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THE ARAB AWAKENING AND THE NEW SECTARIAN DIVIDE

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PARTICIPANTS:

Moderator:

DANIEL BYMAN
Senior Fellow and Director of Research, The
Saban Center for Middle East Policy
The Brookings Institution

Speakers:

GENEIVE ABDO
Nonresident Fellow, The Brookings Institution
Fellow, Middle East/Southwest Asia, The
Stimson Center

KRISTIN SMITH DIWAN
Assistant Professor of Middle East Politics
American University

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. BYMAN: Good morning and welcome. My name is Dan Byman. I'm the research director here at Brookings of the Saban Center for Middle East Policy as well as a professor at Georgetown University. I'm delighted to welcome you to our talk today.

As you all know, the Arab Spring has transformed the Middle East in some good ways and in some negative ways, and one of the more disturbing aspects has been the emergence -- I should say the reemergence, of sectarian tension and violence.

This is notable, of course, in countries like Syria where slaughter is happening, really, on a daily basis, but it's also something that is a legacy of what's happened in Iraq, and is showing up in numerous ways in other countries, many such as Bahrain and Lebanon that are not on the radar screen of many people, certainly in Washington, even though they should be.

So, we're delighted today here at Brookings to have two excellent speakers to educate us on the issue of sectarianism, how it plays out, its drivers, and the different forces in the region that are manipulating it or suffering from it.

Our first speaker is Geneive Abdo. She is a fellow at the Middle East Program at The Stimson Center, and we're delighted to say a new nonresident fellow here at the Saban Center at Brookings. She has held several positions with United Nations organizations, for example, but also made her mark as a reporter reporting for the Middle East for numerous publications and really producing some of the finest quality work as a reporter and as an analyst, and we're delighted that she has the recently released and available outside, Brookings report, *The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a and Sunni Divide*. I think this combines, really, the

best of a reporter going out and finding out new information in the region, as well as an analyst taking a step back and trying to sort out what it means and doesn't mean for the region for the United States.

We are also joined today by Kristin Smith-Diwan, who is a professor in comparative regional studies at American University's School of International Service. She specializes on Arab Islamist politics and has written numerous publications on the politics and political economy of issues of the countries of the Arabian Peninsula in particular.

So, I'm delighted to have both speakers and I've asked Geneive to start us off, so please.

MS. ABDO: Thank you very much. Good morning, everyone. I first would like to thank the Saban Center for early on recognizing the importance of this topic and I'm grateful to Tamara Cofman Wittes and also to Dan for their interest.

Over the years that I've done research, I always seem to have a curse that I choose topics that no one considers to be important until after the fact, but that certainly wasn't the case this time, so I'm very grateful for the opportunity.

As Dan mentioned, I -- the paper is -- after you read it, you will see -- is to some degree on the dark side of the Arab uprisings. Unfortunately, I think in general, the countries in transition haven't really made the transformation that people had hoped, but I think sectarianism is one of the trends, the longer-term trends, that we will see for the next decade in the Middle East as these countries become more stable and as they create, I guess, either more democratic governments or less democratic governments.

The title of the paper, *The New Sectarian,* is such because what I found in my research is that sectarianism, now, is quite different than it has been historically in

the Middle East. Just sort of the classical definition that we know of sectarianism is really communities that align themselves along local, regional, and tribal affiliations.

What's happened since the Arab uprisings began is that with the fall of some authoritarian states, there's been an increase in identity politics. So, this is true not only on Shi'a-Sunni issues, it's also true on gender issues, even if you look at a country like Egypt where, for the first time, the whole issue of gender is being publically debated.

So, it's a return to identities, it's a pronouncement of new identities, and in the countries that I examined, there's a struggle not only for economic and political power among the Sunni and Shi'a, but it's also a struggle for which interpretation of Islam will be more predominant in these countries as we go forward. And it's quite difficult, in fact, to tease out what is a result of doctrinal differences and what is a result of political and economic determination for more power. And this is definitely true in a country such as Bahrain, and I will get to that later.

And when discussing sectarianism, that's often the key question that is asked, how do you distinguish between an attempt for political power and religious difference?

In states such as Bahrain and Lebanon where the Shi'a comprise 70 and 40 percent of the population respectively, the prospects for democratic governance alarm the Sunni, so what I found that was quite interesting in countries where there's either some transition underway or where the Shi'a now are striving for political power, is that the Sunni majorities or minorities consider democracy to be sort of a demon because if you have democracy in a country like Bahrain where the Shi'a are the majority, of course, you know, democratic governance isn't really in your favor, and that's certainly the attitude of the Bahraini government.

So, rather than, as a universal principle, which would advance modernity and development in these countries, democracy becomes something that's very negative.

In addition, the problem that a lot of the Shi'a face is that in some countries, Iran and Shiism have been conflated to become the same thing. So, in a country such as Bahrain, it's assumed that all the Shi'a support the Iranian government, it's assumed that the Iranian government wants to topple the Bahraini government, so to be Shi'a is to be an Iranian loyalist, and that's also a big problem that the Shi'a face across the region.

What I found in the study is that the rise of sectarianism is being driven by three primary factors: first, there is a Sunni ascendency in the Arab world now. If you recall, in 2006 and 2007, it was King Abdullah who coined the term "the Shi'a Crescent", but now we are seeing the Sunni rise in various countries, even in Iraq, where, you know, where we have a Shi'a-led government but you are seeing a Sunni uprising in various parts of Iraq, and this has empowered the Sunni in various countries, particularly in Lebanon.

And even in Egypt, I was in Egypt recently, and it's -- the whole idea of, I guess, the Iranian threat and the Shi'a ascendency -- and the Sunni ascendency for power has even affected a country like Egypt where less than 1 percent of the population is Shi'a, but there's a very robust discussion here in Egypt, in Cairo, of Iranians now who are being admitted as tourists, that the Iranians are going to start converting the Sunni to Shiism.

So, even in a country such as Egypt where this was never even a point of public debate, it's being debated now.

The second cause that I found of sectarianism, of course, is the civil war in Syria. What has happened in a country like Lebanon is, of course, you have direct spillover, and I will get to that in more detail in a few minutes, so you have direct spillover into Northern Lebanon, but then in other countries you have the Syrian narrative being used by the Shi'a and the Sunni to talk about domestic politics.

You know, the Sunnis talk about how the Shi'a are slaughtering tens of thousands of Sunnis in Syria, so this has become a narrative in which the sectarianism is being played out.

And third, the other cause for sectarianism is a perception, whether it's real or not, of Iranian influence, and you have, in some countries, a proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia primarily. This is, of course, true in Bahrain.

And I think that what -- the reason that this perception of Iran's influence, even in countries where Iran is not directly intervening, the reason the perception is very convincing for a lot of Arab societies is that the Iranians are aiding in this perception. I mean, if you read the Iranian media everyday or if you listen to the Iranians, you would think that the Iranians controlled the Arab world. So, the Iranians have not really helped the Shi'a in Bahrain even though they state that that's their ultimate goal, by the broadcasts that they pipe into Bahrain, their Arabic broadcasting, which basically says that, you know, that they're supporting the Shi'a, that, you know, they want the Shi'a to over -- to basically stage a coup d'état in Bahrain.

So, the Iranians have helped in this perception that they control everything the Shi'a do in the Middle East.

To talk specifically about the case of Bahrain, there has been historical institutionalized discrimination in Bahrain, so the uprising that began in the spring of 2011

of course didn't happen in a vacuum. There has been historical marginalization, economic marginalization, of the majority Shi'a population.

For example, the Shi'a aren't allowed to hold certain -- to be employed in certain government ministries. There is a de-emphasis on teaching Shiism in schools, particularly in Islamic schools in Bahrain. Just anecdotally, since the uprising, I was told during my trips there that there is now self segregation in the universities, so the Shi'a and the Sunni are now segregating themselves. There's segregation in restaurants.

So, the whole uprising has really polarized society and exacerbated what has been a longstanding historical conflict.

Much of the sort of human rights violations that have occurred in Bahrain since the uprising began, I don't deal with this in this study, but of course the massive report that Professor Cheri Bassiouni produced in November 2011 goes into great detail of why the security forces and the security apparatuses need complete reform, because there's widespread discrimination against the Shi'a in Bahrain.

So, this all adds to the growing sectarianism. And I think that what I tried to document in the paper is the radicalization of both sides. So, we've had all this talk about national dialogue in Bahrain since the uprising began that the government has initiated, that there's national dialogue -- the main opposition group, Al-Ofouq, has set very concrete, concise goals as to what their objectives were in the dialogue. The government pays lip service to this saying that they are addressing these concerns, but basically the dialogue is at a stalemate.

And what has happened as a result is both on the Shi'a side and the Sunni side, you have youth organizations that have been radicalized, and now the Shi'a, the more radical youth groups, are calling for regime change. So, they're no -- they've

parted ways with the centrist political society Al-Ofouq and now they're calling for regime change. And I was just in Bahrain, actually, last week at a conference that was sponsored by the University of Bahrain; it was a very pro-government conference. I fear that after this experience I may never be allowed into Bahrain again, but it was -- there was no recognition whatsoever of the grievances of the majority Shi'a population. It was only talk about Iran that, you know, the Shi'a take orders from Iran, there wasn't even a specific discussion of which Shi'a groups they were talking about, but that, you know, it was all about Iran and the Iranian threat.

So, unfortunately it seems that now two years after the uprising began, the focus is still on Iran rather than on the grievances of the majority Shi'a population. So, unfortunately, it doesn't seem that there's much movement.

I know in Washington there has been a lot of discussion in recent days that because the crown prince has been promoted to deputy prime minister, he's considered the reformist in the family, that we would see some movement on the Bahraini government side to address the grievances of the opposition, but I have to say, during my two days there I didn't really see any evidence of this.

In the case of Lebanon, and I'll be a bit brief -- in the case of Lebanon, there are basically two results -- two developments that have exacerbated sectarianism, one, of course, as I mentioned earlier, is a spillover from the war in Syria, which is happening primarily in the Tripoli area. I spent a lot of time in Tripoli and basically because of the composition of the population there, you have Shi'a and Sunni, they're basically mirroring what is happening in Syria.

Sunni fighters cross the border, they're kidnapped, then you have sort of the response back in Lebanon. There have been very dramatic violent events that have

happened in Lebanon including the assassination of a very prominent intelligence minister who was aiding the opposition in Syria. So, Lebanon has been directly affected by the war in Syria.

But what I found to be more interesting and probably more indicative of a longer-term trend is the rise of Salafists in Lebanon, particularly in North Lebanon. Interestingly enough, as I mentioned, they are using this narrative of the Syrian war to gain political power in Northern Lebanon. And, when I was there in September during a meeting with one of the Salafi Sheikhs, they announced that they're forming a political party to run candidates in elections in Lebanon in June, which is quite unusual and extraordinary because as we have seen in Tunisia and Egypt, Salafist parties developing, this has not been the case in Lebanon historically.

So, it's quite interesting that the -- again, this Sunni ascendency is having some benefit for the Salafis because they're forming a political party and they hope to now have some say in the Lebanese government.

I visited a lot of the mosques in this area and, again, the whole narrative is focused on Syria, so the Sunnis are using the violence in Syria against the Sunnis to say, now is the moment which Hezbollah is weak and now is the moment when at last, perhaps, we can some how see the decline of Hezbollah.

And of course, in the backdrop of that, is the likely decline of Bashar al-Assad.

So, in Lebanon we are seeing the rise of Sunni power for all of the reasons that we are seeing, sort of, in Syria in the war and how it's being played out.

So, I'll leave it there and I just wanted to conclude by saying that, generally speaking, the reason I think that this topic is so important is that from the

research I conducted for the paper, I think that it is safe to say that we are seeing, in the Arab world, a very inward turn -- a turn -- a look at religious issues and that's sort of one of the reasons for sectarianism, and I think that it's not too much of a point to even say that we might find that sectarianism will replace the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the central mobilizing issue in Arab political life going forward.

Thank you very much.

MR. BYMAN: Thank you. Kristin.

MS. SMITH-DIWAN: Thank you. So, I want to issue my thanks as well to the Brookings Institute for this kind invitation and to Dan Byman and especially I'm happy to be able to join you in welcoming this report from Geneive Abdo, and I really recommend the report to you. I hope that you will all read it.

As you've heard, she has a really astute assessment of a lot of the reasons behind the rise of sectarianism in the region, but beyond that, she really grounds this into in depth case studies, which has a lot of detail. She did an amazing amount of work on interviews, and as somebody who does a lot of field research, I can tell you that it's often difficult to do this, and so I really want to thank her for bringing those voices to us, and as well, bringing her original take to analyzing those voices. And I think, definitely, you should all take advantage of the work she has done.

I want to frame my talk around a very simple concept, which is something that Geneive mentioned, and it actually can be found in a quote that Geneive found with one of her contacts, and that is that when states are weak, sectarianism rises. And as we all know, we've seen in this Arab Spring and even preceding that, a real shift in the politics of the state that has promoted this kind of arc, basically, of weak states across the entire region.

I mean, we can see this all the way from Lebanon, which is perennially a weak state that's always sort of susceptible to proxy battles from outside, now to Syria, where we've all witnessed this really painful descent into an extremely violent civil war that has really strong, now, sectarian character to it, onward then to Iraq, which still has not managed to kind of achieve the national integration that we had all hoped would happen, and down, as well, to Bahrain, so entering even into the Arabian Peninsula where even today, you know, two years after the February uprising, you still have daily -- almost daily, weekly protests taking place, particularly in the Shi'a villages around Manama.

So, all of these states obviously have a mix of population of Sunnis and Shi'a within them as well as other, you know, religious and ethnic minorities, but what I want to argue is that the linkages between them and the transnational linkages of those can just be religious and can't just be social.

The politicization of that is something that takes, you know, kind of an extra input and that is encouraged in a situation where you have very weak states that are failing to basically integrate the populations within them into a national project, and that really increases the salience of these transnational linkages.

Also the thing that increases the salience is, of course, the proxy war that takes place between states that are able to then use these networks in ways, for their own benefit, and of course the primary one, as Geneive mentioned here, that we see in the region now is this competition in this era of uncertainty between Saudi Arabia and Iran to gain kind of positive leverage for each state and this era when everyone doesn't know exactly where things are going.

So, in looking sort of at this broad arc, I want to just bring a few things to

the table that Geneive didn't mention. One thing that I hesitate to do but I want to bring up, that this beginning of state weakness didn't actually begin with the Arab Spring.

The first big contribution, of course, was with the U.S. intervention in Iraq. And beyond the intervention, the actual destruction of a lot of the state institutions there that, of course, resulted in the civil war -- sectarian civil war between 2006 to 2008, and I'm not bringing this up as a means to kind of rehash the debates about the Iraq war. We just did the 10-year anniversary. I know there's been lots of separate panels on that, but the reason why I bring it up is because I think this is important because this intervention in Iraq and the outcome of that, actually preconditioned the viewpoints of a lot of the players in the region for -- and conditioned their reactions in this period of the Arab uprisings and the Arab Spring, particularly in the Gulf States, and I want to talk about that.

You know, there's a number of things, of course, that happened with the U.S. intervention in Iraq. One, of course, is the shift in the geopolitical balance then with Iran with the weakening of the Iraqi states, the rise in Iran just relatively speaking as a power, and suspicions, of course, about their interventions within the country. The rebirth of Najaf, as a -- which has always been there, but the greater openness and facility of people to travel there was actually extremely significant, actually, to Shi'a populations, but of course, then, (inaudible) of the mobilization of Salafi-Jihadi fighters going to Iraq.

And of course, the numbers were not really great, but what they did in this period was that a whole language emerged during this period of actually Sunni victimization coming out of the Iraq crisis, and a lot of kind of sectarian language that made its way across all of the Gulf states.

And this was really fed, as well, by personal stories that people had of

people who had been displaced or died in this conflict, and actually, that happened, obviously, on both sides of the conflict in Iraq.

And as somebody who watches Bahrain really closely, I could see the impact that this was having on the domestic politics in Bahrain at the time. During this period, Bahrain had -- the King of Bahrain had been pushing for a new reform project through the National Action Charter. That was basically an attempt to co-opt the main Shi'a opposition group within new institutions of governance and new opportunities within the economy, and that was basically the program to sort of, in a safe way, and with limited sort of effects on the ruling family -- not able to condition too much accountability on them, but to allow for some more ability for Shi'a to function within the political and economic system. And it was really interesting, after kind of the rising conflict in Iraq, when you saw Shi'a actually elected to power in Iraq, this really rose a lot of concerns about what that might mean if that were also reflected in Bahrain.

And you saw, then, the rise of certain factions within the ruling family that already had had deep suspicions and worries and skepticism about the integration project that was being led, particularly by the crown prince, and they actually conducted even a study that was done by an Iraqi academic at the time about how they could counter this.

And in this study, it's very interesting because you see how you really arose at this time this view of very -- zero sum gain view about these things, that the Shi'a -- it wasn't any more a story about sort of a national project of integration and building the state, but it was very much more about the dangers of having the Shi'a near power, either in the political sphere or in the economic sphere, and how we can start to push back against that.

And so, you had a lot of sort of confusion in what Bahrain was pursuing at this time when you had different sort of factions within the ruling family pushing different viewpoints about what should happen, and I think this also fed into changes within the opposition as well. I mean, you had a lot of factionalization that came through the opposition as they got these sort of conflicting messages, and all of these things, then, came really to fruition and you could see them in the Arab Spring once the uprisings hit Bahrain and the push for reforms, and you had certain parties, then, that were pushing for the overthrow because they had lost any sort of confidence that the regime would be able to reform.

You also saw, post-uprising then, the full implementation of the sort of thinking and plan that the Shi'a need to be displaced and you could see that through kind of the mass firings that took place, destruction of mosques, even removals within the economic sphere you had a lot of things going on within the Chamber of Commerce in Bahrain, kind of trying to take away a lot of power for them to try to kick out certain Shi'a members when actually before that you had had, although a certain kind of top down patronage of powerful Shi'a families, now you had a much more ideological sectarianism emerging that was about -- more about exclusion.

And when we have this kind of situation, I mean, one thing that I want to stress is that it can descend into really a vicious circle because you get very permissive dynamics, you get a very permissive environment, and you can see this in Bahrain, and Geneive has really great kind of evidence of this in her report about how the media sort of plays into this kind of conspiratorial thinking and fears about what the Shi'a are trying to do. And this allows for much more mobilization along these lines, I mean, along sectarian lines.

And there's a scholar, Fanar Haddad, who's done studies in Iraq and he has this really fascinating concept as well, of the presence in this atmosphere that you can have of what he calls "sectarian entrepreneurs", and these can be people that really are just pursuing kind of sectarian language and pushing very much -- trying to kind of max out within the sectarian marketplace to outbid others, in a sense, to gain political support.

And when you have this kind of permissive atmosphere, this happens.

I watched, in Kuwait, actually, which is another country which normally didn't have as much of this sectarian division, but through the influence of what was happening in Bahrain became very divided over this issue and also, of course, through Syria after that, and I watched the rise of this one Shi'a businessman who became the head of the General Conference to support the people of Bahrain, and so he was pushing kind of his advocacy in that area, at the same time he was also the president of the Syrian Friendship Society, that being the Syrian government, which tells you -- you think inconsistent, but maybe in the sectarian way of thinking a very consistent kind of program. And kind of working off of this newfound attention that he got by leading these things, he was then elected to the parliament in 2012.

And you could see this whole dynamic coming across in the parliament in 2012 in Kuwait where you had a really high election of Shi'a Islamists, and at the same time you had a real collapse of sort of the center of a lot of nationalist figures who couldn't compete in this new environment, which really rewarded the sort of outbidding on this sectarian frame.

So, what is -- kind of what can you do in these sorts of situations? And I mean, again, I would go back to it's a difficult thing, but I think ultimately a lot of solutions

to this are going to go back to the level of the states, and needing to focus, again, on sort of strengthening states and particularly national integration within states. And just to contrast how these dynamics aren't always present and how they change, you could go back and look at the earlier part of the decade in 2000, both in Bahrain when you had the National Action Charter, and you can also see this in Saudi Arabia where, at that time, you had a national dialogue when you had the opposite dynamic taking place, where you had sort of meetings that were encouraging discussions about tolerance, allowing a very permissive political atmosphere at that time for interaction between Sunni and Shi'a, and what's very interesting is that you saw, even prior to that, but particularly in this environment where the national arena was opened, a real responsiveness by Shi'a Islamist groups and a lot of scholars -- all the scholars who have done their research -- you can really see the shift in the rhetoric, much less interested in these sort of trends, national networks, and very focused on the national political arena, and on framing their demands very much in terms of the national politics, which I think is a very positive and healthy thing, looking for issues of human rights and looking for issues of constitutionalism in ways that could allow for broader coalitions and likeminded thinking with other groups within society so that Shi'a groups were not so isolated at this time.

The challenge, I think, is that in the environment of the Arab uprisings where, of course, the main rhetoric of the early uprisings was about the sort of citizen empowerment, this same kind of rhetoric was perceived in many of these states as a threat to these governments. And so, what we see today, then, is really a pitched battle, and just this week I was watching in Saudi Arabia where they just recently arrested a number of Shi'a professionals on accusations that they were spying, and the implication is that they were spying for Iran. And there's kind of, again, these sorts of fears about the

role of Iran, and you have, then, the issuance of statements by a lot of Shi'a intellectuals and clerics and leaders within the community denying this and restating, again, kind of the same argument, that this is about national issues, what we really need is further integration, and what we really need is, you know, kind of reforms that would allow for a greater participation, and also kind of hitting at issues that would allow for cross-sectarian cooperation.

The more recent issue that's been very big is the issue of prisoners in Saudi Arabia, so they definitely talked about this issue of the problem of political prisoners in Saudi Arabia, which is the same issue that Sunni reformists, somebody like Sunni Sheikh Salman al-Ouda had also been issuing a call to the government to take necessary reforms and to address these issues.

So, I will leave it at that and just say that again -- reiterate that I think the difficult task would be one of focusing more on state borders and on integrations within states.

MR. BYMAN: Great. I'd like to thank both our speakers for two very stimulating sets of remarks. I want to kind of pick up on Kristin's last point and ask an initial question for both of them. For Geneive, there's a question from an American point of view of, can this be put back in the bottle? Can you reduce sectarianism? You said this is -- may become equivalent or exceed the Israeli-Palestinian issue as kind of part of the driver of the mood of the region.

Are there things that can be done effectively at a national level or at an international level to kind of prevent that from happening? Because this is quite nasty.

And, in particular, from a U.S. point of view, as Kristin mentioned, you have kind of the Iraq example on one end, and the other example is the Syrian example,

which is, you know, tremendous involvement and then I would say minimal involvement, and both of them are huge drivers of sectarianism.

And I would add to that, I think it's safe to say the U.S. ability to kind of dialogue with Muslim voices has always been limited, and especially when you're talking about divisions within Islam. So, is this frankly one of the things that the United States lives with and doesn't like, but it's just going to happen? Or are there things that can be done?

And Kristin, can I push you on one particular aspect of what you said that really led to your premise, that the driver -- or you'll see sectarianism where states are weak. There are two kinds of weaknesses, or probably 20, but let me highlight two, one is a weakness in capacity. So, in Lebanon it's weak, Syria it's weak because the government cannot enforce order and there are very strong sub-state groups, whether militias or rebels, whatever you want to call them. And in much of the Middle East, as we saw in the Arab Spring, it's actually really a weakness of legitimacy. And those two kinds of weaknesses, though, put you in very different places from a policy point of view. Because if its capacity, you build up military forces, you work with intelligence services, you do things that make the state stronger.

If it's legitimacy, you actually might want to make the state weaker. You might want to go after -- you don't want it to be as authoritarian. You want to open it up and have lots of different voices that weaken the course of power of the state.

How do we think about that in the context of sectarianism? So, Geneive, if I can ask you to begin?

MS. ABDO: Well, I mean, I think that the way you framed the problem for the United States is very accurate because there are basically two, I guess,

responses to even the United State's involvement in the Middle East now as it regards sectarianism. The first is that the United States should not have a role, and the second is a perception that the United States is now supporting Sunni Islamist groups.

When I was in the region, there -- because the United States, I guess, did not oppose the Muslim Brotherhood and the presidency of President Morsi, the Shi'a interpret that as, oh, the United States never wanted to talk to Islamist political parties now, but now they're embracing the Muslim Brotherhood.

What's interesting about that is if you actually talk to the Muslim Brotherhood, they say the opposite, which I did two weeks ago and they said in Egypt, oh, the United States is just waiting for Morsi to fall and they're, you know, helping our enemies and they want ElBaradei to come to power in Egypt, but -- so, the reality and the perception is very different.

But having said that, I think that the problem for the U.S. government is that I think it doesn't have any experience in dealing with clerics and religious figures as political actors. There's very little experience with doing that. And so, if you just listen to the whole conversation, for example, between the Muslim Brotherhood and what we hear in Washington, everyday the members of the Brotherhood or the Freedom and Justice Party are on television talking about how they're going to form their own foreign policy agenda, they don't care what the United States wants -- I mean, that's their perspective.

So, it's a real challenge. But I would say that rather than -- that the approach might be in incremental stages. I mean, I think that, for example, if the United States took a tougher position on the Bahraini situation, that that would send a message, A, that they don't just -- that the U.S. government doesn't just support Sunni Islamist groups, and B, that there's some recognition of the Shi'a grievances.

There -- in Bahrain, I think, and we have some Bahrainis in the audience here, perhaps they can elaborate on that in a few minutes, but in Bahrain there is a perception that the United States has not stood by the protest movement and that the United States, because of our naval base there, is basically content with the status quo.

So, I think that in the case of Bahrain, it would be a very good opportunity to highlight, to a greater degree, the human rights violations and to somehow pressure the government, although, as I mentioned, from my experience there it seems like a very difficult thing to do, but to try to pressure the government to at least meet the opposition halfway, at least acknowledge their grievances.

We were just discussing this yesterday, there seems to be -- there are a lot of rumors about what's going on in Bahrain in terms of the United States' role and there are some -- one theory says that with the promotion of the crown prince, who has a very good relationship with the U.S. government, that that means that there's going to be some movement.

The other school of thought is that with his promotion, he's now become more entrenched in the state and we won't see him championing the reforms that the opposition is calling for, but nonetheless, the United States has an ally in the crown prince, so I think that taking these small, incremental steps could be a way to change, I guess, what is -- what are all these, I guess, misconceptions about what U.S. policy is.

MR. BYMAN: Thank you. Kristin?

MS. SMITH-DIWAN: Well, I'll just start by agreeing with Geneive. I mean, it's interesting to hear the kind of conspiracy theories that get established, and while she said that there's a sense on the side that the -- for supporting the Muslim Brotherhood or these sorts of issues that the dominant thing that I've heard in Bahrain is

that the U.S. is actually allied with Iran in trying to undermine Bahrain. So, sometimes these coalitions get very confusing coming from Washington.

But in any case, I think, you know, Dan you set up whether the U.S. intervened in Iraq or we didn't intervene in Syria, we have the same situation -- you know, we get the same outcome, but I think the outcome is due to the actual state destruction, and that was a policy decision on the part of the United States. We took a lot of steps to actually weaken the institutions within Iraq, and that was a policy choice that we kind of went for that I think was a problematic one.

And I still would hold to my argument that ultimately the better path to take, then, is to work for building state institutions and building certain kinds of state institutions. I mean, I think our ability, actually, to intervene and to be effective in the region has declined because of these prior steps that we've taken and also because of an unwillingness on the part of the United States, there's a lot less willingness to dive in, even if we were to want to, to do these kinds of big things.

But I think keeping a consistent message about the building of, you know, kind of rule of law, of state institutions that can fully integrate all of the citizens, could be a useful step and that way you don't have to enter in on the side of the Sunni or the Shi'a or whatever, you can just make an argument for this sort of thing, and that would be true whether, you know, we were looking in Iraq and our encouragement of what we were doing there, in Bahrain, or in Syria where it's going to be a much more difficult situation. Clearly in Syria, any solution that could lead to, you know, ending the violence more quickly would be better because I think, especially any time that you have this kind of violence, I talked about the sort of vicious circle that's set up, well, a situation like Syria is really the worst case scenario where there is a real, you know, sentiment

when you see people killed in front of you, to fall back into this sort of sectarian language and have a lot of, you know, emotion behind it, and that really works to the benefit of the most extreme groups, and so the quicker that that can end, of course, it would be better for the whole region.

MR. BYMAN: Thank you both. I'm going to open it up for questions now, however, before you speak, please -- first of all, wait for the microphone and second of all, please identify yourself and your institution. Sir?

MR. BEARY: Brian Beary. Washington correspondent for Europolitics. I'm wondering what the impact of this new sectarian divide or reemerged divide has on Israel. I was really intrigued by something you said, Geneive; at the end about we may find that sectarianism will replace the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a central mobilizing force in the Middle East. I mean, in a very weird way, does that kind of take the pressure off Israel if this sectarian divide is -- you know, that Iran is becoming sort of the demonized figure in the Arab world and that that in some way that takes the pressure of Israel? I just want your thoughts on that.

MS. ABDO: Thanks for your question. Well, I guess it's always dangerous to make predictions, but I think you can view this in two different ways. One is, as you say, it does take pressure off Israel, and I think that a lot of -- some of the opinion polls that have come out recently -- there was a Zogby poll that came out recently and Pew published a poll about a year ago on Arab attitudes toward Iran, which both polls concluded that Arabs are much more -- have much more unfavorable attitudes toward Iran than they did in the past. And I just -- it was clear, all the time I spent in the region, that that's correct.

So, that helps Israel, obviously, you know, especially if you compare that

to when Ahmadinejad was first elected president, there was some support for Iran. I mean, there has been historically support for Iran because of Iran's positions, but I think that's changed.

So, I think that that's a benefit, of course, to Israel, growing sort of anti-Iranian sentiment. And I think, also, that this -- the need to look inward and to sort out all the crises in all these countries, whether they're political, economic, religious, I think that that also takes the pressure off Israel.

But I think the wildcard in all of this is who's coming to power. I mean, you know, if you take the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, is that good for Israel? We don't know yet. It's probably -- it's not as beneficial to Israel as when Mubarak was in power. And what's going to happen in Syria? If you have a Sunni-led government replacing Bashar al-Assad, is that good for Israel? Probably not.

So, I think that, you know, in some ways, yes, and in others, I think it's still too early to know for sure.

MS. SMITH-DIWAN: Can I add --

MR. BYMAN: Oh, please. Of course.

MS. SMITH-DIWAN: Just one or two points -- three points to add to that. I think I also agree with Geneive that I hear a lot less about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and I think, you know, there's only so many conflicts you can absorb at the same time, and both the Arab uprising, which turned states much more internally, and then the rise of Syria, at least in the Gulf region where I study, the conflict there is really quite all consuming and people are really turning most of their attention there, and into this more sectarian kind of competition that's taking place.

The one reservation I have about that when I'm looking at Israel is that

when you have this kind of rising sectarianism, it breeds -- it feeds the extremes on both sides, so, you're basically empowering more extreme views on both the Shi'a side and on the Sunni side, particularly with Salafi movements and we've seen the rise and greater significance of Salafi Jihadist movements in Syria. And I just can't think that in the long-term that that would be a positive thing, even for Israel, to have these kinds of groups which I've always known don't hide their antagonism for Israel at the same time.

One other interesting dynamic with the competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran, there has been this strategic dynamic, which I didn't cover much, in the Arab Spring, to really sideline Iran and to try to kind of win back countries that they had before. We talked about that in line with Syria, but you also have that in line with the Palestinian factions themselves and, of course, Hamas trying to distance itself more from Iran, again in this new sectarian kind of thinking where it's no longer okay for Hamas to be allied with Iran.

And one thing that you see interesting happening there is, for instance, Qatar trying to come in as sort of a replacement, and we saw the Qatar Emir then being the first kind of head of power to go in and visit Gaza and actually, you know, to go there, which I don't know if you read that as a positive thing or a negative thing for Israel. In the long-term, having the Palestinian conflict be more owned by the Arab states could actually lead to a broader coalition that could put more pressure on Israel.

MR. BYMAN: Thank you. Garrett?

MR. MITCHELL: Thanks very much. I'm Garrett Mitchell, I write the Mitchell Report. I don't know whether this is a case of connecting the dots or misreading the fact that there are dots there that may not be there, but I think about the sectarian divide and the way in which, as you say, it will change the Middle East itself and replace -

- possibly replace the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the sort of dominant narrative. And while your paper specifically has focused on Lebanon and Bahrain, it's hard not to be thinking, in this conversation, about Egypt, the largest player in the region and a country that, described by lots of Egyptians as a "failed state", and I guess the question I'm interested -- and we haven't talked about it in this regard, is it's about women in the Middle East, and that, to put it in simple terms, to the extent that the region is going to be able to sort of get in the lane marked modernity and make progress, it will be a -- it will be, at least, a direct relationship to the extent to which women are empowered and play a central role.

And so, my question, I think this is the question I have, is whether we are looking at another chapter -- who knows how long -- years and maybe decades -- in the Middle East when the central story is about, instead of dictators, per se, it's about sectarian divide, and so here we go for another X number of years or how many ever decades, in which women are still, you know, at the bottom of the scale in the Middle East. Are we looking at -- is the impact of what you're talking about with the sectarian divide and the way it can become institutionalized in the middle east, another way of saying, boy, for a while we thought we had some hope when we started replacing dictators, but we got a new set of problems, and so we're going to have a Middle East that looks a lot like the old Middle East, and instead of the problem being dictators, it's going to be this divide, and among other things, bad few years or decades for women?

MR. BYMAN: Go ahead, if you'd like.

MS. ABDO: I think -- well, first of all, because every country is so different we can't really generalize, but I'll use your example of Egypt, because I think that the points you raise are completely relevant to Egypt.

You have, in Egypt, a women's movement that was tremendously empowered by the revolution. Of course there were strong civil society groups in Egypt. Women have made a lot of progress and did make a lot of progress under Mubarak. You had the sort of institutionalized women's movements that was advanced by Suzanne Mubarak that a lot of women sort of distanced themselves from because it was a regime project.

Now, I mean, I've spent a lot of time in Egypt this spring and its remarkable the progress that women have made. They even -- they have demonstrations now. I was there in February; they had a demonstration against sexual harassment. The marched all the way to Tahrir from, you know, the suburbs. Women are going on television now, they're very vocal. There are virginity tests going on in Egypt now, all sorts of sexual harassment against women, and what's happened in terms of the whole -- well, I wouldn't say sectarian issue in Egypt, but I would say the rise of Islamist groups, whether they're Salafi or Ikhwan, Muslim Brotherhood, is that this issue of women is very sensitive for them. They don't know how to sort this out, and they feel threatened.

So, I mean, the Salafists will not say this to you directly, because they've become very politically savvy, especially when talking to foreigners, so they say that they're for democratic governance and they're for gender rights and all these sorts of things, so it's sort of difficult to get to the bottom of what they really believe, but it is clear that the women are, to some degree, being victimized by the rise of Islamist groups and, you know, there are some -- although, again, we shouldn't generalize about the Muslim Brotherhood. I mean, I've interviewed maybe a total of 15 people, leaders in the Muslim Brotherhood just a few weeks ago, and they all have very different opinions.

But what is said publically is a bit shocking. I mean, what's said publically, you know, Issam al-'Aryan will say on Al Jazeera that he doesn't think a woman should be president of Egypt. She can maybe have other posts, but she shouldn't be allowed to be president.

So, I think in Egypt we don't have a sectarian situation; we have more a perception of Iran intervention, that only arose recently with this whole discussion of allowing Iranian tourists to come to Egypt, and the Muslim Brotherhood's response to that is, oh, but they're only going to the beaches in Sharm el Sheikh. Well, that's not really why they're going to Egypt. They're going to the religious -- you know, the holy shrines.

So, that's why you have this discussion of sectarianism. But I do -- I think that you raise a very interesting point. And I think that in terms of the issues that are important to us in the West -- freedom of expression, women's rights -- I mean, to take your question to a different level, I think that the sectarian divide does put these kinds of issues and values at risk because, as I mentioned in my remarks, as all of these groups sort out the role that Islam is going to play in governance and in society, these kinds of issues are very problematic for them to sort out. I mean, this is why, you know, the government arrested Bassem Youssef, the -- you know, and there's this whole discussion now about freedom of expression in Egypt. It's very serious.

So, I think that that's definitely something that is going to be important going forward.

MR. BYMAN: Right there. Thank you.

MR. KRAMER: Rich Kramer from The National Endowment for Democracy. Geneive, it's good to see you again. Thank you both for your presentations and I look forward to reading the report.

I have two questions. I'll keep them concise. One, for you specifically, Geneive, is about the rise of the Salafists as a political player in Northern Lebanon, one, in order to mobilize politically and to run campaigns, that requires money.

MS. ABDO: Right.

MR. KRAMER: Is that coming from the usual suspects or elsewhere? And the other part of that is, how is the traditional established Sunni political block responding to this? There are pluses and minuses for them.

And the second question is for both of you, is regarding Iraq, and my colleagues at the endowment and, many of us know, they recently sent, I believe $2 billion to Cairo, on one hand, as a part of an effort to sort of, well, obviously extend regional influence, yet at the same time, it's still providing political support for the Assad government and air space for Iranians to fly over and continue to supply it as well.

What is Iraq's role right now in respect to the region and this kind of new outreach? And what is its trajectory? Thank you.

MR. BYMAN: Geneive, why don't you start out and then we'll ask Kristin.

MS. ABDO: You raise a really important point about this more centrist Sunni movement in Lebanon. March 14th, I mean, as an example, they are quite alarmed by the rise of the Salafists and what has happened is that with the departure more than a year ago of the former prime minister, Saad Hariri, there is no real central -- I mean, this is part of the reason, to some degree, I don't want to oversimplify my analysis, but to a large extent there is no real powerful charismatic Sunni leader on the scene in Lebanon. So, this allows for all these more minority voices to develop that are more extremist in nature, and this is something that worries March 14th a great deal.

So, you know, there are all these kind of, now, figures jockeying for

power and trying to figure out who the more centrist leader will be in Lebanon, because it does seem that Hariri, who is now safely in Paris, probably is not reentering Lebanese politics anytime soon.

Regarding the money question, I mean, it's -- I try to be cautious. I don't have any evidence or information or intelligence on whether the Saudis and Gulf states are supporting the Salafists, but I will say that when I visited some of these sheikhs in their mansions overlooking the Tripoli hills, it sort of makes you wonder where the funding is coming from.

One sheikh in particular, Saleem Rafai, he spent his whole life in Germany, he moved to Lebanon, I think, five years ago or so when he was expelled from Germany for his sort of inflammatory rhetoric in this mosque in Germany, and he doesn't really have, to my knowledge, any sort of income. So, the fact that he can afford a multimillion dollar mansion outside Tripoli does raise serious questions. And they have a lot of resources, I mean, obviously. They have money to pay -- they pay people, they pay their supporters, they fund events, they fund marches, all these sorts of things.

So, I think it's sort of safe to assume that they are being funded by, you know, the usual suspects.

MS. SMITH-DIWAN: One just quick comment on the funding. Again, I don't have like particular intelligence or anything on this, but I do think that when you, you know, hear a lot in Egypt about, oh, Saudi Arabia is funding Salafis and the Gulf countries are funding Salafis, a lot of times I wonder, I mean, if there's funding coming in, it isn't necessarily from the Saudi government. I mean, the networks are really extensive and deep and old between these countries, between populations that have moved between these countries since way back, you know, at the time of Nasser when you had a lot of

Islamists, you know, fleeing the country going for Saudi Arabia.

A lot of the money, I think, from my understanding, has come from Egyptians, as well, living in the Gulf that have a lot of money that are Salafi in persuasion, and as well from Salafi networks within Gulf societies, not necessarily the state.

It's possible that the state's funding these things, but if so, I think it would be pretty shortsighted because we were talking about, Salafis are not like the Muslim Brotherhood in this kind of disciplined organizational way. They're very individualistic and the entry of Salafis into politics, I think you'll see a lot of kind of interesting different ways that they'll engage with the political system, and I think ultimately, the bigger kind of challenge for Saudi Arabia will be the expansion of the Salafi democratic, if you can use that term, or at least Salafis engaging in democratic political arenas, is going to be a challenging one for Saudi Arabia. And I know that I know a lot of activists that I've talked to in Saudi Arabia, Salafis are quite excited about that possibility.

On the Iraq question, Iraq is just in a very difficult position, and particularly the Maliki government right now. I mean, I've always thought that the rise of the conflict in Syria ultimately was going to be a really profound challenge for Iraq, and the problem is, it's a challenge in the current situation where I think just recently, this week, I didn't see the evidence, but there's been some talk that actually some of the Salafi Jihadist groups in Iraq have claimed concrete ties with Salafi Jihadists in Syria, and again, this is related to the state weakness, this kind of flow of people across borders, but even beyond that, even if the situation gets settled in Syria with a -- you know, a predominantly -- it depends on how, but with a predominantly Sunni government, that's still going to put a lot of pressure on Iraq.

So, I'm not sure exactly what they're doing. I mean, you mentioned the

outreach to Egypt, that would be kind of a natural way to turn, but I think they're just in a difficult position and I don't -- I think they're trying to kind of find the best way they can in the situation.

MR. BYMAN: Great. Yes, over in the corner.

MR. MORRISON: Thank you. My name is Isaac Morrison. I'm an independent researcher. I was curious, as you discuss this sectarian divide, how you see this spillover impacting your smaller religious and ethnic communities, Christian communities, of course, but also your Alevis, your Yezidis, Baha'i, and so on, these much smaller groups that don't have the same strong networks to protect them and to support them?

MS. ABDO: The general thinking about this is that -- and this rise of Islamist politics, whether on the Shi'a or the Sunni side, the rise of violence that we saw in Iraq, we've already seen evidence of that, also in Syria, is posing really intense challenges to these small communities. They often become targets because when the conflict is an intra-Islamic conflict, then the game is to look for people that are dissidents from the faith and these people become targets. So, I'm pessimistic, actually, about that.

MR. BYMAN: Sir.

MR. GUGGENHEIM: Hi, the name's Joe Guggenheim, just a retired private citizen. If you can comment a little bit more about the Alawites in Syria and the rulers there, how that affects the sectarian differences and vice versa in terms of what -- Syria with Alawites.

MS. ABDO: The Alawites are considered by some to be Shi'a Muslims. There's a long sort of history of whether, in theological terms, they are Shi'a or not, but unfortunately, for some of the Shi'a now, the Alawites are considered Shi'a by the Sunnis

and they're sort of categorizing them that way for their own political goals.

In a country such as Bahrain, I didn't find, really, the issues in Syria to be as relevant there as Iran, as an issue. Because the government is so focused on the Iranian threat, the Shi'a are trying to distance themselves more from Iran than they are the Alawites in Syria. That's not true in other places. For example, the Shi'a in Lebanon are directly penalized and impacted by, you know, what's happening in Syria. And, again, as I mentioned in my remarks, this is what some of the Sunni Salafi groups are using to try to expedite the decline of Hezbollah by saying this is a Shi'a group -- well, what's interesting also is that, you know, the Shi'a historically in Lebanon were never really given the same kind of -- they weren't considered on the same level as the Sunni. This is only sort of a modern phenomenon that you have a powerful movement such as Hezbollah that actually has political power in Lebanon and it has so much influence.

So, that's why I think after, what, 30 some odd years, the Sunnis see this as an opportunity for Hezbollah's demise, to some degree. So, it really depends what country you're talking about, to what degree the Alawite situation in Syria is affecting the Shi'a population.

MR. BYMAN: Sir.

MR. GLUCK: Thank you. My name is Peter Gluck. Actually, my question is sort of the reverse of the very first question, which focused on the effect of this new sectarianism on Israel. My question is the effect or impact of the new sectarianism on the Palestinians.

If Israel's given more freedom of operation because the Arab states are trying to manage their own internal conflict, does that not weaken the Palestinian cause of statehood because they're losing the attention and the resources of those Arab states

that are involved in this new sectarianism.

MR. BYMAN: Kristin.

MS. SMITH-DIWIN: Yeah, I'll just kind of reiterate, the one thing that I have noticed is that the Palestinians and Hamas, in particular, part of the dynamic of this has been -- Geneive was just talking about Hezbollah and, you know, we used to have this alliance between Hezbollah and Iran and Syria as the big resistance front, right, and their appeal to other Sunni Muslims would come from that labeling that they were a resistance front.

The presence of Hamas and that resistance front in this new sectarian dynamic became extraordinarily problematic and Hamas, of course, made a lot of efforts to exit themselves from Syria. And one thing that's been interesting, then, is that the Sunni governments are -- or Gulf governments, I shouldn't say Sunni governments -- Gulf governments are quite interested in kind of consolidating this and extracting the Palestinians from the Iranian hold that they had on them before, or Hamas, in particular, from that.

And so, you have seen, sort of, some attempts to engage with Hamas by Qatar and some of the other Gulf governments. So, in that sense, they're not really abandoning the cause, but you're seeing a shift, perhaps an empowerment of Hamas, which would be interesting, within the Palestinian kind of competition, but I think the kind of outcome of that depends on a lot of other factors, like everything does, and what happens in Egypt.

I think there's a long-term thought that if the Muslim Brotherhood succeeds in consolidating power and in some sort of relatively successful Egypt that can function economically and can look as somewhat of a model, then that would be

empowering to Hamas, but we're a long way from that, obviously, in Egypt right now.

MR. BYMAN: Thank you. Yes, in the back on the aisle.

MR. WEINTRAUB: Thank you. I'm Leon Weintraub, University of Wisconsin. In discussing the Sunni - Shi'a -- the Shi'a divide, we haven't heard anything about the hundreds of millions of Sunni in Indonesia, Sunni in Malaysia, scores of millions of Sunni in India. This doesn't seem to affect them. I'm wondering if the Sunni in the Middle East are really using the flag of Sunni Islam as a flag of legitimacy and it's really a lot of Arab nationalism underneath this. It seems to be much more restricted to the Arab world than to the Sunni Islamic world.

MS. SMITH-DIWAN: Probably we're talking about those things more because this is where we do our research, so that's just kind of an unfortunate outcome of it, but I'll just mention that, you know, the rise in sort of sectarian conflict did antedate, I mean, I think it's been exacerbated in the Middle East region by the Arab uprisings and the instability that that has caused. But we have -- had seen a rise in sectarianism much beyond the Middle East, particularly through the rise of Salafi groups and that are quite focused on, again, the sort of internal competition between Muslims and a purifying sort of Muslim.

So, in that sense, I don't think that they're left out of some of these broader dynamics.

MR. BYMAN: I will simply add that, of course, in Pakistan, this is a tremendous and blood and unfortunately growing problem as well.

Sir. Closer in, in the middle, with the hand up on the aisle. Yes, please.

MR. MADI: Yeah, my name is Ahmad Madi. I'm a news reporter for (inaudible) channel.

There are two things missing in this debate or from their research. I, first of all, have to congratulate them for that research, it's really good, but first of all, as -- I mean, the role of the Arab media in the new sectarian divide, especially big names, I don't want to mention them, how they are supporting these extremist groups in public, even -- I mean, the Americans, they know about that, but they don't do anything.

And the second thing, I mean, I don't understand why the Arab Spring is okay in Libya or in other countries, in Egypt, but it's not okay in Iraq, it's not okay for Iraq to get intervene -- to get rid of the dictatorship, but it's okay and congratulations for the Libyans or Egyptians for their getting rid -- or the Tunisians, for their getting rid of the dictatorship there. This is something really missing in that research. I don't know, maybe the panel can (inaudible).

MR. BYMAN: To big kind of observations that are also questions, let me start with the media. That's, of course, a big driver of this, but the question is always, is it a reflection of sentiment or is it an independent driver? Do either of you have thoughts on that?

MS. ABDO: I'm -- with a few researchers, we monitored some of the media and the online discussion groups to try to see if it was -- you know, I mean, you learn a lot, especially through the online discussion groups, and it's -- a lot of the more extremist discourse comes out on the Internet, obviously.

And I think that, you know, it does fuel the extremists on both sides. I mean, if you take Bahrain as an example, I mean, the harsh language -- and some of it is in the paper, as a matter of fact, in my paper, but if you look at Bahrain online or some of the other discussion groups, people just unleash all their hatred and animosity and, you know, it's very easy to do that behind your computer when you're not face-to-face with

someone -- a human being.

So, I do agree with you, but I do think -- and I think the media is a completely different universe and a very important one. I mean, I would suggest that someone do a whole study just on how the media is contributing to sectarianism. I agree with you that it's a very important part of this. Even if you examine, as I did with the researchers on the project, even what the Iranians publish everyday, it's quite interesting.

If you read the Iranian press, you know, Khamenei is convinced or he seems to be convinced that a pan-Islamic awakening has occurred, you know, never mind the fact that as we both -- all agree, Iran's influence and popularity is declining.

So, the media plays a great role.

Regarding your second question -- do you want to take this about Iraq?

MS. SMITH-DIWAN: Sure. Well, on Iraq, I mean, I think the story of Iraq is sort of muddied by the way in which it was liberated, which was by the U.S. intervention, which obviously plays into any sort of discussion and perception, and obviously, within a kind of sectarian frame, then that gets played up very much by Sunni communities and the U.S. gets pulled into the story, and it gets read a lot about what -- the problem is whenever you have this sort of sectarian dynamics working up, it generates very non-sophisticated, in a way, understanding of things, and it becomes a very "with us" or "against us" kind of mentality, and so unfortunately I think the U.S. intervention and the U.S. role in that, then, plays into this kind of perception and Iraq gets exited from any perception with these broader moves for liberation.

One just small thing on the Arab media, I mean, Arab media, we know the dominant Arab media is owned by Gulf states, and so, obviously, they're pursuing their own interest and we could see that in the coverage of the uprisings, particularly

Qatar's role, if you're talking about Al Jazeera, and championing a lot of the uprisings was quite striking as was its lack of enthusiasm for the Bahrain uprising, for obvious reasons. When the uprisings got much closer to the Arab Gulf, they showed a lot less enthusiasm for them, but I think there's no doubt that that has played a role.

And it is interesting to look at Al Jazeera, and Mark Lynch is somebody who follows this really closely, but there has been actually a shift in Al Jazeera too from a more kind of independent management that allowed for maybe some resistance and some reflection of broader Arab sentiment. You know, there was an idea that Al Jazeera got its popularity by following Arab sentiment to it becoming a much more narrow kind of instrument of state policy and consequently, I think it's lost some of its broader relevance and audience.

MS. ABDO: If I could add just one thing. The other thing that's happened in the Arab media, which is very interesting and does fuel, you know, all of these varying views is, if you take a country like Egypt, for example, there are private channels now, so people don't have to watch Al Jazeera anymore. I mean, there are so many different private and public channels in Egypt -- Bassam Youssef, the comedian, is on one of them.

And so, you know, you can -- any view can be advanced if you just get someone to buy and set up some kind of network. You don't need Al Jazeera.

MR. BYMAN: Yes, please.

MR. MARTIN-RAYO: Thanks. Francisco Marin-Rayo, I run the Winning the Minds Foundation. Do you guys see a counterweight or a potential counterweight to this devolution towards sectarianism, so, you know, nationalism perhaps? And within the new context of sectarianism, how do you see the role of al Qaeda changing?

MS. SMITH-DIWAN: I can take up the first question, actually, because it's something that I've been doing research on and it's a very kind of small movement, but there has been -- within all of these broader transitions that we've seen kind of through the Arab uprisings and things. One thing that people have noticed a little bit less are the real challenges that this has posed within Islamic movements, and if you look particularly at Muslim Brotherhood movements, it has been noted. If you look at Egypt, for instance, the role of youth movements and challenging Muslim Brotherhood organizations, the youth movements were very strong in getting out into the street and wanting to join the revolution where the Muslim Brotherhood, as an organization, was much more reticent, also, the push for more openness within the organization, a frustration with the hierarchy.

So, there's a lot of kind of structural changes that are happening that are being driven by youth movements that are pulling kind of against the tide of a more kind of authoritarian structure within Islamic politics and also these same movements are much more open to pluralism and are moving more towards the idea of a civil state over an Islamic state.

You can see this through parties like the current party in Egypt, people who have been championing this sort of thing Aboul Fotouh who represents kind of a shift more in that direction. In the Gulf you have the same thing happening, you actually have a lot of young activists who have left the Muslim Brotherhood movement -- or some, I won't say a lot, but some who have left them and started -- there's a new party in Kuwait, the Civil Democratic Movement, which is very small but which, as well, is kind of -- you can see has been made up of former Islamists moving in this direction.

And you can even look at really high profile people like I mentioned

before, Sheikh Salman Al Ouda in Saudi Arabia, who clearly, in the period of the Arab Spring, has taken a step away from his kind of strong alliance with the government and has been kind of more critical in pushing for reform, and who as well has taken a much more softened approach to these sectarian relations and hasn't been diving as much into this kind of sectarian rhetoric.

MR. BYMAN: Yes, sir.

SPEAKER: Hello. My name is Ahmad. I'm a judge from Egypt. My question is, do you think that it is potential to have a kind of sectarianism within the Sunni circle itself? And my question is based on the observation that Salafists are accusing the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, for instance, that they have compromised the Islamic agenda, and especially after hosting some Iranians, they said that this is not allowed and it's only in our borders that something like this can happen.

The same is going on at a different degree in Syria, (inaudible) the dogmatic split between (inaudible) for instance, and the Muslim Brotherhood. So, do you think that there is prospects for possible sectarianism within the Sunni circle? Thank you.

MS. ABDO: Yes, most definitely. And I think, you know, as you mentioned, Egypt was a perfect example of that. It was the Salafis who told me that they thought that Iranians were coming to Egypt to convert Sunnis to Shi'a Islam, so, I think -- and this is a very, as you know, in a country such as Egypt, this is a very, very emotional, passionate discussion going on because Egyptians are very close -- or they consider themselves close to the companions of the prophet and it's a very important issue for them.

So, I think that this could become sort of a fault line between the Muslim Brotherhood and some of the Salafi groups. And the way -- I think that the -- what's so

interesting, too, in the case of Egypt, is that the Muslim Brotherhood doesn't really know how to handle this issue now that it's become so public. I mean, what some of them told me in interviews was that for them it's a matter of economics. They need Iranian tourists. The economy is in disarray. There are no tourists coming to Egypt anymore. So, they -- as one person told me, why would we shut the door on an entire Iranian market?

But yet, as a political party now, they -- and as a religious party, they have to deal with sort of the theological issue that's now come into play. And it's very -- it's a real dilemma for them because they agree, on some level, with the Salafists. That's what their heart tells them. But then again, they have an economic crisis in Egypt.

So, I agree with you that it will be interesting to see how these internal disputes play out, you know, among the Sunnis.

MR. BYMAN: Yes, right there.

SPEAKER: My name is Bill Hesser from the Project on Middle East Democracy. I was curious, in Bahrain, you talked about the perception of the -- that Iran controls all Shi'a in the region. Did you get to meet with Shi'a and did you get a sense of whether Iran really does have influence among that population? And I was also wondering if you got to meet any Sunnis that actually also oppose the regime. They have been much more quiet and a lot, I think, in the United States, don't even know that they exist.

MS. ABDO: It's very, very difficult to assess Iran's religious influence. The Shi'a in Bahrain follow basically three marja, one is Fadlallah, who recently died in Lebanon, the other is Khomeini/Khamenei, and the other, third, is Sistani. It's very, very difficult, though, to know what percentage follow which cleric.

A, now, former PhD candidate, Justin Gengler, did a very interesting

study in 2009 in which he interviewed people in Bahrain asking if they supported an Islamic state, an Iranian installed theocracy, and overwhelming the majority said they were opposed to any form of (inaudible) or Iranian theocracy.

But I think it's very hard -- I had hoped initially to try to make some assessment as to Iran's religious influence in some of these countries, but it's quite difficult. I don't know if you have anything to add.

MS. SMITH-DIWAN: I'll take the second question on Sunnis in Bahrain. It's a really interesting question. I agree with you, we understand a lot less about what's going on, but one thing that's really clear is that the same sort of fragmentation that's happened from the top as you've had sort of a lot of factionalism in the ruling family in Bahrain has resulted in a lot of factionalism amongst the Sunni, we have a lot of divisions in Sunni movements inside of Bahrain.

We saw the initial emergence of this (inaudible), this group that played a really important role, actually, I think in derailing the Bahraini uprising by presenting itself in a really interesting way as being opposed to the gathering that was happening at the Pearl Roundabout, so opposed to that, kind of we want to be more loyal to the government, but at the same time being led by a religious figure, Sheikh Abdullah ta fa Mahmoud, who came neither from either the Salafi political party or the Muslim Brotherhood political party, but kind of had an Ashari background and also had a background in a prior time of being critical of the government and having had an oppositional thing. So, this kind of provided an arena for all Sunnis to gather, whether they felt that they were, you know, that were concerned about what kind of democratic empowerment would mean in turn at the rise of Shi'a electorally, but that wanted to kind of stand up at the same time, it gave them an arena to do that separate from the Shi'a, so

that if there were some that still had some problems with the government, they still, you know, had kind of a separate place to go.

That's kind of broken down, as you might think, because it was a really big tent of Sunni at the time and we've seen, in particular, a lot of defections from that movement in the context of the current national dialogues, which is interesting, I think, as some groups are opposing that and other groups are looking at this as an opportunity, maybe, to get some demands from the government themselves.

MR. BYMAN: Here up front, please.

MR. BURR: Yeah, I'm Jim Burr and I'm a journalist here in town. I've been studying this stuff for years. There was an outstanding, in my opinion outstanding, cover story in *The National Journal* about a month ago trying to spell out the various Salafist entities in the entire Middle East. And I came away from that thinking, my god, if I were responsible for American foreign policy; let's get the hell out of here. I mean, what control does somebody with the dirty hands the United States of America has in the Middle East, what hope is there for us having any influence whatsoever? At this stage, it may change somewhere down the road, but at this point, I would just say, man, let's hit it.

MR. BYMAN: That's, I think, a fitting big last question for both our speakers, really, which is, kind of return to some of the initial remarks. Is this something that the United States kind of watches and reacts to or is this something that the United States can shape in a positive direction?

MS. ABDO: I don't think this is something that necessarily the United States can influence. And as I said earlier, I think along the margins or in small steps, but on a large scale, if you compare our policy in the Middle East to what it's been for half a century, it's not anything on that level.

This is an internal debate, a religious debate, a political debate, and I think that people in the region don't think that this is any of the United States' business, basically.

MS. SMITH-DIWIN: Just a quick comment on kind of approaching Salafis. I mean, one worry I have is that now that kind of we're engaging with the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafis are kind of out there and they're kind of seen as the new, like, oh, my gosh, the other one's further to the right and further radical.

I think it's a bit dangerous to start to conceive of the Salafis as a Salafi movement, in a way. I mean, that applies in some situations, but as you probably know from trying to read this article, the appearance of Salafis are they're much more idiosyncratic, they've evolved through a lot of different reasons, some big geopolitical reasons as Iran from way back in '79 -- I mean, Saudi Arabia from way back in '79 was trying to empower its own version of Islam versus Iran, others that brought up very locally due to very kind of personal issues about religion and what role it should be playing, you know, due to issues of modernization and things like that.

So, it's a very disparate group, it doesn't have the kind of formal organization that Muslim Brotherhood organizations have, and I think it would be a mistake to kind of conceptualize it, we need to approach them as one group and one way. So, I will just throw that out there.

But I kind of agree with some of the skepticism about being able to engage, specifically in the field, and I think we should be better placed by putting our energy into bigger issues of governance and getting that right.

MS. ABDO: But if I could just add one thing, on -- at least in terms of the Salafis say, in Egypt, for example, they want to talk to the U.S. government. They feel

that they're misunderstood. So, they're trying to find channels of engagement. So, it really -- and it's really important to emphasize the point that they're very, very different. Many of the Salafist parties don't even communicate with one another, so it's very important to appreciate their differences and their different objectives.

MR. BYMAN: Well, I'd like to thank both our speakers for really not only an excellent set of presentations, but an excellent dialogue. We really got a lot of issues out on the table and I think we've all come away much smarter on this topic. So, please join me in thanking both of them.

(Applause.)

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