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Friends Like These

Why Petrostates Make Bad Allies

BY EMMA M. ASHFORD

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In what the Obama administration describes as a “years-long” coalition effort to “degrade and destroy” ISIS, the United States has reentered conflict in the Middle East. The White House heralds its close cooperation with Arab allies, including a number of petrostates such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, describing their cooperation as vital to the success of the campaign.

But petrostates are unlikely to be good allies for the U.S. campaign in Iraq and Syria. The reliance of those countries on oil and gas revenues distorts both foreign policy decisions and their implementation. First, petrostates have weak foreign policy institutions, producing policy that is of poor quality and strongly driven by personalities. Second, the vast flow of oil income enables the states to back

nonstate actors in conflicts, but their weak civil service cannot control the flow of arms or funds. Third, oil income also enriches private citizens, some of whom directly fund terrorist organizations such as ISIS. Thus, largely through ineptitude, those states have helped to foster Syria’s civil war, indirectly facilitating the rise of ISIS.

The idiosyncrasies of oil-rich states make them poor partners for the United States in this instance and in future conflicts. As allies, petrostates are especially likely to draw America into unnecessary and intractable conflicts. In particular, Washington should largely disentangle itself from the Saudi alliance and from reliance on Saudi intelligence and diplomatic services. Keeping Saudi Arabia at arm’s length will help to minimize involvement in Middle East conflicts that are not vital to U.S. interests.

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INTRODUCTION

On September 10, 2014, President Barack Obama gave a primetime speech announcing that the United States would begin an air campaign to “degrade and destroy” the terrorist group known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).¹ Since August, the United States had been conducting bombing raids against the group in Iraq in response (a) to the sudden collapse of the Iraqi army in the face of ISIS advances into northern Iraq and (b) to the fear that militants could seize key strategic sites such as the Mosul Dam. In his speech, however, the president promised a more active intervention by committing to action in both Iraq and Syria: “Working with the Iraqi government, we will expand our efforts beyond protecting our own people and humanitarian missions, so that we’re hitting ISIL targets as Iraqi forces go on offense.”²

Given the complexity of the situation on the ground in Syria, it is no surprise that U.S. leaders have chosen to emphasize that the campaign will be a coalition effort. Although representatives of the U.S. State Department describe a 60-member coalition, they focus in particular on the regional and cultural expertise of America’s Middle Eastern allies. As Secretary of State John Kerry noted on September 11, 2014, U.S. “strategy is centered in a global coalition of nations, and as I understand. . . Arab nations play a critical role in that coalition—the leading role, really, across all lines of effort.”³ A week later, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Martin Dempsey also emphasized the importance of increasing Arab participation in the coalition, calling it a “prerequisite” for the president’s ultimate approval of the military campaign.⁴

This is nothing new. Senior U.S. government officials often portray Saudi Arabia (and to some extent Qatar, the United Arab Emirates [UAE], and other states) as the linchpin of U.S. policy in the region. At the 2014 Munich Security Conference, Sen. John McCain summed up this attitude: “Thank God for the Saudis and Prince Bandar, and for our Qatari friends.”⁵ Certainly, of the dozen that have so

far joined the United States in airstrikes, the only states that have done so in Syria (rather than in Iraq) are Bahrain, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. Those states are also providing support in other areas. For example, Saudi Arabia has committed to provide weapons and to host a training base for Syrian rebels on its own soil.⁶

Unfortunately, the expertise that those states provide comes in large part from their extensive prior involvement in Syria. States such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar have spent hundreds of millions of dollars in Syria over the past three years while funding various rebel groups. They have also provided weapons, many of which eventually found their way into the hands of extremist groups such as ISIS.

As Vice President Joe Biden noted in an off-the-cuff remark, sometimes it seems that “our allies in the region were our greatest problem. . . . The Saudis, the Emiratis . . . they poured hundreds of millions of dollars and thousands of tons of weapons into anyone who would fight Assad. Except the people who were being supplied were al-Nusra and al Qaeda.”⁷ Though the White House forced Biden to call various leaders in the Middle East and apologize, claiming that his comments had been misconstrued, the remarks are fundamentally accurate.

David Cohen, who is the U.S. Treasury’s undersecretary for terrorism and financial intelligence, has complained bitterly that “our ally Kuwait has become the epicenter for fundraising for terrorist groups in Syria.”⁸ This observation leads to a few key questions: if the expertise and capabilities of those states is indispensable to the United States in resolving the crisis in Syria, why has their previous involvement been so counterproductive? Why have they failed to overthrow the Assad regime? And why did they permit or even enable the rise of ISIS?

One answer is that those states have consistently worked against each other. While Qatar backed a network of Syrian rebels connected to the Muslim Brotherhood, for example, Saudi Arabia focused instead on non-Broth-

erhood Salafi groups.⁹ Although competition can explain some of the turmoil in Syria, this competition is itself a reflection of the problems petrostates face in making foreign policy. Petrostates may seem ideal allies for the United States because of their wealth, but just as dependence on resource wealth can undermine democracy and economic development,¹⁰ it can also undermine the quality of a state's foreign policy.

The pathologies of petrostates make them extremely poor partners and unreliable sources of intelligence and military support for the United States in resolving the current crisis in Iraq and Syria. This paper focuses on two of America's closest Middle Eastern allies: Saudi Arabia and Qatar. It highlights the ways in which their weak foreign policy institutions have helped to foster the current crisis in Syria. By relying on those allies for intelligence or military capabilities in the campaign against ISIS, the United States risks being drawn even further into the Middle East's ongoing struggles.

THE DYSFUNCTIONAL FOREIGN POLICY OF PETROSTATES

Petrostates are prone to being corrupt and nondemocratic, suffering from the "resource curse."¹¹ Oil wealth can inhibit further economic development and democratization, making the curse most damaging to states that are underdeveloped. The most commonly accepted definition of a petrostate is a state that receives oil rents of 10 percent or more of Gross Domestic Product (GDP).¹² Yet the timing of oil discovery and exploitation matters a great deal.¹³ States such as Norway, which became oil-rich when already economically developed, will typically see few negative effects from their oil. Almost no states fit this description; the overwhelming majority of petrostates had low levels of development at the time of oil discovery.

Underdeveloped petrostates will become wealthy from oil, but they are likely to have problems developing democracy or state capacity afterward. The foreign policy patholo-

gies discussed in this paper, therefore, will likely apply to any underdeveloped petrostate. This paper focuses on two such states: Saudi Arabia, which discovered oil in the 1920s, and Qatar, which discovered oil in 1939. Oil wealth, governance, and development have been inextricably linked in both states ever since.

In petrostates, a steady stream of oil revenue enriches autocratic leaders, thereby providing the funds for generous social spending and for bribes, as well as allowing these leaders to resist pressure to democratize and to retain power longer.¹⁴ This relationship provides the basis for Thomas Friedman's oft-quoted (if anecdotal) assertion that in such states "the price of oil and the pace of freedom always move in opposite directions."¹⁵

Petrostates also frequently suffer from various economic maladies. One is the "Dutch disease," in which the lucrative nature of oil extraction encourages capital and labor to flee manufacturing sectors, thus resulting in an underdeveloped economy and the possibility of an exchange rate crisis.¹⁶ Even if petrostates avoid Dutch disease, they suffer from corruption and a lack of transparency, as politicians have an incentive to use oil revenues for personal enrichment rather than for economic development.¹⁷

Oil wealth also impedes economic performance by retarding the formation of state capacity, in particular the creation of even a minimally coherent and capable bureaucracy.¹⁸ Although leaders in a poor state have an incentive to develop competent state institutions to help them manage taxation and build a strong economy, leaders who receive a large amount of "no-strings-attached" money, such as oil revenues, lack that incentive.¹⁹ It is for this reason—the easy acquisition of "rents" from abroad—that petrostates are often called "rentier states." The economy is kept afloat by the resource industry, and bureaucrats must be paid out of resource revenues rather than through statewide taxation.

Table 1 shows the impact that oil income can have on state budgets (i.e., government consumption and capital formation) in several

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Table 1
Resource Revenue Impact on Petrostates

| State | Natural Resource Rents as % of GDP | Government Consumption as % of GDP | Gross Capital Formation as % of GDP | Resource Rents as a % of Government Spending |
|--------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|
| Bahrain | 23.7 | 15 | 20 | 68 |
| Kuwait | 55.1 | 15 | 15 | 184 |
| Qatar | 24.5 | 12 | 29 | 60 |
| Saudi Arabia | 48.2 | 22 | 25 | 103 |
| UAE | 23.8 | 7 | 23 | 79 |

Source: Data for all states for year 2012; available from data.worldbank.org.

oil-rich states. In each case, resource rents are equal to a sizable proportion of the state’s annual budget.²⁰ Although states are unlikely to receive 100 percent of resource rents as pure income, government control of the oil industry typically means that states capture a high proportion of those rents. Thus, the costs of building a capable civil service frequently outweigh the benefits in a rentier state, thereby providing “little incentive to establish an efficient civil service.”²¹

The result is that petrostates often have weak institutions and an ineffective civil service. Any such civil service that does exist tends to be corrupt, because positions frequently are awarded for political gain rather than for individual merit. Although most studies of this phenomenon focus on economic institutions such as development ministries or central banks, that weakness is endemic across a variety of state institutions, including foreign policy agencies such as foreign service or affairs ministries, intelligence services, and the military.

Leaders may try to develop those institutions and seek competent performance from them, but while small “pockets of efficiency” may exist within an otherwise weak bureaucracy, research indicates that such piecemeal efficiency strongly undermines organizational coherence. Even semi-efficient institutions in a petrostate are likely to be undermined by

corrupt hiring practices and overall bureaucratic inefficiency.²² Thus, even institutions as important as those for foreign policy tend to be weak in petrostates.

Although it is difficult to assess the quality of foreign policy, one can do so by looking at two factors. First, is the foreign policy rational and in the national interest? This question doesn’t mean that the policies necessarily produce the best outcomes, merely that they draw from the most logical policy alternatives at the time they were formulated. In effect, policy choices should make sense in context.

Second, was implementation of foreign policy at least somewhat effective? Policy implementation can obviously be affected by many factors, including the responses of other actors in the international system. But in general, the weakness of institutions in petrostates is likely to result in less rational, more confrontational foreign policy, as well as in more frequent failures of implementation. Thus, when it is compared with that of other states, foreign policy in petrostates will tend to be of poor quality, unprofessional, and ineffectual.

U.S. national security institutions can themselves be criticized for a variety of reasons, including excessive size, bureaucratic infighting, and a tendency for threat inflation.²³ The accuracy of those criticisms is not in doubt. Yet, extremely weak—or effectively ab-

sent—national security institutions also have detrimental effects on foreign policy.

First, foreign policy formation tends to be more personality-driven and less cooperative when institutions are weak. Evidence shows that effective foreign policymaking relies on the inputs of many actors that are working together in a deliberative process. In most states, the civil service provides this vital support for leaders, thus ensuring that policy options are provided and debated.²⁴ The foreign policy bureaucracy engages in debate from multiple viewpoints and more readily absorbs learning from prior experiences than individuals do, which makes their advice valuable.²⁵

As critics have noted, in well-developed states such as the United States, this debate about policy can sometimes result in too little influence for elected leaders themselves in the foreign policy process.²⁶ Yet in states with weak institutions, decisions are instead made entirely by individual leaders or by a small group of insiders. With little debate and no foreign policy bureaucracy to provide alternate viewpoints, the individual personality traits of leaders dominate.²⁷ Foreign policy made solely by individuals tends to be less cooperative and more confrontational than does foreign policy that draws on the experience and expertise of a competent civil service.²⁸ The weaker the institutions, the more pronounced the effect. For example, revolutionary states, which often lack institutions entirely, are more prone to conflict than are other states.²⁹

Second, information is a core component of rational, effective foreign policy decisions. Myriad works about foreign policy highlight the ways in which leaders process information when making foreign policy decisions, and most assume that policymakers receive good information, which, in turn, enables them to make an informed choice.³⁰ Yet the quality of available information depends on the quality of the country's foreign ministry and intelligence services. Such institutions provide leaders with most of their information about both foreign policy and economic issues.³¹

Whatever the flaws of foreign policy institutions, they provide leaders with information

more effectively than would be the case if the institutions did not exist. When such institutions are unavailable, leaders fall back on other available sources of information: the personal knowledge of those around them and what they can glean from media. At best, a lack of good information can result in foreign policy decisions that are less than optimal. At worst, it may lead to avoidable conflicts, as leaders miscalculate their chances in a conflict or misjudge an opponent's strength.³²

Finally, weak institutions also undermine the implementation of foreign policy. Typically the bureaucracy carries out a range of functions, including low- to mid-level diplomacy, intelligence operations, and military campaigns. Scholars debate how much bureaucracies themselves influence foreign policy outcomes.³³ But it is generally accepted that the civil service is responsible for the implementation of policy. Indeed, leaders often make decisions only at a general level, leaving the specifics of implementation to subordinates.³⁴ When leaders do not know the specifics of implementation, they have difficulty exerting control or correcting problems introduced at this stage.³⁵ A weak or corrupt foreign policy bureaucracy is less able to manage policy implementation, particularly when it is complex.

As a result of such factors, poorly informed individuals drive foreign policy in petrostates, and petrostates' weak bureaucracies often fail to effectively implement foreign policy decisions. An example is Saddam Hussein's 1991 invasion of Kuwait. His decision to invade was predicated on poor intelligence work, particularly the belief that the United States didn't particularly care about Kuwait and would not intervene,³⁶ which was an erroneous conclusion that was based largely on Saddam's own intuition rather than on any formal intelligence.³⁷ He was quickly proven wrong by the rapid formation of an international military coalition to remove Iraqi forces from Kuwait, thereby highlighting how easy it can be for leaders to make foreign policy errors when lacking in basic information. This paper considers how weak institutionalization affects the foreign policy of

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two petrostates, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, during their involvement in the Syrian civil war.

Foreign Policy in Saudi Arabia

Saudi foreign policy has long been the province of the royal family, with a heavy focus on personal diplomacy. The roots of Saudi diplomacy lie in the kingdom's role as a major oil exporter. Early diplomacy was often carried out through intermediaries of Western oil companies or through foreigners hired by the kingdom's rulers for their foreign policy expertise.³⁸ This practice ceased only in the 1950s and 1960s with the expansion of the Foreign Ministry and founding of an intelligence service, the *al Mukhabarat al A'amah*, under King Faisal.

Despite the creation of these new institutions, Saudi foreign policy is still made informally. Rather than receiving formal bureaucratic briefs about key foreign policy issues, the king instead makes decisions after informal conversations with key advisors. Those advisors are sometimes foreign policy specialists but, because advising is not a formalized system, participation tends to be ad hoc. The bureaucracy itself is balkanized, with ministries “belonging” to individual princes who treat them as fiefdoms and sometimes even bequeath them to their sons.³⁹

One example serves to illustrate how destructive this practice can be: Yemen policy was for many years the brief of Prince Sultan, head of the Special Office for Yemen Affairs. But when Sultan was incapacitated by a stroke in early 2009, this office was effectively shut down. As a result, during the 2009 Houthi crisis in Yemen, the kingdom had no coherent policy on how to deal with violent turmoil in its closest neighbor.⁴⁰

Further, when the Saudis invaded Yemen in late 2009 in response to the uprising, Prince Khaled, Sultan's son, led the campaign. Despite his military education, Khaled was no general and had little experience coordinating a military campaign. He is rumored to have caused many of the conflict's tactical blunders, resulting in the deaths of more than a hundred Saudi troops.⁴¹ This strong personalization of

Saudi foreign and military policy around individual royals is merely one manifestation of the lack of a professional civil service.

Key foreign policy decisions in the kingdom are based on consultation among senior royals, and influence on foreign policy decisions tends to be based on royal status rather than on expertise or ministerial brief.⁴² The centrality of senior royals to this system has in recent years posed an increasing problem as the sons of the first king (Abdulaziz al Saud) reach advanced ages. There is little movement among officials, who often hold posts for decades (e.g., there have been only three Saudi foreign ministers since 1930). Officials are often incapacitated by ill health, and many spend months abroad for treatment. During those periods, decision-making can be suspended.

In January 2011, for example, as the Arab Spring was gaining steam, Saudi officials were concerned about unrest in neighboring Bahrain. Nonetheless, observers note that no decision on this issue could be made until late February, when King Abdullah returned from surgery abroad.⁴³ Immediately after his return, the kingdom announced two major social spending packages for Bahrain to relieve the unrest, decisions that could have been made by deputies in Abdullah's absence. Hence, the lack of foreign policy infrastructure undermines timely Saudi foreign policy decisions.

Another indicator of the weakness of the Saudi bureaucracy is the kingdom's continued reliance on U.S. defense firms, with whom it contracts to build and staff a military and intelligence infrastructure. This arrangement is institutionalized in the U.S.-Saudi Technical Cooperation Agreement, which was signed in 2008 and which obligates the U.S. government to “make available for sale . . . its capacity in the areas of critical infrastructure protection . . . including technical assistance,” and which is to be provided “directly or through U.S. government contractors.”⁴⁴ Those contractors typically do not play an advisory role; instead they act as a key part of the Saudi civil service for the purposes of implementing policy and providing monitoring and technical services.

Foreign Policy in Qatar

If Saudi foreign policy institutions are underdeveloped, Qatari foreign policy institutions are effectively nonexistent. The state became independent in 1971 and has been oil-rich throughout its existence. Until around 2001, Qatar largely followed the Saudi lead on foreign policy and did not undertake any significant home-grown foreign policy initiatives. During the 2000s, the new emir and his foreign minister decided to use Qatar's burgeoning gas wealth to raise its profile on the world stage, including applications to host sporting events such as the 2022 FIFA World Cup and several high-profile attempts at international conflict mediation.

Despite this increased activism, Qatar lacks the large professional diplomatic service necessary for such engagement.⁴⁵ Instead, Qatar's foreign policy is characterized primarily by the personal diplomatic activity of the emir and an extremely small circle of elite advisors. All decisions are made by the emir personally in a highly informal process. As one author describes, Qatari foreign policy is centralized "in the hands of, at best, four people."⁴⁶

Qatari foreign policy has recently focused on mediation, with Qatar portraying itself as a neutral, third-party negotiator in many conflicts. Indeed, the 2003 Qatari constitution requires that foreign policy be based "on the principle of strengthening international peace and security by means of encouraging peaceful resolution of international disputes."⁴⁷

Qatar's wealth is an intrinsic part of its diplomatic approach, with the state often providing financial incentives to negotiating parties to encourage a deal. The mediation approach has worked well for Qatar in some respects, largely because it can be carried out by individuals and will require little bureaucracy.⁴⁸ Yet many of Qatar's best-known achievements in mediation, including involvement in crises in Yemen, Lebanon, and Darfur, have failed after a brief period of seeming success. Those failures are undoubtedly due to the personal nature of Qatari mediation, which brings parties together with financial incentives to resolve specific

crises but which lacks contextual awareness or technical skill at mediation.⁴⁹ Qatar also lacks the ability to monitor implementation.⁵⁰ Such deficiencies leave fundamental problems unresolved.

Many scholars have highlighted the mismatch between Qatar's foreign policy goals and its capabilities. Qatar's handling of the Arab Spring, for example, saw the tiny state take a far more active role in foreign policy than previously when it backed rebels in Libya and Syria and fostered the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Yet all of those interventions failed: Libya is still in turmoil, and Egypt is back under military rule, with many experts blaming Qatar's poor diplomatic and bureaucratic capability. In effect, Qatar "lacked the administrative and on-the-ground resources to leverage its influence into tangible results."⁵¹

Petrostates in Syria

The war in Syria began as an extension of the Arab Spring protests, but the situation turned violent in late 2011. The Assad regime increasingly sought to crack down on protests, thus sparking a full-fledged civil war between the government and a variety of rebel groups. The United States refrained from involvement in the conflict initially, but in a 2012 press briefing, President Obama, perhaps unwisely, stated: "We have been very clear to the Assad regime, but also to other players on the ground, that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized."⁵²

As a result, when in late 2013 it became apparent the Syrian government had used chemical weapons, including the deadly nerve gas sarin, against its own populace, the administration began to come under pressure from some in Congress and the media to intervene in Syria on humanitarian grounds or risk losing credibility. Other members of Congress argued that the administration's proposed draft resolution authorizing the use of military force in Syria to interdict chemical weapons was too broad.⁵³

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Ultimately, a chance comment by Secretary of State John Kerry in a press conference on September 9, 2013, that Bashar al-Assad could still avoid U.S. intervention if he “turn[s] over every single bit of his chemical weapons to the international community” led to a surprising deal with Russia to facilitate Syria’s chemical weapon disarmament, and allowed the administration to avoid intervention at that time.⁵⁴

To be sure, during this period the United States began to provide small arms to Syrian rebels. However, the reticence of the White House to get pulled into the Syrian conflict meant that those efforts have been until recently tightly constrained and are limited to small arms and minimal training for a small number of rebel groups.⁵⁵ The increasing fragmentation and radicalization of Syrian rebel groups has also made it extremely difficult to find acceptable “moderates” to arm or keep arms from extremist groups. Those factors, combined with the Obama administration’s unwillingness to countenance active U.S. military intervention in Syria, helped to keep U.S. involvement minimal until late 2014.

Unfortunately, U.S. restraint was not matched by other states. As early as June 2012, media sources reported that Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey were arming anti-regime rebels with both light and heavy weapons. Iran provided weapons and military advice to the government in Damascus, which is also assisted by ground troops from Iranian-sponsored Hezbollah. In some ways, the Syrian crisis can even be characterized as a proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia.⁵⁶

Both the civil war in Syria and the rise of ISIS have been shaped by the involvement of those third parties, many of which are petrostates. The vast quantities of money and arms they have provided during the past three years have driven competition among Syria’s rebel groups. This competition has increased the conflict’s duration and has reduced the likelihood that the rebels will eventually triumph.⁵⁷ The groups that have been the most successful in Syria are now Islamist groups—such as Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al Sham, or ISIS—instead of the more moderate groups that are loosely associated with the Free Syrian Army or the Front to Liberate Syria.

The most prominent group is ISIS, which was formerly part of al Qaeda in Iraq. Although the group emerged only within the past two years, it has made major territorial gains in both Syria and Iraq, including the cities of Aleppo, Idlib, Raqqah, and Mosul.

The group has aims outside of conventional jihadi terrorism: in June 2014, ISIS proclaimed a caliphate, known as the Islamic State (with leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as Caliph), and it is attempting to hold and administer the territory it has taken. ISIS has an estimated 20,000–31,500 fighters, including foreign fighters from across the globe.⁵⁸ Their extreme brutality, including mass executions of non-Muslims, torture, killing of journalists and aid workers, and enslavement of thousands of women and children, has alienated even other Salafi and jihadi rebel groups, further splintering the Syrian resistance.

Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been key players throughout this process by setting in motion the events that would lead to the current U.S. intervention. Indeed, both states’ policies in Syria have in many ways compromised their own best interests. Leaders have made poor policy choices, which have ignored consequences that should have been easily foreseen. Those failures are instead a consequence of the countries’ weak foreign policy institutions. Oil wealth enabled them to back violent nonstate actors in Syria, but both states lacked the bureaucratic infrastructure to control the flow of weapons and funds. Oil income also has enriched the states’ private citizens, thereby permitting them to easily fund violent groups across the region, even as each state’s weak infrastructure increases the difficulty of interdicting this private terrorist financing.

LACK OF ADVICE: INSULAR DELIBERATION. Each state’s involvement in Syria has included a dysfunctional decisionmaking process, limited information, and poor decisions. Several of those decisions, such as the choice to unilaterally arm unvetted Syrian rebels, have backfired in ways that could have been foreseen had the decision-making process not been so ad hoc and lacking in information.

Though neither state directly backed ISIS, the states did variously fund rebel groups such as Liwa al Tawhid, Ahrar al Sham, and Jaish al Islam, each of which has links to al Qaeda's Syrian branch, al-Nusra.⁵⁹ Though those groups deny such ties, strong evidence indicates cooperation. For example, Abu Khalid al-Suri, who was a senior leader in Ahrar al Sham prior to his death, has been named by the U.S. Department of the Treasury as al Qaeda's representative in Syria.⁶⁰

Two factors seem to have driven Saudi Arabia's initial decision to get involved in Syria: fear of Iranian influence and personal animus toward Bashar al-Assad. Saudi representatives made frequent and early calls for Assad's ouster and began negotiations with Jordan in early 2012 to permit passage of Saudi weapons to rebels inside Syria.

By summer, the *Washington Post* reported that Saudi Arabia was sending large quantities of arms and ammunition to Syria, as well as paying salaries and incentives to officers who opted to defect from Assad's armed forces to the rebels.⁶¹ Since that time, the kingdom has poured money and arms into Syria's conflict.

However, the sclerotic nature of policymaking within the kingdom has constrained Saudi decisions about those actions. Although Bandar bin Sultan, at the time Saudi Arabia's head of intelligence, attempted to coordinate international support for the removal of the Assad regime as early as May 2011, the Saudis largely ignored the crisis in Syria until 2012, partly because they lack the policymaking capacity to juggle several crises at the same time.⁶² With Arab Spring crises in Egypt, Bahrain, and Yemen occupying their attention, Saudi leaders did not focus on Syria until the conflict was well under way in spring of 2012.

The strongly personalized nature of Saudi foreign policy also posed problems for Syria policy. Thomas Donilon, at the time U.S. National Security Advisor, publicly blamed the declining health of many of the kingdom's key figures for the inability of Saudi leaders to address concerns in a timely manner.⁶³ During the key period 2011–2012, it was frequently unclear who was in

charge of policy, as various key royals underwent medical treatment abroad. Some observers even argued that Syria policy had been delegated to Bandar bin Sultan, whom King Abdullah strongly disliked, simply because no other healthy and qualified senior royal was available.⁶⁴

At that time, Saudi Arabia's Syria policy also displayed a worrying lack of knowledge about the state, despite its proximity and regional importance. The kingdom largely ignored Syrian domestic concerns when it treated the conflict as sectarian and Iranian influenced. This approach led the Saudis to back only Sunni actors in Syria, a policy that actually increased sectarian violence. It is unclear whether those policies may have simply been the result of poor decisionmaking, or whether they reflected a lack of understanding of the initial aims of the Syrian uprising.⁶⁵

Saudi leaders certainly may have misunderstood the situation, because they have few ties to tribes and business networks within Syria. Saudi intelligence capacity in Syria is extremely poor, with only a limited ability to follow events on the ground.⁶⁶ Whether or not the Saudis misread the intent of Syria's rebels, continuing shortfalls in intelligence limited the ability of leaders to make good decisions about the crisis, and poor policy choices had widespread ramifications for any quick resolution.

In contrast to Saudi Arabia, Qatari policy toward Syria was quick and decisive, although it still suffered from many deficiencies. Qatar initially attempted to forge an international response to the violence, with the emir being the first Arab leader to publicly advocate sending troops to Syria. The Qataris sought to create a coalition for rapid military action to oust the government of Bashar al Assad, similar to the 2011 coalition that helped rebels to topple Muammar el-Qaddafi in Libya. But to their frustration, international action was not forthcoming. Even the rapid spiral of violence in Syria in 2011–2012 did not produce action by Western or Arab governments, and Qatar began to act increasingly unilaterally, ratcheting up the rhetoric and increasing its funding to anti-Assad groups in Syria.⁶⁷

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In doing so, Qatari leaders ignored the concerns of other states about key historical and political factors, many of which differentiated Syria from Libya. The factors included strong links between Bashar al-Assad and the government in Tehran, support from Moscow, and sectarian tensions within the country. Indeed, many within the international community, including members of the “Friends of Syria” group of countries, highlighted the high probability of increasing sectarian tensions within Syria when rejecting Qatari calls for intervention in 2011–2012.⁶⁸

Despite those warnings, Qatar began to arm various rebel groups. Between January 2012 and April 2013, in addition to providing more than \$100 million in direct funds, Qatar sent around 90 cargo flights full of small arms, including AK-47s and RPGs, to Turkey, where the weapons were shipped to rebels in Syria.⁶⁹

In Libya, such support, combined with international airstrikes, had led to the ouster of Muammar el Qaddafi in under a year. In contrast, Qatari aid to rebel groups in Syria served to increase the violence, fragment the Syrian opposition, and worsen sectarian tensions.⁷⁰ The willingness of Qatari elites to act in Syria despite warnings about the potential for large-scale sectarian conflict is perhaps unsurprising given the widespread lack of crisis assessment skills or knowledge within the Qatari civil service.⁷¹

Similar to the Qatari desire to be involved in regional mediation in earlier years, Qatar’s involvement in Syria was most likely driven by personality-based factors such as ideology or religion, rather than by national security concerns.⁷² Qatar received no concrete benefits from its involvement in Syria, and the regional instability caused by the conflict in Syria (as well as Qatar’s continued involvement in Libya’s turmoil) is counterproductive to Qatar’s own security and stability. Scholars have noted the inherent contradictions in Qatar’s championing of pro-democratic activists in Syria, when the country itself “remains without an independent legislature or political parties.”⁷³ Some speculate that Qatari involvement in Syria was driven largely by the altruistic aims of the emir and his advisors, rather than by any long-term policy goal.⁷⁴

The Qatari decision to pursue active involvement in Syria also was taken despite extremely limited intelligence and information. Even as weapons flowed into Syria, all indications were that Qatar just didn’t have enough data about conditions within Syria, especially about which groups were most prominent, to manage their contributions correctly. For that reason, much of the Qatari aid was initially disbursed to Syrian (or Muslim Brotherhood) expatriates living in Doha.⁷⁵ Those individuals had connections in Syria but little relevant experience in the conflict there.

As the civil war grew, it became apparent that the Qataris were often unsure where their supplies were ending up. As one observer noted, “The data collection was just not what it could have been. They didn’t know how much was going to each group.”⁷⁶ Another observer ascribed Qatar’s consistent failure to meet its objectives in Syria to the state’s overreliance on money and to this lack of information, noting that “the game got too complicated” for them to manage.⁷⁷ Still others describe Qatar as a rich child that is trying to play the game of diplomacy but is prevented from doing it well by the lack of infrastructure and experience.⁷⁸ Qatar’s consistent and unsuccessful search for new proxies in Syria throughout the past few years highlights this problem.

As a result, the Qataris have since experienced widespread diplomatic backlash from their involvement in Syria. In 2013, for example, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE all withdrew their ambassadors from Doha in protest of Qatar’s involvement with the Muslim Brotherhood. The protest not only focused on Syria, Egypt, and Libya, but also alleged that Qatar was in breach of a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) agreement on noninterference in the internal affairs of other members by supporting the Brotherhood in other GCC states.⁷⁹

Qatar also suffered backlash from Western countries, as its many failures of foreign policy, combined with a UAE-funded lobbying blitz, led journalists to link the state with Islamic militants in Syria and accuse it of fomenting chaos throughout the region.⁸⁰ Though the

timing of the revelations owed much to internal GCC rivalries, they were fundamentally accurate and sparked a backlash that cost Qatar its leading role in Syria.

By May 2013, Saudi Arabia had informally taken the lead on the GCC's Syria policy, relegating Qatar to a more minor role. This publicity also cost Qatar prestige and its hard-won reputation as an impartial mediator because few regional actors now trust Qatari motives.⁸¹ Qatari policy in Syria, therefore, served to undermine Qatar's long-term foreign policy goals, thus tarnishing the Qatari "brand" and giving it a deserved reputation for funding extremism.

LACK OF BUREAUCRATIC CAPACITY: NONSTATE ACTORS AND POLICY IMPLEMENTATION. Although Saudi and Qatari foreign policy decisionmaking about Syria was confused and ineffectual, it was in the implementation of that policy that the two countries inflicted much of their damage. In both cases, leaders agreed to support rebels within Syria, but neither country possessed a sufficient intelligence capability or network within Syria to do so effectively.

Initial attempts by both states to pass weapons to the Free Syrian Army (FSA) through the Syrian National Council, a Turkey-based group of expatriates, were largely unsuccessful because the council was regarded with a certain amount of hostility by the FSA. Further attempts to unify the Syrian resistance under a single command structure, including the FSA's Supreme Military Command, or the National Coalition for Revolutionary Forces, were also unsuccessful. Ultimately, none of those groups proved reliable surrogates for Saudi Arabia or Qatar.⁸²

Following the 2013 chemical weapons attacks, Saudi Arabia's frustrations led it to minimize its involvement with the FSA, instead organizing a merger of Salafist militias that became known as the Army of Islam. Although those groups were more easily managed through existing Saudi Wahhabist networks, many of the militias were sworn enemies of the FSA. Weapons given to those groups thus served to increase factional fighting between anti-Assad groups, thus benefiting the Assad regime.⁸³

Saudi Arabia continued to fund both the FSA and the Salafist groups as the conflict continued, even as the two sides became increasingly hostile to each other. Saudi backing of Salafist militias was also counterproductive to the Saudi fight against al Qaeda, because many of those groups began to embrace more extremist views.⁸⁴ Saudi leaders ultimately proved unable either to project power into Syria themselves or to wage an effective proxy war there.⁸⁵

Qatar chose to compensate for its minimal on-the-ground presence in Syria by relying on its ties to the Muslim Brotherhood. Qatar has long acted as a safe haven for members of the Muslim Brotherhood who are exiled from their own countries, although it doesn't permit activity by the group within its own borders.

At the start of the Arab Spring, therefore, lacking any foreign policy infrastructure, Qatari leaders sought to use the networks established by the Muslim Brotherhood to advance their own policies in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt.⁸⁶ In Syria, Qatar repeatedly tried to hand control of the Syrian opposition to the Brotherhood-backed Syrian National Council, long after other Gulf States had abandoned it. Qatar's alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood is unusual because the goals of the Brotherhood in regard to political Islam are a direct threat to the regime in Doha.

The relationship, moreover, appears to be one of convenience: Qatar seems to have chosen the group largely because it was close at hand and enabled quick action in Syria.⁸⁷ Unfortunately, much of the funding given to the Syrian National Council did not, in fact, go toward fighting Bashar al-Assad's forces, but instead it was directed toward rebuilding the Muslim Brotherhood's political network inside Syria.⁸⁸

In addition to Brotherhood-related groups, Qatar also solicited bids from individual rebel groups. Syrian expatriates were particularly encouraged to apply by submitting a "pitch" for the brigade they hoped to create and then receiving funding.⁸⁹ Similar to Saudi Arabia, Qatar backed a variety of different groups inside Syria in an almost haphazard fashion. Unfortunately, although intended to topple Assad

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“Many of the arms and funds provided by both Saudi Arabia and Qatar have found their way into the hands of extremist groups such as ISIS.”

quickly, Saudi and Qatari funding for many disparate groups instead appears to have incentivized conflict among the opposition, especially between Salafists, Muslim Brotherhood-linked groups, and secular rebels. Both states have been unable to control their proxies, which have shown an inclination to turn on each other, and, in the case of the Salafists, to cooperate with more extreme groups linked to al Qaeda or ISIS. In the process, lack of coordination and even open competition between Saudi Arabia and Qatar have fragmented the opposition in Syria and encouraged corruption.⁹⁰

Qatar has shown increasing desperation in its willingness to fund any group that shows a minimal level of competence in fighting Damascus, even if that group exhibits extremist tendencies. As late as 2012, Qatar’s minister of foreign affairs argued “against excluding anyone at this stage, or bracketing them as terrorists or bracketing them as al-Qaeda. . . . We should bring them all together, we should treat them all equally, and we should work on them to change their ideology.”⁹¹

Although there is no evidence that the Qatari government directly funded ISIS, the government’s apparent embrace of any group that promised to topple Assad is concerning, and their haphazard provision of weapons and money inside Syria almost certainly led to indirect support for ISIS in some cases. In advocating efforts to arm al Qaeda-linked affiliates, Qatar emphasizes the affiliates’ role in fighting the Assad regime but ignores their international activities, including terrorist attacks and political opposition to the monarchies of the Gulf States, both of which represent long-term threats to Qatar itself.

Both states also frequently proved unable to provide promised aid within a reasonable time frame. The United States also has had problems delivering aid to Syria in a timely manner, but the delay is largely due to the extensive vetting required of aid recipients. In contrast, Saudi and Qatari aid was not subject to such vetting, but it still suffered substantial delays. Even in late 2012, as both were loudly proclaiming their support for the Syrian opposition, their aid was arriving in only a piecemeal way.⁹²

Moderate FSA fighters complained that aid was slow to arrive, although groups with private funding were already receiving arms and ammunition. For those with state funding, the lack of bureaucratic infrastructure proved an obstacle to speedy deliveries. As a result, many Syrian groups were forced to seek outside funding from private donors, typically wealthy citizens of the Gulf States.

Slow delivery produced two effects. First, it strengthened Salafi Islamist groups, which were favored by many wealthy donors. It further encouraged moderate groups to cooperate with more extremist groups and emphasize their Islamist credentials to obtain weapons from private funders.⁹³ Second, the failure to adequately provide promised aid has increased the fragmentation of the opposition. Each small group is in competition for donations from private donors, which provides no incentive to work with other rebel groups to overthrow Assad.

As a result, the only groups that have been able to coordinate a more unified front against Damascus are groups such as ISIS, which coalesced because the parties shared an ideological affinity.⁹⁴ Thus, delivery failures by both Saudi Arabia and Qatar have directly contributed to the increasingly extremist nature of the Syrian opposition.

The ineptitude of such states extends beyond their inability to effectively fund, arm, or train a Syrian opposition force. Many of the arms and funds provided by both Saudi Arabia and Qatar have found their way into the hands of extremist groups such as ISIS. As a result, a series of articles in Western newspapers appeared accusing both countries of “arming extremists” and describing various ways in which Saudi and Qatari weapons and money were finding their way to Islamist groups including al-Nusra and ISIS.⁹⁵

Some accusations were politically motivated, including a series of stories about Qatari involvement with extremist groups that appears to have been provoked by a Washington, D.C. lobbying firm, the Camstoll Group, which is working on behalf of the United Arab Emir-

ates.⁹⁶ The accusations typically implied that the arming of extremists was purposeful, but there is no evidence to support such accusations. Instead, extremists seized some weapons from captured Syrian moderates, while rebels took other weapons with them when they defected to more extremist groups. Weapons also were likely provided by Saudi or Qatari middlemen in error through insufficient vetting of rebel groups, insufficient information about rebel group motives, a lack of control over middlemen, and poor control of weapons shipments.

Indeed, both states lack the means to easily vet groups for extremist leanings, although Saudi Arabia appears to have been more successful than Qatar. Doha frequently didn't vet groups at all, instead simply looking for groups that appeared friendly.⁹⁷ In addition, neither state could effectively keep track of its weapons: Qatar in particular has almost no control over its own weapons transfers, because its preferred method is to pay middlemen, typically Turks, who buy weapons, choose the recipients, and arrange the transfer themselves.⁹⁸

The arming of extremist groups by Qatar thus appears to have been unintentional, if not unexpected, a result of Qatar's inability to monitor which groups were actually receiving weapons shipments on the ground in Syria.⁹⁹ Weapons matching the description of ones sold by the United States to Saudi Arabia likewise have appeared in the hands of ISIS fighters.¹⁰⁰ Thus while neither state explicitly chose to arm Syrian extremists, the haphazard way in which they implemented their Syria policy and the desperation with which they sought new partners in Syria were a recipe for further, foreseeable bloodshed.

LACK OF BUREAUCRATIC CAPACITY: INTERDICTING TERRORIST FINANCING. Another area in which Saudi and Qatari policies have influenced the conflict in Syria is in their respective responses to terrorist financing. Again, there is no evidence that either state has directly funded ISIS, yet large monetary gifts flow to such groups from private citizens within their borders. The importance of this largesse to groups

in Syria has fallen recently as ISIS increasingly relies on income from oil, theft, and other criminal activities, but it was instrumental in allowing the group to grow over the past few years.¹⁰¹

Both states have been massively enriched by oil, leaving their citizens extremely wealthy. GDP per capita in Saudi Arabia in 2013 was \$18,034, and in tiny Qatar it was \$59,406, amounts that can be contrasted with dramatically lower GDP per capita figures in non-petrostate neighbors such as Jordan (\$2,855).¹⁰²

In addition to enriching elites, those states pass a substantial portion of the wealth on to their citizens in the form of generous social spending. When such spending is combined with the Islamic mandate for charity, it is unsurprising that citizens within those countries give frequently to "good causes," some of which have ties to militant groups throughout the Middle East. Many of the donations are unwitting, because citizens genuinely believe they are giving to Islamic charities that provide social or medical aid, while the money is instead channeled through middlemen to extremists.¹⁰³ One anonymous intelligence community source reported to the *Washington Post* that hundreds of millions of dollars have flowed in donations from the Gulf States to groups in Syria.¹⁰⁴

Neither Saudi Arabia nor Qatar has had much success interdicting such terrorist financing. Saudi Arabia received substantial technical support from the United States for its campaign to crack down on extremist funding following the September 11th attacks in 2001. Despite that help, Saudi Arabia has been only moderately successful (a) at preventing the flow of money to groups such as al Qaeda and (b) in preventing the radicalization of youth within the kingdom.¹⁰⁵

The Saudi authorities continue to have difficulty tracing flows of money that move to extremist groups, including those in Syria. This lack of success is at least partially the result of a lack of will. In 2008, Stuart Levey, undersecretary for terrorism and financial intelligence at the U.S. Treasury, told Congress that while Saudi leaders are "serious about fighting al Qaeda in the kingdom. . . . The seriousness of

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“David Cohen, former undersecretary for terrorism and financial intelligence at the U.S. Treasury, describes Qatar publicly as a ‘permissive terrorist financing environment.’”

purpose with respect to the money going out of the kingdom is not as high.”¹⁰⁶

For this reason, Saudi Arabia initially did little to prevent terrorist financing from flowing to participants in the Syrian civil war. By 2012, however, conscious that some funding was flowing to al Qaeda affiliates, the Saudi regime forbade influential sheikhs within the Sahwa (the main Saudi Salafist movement) from fundraising for Syria.

Despite this prohibition, money continued to flow unimpeded to Syrian Islamist groups through Sahwa networks.¹⁰⁷ It was not until 2013 that U.S. pressure and fear of blowback at home led Riyadh to criminalize financial support of groups such as al-Nusra and ISIS, following this law with a blanket ban on nonofficial funding to Syrian groups generally.

Unfortunately, the Saudi inability to monitor or restrict cash flows severely hinders their ability to interdict terrorist financing. U.S. officials ascribe the difficulties to political and logistical issues, in particular the limited capabilities of the Saudi state.¹⁰⁸ New technologies also have made tracking terrorist financing increasingly difficult for the government. Donations can be made from mobile phones; by text messages; and through Facebook, WhatsApp, and Kik.

Qatar has limited ability and minimal political will to crack down on terrorist financing. David Cohen, former undersecretary for terrorism and financial intelligence at the U.S. Treasury, describes Qatar publicly as a “permissive terrorist financing environment.”¹⁰⁹ In the early stages of the Syrian conflict, the government in Doha actively encouraged the involvement of Salafi clerics in raising money for groups in Syria. Although the clerics spoke primarily of providing blankets and food, many also supported the arming of jihadis in Syria. It was not until September 2014 that the Qatari government created a board to better regulate such Islamic charities and the ways in which they spend money.¹¹⁰

Two key reasons explain the Qatari government’s inability to constrict those financial flows. First, they are often unwilling for political reasons to restrict the freedoms or business activities of important donors. For example, Qatari busi-

nessman Abd al-Rahman bin Umayr al-Nuaymi has been designated as a terrorist funder by the United States, and he stands accused of funneling as much as \$2 million per month to al Qaeda in Iraq. Yet he remains free and has been allowed to continue to manage his business interests.¹¹¹

Second, Qatar’s relatively open banking system and limited infrastructure have hampered the ability to prevent funding from leaving the country.¹¹² This environment led Cohen to note that “the U.S. government continues to be concerned about spotty, to say the least, Kuwaiti and Qatari enforcement of their counterterrorism financing laws.”¹¹³

In both Saudi Arabia and Qatar, the links between oil wealth and private or humanitarian aid have been problematic and have undoubtedly permitted large-scale private funding of groups such as ISIS and al-Nusra, even if such aid is often unwitting. Some of this funding, early in the Syrian conflict, resulted from the willingness of the states to look the other way. Yet substantial funding has also occurred during the past two years, as both Saudi Arabia and Qatar sought to crack down on it. Both states continue to lack the ability either to effectively monitor financial transactions or to inhibit the flow of private funds to undesirable groups.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Saudi Arabia and Qatar have worsened the crisis in Syria and inadvertently facilitated the rise of ISIS. Although both states sought a quick end to the conflict and the installation of a friendly regime in Damascus, their actions in Syria were badly hampered by a lack of effective foreign policy institutions that left leaders with little information and with poor advice when making decisions. As a result, they committed to a conflict that was not in their best interests.

Weak institutions also made it difficult for those states to effectively implement policy, with the result that they have inadvertently funded and armed extremist groups such as al-Nusra and ISIS. Both states have further proven inadequate to the task of preventing private funding flows from their own citizens to extremist groups.

Unfortunately, the states play an increasingly large role in U.S. Middle Eastern policy initiatives. The current U.S. intervention in Syria is an about-face for the Obama administration, which has been only minimally involved in the conflict until this point. As a result, the swift entry of the United States into the Syrian conflict, following ISIS's advance into Iraq and its growing list of atrocities, is predicated in many ways upon support from Middle Eastern allies.

In his speech announcing the first airstrikes in Iraq and Syria, President Obama was eager to note that “we were joined in this action by our friends and partners—Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Bahrain, and Qatar. America is proud to stand shoulder to shoulder with these nations on behalf of our common security.”¹¹⁴

Those five states are the only non-U.S. participants in anti-ISIS airstrikes inside Syria. Additionally, the United States participates in intelligence sharing with Saudi Arabia about Syria-related issues, although the scope of coordination between the two is not known. It has also relied diplomatically on both Saudi Arabia and Qatar to conduct sometimes sensitive negotiations in Syria and elsewhere. The May 2014 Afghan hostage exchange of Bowe Bergdahl for five Taliban prisoners, for example, was organized and executed by Qatari intelligence.¹¹⁵ It is, therefore, unsurprising that U.S. government officials often refer to those states as “essential” to U.S. policy initiatives.

Saudi Arabia in particular is typically regarded as a close U.S. ally. Although American and Saudi interests have in many ways been divergent for years—the Cold War is over and the United States no longer depends on Middle Eastern oil—the alliance still exercises broad influence on U.S. foreign policy.¹¹⁶ Saudi Arabia is allowed to buy U.S. weapons denied to most other countries and spent \$86.6 billion on U.S. armaments in 2010–2013 alone.¹¹⁷

The relationship has also constrained U.S. policy in many ways, thus (a) making it more difficult for the United States to open negotiations with Iran, which the kingdom sees as an existential threat, and (b) encouraging opposi-

tion to the U.S.-supported Maliki government in Iraq.¹¹⁸ The Obama administration's recent pursuit of policies unpopular in Riyadh is a notable aberration in U.S.-Saudi ties and is one that the administration now seems keen to end.

Following the recent death of Saudi King Abdullah, President Obama cut short an important state visit to India to travel to Saudi Arabia to pay his respects and meet the new king. The delegation included 29 high-ranking officials from both political parties. Former secretary of state James Baker expressed the dominant view: “I believe it is important that we demonstrate to the Saudis the importance that they represent to us.”¹¹⁹

Unfortunately, such importance comes with influence, and Saudi aims are frequently at odds with the best interests of the United States. As another delegate noted, “They want us to be more aggressive on Iran. They want us to be more aggressive on Syria.”¹²⁰

The problems detailed in this paper, particularly petrostates' weak and badly managed foreign policy and their prior disastrous involvement in Syria, indicate that the United States is foolish to rely on these countries or to be influenced by them. The use of intelligence from or negotiations conducted by petrostates has the capacity to undermine U.S. foreign policy objectives and even to draw the United States into unnecessary and intractable conflicts.

In classic “mission creep” fashion, only two months into U.S. involvement in Syria, American strategy began to shift toward the removal of Bashar al Assad, a shift that Rep. Ed Royce (R-CA) publicly attributed to strong lobbying by Middle Eastern allies. A senior U.S. official confirmed that those states had pressured the United States to commit to attacking the Syrian government, not just ISIS forces, telling CNN that “what really tipped this into a more vigorous reassessment was hearing from our coalition partners that they are not convinced by the Syria part.”¹²¹

Qatar's emir again pushed the issue during his recent visit to Washington, writing a *New York Times* op-ed in which he argued that the battle against ISIS would succeed only if “the people of the region are convinced that we are

“Saudi Arabia and Qatar have worsened the crisis in Syria and inadvertently facilitated the rise of ISIS.”

“The United States should extricate itself from the Syrian civil war, regardless of the wishes of its allies.”

committed to ending the tyrannical rule of ... Bashar al-Assad.”¹²² Although the impracticality of fighting both Assad and ISIS has led the administration to avoid making public statements on this topic, the pressure from allies such as Saudi Arabia is clear.

The United States should distance itself from petrostates in this and in future conflicts. A more arms-length relationship with those states would not preclude cooperation on important issues, including the use of bases such as al Udeid in Qatar if necessary. But the United States should treat those states as partners only when necessary. In particular, the United States should cease to rely heavily on intelligence sharing and joint diplomatic initiatives with the states because they simply do not possess much of the technical or contextual knowledge necessary for good foreign policy; they rely instead on “personal diplomacy” and on financial incentives.

The quagmire in Syria has been substantially worsened by their actions. Current U.S. policies toward Syria are incoherent, and the United States continues open-ended airstrikes based only on a broadly phrased directive to “degrade and destroy” ISIS. It is increasingly unclear whether any acceptable solution to the Syrian crisis can be achieved. Given this lack of clarity, the United States should extricate itself from the Syrian civil war, regardless of the wishes of its allies. The actions of petrostates such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar in worsening the crisis in Syria provide a salutary lesson as to why we in the United States cannot let the interests or desires of allies override America’s own interests. Instead, Washington should keep Saudi Arabia, as well as other petrostates, at arm’s length during this and future crises. In doing so, it will ensure that American involvement in the Middle East is based on its own interests, not on the interests or the incompetence of other states.

NOTES

1. The group is known by a variety of names, of which the most common is ISIS, or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. Formerly, it was known as ISIL (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant).

The group itself prefers to be known as the Islamic State (I.S.), but detractors typically use ISIS, ISIL, or the Arabic acronym Daesh. The group itself has expressed strong dislike for Daesh, which it considers degrading. U.S. government officials have used various forms of the name at different times. For clarity, this paper will use ISIS throughout, unless the name is part of a direct quote.

2. Barack Obama, “Statement by the President on ISIL,” Speech to the Nation, September 10, 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/statement-president-isil-1>.

3. John Kerry, “Joint Press Statement with Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal,” September 11, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/09/231506.htm>.

4. Associated Press and NBC News, “Gen. Dempsey: Arab Nations Need to Help in ISIS Fight,” September 21, 2014, <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-terror/general-dempsey-arab-nations-need-help-isis-fight-n208416>.

5. Steve Clemons, “Thank God for the Saudis’: ISIS, Iraq, and the Lessons of Blowback,” *The Atlantic*, June 23, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/06/isis-saudi-arabia-iraq-syria-bandar/373181>.

6. Michael R. Gordon and Eric Schmitt, “Saudi Arabia Will Grant U.S. Request for Anti-ISIS Training Program,” *New York Times*, September 10, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/11/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-isis.html>.

7. Roy Gutman, “Biden Continues to Apologize; First Turkey, Now UAE,” *McClatchy DC News*, October 6, 2014, http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2014/10/06/242222_biden-continues-to-apologize-first.html?rh=1.

8. Karen DeYoung, “Kuwait, Ally on Syria, Is Also the Leading Funder of Extremist Rebels,” *Washington Post*, April 25, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/kuwait-top-ally-on-syria-is-also-the-leading-funder-of->

extremist-rebels/2014/04/25/10142b9a-ca48-11e3-a75e-463587891b57_story.html.

9. David Andrew Weinberg, "Qatar's Muslim Brothers: A Failing Regional Strategy," in *Allies, Adversaries, and Enemies: America's Increasingly Complex Alliances*, eds. Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Jonathan Schanzer, (Washington: Foundation for Defense of Democracies, 2014), 65–74.

10. For an excellent summary of the well-developed literature on the "resource curse," see Michael Ross, "What Have We Learned about the Resource Curse?" (unpublished paper, Stanford University, February 12, 2014), <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/polisci/faculty/ross/Ross%20-%20What%20have%20we%20learned%20about%20the%20resource%20curse.pdf>.

11. The "resource curse" is the name often given by political scientists to the counterintuitive idea that states that are oil-rich typically don't become wealthy and prosperous. Instead, oil tends to correlate with poor economic development, authoritarian tendencies, and even civil conflict.

12. During the period 1960–2001, at least 37 states met this "petrostate" criteria (oil rents of 10 percent of GDP) in at least one year. They were Algeria, Angola, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Brunei, Cameroon, China, Congo, Ecuador, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Libya, Malaysia, Mexico, Nigeria, Norway, Oman, Papua New Guinea, Peru, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Suriname, Syria, Trinidad and Tobago, Tunisia, Turkmenistan, United Arab Emirates, Venezuela, and Yemen. Of those 37 states, only Norway could be considered a developed state at the time of first oil discovery and extraction.

13. Michael Alexeev and Robert Conrad, "The Elusive Curse of Oil," *The Review of Economics and Statistics* 3 (2009): 586–98.

14. Early studies argued that oil wealth was directly linked to the failure of many states to democratize, but later studies have shown a more nuanced rela-

tionship. Oil, in fact, enables autocratic leaders to retain power, by buying off key individuals within the state, increasing the state apparatus for repression (i.e., police and military), and keeping the population docile through large-scale social spending. See Michael Ross, "Does Oil Hinder Democracy?" *World Politics* 53 (2001): 325–61; Ricky Lam and Leonard Wantchekon, "Political Dutch Disease," (unpublished paper, New York University, 2003), <http://www.nyu.edu/gsas/dept/politics/faculty/wantchekon/research/lr-04-10.pdf>; or Jay Ulfelder, "Natural-Resource Wealth and the Survival of Autocracy," *Comparative Political Studies* 40 (2007): 995–1018, for further analysis of this relationship.

15. Thomas Friedman, "The First Law of Petro-politics," *Foreign Policy*, May 1, 2006, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2006/04/25/the_first_law_of_petro-politics.

16. Jeffrey Sachs and Andrew Warner, "Natural Resource Abundance and Economic Growth," Harvard Institute for International Development, Working Paper no. 517, 1995.

17. Various studies outline the numerous ways in which resources may undermine economic development, including James Robinson, Ragnar Torvik, and Thierry Verdier, "Political Foundations of the Resource Curse," *Journal of Development Economics* 79 (2006): 447–68; Halvor Mehlum, Karl Moene, and Ragnar Torvik, "Institutions and the Resource Curse," *Economic Journal* 116, no. 508 (2006): 1–20; Christa Brunnschweiler and Erwin Bulte, "The Resource Curse Revisited and Revised: A Tale of Paradoxes and Red Herrings," *Journal of Environmental Economics and Management* 55, no. 3 (2008): 248–64; and Andrew Williams, "Shining a Light on the Resource Curse: An Empirical Analysis of the Relationship between Natural Resources, Transparency, and Economic Growth," *World Development* 39, no. 4 (2011): 490–505. For a contrarian or minority view that argues that petrostates suffer no economic ill effects from the possession of resources, see Stephen Haber and Victor Menaldo, "Do Natural Resources Fuel Authoritarianism? A Reappraisal of the Resource Curse," *American Political Science Review* 105, no. 1 (2011): 1–26.

18. Avinash Dixit, "Democracy, Autocracy, and Bureaucracy," *Journal of Globalization and Development* 1, no. 1 (2010); and Timothy Besley and Torsten Persson, "State Capacity, Conflict, and Development," *Econometrica* 78, no. 1 (2010): 1–34.
19. Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990–1990* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell Publishers, 1990); Margaret Levi, *Of Rule and Revenue* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); and Deborah Brautigam, Odd-Helge Fjeldstad, and Mick Moore, eds., *Taxation and State-Building in Developing Countries: Capacity and Consent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) all provide excellent descriptions of this relationship.
20. Government consumption is a measure of most government expenditures, including salaries, goods, and services. It does not include large capital expenditures (i.e., major military purchases), which are included as gross capital formation. Together, they provide a measure of government spending in any given year.
21. Mick Moore, "Political Underdevelopment: What Causes Bad Governance," *Public Management Review* 3, no. 3 (2001): p. 404.
22. Peter Evans, "Predatory, Developmental, and Other Apparatuses: A Comparative Political Economy Perspective on the Third World State," *Sociological Forum* 4, no. 4 (1989): 561–87; and Steffen Hertog, *Princes, Brokers, and Bureaucrats: Oil and the State in Saudi Arabia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011).
23. Michael Glennon, *National Security and Double Government* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
24. See Peter Katzenstein, ed., *Between Power and Plenty: Foreign Economic Policies of Advanced Industrial States* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978). It should be noted that bureaucracies do not always produce the best policy outcomes; they can be victims of groupthink, as in the case of U.S. foreign policy during the Vietnam War (see Leslie Gelb and Richard Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* [Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 1979]). Despite this, bureaucracies tend on average to provide a range of higher quality foreign policy options than do leaders acting alone.
25. Learning in foreign policy differs for bureaucracies and individuals; the former tends to learn more effectively, but individuals tend to rely on analogies. For more on bureaucratic and individual learning, see Jack Levy, "Learning and Foreign Policy: Sweeping a Conceptual Minefield," *International Organization* 48, no. 2 (1994): 279–312; or see Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992). Some work in public administration theory argues that organizations are, in fact, less likely to learn; see Aaron Wildavsky, "The Self-Evaluating Organization," *Public Administration Review* 32, no. 5 (1972): 509–20. But international relations theory has rarely included insights from this literature; moreover, various features of foreign policy bureaucracies, including generational change and the presence of multiple viewpoints about past crises, indicate that such organizations may still be better than individuals at learning in the context of foreign policy.
26. Institutions that are large and well established, such as today's U.S. national security bureaucracy, may exert too much control over policy, thereby cutting elected officials out of the process to a large extent. Those problems should not be discounted. But many petrostates occupy a position at the other end of the spectrum, where leaders and their cronies typically make foreign policy decisions in a vacuum, a situation that can be even more damaging. We might describe this as a "Goldilocks effect." Too much bureaucracy in foreign policy is bad, but too little creates different problems. For more on the pathologies of well-established national security bureaucracies, see Glennon, *National Security and Double Government*.
27. Margaret Hermann, "Explaining Foreign Policy Behavior Using the Personal Characteristics of

Political Leaders," *International Studies Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (1980): 7–46.

28. See Margaret Hermann and Charles Hermann, "Who Makes Foreign Policy Decisions and How: An Empirical Inquiry," *International Studies Quarterly* 33 (1989): 361–87; and Valerie Hudson and Christopher Vore, "Foreign Policy Analysis: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow," *Mershon International Studies Review* 39 (1995): 209–38.

29. Jeffrey Colgan argues that revolutionary oil states are intrinsically aggressive, in large part because the lack of constraints on leaders allows their revisionist, aggressive preferences to be converted easily into foreign policy. See Jeffrey Colgan, *Petro-Aggression: When Oil Causes War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

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