

*On November 30, the Middle East Program hosted a meeting, “Who Leads the Arab World?” with **Robin Wright**, USIP-Wilson Center Distinguished Scholar; **David Ottaway**, Senior Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center; and **Hanin Ghaddar**, Public Policy Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center and Managing Editor, NOW News, Lebanon. These scholars discussed regional players in the Arab world and the domestic and international challenges they face in maintaining their influence in the rest of the Middle East. The following paper expands upon Ottaway’s presentation at the November 30 meeting.*

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Saudi Arabia and the Arab World’s Geopolitical Fragmentation

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The Arab Awakening has set loose centrifugal forces which have fragmented the Middle East into four separate geopolitical theaters with a different defining issue at the core of each. The six monarchies of the Persian Gulf form one distinct unit that has the Iranian threat as its focal concern. The Egypt-Israel axis forms a second arena consumed with the intertwined futures of the Palestinians, Gaza, and the relationship between the two peace partners. The Levant from Lebanon to Iraq constitutes a third theater with Syria’s fate as its core preoccupation. Finally, the Maghreb stretching from Libya to Morocco is fixated right now on al-Qaeda’s conquest of northern Mali.

Arab leadership is just as badly fragmented. Within each geopolitical theater, different Arab states (and even non-Arab ones) play a leading role but often in competition with others. In the Gulf, Saudi Arabia is the dominant power in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) of six monarchies because of its size, population, and military strength. But its influence is limited even within GCC confines by some of its independent-minded partners, like Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, out to establish their own renown.

Egypt, on the other hand, is the key Arab player in dealing with Israel and the Palestinian issue, though it, too, must contend with other actors like Qatar and non-Arab Iran vying for influence over the Palestinians.

In the Levant, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and non-Arab Turkey and Iran are all competing for influence. No one of these countries plays a decisive role in aiding the rebel Free Syrian Army or determining President Bashar al-Assad’s fate or shaping Syria’s future.

In the Maghreb, Algeria is striving to assert itself as the key player in shaping that region’s response to al-Qaeda’s spreading presence in northern Mali because of its geographic location, military might, and strong opposition to foreign intervention.

The consequence of the Arab world facing four major crises simultaneously in different geopolitical settings is considerable. It is almost impossible for Egypt, Saudi Arabia, or Algeria to assert leadership

much beyond its immediate geographic area and sphere of influence. Egypt has no political influence in the Maghreb or the Gulf and only a limited one in the Levant. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia swings no weight in the Maghreb and only minimally regarding the fate of the Palestinians or the Egypt-Israel peace treaty.

Even within two of these four geopolitical theaters, non-Arab actors swing about as much weight as the principal Arab players. In the case of Syria, Turkey probably has more influence than any single Arab state or combination of them because of its location and military strength backed by its membership in NATO. Algeria, on the other hand, has to contend with the West African bloc of states known as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) as well as France, the European Union, and the United States, which all favor military intervention in northern Mali.

In the wake of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's ouster in early 2011, Saudi Arabia made a bid for greater Arab leadership. The Saudis believed that Egypt would remain totally preoccupied with domestic politics and "out of action" in its foreign policy for at least five years. The kingdom took leadership of the Arab diplomatic campaign to line up support in the Arab League for the overthrow of Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi through a UN-sponsored and NATO-enforced no-fly zone over Libya. King Abdullah also led the Arab drive to oust Syrian President Bashar al-Assad from power, first publicly calling on him to leave and then urging his overthrow by force of arms.

Simultaneously, Saudi Arabia sought to boost the collective GCC role in Arab politics with new initiatives and an activism rarely seen before. Two years ago, it proposed the expansion of this exclusive club of Arab Gulf monarchies to include neighboring Jordan and faraway Morocco, both also monarchies but located at opposite ends of the Arab world. So far, this Saudi initiative has gone nowhere.

Last year, Saudi King Abdullah came up with another idea, namely the immediate and total political, military, and financial unity of the original GCC members. This proposal immediately ran into stiff resistance from several other long-established monarchs unwilling to surrender independence to their Saudi big brother.

The main tools for expanding Saudi influence beyond the GCC have traditionally been its oil wealth and ultraconservative Wahhabi brand of Islam. The kingdom had long promoted like-minded Salafi groups across the Arab world, and the Arab Awakening has served to catapult Salafis to the fore of Arab politics.

The same awakening, however, has also catapulted the competing Muslim Brotherhood to power in Egypt and Tunisia and to the forefront of events in Syria and Jordan. The Brethren have even begun making their presence felt within GCC countries. As a result, there is an intense intra-Sunni religious rivalry that, while hardly new, is now out in the open. The Brethren, championed by Egypt and Qatar, are now in fierce competition with Saudi-backed Salafi groups for religious and political influence.

There are other reasons for the difficulties the Saudis have run into in their bid for Arab leadership. First and probably foremost, the ruling House of Saud has had to turn inward to deal with serious issues of health and succession. In the past year, two crown princes have died while the king, who is at least 89, was again in the hospital for yet another back operation this fall. Meanwhile, the long-serving Saudi

foreign minister, Prince Saud el-Faisal, was out of office for three months dealing with his own health problems. He returned in early November, but his Parkinson's disease seems worse than ever. This makes it unlikely he will be very active in pushing the Saudi agenda in Arab counsels.

At the same time, the rapid demise of Saudi Arabia's geriatric leadership has forced to the front of the al-Saud family's own counsels whether now is the time for a new generation to take over, and, if so, which of the competing junior princes should be selected as the next crown prince.

Two years into the Arab Awakening, Saudi Arabia seems more "out of action" than Egypt and far behind even its tiny GCC neighbor, Qatar, in seeking to expand its influence or take the lead. The kingdom has been unable to take advantage of either its oil wealth or its Custodianship of the Two Holy Mosques to assert itself because of a combination of circumstances: its ailing leaders, preoccupation with the succession issue, and the new challenge to its religious authority from the rising Muslim Brotherhood.