

ISIS and Sectarianism as a Result of a Meltdown of the Regional Orders in the Middle East*

Keiko Sakai

Chiba University, Chiba, Japan

This paper aims to analyze the background of the emergence of “Islamic State” and prevailing sectarian strife in the Middle East from the aspect of international relations, considering it as the result of the failure and mistakes, accumulated not only since the Iraq War and the Syrian Civil War but also from the post-WWI period when the territorial-state system was introduced in this area. This paper emphasizes the importance of the norms and ideas that provide the basis of regional order, and focuses on conflicts between norm-based regional order and interest-based regional alliance. The former has been pursued by the actors that underline supra- or sub-state identity as cores for regional solidarity, while the latter has been introduced by external actors, or established by conservatives to maintain the status quo to react to revolutionary/revisionist movements. The situation became complicated when regional actors faced three different cataclysmic transformations in 1979. Although each incident necessitated a different re-arrangement of their relations, a shorthand patchwork-like formation of alliances was applied, in which the US and Saudi Arabia played key roles. In the post-1979 regime, rivalry became dominant between the interest-based pro-US regional alliances vs. the challengers that justified their own interests with norm-based regional order, manipulating supra-state identity. Once the influence of the US declined after 2011, pro-US state actors found neither interest-based regional alliance nor norm-based regional order supported their own interests. Here, sectarian identity has emerged as a kind of norm to cover their collective interest. Thus sectarianism is the result of necessity for the regional actors to legitimize their interest-based actions and to secure partners for collective action. “Islamic State” was born in this circumstance, where sectarian identity became an ostensible factor for new regional order in the Middle East in the absence of the US-led regional alliance.

Keywords: Islamic State, sectarianism, regional order, norm, supra-state identity

ISIS as a Result of Wars in Iraq and Syria

In 2001, two months after the September 11 Attacks in the US, Fred Halliday, the famous late professor on International Politics and the Middle East, wrote as follows:

If the Soviet system has left a mass of uncontrolled nuclear, chemical and biological weapons and unsolved ethnic problems, the West has bequeathed a bevy of murderous gangs, from the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola and Cuban exiles ... to the mujahedin in Afghanistan, who are now on the rampage. (Halliday, 2001, p. 5)

Halliday called it “a two dustbins theory” of cold war legacy. If he were alive to see the current situation in Syria and Iraq now, he would almost certainly describe it as follows: “Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham

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Keiko Sakai, Professor, Faculty of Law, Politics and Economics, Chiba University.

(ISIS)¹ has arisen from the dustbins of the Invasion of Iraq, Arab Uprisings, and the civil war in Syria”.

The international community is now keen on “degrading and destroying²” ISIS, considering it to be the “source” of threats to international peace. Indeed ISIS is the result of the failure and mistakes made during the post-Iraq War period (2003-) and during the Syrian Civil War (2011-).

In Iraq, frustration and disappointment has prevailed among the populace, not only among the Sunnis but in general, against corruption, mismanagement and lack of professionalism in the post-war government. Political actors failed to accept power-sharing among the various social and political forces, and to establish a kind of government of national unity, especially during the second term of Maliki’s premiership. Maliki began to concentrate power around himself, purging Sunni political rivals as early as 2011 (Sakai, 2014b).

Under this situation, ISIS has taken advantage of the situation by seizing control of Mosul and other Iraqi cities in the central-north area, revealing how fragile the mutual trust among the Iraqis was, how weak the national consciousness of the newly established National Army of Iraq was, how strong the frustration among the marginalized Sunnis in the North and West was, and how dependent the regime was on Shi’ite religious devotion for national security (Sakai, 2014a, p. 43). The more the Iraqi government relies on the Shi’ite religious militia and on the help of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, the more the Sunni population prefers to be under ISIS rather than under the Iraqi government, which is more ready to protect the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala than to protect Sunni residential areas (Wilgenburg, 2014). The government is trying to persuade Sunni tribal groups to work with them, but it cannot sweep away the memory of Sunni tribes to whom Maliki failed to keep his promise to secure enough budget to include them in the national security forces (Yamao, 2013, pp. 196-202).

If it were only a matter of mismanagement in Iraq, ISIS would not have developed to the extent that we have witnessed since 2014. The civil war in Syria since 2011 has provided territory, resources and money to ISIS. As Syria became a “collapsed state”, a power vacuum prevailed in various areas, and that is where ISIS established its own power bases. Financial resources of local administrations were confiscated by ISIS. Smuggling oil was the easiest method to gain foreign currency from neighbors. Needless to say, ISIS could seize the money and property of anti-Assad organizations, most of which were provided by supporters from outside of Syria and Iraq (Takaoka, 2014, pp. 44-51).

Moreover, Islamophobia and Muslims’ sense of being discriminated against in the US and Europe nurtured frustration and distrust among the Muslims against the West. It prepared the soil for “lone wolves” and voluntary “jihadists”, whom ISIS could recruit from all over the world. If we consider that such an atmosphere was encouraged by the “War on Terror”, we can conclude that creation of jihadist reserves in the West is also the “result” of the Iraqi War.

The situation is rather more serious and complicated, however, than ISIS being on the level of simply reflecting the lack of governance in Syria and Iraq. ISIS casts doubt on all the prerequisites upon which the modern Middle East has established. It denies the notions of state in the sense of the Westphalian system, that is, sovereignty, territoriality, and recognition by international society. It also denies the notions of borders, nations, and nationalities. ISIS claims to have brought about a revival of the Caliphate system and rejects the

¹ The name was changed from ISIS to Islamic State after declaring the establishment of a Caliphate state at the end of June 2014. In the Arabic media, it is called *Tanzim al-Da’ish* (Daish Organization), using the abbreviation of the Arabic name of ISIS to show their dissatisfaction at calling them an “Islamic State.” In this paper, I use the abbreviation of ISIS for “Islamic State”.

² Statement by the US President Barack Obama. Retrieved September 13, 2014, from <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/12/weekly-address-we-will-degrade-and-destroy-isil>

ancient regime of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which means that it denies all that has been established based on Western colonialism since WWI. ISIS is, in this sense, the result of the failures, mismanagement and inconsistency of international politics thus far conducted in this part of the world since WWI.

The question here is why has ISIS come to be a presence a century after the Sykes-Picot Agreement was imposed? In fact ISIS is not the first to challenge the Sykes-Picot regime or to search for a neo-Caliphate system. Overcoming the Sykes-Picot system was the major target of Arab Nationalists who longed for Arab Unity. It was not odd for Islamists to express their preference for a Caliphate system in the early days, such as Rashid Rida and Sa'id Hawwa' in the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood did (Kosugi, 1994, pp. 177-193). Why has this idea not appeared as a major force in the Middle East thus far, and why does it do so now? If state collapse in Iraq and Syria and the War on Terror provided ISIS with the territory, resources, money and population, were these sufficient to enable ISIS to come into being?

Some may point out that ISIS appeared as the result of the decreased US presence and influence in this region after 2011. Republicans often blame the Obama's decision to withdraw the entire US force from Iraq in 2011, without bending his ear toward Gen. Petraeus or to Ryan Croker, the US ambassador to Iraq.³ Is the absence of a US-led regional security system the reason for the emergence of ISIS? The point to be focused on is, on the contrary, not the absence of the US but the absence of an alternative regional system to fill the vacuum after the US withdrawal. ISIS has emerged in the absence of a regional system or order in two senses: Absence of a shared feeling of solidarity based on norms, identity, and a value-system, and absence of a regional alliance led by the US to protect its interests and those of its allies.

In this paper I will survey the historical importance of the norms and ideas that provide the basis of regional order (Barnett, 1995; Gause III, 1999), as well as conflicts between the different actors and the existing regional order that external actors have imposed on this area. What I underline here is the discrepancy and ineffectiveness of the imposed regional order to solve local problems, such as irredentism, supra- and sub-national solidarity, territorial disputes, and ethnic nationalisms among minorities. A new regional order would be introduced once drastic political changes such as wars, revolutions and uprisings occur, but that would not necessarily solve the above problems. Rather, it might invoke another conflict, as Oliver Janz (2014) explains by stating, "(during the world wars) various false territorial promises were done, which connected the World War to the local wars which had had almost no relation with it" (p. 121).

Thus the problems were historically accumulated without being heeded, until challengers such as Saddam Hussein in Iraq, al-Qaeda, and also ISIS could mobilize them to legitimize their own ideas and norms when they started their own local wars. What I focus on here is how a new regional order was established after major political transformations and struggles between internal and external actors concerning how the regional order should be. This coincides with the clashes of ideas between norm-based regional order and interest-based regional alliance. I will clarify which kinds of problems were left, shelved and accumulated, and how these problems offered those who challenged the imposed regional order the materials to legitimize their challenge.

Role of Norm and Identity in Regional Order

As Hinnebusch (2003) emphasized, "[n]o analysis of the Middle East can succeed without taking account of the identity-sovereignty dynamic that constitutes the regional system" (p. 6). Identity is important as a

³ CNN. *McCain claims victory in policy fight with Carney*. Retrieved September 12, 2014, from <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/11/politics/mccain-carney-tv-fight/>

decisive factor in determining the relations among the state and non-state actors in the Middle East. As Hinnebusch (2003) continued, that “the Middle East’s first indigenous attempt to create a regional order” was the Pan-Arab regime (p. 10), according to the understanding of constructivists. Sub-national or supra-national identity such as religion, Arabness, tribal networks, etc., offer a norm and shared identity on which regional system can be established.

However, the modern state system in the Middle East was established mainly as a part of post-WWI international order, neglecting local notions of homeland (*wataniya*).⁴ As the Middle East has been a key region for international politics, being the vital path for the colonial powers to Asia and the frontline in the Cold War rivalry, regional order in this area has been deeply related to international security and has seen much intervention by external actors. In the light of the above global setting, realists consider that security is the main source of sustenance of order in the regional system in the Middle East, and put more emphasis on the power balance than on norms and identity for forming alliances (Walt, 1988).

Transformation of the regional order/system in the Middle East shows the best example for the constructivist/realist argument (Barnett, 1995, p. 482). Efforts to search for regional order in the Middle East have been colored by constant struggles and rivalries between the traditional authentic idea of their regional order and the territorial sovereign state system introduced after the WWI. Once the regional order has been imposed by external actors, the local actors challenge it, proposing alternatives which they believe represent their sub- and supra-identity better.

In the following part of this paper, I would like to shed light on the struggles between the existing regional order and the counter regional order that challenges the former. I would also like to clarify how the new regional order is needed, and on what occasions. Through analyzing the above, I will clarify which circumstances of the regional order allowed the emergence of ISIS.

Early Period: Imposed Regional Order and Its Challengers

The post WWI period is a typical example for this interaction between imposed regional order and the norm based on the traditional social identity, which led to local authentic resistance toward Western colonialism/imperialism. As David Fromkin (1989) clearly described, post-WWI arrangement was “a peace to end all peace”. Experiencing order formation by external powers, every kind of resistance against it emerged in this period, not only Islamic reformism and Pan-Arabism but also communism/socialism, liberal nationalism, and tribal/ethnic uprisings for autonomy (Hourani, 1991). These developed into the major political movements in the later period.

Problems bequeathed by the imposed territorial state system became the prototypes of future conflicts, such as territorial disputes, border conflicts, irredentism, inconsistency between national consciousness and territorial identity, and identity crises caused by the rapid transformation from traditional social solidarity, such as religion and tribes, to the Western-oriented modern nation-state identity (Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, 2014, pp. 9-17). These problems were most symbolized by the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. The establishment of Israel, retreat of the European colonial powers and the beginning of the Cold War were the major prerequisites of regional order in the Middle East in the post-WWII period.

⁴ As for the role of the sovereign state and its relations with trans-state identities and movements, there have been a number of discussions (Harik, 1987; Luciani, 1990; Salame, 1987; Stein, 2012).

The first two factors encouraged the crystallization of Pan-Arab identity into Arab Nationalism. Nationalist groups, most of the members of which were military officers, claimed that they sought “real independence” from the colonial powers, and succeeded in taking power, such as in Egypt (1952), Tunisia (1956), Iraq (1958), Algeria (1962). Here the structure of rivalry between the regional order with sovereign states and that of the challengers was clear (Gause III, 1992; Barnett, 1995, p. 492). Regional order based on supra-state identity, that is Arab Nationalism, was raised by the young local leaders against the existing territorial states which were divided into “artificial” states, including Israel. This challenge to overcome the present border system among the Arab states to accomplish “Arab unity” has not materialized, except for the short-term attempt of establishing the United Arab Republic, merging Egypt and Syria (1958-1971). Nevertheless, the sense of solidarity among the Arab states was maintained to some extent until the Gulf War⁵, when the Arab League failed in its unanimous decision-making for the first time.⁶

The cold war structure added another factor in the creation of regional order. There emerged the necessity to establish pro-Western blocs in this area, the forerunner of which was the Baghdad Pact (monarchial Iraq and Jordan). After Iraq’s withdrawal from the Pact, Turkey and Iran became key states in preventing the expansion of the Soviet Union, as member states of CENTO (1955-1979), together with Pakistan. Monarchies in the Arab Gulf also deeply relied on the West, fearing the spread of Arab Nationalism mainly from Nasserism in Egypt and the Ba’thism of Syria and Iraq.

Thus the challengers of the existing regional order coincided with those who opposed the above pro-Western alliance. This means that the Cold War structure clarified and fortified the rivalry between regional order among the sovereign states and that based on supra-state identity. What is worth mentioning here is, however, that all of the conflicts that happened in the post-WWII period were not necessarily the product of Cold War rivalry, nor were they challenges against the imposed order (Binder, 1958). Power struggles between Iran and Iraq and between Egypt and Saudi Arabia over Yemen can be partly understood as an extension of their historical rivalries.⁷ In other words, interest-based relations with neighboring states, such as the territorial disputes that were left unresolved in the post-WWI arrangement in the Middle East, were reshaped in the Cold War bi-polarity, and interpreted as a part of the conflicts between two different regional orders.

1979 as a Turning Point

It was in the year of 1979 when the above simple structure of competition between the imposed regional order and that of challengers was undermined. Major incidents that happened in that year were the Peace Treaty between Egypt and Israel, the Iranian Revolution, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Each incident necessitated a different re-arrangement of the relations among the state-actors, which required a different regional order to be adopted to adjust to the new situations. There was no single fit-for-all regional order that could satisfy all the actors, and no regional system that could offer stability after the cataclysmic

⁵ There are several arguments on when the Arabism failed to be a major unifying factor among the Arab states. Ajami (1978/1979), for example, argued that Sadat’s visit to Jerusalem marked the end of Pan-Arabism.

⁶ On the eve of the Gulf War, an Arab Summit was held, where opinions from Libya and Yemen opposing military action against Iraq were neglected. In the Gulf War, Egypt and Syria joined the US-led multinational forces together with Saudi Arabia and other Arab Gulf monarchies, while Jordan remained neutral.

⁷ Iran and Iraq have continued to confront each other over the border in the Shatt al-Arab river since the 18th century, when Iraq was part of the Ottoman Empire. Egypt often intervened in political rivalries on the Arabian Peninsula from the time of the Muhammad Ali dynasty in 18C.

transformations. Inconsistency and contradiction between the regional orders that were introduced in order to deal with the new changes temporarily made the situation more complicated and left more problematic questions unsolved.

Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty

Peace between Egypt and Israel meant that Israel became, for the first time, an actor to be included in the formation of regional order. It showed that Egypt, as well as the Egyptian type of Arab Nationalism, was no more a challenger against the regional order including Israel. It encouraged an alternative idea for challenge to emerge: Islamism. This is evident from the fact that President Anwar Sadat was assassinated in 1980 by a militant Islamist, a member of Tanzim al-Jihad. Arab Nationalism lost its legitimacy as a main ideological principle for the formation of regional order, as Egypt stepped down from the war against Israel, and as Syria and Iraq broke their relationship concerning the revolutionary regime in Iran. Islamism emerged as an alternative supra-state identity that can provide a core norm for regional order. It was not clear, however, whether Islamism at that time had any kind of regional order in mind, or even if it did, it is uncertain whether all the Islamists in this region shared a same notion of regional order.

The important outcome that the Egypt-Israeli Treaty left was the multiplication of fault lines within the regional order. While Egypt became isolated from Arab Nationalist regimes⁸, it became one of the twin pillars for the US in its policy toward the Middle East. This means that Egypt shared a pro-US stance with the Saudi monarchy, with which it had developed better relations by the time the oil strategy was adapted in 1973.⁹ Thus Egypt became a Janus-faced regional actor between the revisionist anti-US Arab Nationalist bloc and the conservative pro-US Arab monarchical bloc.

The approach between Egypt, a Arab Nationalist regime, and the Arab monarchies allowed easier survival of oligarchic regimes, especially under the cover of being US allies. In a way, the fault line between Arab Nationalists and Arab monarchies faded away under the unofficial coalition among oligarchic/authoritarian regimes. This factor plays an important role in the regional order formation which appeared against the “Arab Uprisings” in 2011, as Saudi Arabia supported military-dominated Egypt against the democratically elected Islamist Mursi government.¹⁰

Iranian Revolution and the Regional Alliance Against it

Without doubt, the Iranian revolution was the watershed in the formation of regional order in the following two senses: Firstly, it did fatal damage to the Western security bloc against the Soviet Union in the Gulf area. Secondly, Islam or Islamism appeared as an influential factor for social order formation.

It was the Arab Gulf monarchies that were quick to respond to the revolution, and formed the first official regional alliance without direct pressure from the West: The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Indeed, a broader regional order was established as Iraq sided with the Arab monarchies and launched the war against revolutionary Iran in 1980 (Gause, 2010; Kamrava, 2011). This means that the fault line had moved from an Arab Nationalist vs. conservative monarchy division to that of an Islamist regional order led by Shi’ite Iran vs.

⁸ Egypt was expelled from the Arab League in 1979 because of its negotiations with Israel.

⁹ Relations between Saudi Arabia and Egypt under Nasser in the 1960s had deteriorated because of fear of expansion of Nasserism in the Kingdom, even among the Saudi princes, as well as Egypt’s intervention in the civil war in Yemen (1962-1970).

¹⁰ On July 3, 2013, the Egyptian military forced the Mursi government to resign, backed by the huge popular anti-government demonstration held at the end of June. Saudi Arabia immediately declared financial support for the new military-dominated regime.

the anti-revolutionary coalition.

The new fault line, just as the post-Camp David regime did, brought together various actors with different interests and ideologies. Iraq, as the most hardline Arab Nationalist regime under the Arab Ba'th Socialist Party, had a long history of confrontation with the Gulf monarchies, denouncing them as reactionary and products of the colonialist West. It had territorial disputes with Kuwait and Saudi Arabia until the end of the 1970s.

In addition, points of conflict that the Arab Gulf monarchies had toward Iran varied.¹¹ For Saudi Arabia, revolutionary Iran was a serious threat from the following points of view; the latter showed the best example of overthrow of a monarchy and a turn toward an anti-US stance; this might influence Shi'ites in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province; the ideology of the Iranian Revolution might undermine the legitimacy of the Saudi monarchy. Other Gulf states, such as Iraq, UAE and Bahrain, had territorial disputes with Iran. The Ba'thist regime in Iraq feared "export of the Shi'ite Islamic revolution", as it had witnessed similar movements challenging its authority.¹²

In a word, regional order was formed among the Arab states as a reaction against the Iranian revolution, as a result of "balance of threat" as Walt (1988) described, but the interests of the members of alliance were diverse and often contradicted each other without sharing any common norm. It was the US that bound together these actors with different interests (p. 314). In 1984, the US succeeded in establishing a diplomatic relationship with Iraq under the Ba'thi regime, which had been an ally of the Soviet Union and hardline anti-Israel.

Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan

If the US was forced to rely on Iraq and GCC against revolutionary Iran, it was Saudi Arabia and Pakistan that the US relied on when Soviet forces invaded Afghanistan. This was a grave shock to the US, as it meant that the US had lost two of its allies in the northern tier of the Middle East against the Communist bloc. As is well known, the US-Saudi Arabia-Pakistan triangle recruited, trained and paid for Islamic volunteer fighters from all over the world, which paved the way for al-Qaeda.¹³

This alliance was formed as a result of a balancing policy against communist-led Afghanistan, not as a result of shared belief. However, Islam played an important role in fortifying the ties among the allies. With the presence of Saudi Arabia, a patchwork-like alliance against Communist expansion was flavored with ideological and normative legitimacy under the name of Islam. In this sense, the role of Saudi Arabia became crucial for the interest-based regional alliance to pretend to share a norm-based regional order.

Coincidentally or not, the common actor in the above three transformations was Saudi Arabia. In the first case, Saudi played a role in changing Egypt's diplomatic direction from pro-Soviet Union to pro-US, offering financial aid as well as cooperating together in conducting an oil strategy in the 1970s. In the case of the Iranian revolution, it was Saudi Arabia that supported Iraq financially throughout the Iran-Iraq War. In the case of Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia played a pivotal role both in forming a network of encouraging and supporting Muslim jihadists against Soviet forces in Afghanistan. In short, despite the fact that diverse arrangements were

¹¹ Lawson (2011) reviewed the massive literatures of international studies on the Gulf (Potter & Sick, 2002).

¹² In Iraq, the al-Da'wa party was established by Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr in the late 50s, claiming legitimacy for the rule of Islamic scholars, far before Khomeini in Iran. The Ba'thist regime arrested Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr and his sister and executed them in 1980, fearing that a similar Shi'ite Islamic revolution might also occur in Iraq.

¹³ Usama Bin Ladin was among these "Arab Afghans" who volunteered to fight against the Soviet Union. Al-Qaeda was said to have been established before the withdrawal of Soviet forces in 1989, and before Bin Ladin returned to Saudi Arabia.

required for regional order in the case of incidents with different backgrounds in the wake of the drastic changes of 1979, as Gause (1999) described it as “multipolar system” (p. 19), it appeared as if a new, single regional order had been formed under the Saudi leadership.

Here, new fault lines were introduced that were opposed to the previous norms based on supra-state identity, such as Pan-Arabism and anti-colonialism. It was the idea of Islamic solidarity, led by Saudi Arabia, that provided an alternative for supra-state regional identity.¹⁴ Needless to say, it was indeed oil money with which Saudi could bring its new allies together, not Islam.¹⁵ Yet, the Islamic policy was closely connected together with oil-producing Arab monarchies. The Islamic Development Bank, established in 1975 as a special organization under the Organization of Islamic Countries, supported countries with strategic significance in the Cold War framework, such as Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Pakistan and Somalia (Bronson, 2006, pp. 128-129).

The Middle East with the US: From the Gulf War to the Post-Iraq War Regime

Beginning of the US Involvement in the Middle East

It was not long before the post-1979 regional order revealed cracks among the key actors. The Iraq-Saudi relationship was doomed to rapid collapse, since their ideology, type of state, as well as historical experience differ so widely that creation of common trust failed, despite the fact that both considered revolutionary Iran to be the first and greatest threat.

The invasion of Kuwait in 1990 showed very clearly how the interest-based alliance was fragile in front of diverse state interests. Moreover, reaction of the Arab societies on the Gulf War showed how the idea of norm-based regional order was so attractive for the populace, and how the interest-based alliance was easily denied and negated once the idea of norms was mobilized. Saddam Hussein received strong support from Palestinians when he linked the issue of the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait with that of the Israeli occupation of Palestine.¹⁶ For sure the logic was manipulated only to defend Iraq’s stance and to find an excuse for the occupation. The invasion of Kuwait itself was nothing more than an act pursuing self-interest, and was far from being norm-based. Nevertheless, it is also true that it attracted the people’s desire for a rearrangement of the regional order based on norms. As Telhami (2013) pointed out, it was Saddam who “had seen close-up the potential power of inciting Arab opinion against the West”¹⁷(p. 6).

What is important is that all the rhetoric Saddam introduced was somehow related to the unresolved problems resulting from the past rearrangement of regional orders. Palestinian issues were still left unresolved since Western colonialism had imposed an artificial state-system. The dispute over Kuwaiti sovereignty can be traced back to the days of the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire.¹⁸ The idea of Arab Unity was still effective

¹⁴ Aoyama (2014) stated that the current problems were caused by the shift of the center of Arab politics from its “heartland” (Syria, Egypt, Iraq and other east Arab states) to Saudi Arabia and other oil producing countries (pp. xvii-xviii).

¹⁵ Ironically enough, the solidarity based on Islam that Saudi offered backfired in creating the counter-norms of al-Qaeda and ISIS, where Wahhabism played a basic role in their principles.

¹⁶ In a speech justifying the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait, Saddam Hussein stated as follows: “Iraq would withdraw from Kuwait if Syria withdrew from Lebanon and Israel withdrew from both Lebanon and the Palestinian territories” (Wanis-St. John, 2010, p. 50).

¹⁷ According to Telhami (2013), name of the late Saddam Hussein was mentioned as “the most admired world leader for Saudis... probably because he was seen to have stood up to the United States and Iran” (p. 23).

¹⁸ The Iraqi regime claimed that Kuwait was part of Basra Wilaya under the Ottoman Empire, and was supposed to have been included in the territory of Iraq, which was established by combining three Wilayat (Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra) if there had not been British colonial protection of the emirate of Kuwait.

enough to be utilized as a justification for amalgamation of the neighboring Arab states.¹⁹ In this sense, the Gulf War was truly the “Mother of all the battles” (umm al-ma’arik), as Saddam Hussein named it, since all the logic he used to defend wars and battles remained as justifiable claims for the unresolved problems kept ready to be re-mobilized in the future.

In short, the invasion of Kuwait shows the weakness of the interest-based regional alliance in view of the norm-based regional order, where the problems created by external actors remained unresolved. Patchwork-like regional alliances in the post-1979 period were not capable of compensating for the weakness. In the end, the interest-based regional alliance of the US and pro-US Arab states, GCC and Egypt, won the war against the challenger, the interest-based leader indeed, who wore the old-fashioned clothing of Arab identity. But the victory was only possible because the former induced the direct involvement of US military forces in the area.²⁰ Although the post-1979 regional order implicitly took the leading role of the US for granted, its increasing military presence in the region caused a furious anti-US atmosphere not only in Saudi Arabia but also in the Middle East in general.²¹

Age of War on Terror: Middle East Divided With or Without the US

While it was the rivalry between the post-1979 interest-based pro-US regional alliance vs. the challenger who justified his own interests through the norm-based regional order that had brought the US forces to the Middle East, clashes of regional orders in the post-Gulf war period were clearly represented by the conflicts between the US and anti-US militants. Here the attitude toward the US in the Middle East became a key ideological element in the formation of the regional order.

Since 9.11, the Middle East was divided into two groups; one of them supported the US-led War on Terror, and the other consisted of those whom the US considered as “axes of evil”, no matter whether they were actually supporting terrorism or not. After regime changes in Afghanistan (2001) and in Iraq (2003), most of the state actors in the Middle East, except Syria and Iran, were included in the former. On the other hand, the latter, which expressed its strong opposition against the US, found supporters not at the state level but only among some non-state actors such as al-Qaeda and other anti-US organizations.

The problem was that the gap between the state actors and the populace became wider, as the people’s frustration increased when they witnessed the injustice and brutality of the US military operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Yemen.²² Thus conflicts have emerged concerning whether there should be a regional order with the US or without.

The latter did not share the same norms for an alternative regional order, other than the idea of the Middle East without the US. Al-Qaeda and other Islamists clearly held the idea of establishing their own “Islamic state” and the idea of regional order with their Islamist norms. On the other hand, the local anti-US resistance

¹⁹ The Iraqi government explained the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait by saying that the Kuwaiti monarchy was toppled by “revolutionaries”, who asked Iraq to assist.

²⁰ It was the dual containment policy against Iran and Iraq that was introduced to the Gulf after 1991 in order to maintain security there. It was only possible with the military presence of the US (Al-Shayehji, 1997; Edwards, 2014).

²¹ The presence of US troops in Saudi Arabia since 1990 became a target of criticism against the US as well as against the Saudi government. In Turkey, the US used its military base to bomb Iraq during and after the Gulf War, but the Turkish parliament refused to allow the US to use the base during the Iraq War in 2003, considering that there would be strong opposition among the people against the US attack on Iraq.

²² It was revealed that US soldiers tortured and abused Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib in 2004. In 2006, US soldiers based in Mahmudiya in Iraq raped an Iraqi girl and killed her and her family. These scandals fueled anger not only among Iraqis but also among Arab and Muslim societies in general. Recently, the Obama administration came under criticism for using drones to attack al-Qaeda and Taliban bases in Yemen, Afghanistan and Pakistan, killing more innocent civilians than the actual targets.

insurgency in post-war Iraq (such as Sunni tribal uprisings in Anbar Province and frustrated youth of the al-Sadr Trend) had no concrete idea of regional order. Their purpose was often more domestic, rather than regional or transnational, as what they aimed for was rehabilitation, power-sharing, or power-seizure within their own state, not beyond. Moreover, they carried no concerted notion on which kind of regime/state (Ba’thist, Islamist, military-dominated, etc.) to substitute for the post-war Iraqi regime, which they believed had been imposed by the West.

Post-Iraq War Period: The Rise of Sectarianism as Regional Co-feeling

When the Ba’thist regime in Iraq was toppled and a new government was established reflecting the result of the general election in 2005, a new factor was added to the rivalry over regional orders; it was about whether a regional order that included the new Iraq under Shi’ite Islamists could be possible.²³ From that moment, the sectarian factor emerged in the formation of the regional order.

Since leading politicians in post-War regimes in Iraq were mostly from expatriate Shi’ite Islamist parties²⁴, it was and still is considered that the Shi’ite-dominated government would mainly pursue its pro-Iran policy; even the domestically developed political movement, such as al-Sadr Trend, was recognized as being supported by Iran. On the other hand, Gulf monarchies, as well as Jordan²⁵, expressed anxiety over the tide of Shi’ite political Islam. Among the Wahhabi ulama in Saudi Arabia, there emerged an Islamist movement, called the al-Sahwa movement, opposing the US presence in the 90s, and this movement accelerated its anti-Shi’ite propaganda from 2003 onwards (Lacroix, 2011). During the civil war in Iraq in 2006-2007, blackmail, threats, and violence were exchanged in religiously mixed areas in Iraq.

While sectarian division did not go beyond Iraq in an explicit way during the civil war in Iraq, it suddenly expanded to the surrounding area when civil war broke out in Syria. It took the shape of a proxy war; Turkey, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states apparently supported anti-government groups in Syria, while Iran and the Hizballah of Lebanon backed the al-Asad regime. In a word, proxy war in Syria was the first case that the sectarian factor became trans-state, and played a major role in formation of regional alliance.

The spread of sectarianism into Syria coincided with the US withdrawal from Iraq. What does this coincidence mean? There has been no norm or identity backing up the regional order since 1979 other than the US presence connecting together the members of the regional system; however, they were not ready to admit that their alliance was interest-based, without norms, and pretended to be norm-based. Being led by Saudi Arabia, the norm it carried since 1979 wore a religious color, while their interests were represented by the US. After the US influence faded away, as we shall see in the following section, Saudi Arabia and other pro-US actors had to bear their own interests, without relying on the US, and needed another norm to cover their interests: That was sectarianism.

Arab Uprisings in 2011

After the fall of the Tunisian regime, anti-government popular demonstrations prevailed all across the

²³ Since 2005, Iraq has experienced four national elections, in all of which Shi’ite Islamist coalitions have won the majority of the votes.

²⁴ Though the mainstream of the Da’wa Party, leading party in the ruling coalition, were from its branches in London and Damascus until they returned to Iraq in 2003, ISCI (Islamic Supreme Council in Iraq), the leading party in the second biggest coalition, was established in Iraq by Iraqi expatriates living in Iran at the beginning of the 1980s.

²⁵ In 2004, King Abd Allah of Jordan warned that “a new crescent of dominant Shi’ite movements or governments stretching from Iran into Iraq, Syria and Lebanon could emerge” (Wright & Baker, 2004).

Arab states, which shook the stability of the incumbent regimes not only in the states where there was successful regime change (Tunisia, Egypt and Libya) but also in those where the regimes survived (Syria, Bahrain and most of the Arab states except UAE and Qatar). As neighboring states did in the Iranian revolution, conservatives pursued the status-quo against the Uprisings and moved forward to form a new regional order to prevent the wave of popular revolution. GCC, which was originally established as an alliance of conservatives against the Iranian revolution, has changed its meaning to resist Arab Uprisings; GCC joint forces were mobilized in order to suppress the uprising in Bahrain in March, 2011. There emerged a plan to enlarge GCC as a coalition among Arab monarchies, including Morocco and Jordan (Blanche, 2011).

This idea of the expansion of GCC in a way materialized when the US asked neighboring states in the Middle East to join airstrikes against ISIS in Syria in September 2014; members of coalition against ISIS were GCC (except Kuwait and Oman), Jordan and Morocco. It is ironical to see that the rivalries of regional orders that have arisen after the Arab Uprisings, that is, the tide of popular movements against authoritarian regimes vs. conservative monarchies against regime change, have been deformed and began to carry a different kind of significance when the latter was mobilized in the US attacks against ISIS.

In addition, the Arab Uprisings revealed that each state actor had to act independently in pursuing its own interests, less subject to US intension. As mentioned above, the presence of a Shi'ite Islamist regime in post-war Iraq irritated the neighboring Arab Sunni monarchies. What irritated them more, however, was the US's underestimation of their frustration and the sense of fear among its allies in the Middle East. Indifference by the US to such irritation and anxiety became a source of concern about the future of their relationship with the US.

The fears of their being downgraded by the US were accelerated by the US reaction to the Arab Uprising, especially when the Mubarak regime fell in Egypt. It was a grave shock for the pro-US actors to see the US abandon its closest ally so quickly and welcome the newly elected parliament and president dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood. When GCC joint forces intervened in suppressing the Uprising in Bahrain, the US administration expressed their discomfort and supported "democratization" in the Middle East.²⁶

Needless to say, it was in September 2013, that Saudi Arabia felt serious dissatisfaction with the US when US President Obama abandoned the idea to attack the Syrian Army as punishment for their use of chemical weapons.²⁷ Moreover, the US tried to find a way for rapprochement with Iran in their negotiations on nuclear development. All these events not only annoyed Saudi Arabia and other US allies but also urged them on in their search for independent diplomatic and security policy based on their own national interests, with less consideration of US interests in the area.

This explains the discordance between the US and its allies in the US operation against ISIS. Lack of full support from the West to oust the Assad regime in Syria may have urged the neighboring states to pursue their own independent anti-Assad policies. That resulted in a flux of weapons, money and human resources into anti-Assad organizations, which were finally absorbed into ISIS.²⁸ As for Turkey, it is reluctant to support anti-ISIS Kurds in Ain al-Arab on its border, while the Kurds act as if they were the US's only trustworthy

²⁶ Hillary Clinton, then US Secretary of State, criticized the dispatch of GCC forces, saying that "the Arab Gulf states are following the wrong track by getting involved in Bahrain" (Alhomayed, 2011).

²⁷ Saudi Arabia rejected a seat on the Security Council in October 2013 in protest against the Western hesitation in attacking Syria (Worth, 2013).

²⁸ Several Western research institutes and media outlets issued reports pointing out that Saudi Arabia and other Arab Gulf states supported ISIS (Boghardt, 2014).

partner.

What does this situation mean? First, it is the collapse of the regional orders which the US had built up in this area, and which led to the current Hobbesian situation of anarchy. Secondly, state actors mobilized the sectarian co-feeling as a supra-state social bond in order to conceal the fact that state actors are acting independently according to their own interests. It was in this way that sectarianism became a key notion for regional order, and it is here that ISIS found the room to manipulate.

Conclusion: Back to the 1980s?

The emergence of ISIS and the prevailing sectarian strife in the Middle East are the result of controversies and discrepancies in forming regional orders in this area, and of problems accumulated since the territorial-state system was introduced after WWI. The importance of norms and ideas in this area is crucial in providing the basis of regional order, and became the sources of conflicts between norm-based regional order and interest-based regional alliance. The former has been pursued by the actors that underline supra- or sub-state identity as cores for regional solidarity, while the latter, in principle, has been introduced by external actors, or established by conservatives in order to maintain the status quo to react to revolutionary/revisionist movements that have occurred within the region.

The situation changed drastically in 1979 when three different transformations occurred. Although each incident required an individual re-arrangement of regional relations, a shorthand patchwork-like formation of alliances was applied, in which the US and Saudi Arabia played key roles. In the post-1979 regime, rivalry became dominant between the interest-based pro-US regional alliance (Arab Gulf states and Egypt) vs. the challengers that justified their own interests with norm-based regional order, manipulating supra-state identity (Iraq in the 1990s and al-Qaeda). As Aoyama (2014) noted, pivot of regional politics moved from the Arab heartland of Syria, Iraq and Egypt to oil-rich Gulf states, as the core factor to maintain regional order shifted from norms and identity to interests and alliance with the US (p. xviii).

In this sense, the current situation in the absence of a concrete regional order can be ascribed to the uncoordinated policies of the US and those of states depending on the US, simply reacting to what had happened in Egypt, Iran and Afghanistan since 1979. The Egypt-Israeli Peace Treaty connected Egypt with the US; the Iranian revolution connected GCC and Iraq with the US; the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan connected Saudi Arabia and Pakistan with the US. It was the presence of the US that patched together these fragmented regional alliances in this area in the wake of the above incidents. It should be born in mind that it was the regional actors that demanded US involvement in this area, to protect their interests under the cover of the US presence.

Once the influence of the US declined after 2011, pro-US state actors found neither an interest-based regional alliance nor a norm-based regional order supported their own interests in their relations with neighboring states. Here, sectarian identity has emerged as a kind of norm to cover their collective interests; Sunniness for intervening in the Syrian civil war, and Shi'ite-ness for defending themselves against ISIS. Thus sectarianism is not the "source" of the conflicts but is the "result" of necessity for the regional actors to legitimize their interest-based actions and to secure partners for collective action. ISIS was born in this circumstance, where sectarian identity became an ostensible factor for a new regional order in the Middle East in the absence of the US-led interest-based regional alliance.

The presence of Shi'ite Islamist regimes both in Iran and in Iraq, the expansion of Iranian influence to

southern Iraq and to North Yemen, increasing fear against the Iranian “threat” among the Arab Gulf monarchies, and the challenge of ISIS against Shi’ites with extreme Jihadist/Salafist views—these are exactly the problems that the Iran-Iraq War has left. The Iran-Iraq war was stopped in 1988 by US political pressure. Are we witnessing the world of “if” now, nullifying a quarter century of US presence in the Middle East, that is, the unfinished war of ideology between Shi’ite revolutionary Islamism vs. Sunni Jihadist/Salafist Islamism?

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