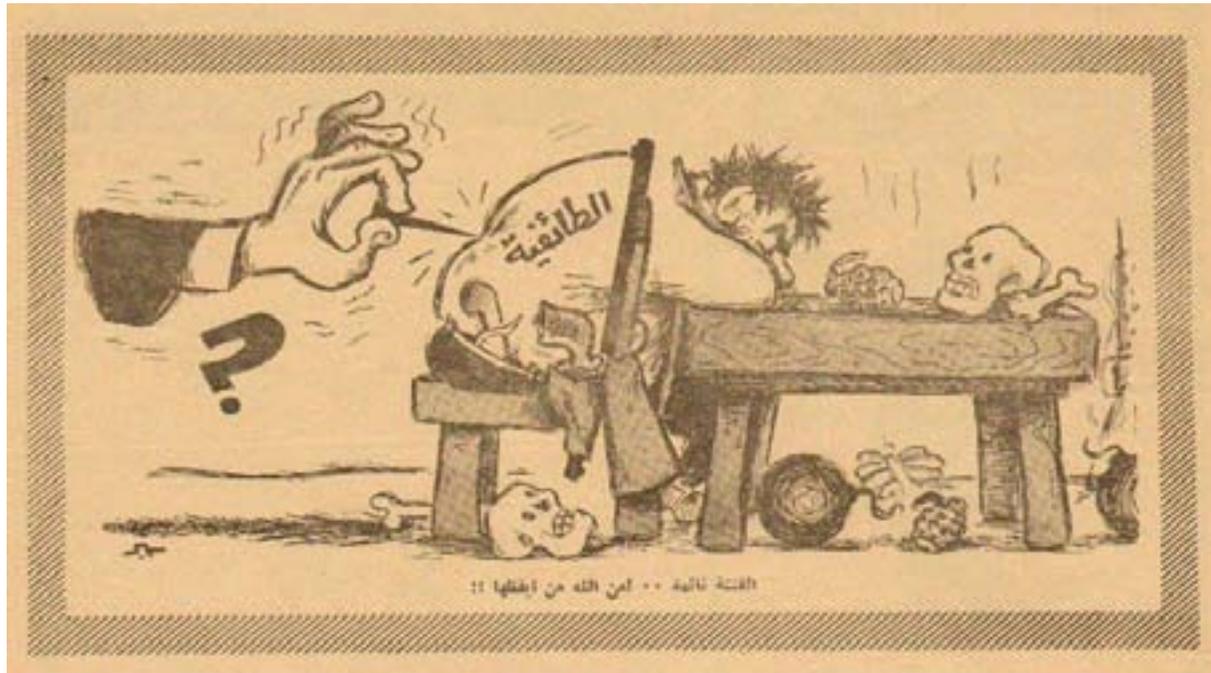
- Great ideological storms of the 20th Century (Isaiah Berlin)
- Liberal Democracy seems to have triumphed in the West but the MENA region has yet to settle the debate



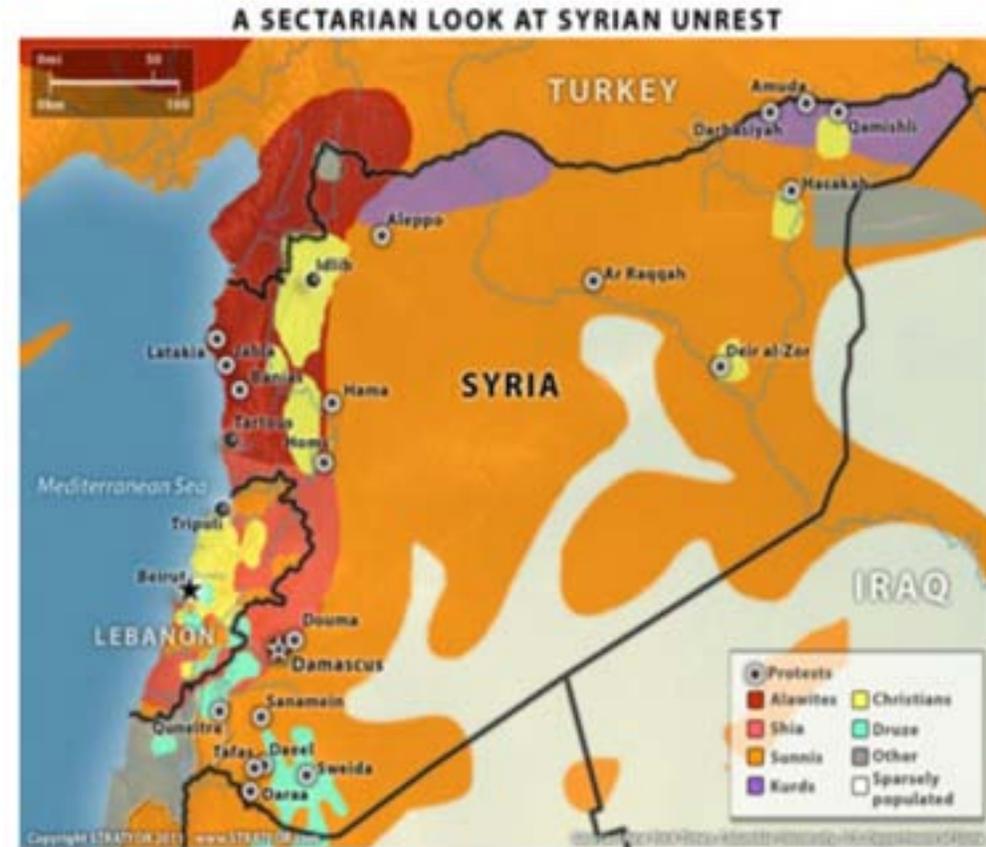
- Revolutions and Counter-revolutions, panarabism, panislamism, secularism, liberalism, authoritarian nationalism, nihilism...
- The Constitutional Debates
- Tunisia's attempt to transcend polarization
- Women, minorities, pluralism, freedom of conscience...
- Similar arguments in Turkey and Iran



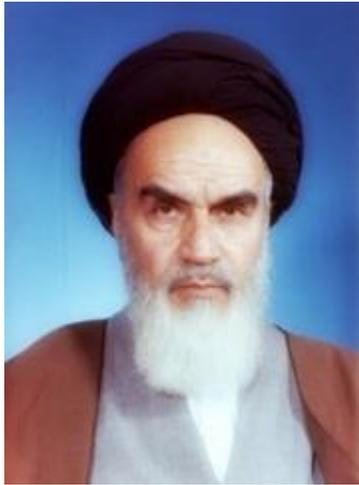
# The Sunni-Shiite Rift, **Sectarianism** and its uses by regional powers to further their geopolitical ambitions



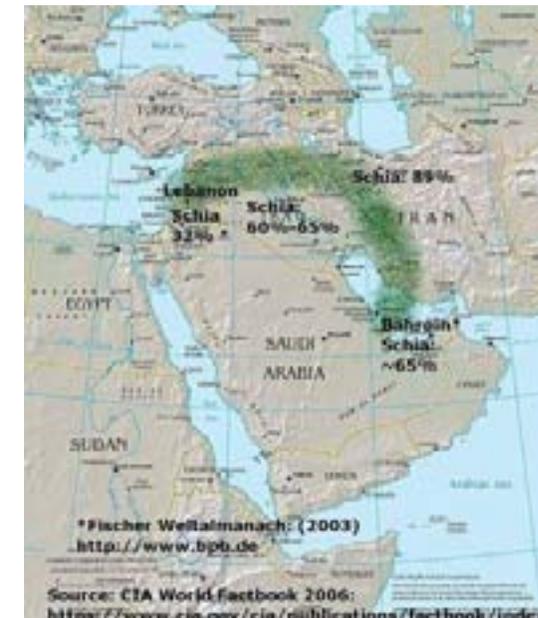
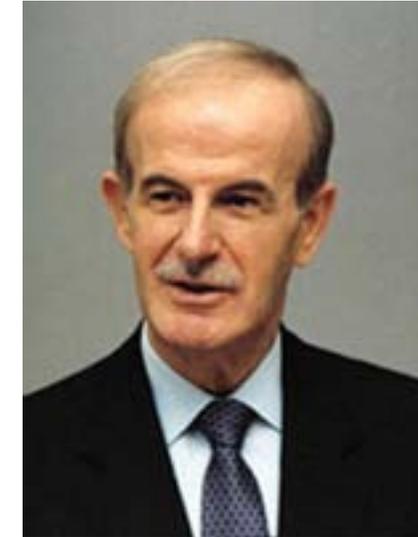
- Sectarianism, a sleeping giant awakened by the 2003 Iraq War and the subsequent rise of Iran?
- The Sunni / Shiite divide has little to do with theology or religion
- The Iranian revolution of 1979
- The rise of Salafism



## The Syrian-Iranian Strategic Alliance, Hezbollah and the « Shiite crescent »



- A 35 year old strategic alliance
- The Iran-Iraq War
- Failed US attempts to bring Syria back into the « sunni arab fold »
- Hezbollah's supply routes
- The curious alliance of baathism and khomeynism? Ideology vs Strategic Interests



# Hezbollah in a post-Assad Configuration

- Hezbollah has been straddling a very tenuous line between Lebanon and Syria
- An existential threat ?
- The vicissitudes of the Iranian-Syrian relationship (1980s-2010s)
- If Assad goes, will Hezbollah be alone in the Levant ?
- Realities vs wishful thinking
- To what extent is Hezbollah's constituency captive ?
- Hezbollah's Domestic Lebanese Impasse



The 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon and its unintended consequences



A Rare picture of Hassan Nasrallah

# The decline of US influence and the never-ending debate on Western **interventionism**



- From Bonaparte's 1798 Egypt expedition to Bush's 2003 Iraq invasion
- The track record of interventionism
- Can the US engage in nation-building?
- Does channelling weapons to insurgencies work?
- Inevitable backlash?
- Can the strikes on ISIS be effective?



# Towards a competitive multipolarity?

“The **increasing engagement of both powerful external actors and assertive mid-size powers in a setting marked by Saudi-Iranian rivalry bolsters the outlook of a competitive multipolarity** in the MENA region among a range of big and middle powers. Rather than forming cohesive blocs and entering long-term alignments, a range of regional and external players of different sizes and weights are likely to compete in shifting, overlapping alliances. Past strategic orientations can no longer be taken for granted. In a region marked by growing insecurity and competitive multipolarity, alliances are likely to take more passing, functional forms.” **Kristina Kausch**



# Past US mistakes and Dangerous Liaisons still haunt US decision makers



Eisenhower attempting to prop up the Muslim Brotherhood (Said Ramadan) in order to weaken Nasser's Arab Nationalism



Ben Laden praised by the Western Press for his anti-Soviet Jihad



Donald Rumsfeld visiting Saddam in 1983. US removed Saddam from the Terror List so that he could fight Iran



Reagan welcoming the Afghan Mujahideen at the White House to confront the USSR: freedom fighters?

The 2003 Anglo-American invasion of Iraq vs Crimea



# Syria's Tragedy: No End in Sight

“The Syrian conflict has triggered something more fundamental than a difference of opinion over intervention, something more than an argument about whether the Security Council should authorize the use of force. Syria is the moment in which the West should see that **the world has truly broken into two.**” (...)



“The situation in Syria has mutated from an uprising in a few outlying cities into a full-scale civil war. Now it has mutated again into a proxy war between the **Great Powers**”

**Michael Ignatieff, The New York Review of Books**

# IRAN AND LEBANON'S HEZBOLLAH

- Considerable evolution throughout the years
- Hezbollah has a captive Lebanese constituency
- Lebanese National Resistance or Iranian proxy?
- The 2006 turning point

ولاء حسن نصرالله لإيران ولقاداتها



Or ?



# The personality cult of Qassem Suleimani

## How Iran plays with Arab Nationalist and anti-imperialist sentiment

قاسم سليماني: شارك في أكثر من 50 حرباً ومعركة، منهم انه يقتل في أكثر من جبهة في الوقت نفسه - لا تسألوني كيف: لا أوسع!

جلالة العاهل الأردني الملك عبد الله الثاني شارك في المعارك في العاب البلايستاشن ومقاتلات لاس فيغاس: 1250 غ أوسعة

سلطان بن سلطان: شارك في التسكع والتفريج على شاشات غرفة عمليات سفينة الصحراء: 650 غ أوسعة

الملك حمد أمير قطر شارك في غزوات صيد الثقراوات في منتجعات مونكو وماريبيا: 870 غ أوسعة



# Saudi Arabia and Iran before the Iranian Revolution



Anti-Saudi Internet Activists dug up old press clippings showing Saudi Support for the Shah of Iran



# CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION...

Questions or comments?



[karimbitar@yahoo.com](mailto:karimbitar@yahoo.com)



[@karimbitar](https://twitter.com/karimbitar)



[Karim Emile Bitar](https://www.linkedin.com/in/karimbitar)



[www.facebook.com/karimbitar](https://www.facebook.com/karimbitar)