



مركز برونكس الدوحة
BROOKINGS DOHA CENTER

POLICY BRIEFING

DECEMBER 2015

DEALING WITH DELHI:
HOW CULTURE SHAPES INDIA'S MIDDLE EAST POLICY

KADIRA PETHIYAGODA

B | Foreign Policy
at BROOKINGS

DEALING WITH DELHI:
HOW CULTURE SHAPES INDIA'S MIDDLE EAST POLICY

KADIRA PETHIYAGODA

B | Foreign Policy
at BROOKINGS

BROOKINGS

The Brookings Institution is a private non-profit organization. Its mission is to conduct high-quality, independent research and, based on that research, to provide innovative, practical recommendations for policymakers and the public. The conclusions and recommendations of any Brookings publication are solely those of its author(s), and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Institution, its management, or its other scholars.

Brookings recognizes that the value it provides to any supporter is in its absolute commitment to quality, independence and impact. Activities supported by its donors reflect this commitment and the analysis and recommendations are not determined by any donation.

Copyright © 2015 Brookings Institution

BROOKINGS INSTITUTION
1775 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20036 U.S.A.
www.brookings.edu

BROOKINGS DOHA CENTER
Saha 43, Building 63, West Bay, Doha, Qatar
www.brookings.edu/doha

DEALING WITH DELHI: HOW CULTURE SHAPES INDIA'S MIDDLE EAST POLICY

KADIRA PETHIYAGODA¹

INTRODUCTION

“Cultural traditions, spiritual values, and shared heritage” underpin India and the United Arab Emirates’ social and foreign policies, according to the joint statement issued by the two states following Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit.² Of all emerging and established great powers, none boast deeper or longer cultural ties with the Gulf than India. In addition, arguably no power is as dependent on the region as India, due to both energy trade and remittances. The Gulf Cooperation Council is India’s largest trading partner.³ In addition to the economic interests long underpinning India-Gulf ties, relations are now increasingly strategically relevant given changing global dynamics.⁴ At this pivotal time, it is imperative that Gulf states understand the important role played by culture in India’s Middle East policy.

This policy briefing examines India’s culture and how it influences Delhi’s approach to the region through two key avenues: values and identity. Recommendations are then provided for policymakers in Gulf states on how to utilize this knowledge to support strategic and economic interests and to foster mutually beneficial, lasting ties with India. Understanding

the roles played by culture in both supporting and undermining interests will help states to respond with more informed policies and better equipped tools and institutions.

THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN FOREIGN POLICY

Most policymakers acknowledge the role played by culture in foreign policy.⁵ Studies of the foreign policies of India and Middle Eastern states reveal that culture plays an important role.⁶ While culture is just one of many factors that underpin policy (e.g. strategic and economic interests), it receives relatively little attention, particularly with regard to India’s approach to the Middle East.

The complexity of the culture concept and its multiple meanings across disciplines contribute to the difficulty in understanding its role in international affairs.⁷ As such, a conception of culture needs to be adopted that 1) is compatible with much of the political and social science literature discussing it, and 2) permits the examination of culture as a variable influencing foreign policy. This policy briefing will focus on cultural values, defined as observable social ideals for which people of a society show some affective regard.

¹ Kadira Pethiyagoda is a visiting fellow in Asia-Middle East relations at the Brookings Doha Center. His research focuses on India’s relations with the Gulf States, drawing on experience in Indian foreign policy spanning both policymaking and academia. He gratefully acknowledges the advice of Sultan Barakat, director of research at the Brookings Doha Center, and insights provided by Ranjit Gupta, Sanjay Singh, and other Indian officials. He is also grateful for the editorial support from the BDC research assistants, promotion by the BDC communications team, contacts provided by Brookings India, and the helpful feedback of family and friends who kindly shared their time.

² “Joint Statement between the United Arab Emirates and India,” Press Information Bureau of India, 17 August 2015, <<http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=126127>>.

³ “India, Gulf Nations Rapidly Becoming Biggest Trading Partners,” *The Economic Times*, 18 January 2015, <http://articles.economicstimes.indiatimes.com/2015-01-28/news/58547070_1_indian-business-professional-council-trade-partner>.

⁴ Kadira Pethiyagoda, “Modi Looks West: India’s Unlikely Relationship with the Middle East,” *Foreign Affairs*, 11 June 2015, <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/india/2015-06-11/modi-looks-west>>.

⁵ Peter J. Katzenstein, “Introduction: Alternative Perspectives on National Security,” in *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, ed. P.J. Katzenstein (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 23–49.

⁶ Kadira Pethiyagoda, “The Influence of Cultural Values on India’s Foreign Policy” (PhD diss., University of Melbourne, 2013), 24; G. Hossein Razi, “An Alternative Paradigm to State Rationality in Foreign Policy: The Iran-Iraq War,” *The Western Political Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (1988): 689–723; Andrew Rotter, *Comrades at Odds: The United States and India 1947–1964* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2001); Rudra Chaudhuri, *Forged in Crisis: India and the United States Since 1947* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁷ R.B.J Walker, “The Concept of Culture in the Theory of International Relations,” in *Cultural and International Relations*, ed. Jongsuk Chay (New York: Praeger, 1990), 8.

Ideals, of course, are not necessarily practiced by the majority of society.⁸ The values discussed will conceptually resemble Weber's "ideal types."⁹ Even in terms of ideals, great diversity exists within Indian society. The cultural values identified will therefore be restricted to those that have been dominant throughout history and that exert influence on society today.

Cultural values are most often expressed within foreign policy via leaders' preferences and perceptions.¹⁰ Values motivate, shape, and influence these perceptions and preferences, which can be observed in either discourse or state behavior.¹¹

INDIAN VALUES

Within India's diversity, it is possible to describe a set of dominant cultural values capable of influencing foreign policy. This is partly because of the cultural integration processes which began in medieval times, accentuated under Islamic and British rule, and then furthered under modern nation-building.¹² The impact of any religion-based differences in values is negated by the fact that the majority of the population follows Hinduism, which itself has been influenced by most of the religious traditions that existed in Indian history, including the next most populous religion, Islam.

Only a few cultural values have remained dominant throughout Indian history (according to a survey of major history texts) and are relevant to present-day foreign policy.¹³ These

include nonviolence, tolerance, pluralism, and hierarchy/prestige, all of which are fairly basic, deep-seated, and fundamental.¹⁴

While those four values appear in the rhetoric of many states, they have particularly influenced India's Middle East policy. Although other values may affect Indian policy, they will not be examined as they are not unique to India, and impact the Middle East policymaking of other great powers as well.

Nonviolence, as a dominant ideal, spans India's diverse cultural strands. It is particularly relevant to foreign policy because violence remains the ultimate and final tool in modern international relations. Buddhism, and to a lesser extent Jainism, furthered the transformation of Vedic society that was already taking place with the Upanishads (which espouse nonviolence), to one in which nonviolence was a dominant cultural value.¹⁵ The value was further reinforced in medieval times when Hinduism responded to Buddhism and Jainism and appropriated some of their values.

During the independence movement, leaders like Mahatma Gandhi defined Indian identity in opposition to the British partly through non-violence.¹⁶ Post-independence, the value was enshrined within the country's national image.

Despite several conflicts involving Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and others, in comparison to other large states, the value of nonviolence has been

⁸ Sheldon Smith and Phillip D. Young, *Cultural Anthropology: Understanding a World in Transition* (London: Allyn and Bacon, 1998), 28.

⁹ Max Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* (New York: The Free Press, 1949).

¹⁰ This policy briefing differs from strategic culture studies. By looking at cultural values, it investigates India's broader, socio-cultural history to determine independent variables whose influence on Middle East policy can be examined.

¹¹ K.J. Holsti, "National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy," *International Studies Quarterly*, 14 no. 3(1970): 233–309; Richard Ned Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 41.

¹² V. Subramaniam, *Cultural Integration in India: A Socio-Historical Analysis* (Delhi: Ashish, 1979): 7–8, 46.

¹³ These are values which rose to prominence during the formative stage of Indian civilization, from the Vedic period through the beginning of the Medieval era. It is these values that express themselves most in the present nation-state.

¹⁴ Pethiyagoda, "The Influence of Cultural Values," 2.

¹⁵ A. L. Basham, *Wonder That Was India* (London: Picador, 2004), 215, 286; W. Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (London: Gordon Fraser Gallery, 1978), 46.

¹⁶ M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 64 (Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting Government of India, 1937).

visible in India's relatively restrained conduct in war, its nuclear posture, and general distaste for comprehensive security strategies.¹⁷ Even when nonviolence was not reflected in India's actions, the diplomatic resources expended to promote a nonviolent image attested to the prevalence of the value. The fact that this image at times compromised strategic interests suggests it is important in itself, rather than purely as a ploy to further other interests.¹⁸

Pluralism, defined as people seeing the presence of diverse groups, ideas, cultural forms, and beliefs within their society as the norm, has remained dominant throughout much of Indian history and has been an aspiration of the modern state since independence. It is rooted in Hindu and Buddhist philosophical traditions, as well as historical adaptation, absorption, and interaction among various groups.¹⁹

While pluralism entails seeing diversity as a normal state of affairs, tolerance means accepting contradicting ideas, norms, and values.²⁰ The ethos of absorbing and accommodating diverse identities, ideas, and practices, and the ability to synthesize these sets Indian civilization apart from many others.²¹

In post-independence India, tolerance and pluralism informed the political thinking of the elite.²² According to the 2010-2014 World Values Survey, India scored higher on the axis of "Survival Values vs. Self-Expression Values"

than any of the other Asian countries listed.²³ Scoring higher on this scale indicates growing tolerance of certain minority groups. While domestically, pluralism and tolerance have been challenged by some political movements over the last two decades, for the most part they have not been dislodged as ideals among the majority, as witnessed in recent electoral results.²⁴

The value of **hierarchy** is defined here as the perception that social relations exist in a hierarchical system, and acceptance of this as the norm. Hierarchy has had a long history, stemming from the development of early elements of the caste system during the Vedic period.²⁵ As a result, Indian leaders hold a "hierarchical worldview" where nation-states are arranged as a hierarchy.²⁶ A state's ranking can be measured through strategic, military, and economic power, as well as morality, ideology, intellectuality, and culture.²⁷ This worldview also holds that India should sit at the top of the international order. While the norms of modern international affairs rhetoric have prevented overt expression of this worldview, it is clearly visible in India's actions within key policy areas, such as nuclear posture.²⁸

THE INFLUENCE OF VALUES ON MIDDLE EAST POLICY

While values have consistently had a significant impact on foreign policy, the nature of this impact has varied since independence. Before

¹⁷ B. Karnad, *India's Nuclear Policy* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2008), 3.

¹⁸ This can be seen in India's approach to humanitarian intervention when strategic interests in relations with the West were at times outweighed by the preference for interstate peace. In nuclear posture Delhi promoted its no-first use policy, sometimes at the cost of deterrence (Pethiyagoda, "The Influence of Cultural Values," 342).

¹⁹ Romila Thapar, *The Penguin History of Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300* (Delhi: Penguin Books, 2002), 122.

²⁰ Subramaniam, *Cultural Integration in India*, 23.

²¹ Noting some periods of history saw greater tolerance than others; B. Saraswati, *Interface of Cultural Identity Development* (Delhi: D. K. Printworld Ltd, 1996), 8, 296.

²² Stephen P. Cohen, *India: Emerging Power* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2001), 11, 302.

²³ See Appendix 1.

²⁴ See pages 7 and 10 of this Policy Briefing.

²⁵ For importance of Vedic period see: Cohen, *India: Emerging Power*, 9; Pethiyagoda, *The Influence of Cultural Values*, 61-4; S.L., Raj, and B., Pradhan, "Indian Cultural Values and the Promotion of Human Rights," *Focus*, Vol. 8, Asia-Pacific Human Rights Information Center, 1997.

²⁶ Pethiyagoda, "The Influence of Cultural Values," 128.

²⁷ George K. Tanham, *Indian Strategic Thought: An Interpretive Essay* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1992), 16.

²⁸ Pethiyagoda, "The Influence of Cultural Values," 5.

the early 1990s, India's foreign policy, which was dominated by the Indian National Congress party (henceforth referred to as Congress) was a mix of "Nehruvian" idealism and Indira Gandhi's realism.²⁹ These approaches left legacies of thinking within the foreign policy establishment, particularly the Indian Foreign Service (IFS).³⁰

Cultural values most obviously influenced Nehru's foreign policy, including relations with the Middle East.³¹ During the post-independence period from the 1940s to the 1970s, Nehru founded and led the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) with Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser. NAM's ideology grew largely out of India's nonviolent independence movement prioritizing peaceful resolution of international disputes. The movement evinced a pluralistic character.

Concomitant with its values-driven support for NAM, India's foreign policy elite identified with and supported the Arab nationalist struggle led by Egypt. Nevertheless, India maintained a largely neutral position with regard to the regional "Arab Cold War" of the 1950s and 1960s between the secular, socialist-leaning republics and pro-Western kingdoms.³² Ranjit Gupta, a veteran of India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), highlighted this neutrality principle stating that after the Nehru-Nasser era "we never took sides in any regional dispute."³³ Similarly, despite India's fervent anti-colonialism, distrust of the West, voting against the partition of Palestine and Israel's entry into the United Nations, and voting for the condemnation of Zionism alongside racism, Delhi subsequently recognized Israel in

1950. With regard to Iran, values of tolerance and pluralism ensured relations did not swing too far in one direction or another following the 1953 toppling of Muhammad Mossadeq and the 1979 revolution.

India's 1990s economic crisis and consequent reforms, combined with the end of the Cold War, slightly altered how culture influenced the country's approach to foreign policy. The overt expression of values in government rhetoric declined, though values still influenced state behavior.

Former and current senior Indian diplomats handling relations with the Middle East, when pressed during interviews on the ultimate justification for many policy positions, revealed deep-seated values. "It is just the right way to behave," stated Sanjay Singh, former ambassador and Secretary East at the MEA. He added that India's international tolerance and pluralism among other things stemmed from the country's internal diversity and political and cultural ethos. Ranjit Gupta stated that these values are "part of every Indian," and that India ran its "foreign policy according to its values and civilizational ethos."³⁴

One of the most important ways Indian cultural values impacted the country's relations with the Middle East is through Delhi's position on international military involvement in the region, often through humanitarian interventions. India, like many Western states, is relatively democratic, pluralistic, and liberal. Yet, until the last decade, India was one of the leaders of the "pro-sovereignty, anti-intervention" bloc of states (which contained most Middle East states

²⁹ Noting that neither was completely idealist or realist.

³⁰ Jawaharlal Nehru, *India's Foreign Policy* (Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1961), 102.

³¹ Rotter, *Comrades at Odds*.

³² F. Gregory Gause, III, "Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War," Analysis Paper no. 11, Brookings Doha Center, July 2014, <<http://www.brookings.edu/-/media/research/files/papers/2014/07/22%20beyond%20sectarianism%20cold%20war%20gause/english%20pdf.pdf>>.

³³ Ranjit Gupta, a former Head of the Ministry of External Affairs' West Asia and North Africa division who also served as Ambassador to Oman and Yemen, interview with author, New Delhi, 10 June 2015.

³⁴ Sanjay Singh, interview with author, New Delhi, 11 June 2015.

as well). This was the result of cultural values in addition to anti-colonialism, material and strategic interests, Third World solidarity, and domestic politics.³⁵

The West took a more liberal, solidarist view, focusing on individuals and supporting concepts like “human security.” Western leaders felt the “international community” had a responsibility to intervene in response to certain rights violations.³⁶

Indian culture, however, is relatively less individualistic and more collectivist than most Western cultures, meaning Delhi focused more on groups or “peoples” than individuals. Additionally, India’s colonial experience helped sanctify the view that the sovereign state was the legitimate representative of a people within global affairs. As such, Delhi often expressed greater concern for interstate violence than violence within states such as alleged large-scale human rights violations.³⁷ India therefore opposed humanitarian intervention without state consent, because it represented interstate violence.³⁸

Furthermore, compared to the texts of most Abrahamic religions, Hinduism and Buddhism hold mixed to negative views on the idea of a “just” or “righteous” war.³⁹ Texts like the Mahabharata which discuss the morality of “dharmayudda” (righteous war) do so in the broader socio-political cultural context in which nonviolence and no-harm were dominant ideals. Similarly, India applied pluralism and tolerance internationally, accepting different regime types and societies.

Given that some Middle Eastern governments face significant threat of foreign intervention by extra-regional and regional powers, India’s position on intervention helped strengthen its image in several states. While regime change in the Middle East often results in sharp bilateral realignments, relations with India remained relatively steady.

Moreover, the Middle East and West often differ when it comes to civil and political rights. India is a democracy with a vibrant civil society, and, relative to comparable developing countries, has a history of individual rights enshrined in its laws. Despite this, Delhi often opposed enforcing human rights overseas. For most Middle Eastern states, this enhanced India’s credibility and value as a partner.⁴⁰

POST-ARAB SPRING STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT

Interviews with current senior MEA officials dealing with the Middle East revealed strong continuity in India’s long standing principled approach. Pluralism and tolerance were evident, with one official highlighting India’s friendly relations with Palestine and Israel, and with Saudi Arabia and Iran.⁴¹ The official stated that India calls for political dialogue in Syria and peaceful solutions to conflicts in Libya and Yemen. “We do not export democracy,” he added. Non-interference was preferred. The value of nonviolence remains visible, with clear aversion to military intervention. The MEA interviewees believed adhering to values in foreign policy served India’s interests.

Delhi’s enthusiasm for a greater strategic role

³⁵ India’s own interventions in its smaller neighbours are examples of where strategic interests overrode values. The role of cultural values is seen more acutely in questions of intervention further afield as here it is more a question of principle. Other states supporting intervention did so partly due to their own values.

³⁶ Nicholas J. Wheeler, *Saving Strangers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 2-11.

³⁷ *Psychology in India Revisited: Developments in the Discipline*, vol. 3, ed. J. Pandey (Delhi: Sage, 2004).

³⁸ Kadira Pethiyagoda, “India’s Approach to the Responsibility to Protect and Humanitarian Intervention,” (working paper, Institute for Ethics Law and Armed Conflict, University of Oxford, Oxford, 2013), 5, <<http://www.elac.ox.ac.uk/downloads/pethiyagoda%202013.pdf>>.

³⁹ These reasons are complemented by India’s own battles with separatist/insurgent movements regarding which Delhi would prefer little international attention. For more detail, see Paul Robinson, *Just War in Comparative Perspective* (Ottawa: Ashgate Publishing, 2003), 123.

⁴⁰ Table 1 (Appendix 2) illustrates how the aforementioned cultural values influenced India’s approach to various interventions in the Middle East over the last few decades.

⁴¹ Author’s interview with a senior official from Ministry of External Affairs of India, Delhi, June 11, 2015

in the Middle East, made possible by increased multipolarity, is driven partly by hierarchy and prestige. The region is located on the western edge of the Indian Ocean, what Delhi sees as its “rightful” sphere of influence, a “right” conferred by India’s status as a great power.

The India-UAE joint statement made after Modi’s August 2015 visit reflected the continuing impact of cultural values under the current government. Nonviolence appears in the two countries’ promotion of peace, support for nonviolent resolution of conflicts, and advancement of non-interference in dispute settlement. The statement further advocated tolerance and reflected pluralism.

INDIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY

While India’s dominant culture has remained largely consistent since independence, the last few decades have seen a change in the way culture influences foreign policy; it has played a greater role in shaping national identity.

Identity has a more obvious impact on Delhi’s foreign policy than values do. The contours of India’s national identity are marked by how the people and government feel India differs from the external world. It is a more conscious, purposeful, and in some ways superficial driver of foreign policy than values. Two major streams have fed into India’s current national identity.

“Nehruvian” Identity

One stream is constituted by views delineated by the dominant strands of the independence movement and Gandhi, and carried into the post-independence period by Nehru. This national identity is colored by the aforementioned cultural values. Echoing Ashoka and Akbar, Gandhi expounded

tolerance, arguing that religious and spiritual quests need not be tied to a communal identity. The framers of the Indian constitution wanted to give appropriate recognition to the importance of religious pluralism.⁴²

LEGACY OF NEHRUVIAN MIDDLE EAST POLICY

While there have been challenges to the Nehruvian identity in domestic politics since the 1990s, in terms of Middle East policy, its legacy has remained somewhat resilient. Congress has been more enthusiastic than the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in promoting this form of identity.

Carrying on the Nehruvian secular legacy domestically meant Congress established a constituency among India’s religious minorities, including Muslims. This allowed the Indian Muslim identity, held by the 180 million strong community—roughly 15 percent of India’s population in 2011, to influence Middle East policy.⁴³ Congress, BJP, and the bureaucracy still refer to the Middle East as “West Asia”—reflecting a shared sense of identity with South Asia.

Throughout the Nehruvian period, Delhi identified with Arab nationalist secular regimes. The Indo-Egyptian NAM friendship laid the groundwork for pro-Arab policies. It created a prism for viewing the region that lasted until the 1990s. Ambassador Ranjit Gupta stated that Iraq and Syria were also considered among India’s best friends. Parts of this identity survived beyond the 1990s, as evidenced by Delhi’s wariness of attempts to topple Gaddafi in Libya, and Assad in Syria.

Hindutva

In the last two decades an alternative identity emerged at the national level—Hindutva.

⁴² Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 309.

⁴³ Vijaita Singh, “Over 180 million Muslims in India but they are not part of global terror groups: Govt.,” *Indian Express*, 24 February 2015, <<http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/over-180-million-muslims-in-india-but-they-are-not-part-of-global-terror-groups-govt/>>.

Simultaneously, a shifting and widening occurred in how culture influences foreign policy, particularly under BJP governments. While the Nehruvian identity was influenced by values emanating from the dominant Indian culture, Hindutva involved greater co-option of the symbols of this culture to form the national identity.

Hindutva's core beliefs consist of a view that India is a Hindu nation, with all "culture, civilization, and life" owing a debt to Hinduism.⁴⁴ This, at times, expanded to include other indigenous Indian religions like Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism.

By cordoning off and strengthening identity defined by the Hindu religion, the Hindutva movement's objectives are ironically, at times, at odds with some of the core values of Hinduism itself, pluralism and tolerance. The ideology is propagated by a broad umbrella group of organizations known as the Sangh Parivar, which includes both national political parties like the BJP and grassroots movements (e.g. the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, or RSS).

The national identity supported by Hindutva ideology presents significant implications for relations with the Middle East. Hindutva arose in part as a reaction to foreign domination. Therefore, it predominantly focuses on the perceived remnants of this domination within Indian society today, namely non-indigenous religions, the largest of which is Islam. The Hindutva movement has been accused of attempting to subordinate non-indigenous religions and values within the national identity.⁴⁵ The movement gathered strength with the electoral success of the BJP in 1996

and 1998. The most recent victory, led by Modi in 2014, was the BJP's biggest—it won 52 percent of parliamentary seats.

Prime Minister Modi

Up to 2014, India's behavior toward the Middle East had displayed few major changes, despite alterations in how culture influenced identity under BJP and Congress governments. Last year, however, India elected a government led by a prime minister more "culturally nationalist" than any predecessor. Debate exists over whether India possesses a "grand strategy," leaving foreign policy susceptible to potential shifts by governments with strong ideological bents. Within the BJP itself, Modi had long been considered one of the most ardent Hindutva supporters. A culturally based identity has been central to his ideology and political success. His political background simultaneously represents the non-pluralistic sentiments of the nationalist Hindutva movement and the distinctly pluralistic religions it seeks to protect.

The PM's political pedigree is colored heavily by Hindutva.⁴⁶ Prior to the BJP, Modi had worked with the RSS, promoting their ideology.⁴⁷ He had also devoted himself to Hinduism, attempting to join several religious missions of the Ramakrishna Order; founded by Swami Vivekananda, whom Modi sees as a "personal inspiration."⁴⁸

Modi's background also suggests he had adopted Hindutva's approach toward Indian Muslims. He was Chief Minister of Gujarat when the state underwent major riots, in which at least 1000 people—mainly Muslims—died, and was accused of negligence at the least.

⁴⁴ D. R. Goyal, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, 2nd ed. (Delhi: Radhakrishna Prakashan, 2000), 8-17; M.S. Golwalkar, *A Bunch of Thoughts*, 3rd ed. (Bangalore: Sahitya Sindhu Prakashana, 1996).

⁴⁵ Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*, 3-62.

⁴⁶ "Timeline of the Riots in Modi's Gujarat." *New York Times*, 19 August 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/04/06/world/asia/modi-gujarat-riots-timeline.html?_r=0>.

⁴⁷ "PM India," Prime Minister's Office, accessed December 12, 2015, <http://pmindia.gov.in/en/personal_life_story/personal-life-story/>.

⁴⁸ "Narendra Modi Invited to Ramakrishna Mission's Headquarter in Belurmath," *The Economic Times*, 26 May 2015, <http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2014-05-26/news/50099180_1_narendra-modi-swami-vivekananda-belurmath>.

After graduating from Gujarat to national politics, Modi began to reform his image and move closer to the middle of the ideological spectrum. This trend continued, following communalist comments by other BJP leaders contributing to a significant election loss in Delhi. Subsequently, incidents of inter-communal violence and growing civil society criticism of the government's stance on religious tolerance were alleged to have contributed to the party's major defeat in the Bihar state elections. Modi's efforts to change likely represent not only attempts to reassure his non-Hindutva supporters and those fearing communal unrest and to maintain India's tolerant international image, including among Muslim states where India's "tolerance debate" has received coverage, but also a genuine mellowing of beliefs after gaining greater responsibility and maturity with age.

The prime minister has sought to build an image of tolerance, including with regard to Islam. This is evident in his high-profile UAE trip, where he visited the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque and hailed "the peace [and] harmony inherent in Islam."⁴⁹ Domestically, Modi met with Muslim leaders and expressed confidence that Indian Muslims would live and die for India, and that al-Qaida would be "delusional" to expect their support.⁵⁰

IDENTITY AND MIDDLE EAST POLICY

Concomitant with Modi's increasing pragmatism, the current government is informed by several streams of thinking, including realist/strategic and liberal, trade-focused interests, with regard to overall foreign policy. Never-

theless, examining the effect of culture-based identity on Middle East policy is still worthwhile, given Hindutva's past focus on Islam and the BJP's reliance on RSS supporters for grassroots campaigning during elections. Also, Modi has already increased the promotion and utilization of a culture-based national identity in foreign policy, particularly throughout Asia.

The aforementioned India-UAE statement reflected the importance of culture-based national identity. It touted the positive influence of the International Day of Yoga and thanked the UAE for its "strong support." The statement also promised cultural exchange between the two states.

Modi also brought ties with Israel out of the closet, in line with the BJP's traditional rhetoric. While India purchased Israeli arms for over a decade under Congress, the relationship stayed discreet. In contrast, Modi held the first prime ministerial-level meeting in 10 years on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in 2014. Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu's comments on the meeting included cultural and ideological references. He suggested that the two leaders represent "some of the oldest civilizations on earth . . . two democracies, proud of [their] tradition."⁵¹ Even more significantly, Delhi announced that within the next year, Modi will be the first Indian PM to visit Israel.⁵²

Modi's moves seem partly influenced by the BJP's pro-Israel ideology and identity, as witnessed among the party's politicians and base. A 2009 study commissioned by the Israeli Foreign Ministry claimed that India's population held the most sympathy for Israel

⁴⁹ C. G. Manoj, "First Visit to a Gulf Arab Nation: At UAE Grand Mosque, Modi Hails 'Peace, Harmony Inherent in Islam,'" *The Indian Express*, 17 August 2015, <<http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/pm-narendra-modi-arrives-in-uae-for-two-day-visit/>>.

⁵⁰ "Indian Muslims Will Live, Die for India,' Says PM Narendra Modi," *Indian Express*, 17 August 2015, <<http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/indian-muslims-wont-dance-to-the-tunes-of-al-qaeda-they-will-live-and-die-for-the-country-narendra-modi/>>; "Muslim Leaders Meet Modi," *The Hindu*, 7 April 2015, <<http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/muslims-leaders-call-on-modi-over-emerging-threat-of-terrorism/article7074243.ece>>.

⁵¹ Devirupa Mitra, "Sky's the Limit: Israel PM tells Modi in First PM-level Meeting in a Decade," *New Indian Express*, 29 September 2014, <<http://www.newindianexpress.com/express-in-america/Skys-the-Limit-Israel-PM-tells-Modi-in-first-PM-level-Meeting-in-a-Decade/2014/09/29/article2455133.ece>>

⁵² Though there have been delays in announcing a date for the visit, likely due to domestic political considerations.

out of all major powers, including the United States.⁵³ Support for Israel partially emanates from Hindutva's reaction to Islam. Supporters believe India and Israel, Hindus and Jews, face a common threat from extremist Islam.

Even more supportive of Israel is the pro-BJP Indian diaspora in the West, particularly the United States. This middle-class community holds an identity defined more by Hinduism than by the Indian national identity forged by Nehru and Gandhi.⁵⁴ Indian lobbies in the United States, such as the U.S.-India Political Action Committee, worked with, and learned from the Israel lobby. The American Jewish Committee even established an office in India. Part of the justification offered for this cooperation is common values.⁵⁵

Values also drive Indians' identification with Israel. Both cultures value education, something accentuated overseas and acknowledged by both countries' prime ministers. Indians have been ranked the most educated and economically successful minority within America, a stereotype long associated with Jews.⁵⁶

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to further strategic and economic interests vis-à-vis India, Gulf states must understand and harness the influence of culture as part of a proactive wave of engagement. The below recommendations should be attempted in tandem, by individual states or the GCC as a whole. They should be balanced with existing policies and will require implementation within political constraints. Results may not be obvious at first and, as with many diplomatic strategies, may be difficult to quantify.

1. Appeal to Indian Values

Gulf states can appeal to India's values and identity, seeking to neutralize culture as a liability and potentially turn it into an asset. In doing so, Gulf states should remain conscious of how cultural values and identity influence their foreign policies in the Middle East.⁵⁷

An appeal to values is important given the continuing influence of cultural values on India's approach to conflicts in the Middle East which impact Gulf states. Such an appeal is possible given that, when it comes to values, India is much closer to Qatar than powers such as the United States, China, and Russia. In fact, India falls roughly halfway between Qatar and most Western states.⁵⁸

Gulf states can also promote a neutral, independent, pluralist approach to geopolitical matters, including through high-level discourse in forums like the United Nations. Domestically and regionally, they could evoke India as an example of a country where religion and tradition are valued alongside pluralism and tolerance. Presenting India as an inspiration may appeal to the IFS and political leaders, to whom prestige is an important value.

To appeal to India's pluralistic ethos, Gulf states could consider permitting the creation of more Hindu temples within their borders, while considering domestic public opinion.

When appealing to the parts of the foreign policy establishment that still have sympathy for NAM principles and the Nehruvian identity, Gulf states' postcolonial identity should be emphasized. India was ruled by the Mughals who had Turko-Mongol ancestry

⁵³ Itamar Eichner, "From India with Love," *Ynet News*, 4 March 2009, <<http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3696887,00.html>>.

⁵⁴ Kadira Pethiyagoda, "Modi's Triple Bottom Line," Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 5 June 2014, <<http://www.aspistrategist.org.au/modis-triple-bottom-line/>>.

⁵⁵ Louise Tillin, "US-Israel-India: Strategic axis?" *BBC News*, 9 September 2003 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/3092726.stm>.

⁵⁶ Jason Richwine, "Indian Americans: The New Model Minority," *Forbes*, 24 February 2009 <http://www.forbes.com/2009/02/24/bobby-jindal-indian-americans-opinions-contributors_immigrants_minority.html>.

⁵⁷ Razi, "An Alternative Paradigm", 699.

⁵⁸ Qatar and Bahrain are the only GCC states included in the World Values Survey's Values Map; for more details, see Appendix 1.

while Arabia was ruled by the Turkish Ottomans. Both India and Arabia engaged in struggles to overthrow this rule, enjoying some support from the British, only to be ruled by them subsequently. There is likely receptiveness toward this approach within the MEA given the sense of shared identity between India and “West Asia.”⁵⁹

These strategies can be implemented at the macro-level through coloring public diplomacy campaigns and at the micro-level between political leaders and diplomats.

2. Change Image Through Relationship Building

Noting the role of identity in foreign policy, the GCC should take a coordinated approach to improving the image of the Gulf held by relevant power nodes among India’s people, foreign policy establishment, and political leadership. This will promote mutual understanding and separate the Gulf states’ image as Islamic countries from the hostility felt toward Pakistan. Gulf states could build mutually beneficial, long-term, durable relationships with key constituencies. Such efforts should always be weighed against the risk of negative publicity, offense, and appearing to interfere in India’s internal affairs.

Indian Muslims

Given the strength of pan-Islamic identity, the most receptive group is Indian Muslims.⁶⁰ Gulf states can fund projects which promote interreligious, intercultural, and inter-communal harmony between Hindus, Muslims (both Sunni and Shiite), and others. Dialogues could include Hindu religious leaders, and Indian and Gulf Muslim leaders.

However, outreach should not be limited to Indian Muslims; doing so risks strengthening the stereotype that Indian Muslim loyalties lay outside India.

Opinion Leaders

Important to any relationship are influential leaders in politics, industry, religion, and media. Following Modi’s ambitious UAE trip, there should be further invitations, only publicized if the prime minister accepts. Additionally, the GCC could take a page out of Israel’s book by offering trips to opinion leaders to visit the region and learn about the culture.

Gulf states should discreetly engage with leaders of nationalist political organizations including Hindutva groups. While this might seem difficult, in recent years communal tensions proved to be an electoral liability for the BJP in certain regions. Simultaneously, relations could be established with secular political parties.

Utilize Diaspora

Gulf states should harness the 7 million Indian expats in the region, who act as a cultural bridge with India, sending home \$40 billion in remittances annually. This further supports the intermediary role they play between India and the broader Middle East. The diaspora exhibit an in-depth understanding of both cultures and include not only blue collar, but also white collar workers and wealthy, influential communities like in Oman. The political importance of the diaspora was made clear during high-level visits to the Gulf. In addition to responding to labor rights issues, GCC governments could support the training and education of workers.

Public diplomacy, aid, and engagement should target particular states (publics and governments) like Kerala, given the majority of Indians in the Gulf hail from a handful of states. The MEA is undertaking to allow state governments greater engagement and influence on foreign policy. Kerala, which is of particular importance given the BJP’s reliance on partners in South India, happens to have a history of

⁵⁹ This was observed during the previously cited interviews with current and former MEA officials.

⁶⁰ Shibley Telhami and Michael Barnett, *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East* (New York: Cornell University, 2002).

relatively peaceful Muslim-Hindu-Christian relations. In fact, Kerala and other Western states hosted the earliest interactions between Arabs and India, providing a good basis for engagement.

3. Support an Objective Assessment of Islam's Role in India

A more long-term approach to strengthening bilateral ties should involve building a more objective image of Islam among non-Muslim Indians. The aforementioned issues of identity under the BJP mean anti-Muslim sentiment would likely impact foreign policy in India more than China or Russia. Communalism is also a larger political issue in India than in any other great power. India's "history wars" include a politicized debate over the historical roles of Islam and Hinduism.⁶¹

Efforts could also include promoting a narrative that separates historical hardship suffered under Mughal rulers like Aurangzeb, from Indian present conceptions of both Islam and Arab states. India enjoyed peaceful relations with Arabs before the Mughals. Trade and immigration came from Arabia, particularly Yemen, as well as Persia, prior to Islam. Economic exchange, along the coasts of Malabar, Sri Lanka, and the coast of Bengal, dates back to the first century.⁶² From the seventh to 10th centuries, peoples from the southern Gulf were settling in Gujarat.⁶³ As far back as 629, one of the first mosques in the world was built in Kerala by an Arab trader.⁶⁴

Cultural engagement should also acknowledge how Islam in India influenced and was influenced by Indian cultural values. Islam perhaps made its most lasting impact on the

cultural values of Indian societies indirectly, via shaping developments in Hinduism during the medieval period. For instance, Sufi mystic orders, which attracted the masses and communicated effectively with Hindu society, elevated the value of equality.⁶⁵

4. Help Improve India's Image Among Muslim Populations

Given their stability, custodianship of Muslim holy sites, growing cultural influence, economic resources, and large Indian populations, Gulf states can offer to help India's broader cultural relations and image throughout the Middle East and the Muslim world, including India's restive Jammu and Kashmir states. This would further Modi's aforementioned efforts to soften his own image domestically. Diplomatic support could be offered for India to join the Organization for Islamic Cooperation, including through pushing Pakistan to allow this.

This is particularly valuable to Modi's BJP government given its anti-Muslim reputation in the eyes of militant Islamist groups, like the Taliban and the newly established al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent. Maintaining a positive image in the region is important given the large number of Indians working there, who are vulnerable to kidnap by extremists. Furthermore, unlike other major or regional powers, India does not enjoy a ground security presence in the volatile Middle East region. In the past, major conflicts resulted in costly airlifts.

5. Emphasize Strategic Interests

If culture, values, and identity begin to influence Indian foreign policy under the BJP in a way that is inimical to Gulf interests, GCC

⁶¹ Chandan Mitra, "The Hidden Agenda," review of *Somanatha: The Voices of a History*, by Romila Thapar, *India Today*, February 16, 2004, <<http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/book-review-of-romila-thapar-somanatha-the-many-voices-of-a-history/1/196624.html>>.

⁶² André Wink, *Al-Hind, The Making of the Indo-Islamic World: Early Medieval India and the Expansion of Islam 7th-11th Centuries* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1990), 68.

⁶³ Atul Sethi, "Trade, Not Invasion Brought Islam to India," *Times of India*, 24 June 2007, <<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/India/Trade-not-invasion-brought-Islam-to-India/articleshow/2144414.cms>>.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Pethiyagoda, *The Influence of Cultural Values*, 97–98.

states could try to emphasize their considerable importance to India's material interests, both strategic and economic. This will likely create an impact given the general disconnect between the emotional, value-driven, ideological domestic realm, and the cold, calculating, distant nature of the international.

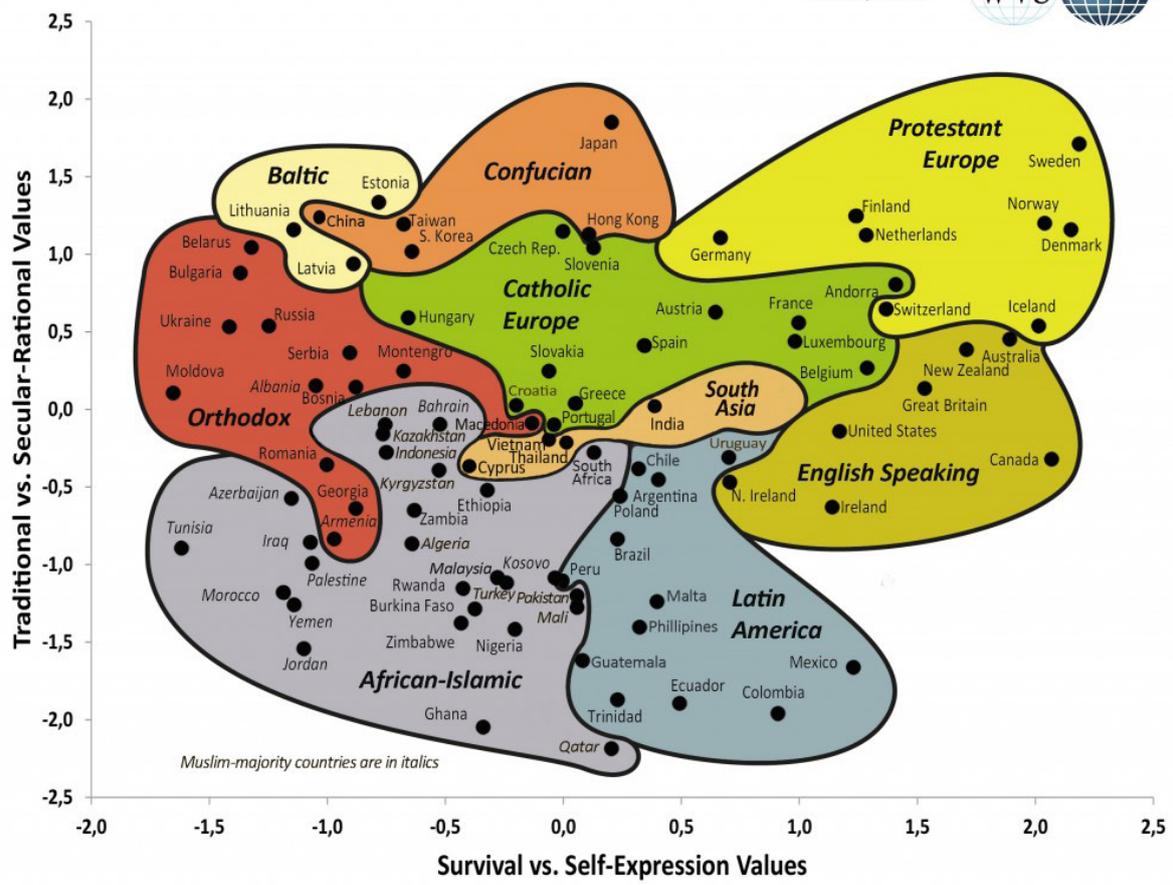
CONCLUSION

The Middle East is at a critical period in history. Gulf states face arguably larger challenges than at any time since independence. It is also an era of great opportunity. Relations with India, particularly under Prime Minister Modi and the BJP, reflect this double-edged sword. The cultural-nationalist ideology of the BJP government's base makes attention to culture more important, even if it is merely to help neutralize it as a negative influence on policy.

The pragmatism and openness recently displayed by the Modi government makes this entirely possible. While visiting the UAE, the PM lamented that "it took an India[n] prime minister 34 years to come here."⁶⁶ The resulting five-paragraph joint statement reflected the importance of cultural values and culture-driven identity.⁶⁷ Understanding, managing, and harnessing culture's role can help end decades of strategic stagnation, allowing Gulf states to cooperate and make the most out of one of their paramount future relationships.

⁶⁶ Anam Rizvi, "Indian PM Hails UAE as a Rainbow Nation in Dubai Speech," *The National*, 18 August 2015, <<http://www.thenational.ae/uae/indian-pm-hails-uae-as-a-rainbow-nation-in-dubai-speech>>.

⁶⁷ "Joint Statement," Press Information Bureau of India.



⁶⁸ Inglehart, R., & Welzel, C., WVS 3rd Culture map, (2015), www.worldvaluessurvey.org

APPENDIX 2: THE IMPACT OF VALUES ON INDIA'S INTERVENTIONS

Columns 2-4 indicate the values and whether they “drove” or “allowed” Indian leaders to adopt a particular policy preference and perception. “Drives” implies a strong influence, while “allows” means that the value only helped facilitate the preference/perception. For instance, regarding the 1991 invasion of Iraq, the value of non-violence drove the preference for international peace. This in turn influenced India’s position on the conflict, indicated in column 6.⁶⁹

| Intervention | Non-violence | Pluralism and Tolerance | Hierarchy | Preferences or Perceptions resulting from cultural values | India’s Position |
|--------------|--------------|-------------------------|---|---|---|
| Iraq 1991 | Drives | | | Preference for international peace, including the peaceful resolution of conflict | Officially neutral. Political parties protested and stopped refueling U.S. jets in India. |
| | Drives | | | Preference for caution in using force and for using it as a last resort / Perception that force would not likely work | |
| | Drives | Drives | | Preference for supporting sovereignty | |
| | | | Drives | Perception that India was so powerful that it had little to fear from unwanted humanitarian intervention (HI)HI | |
| Iraq 2003 | Drives | | | Preference for international peace, including the peaceful resolution of conflict | Opposed invasion and rejected U.S. request for peacekeepers. |
| | Drives | | | Preference for caution in using force and for using it as a last resort / Perception that force would not likely work | |
| | Drives | Drives | | Preference for supporting sovereignty | |
| | Drives | Drives | Allows | Preference for UN, multilateral, or legal authorization or control of the intervention | |
| | | Drives | Allows | Preference for accepting all regime types | |
| | | Drives | | Preference for maintaining a pluralist and tolerant image | |
| | | | Drives | Perception that India must present its views and lead by principle due to its status | |
| | | | Allows | Preference for not supporting strong states to dominate weak states | |
| | | | Drives | Perception that India was so powerful that it had little to fear from unwanted HI | |
| | Libya | Drives | Drives | | |
| Drives | | | | Preference for intra-state peace | |
| Drives | | | | Preference for caution in using force and for using it as a last resort / Perception that force would not likely work | |
| Drives | | Drives | | Preference for supporting sovereignty | |
| Drives | | Drives | Allows | Preference for UN, multilateral, or legal authorization or control of the intervention | |
| | | Drives | Allows | Preference for accepting all regime types | |
| | | Drives | Allows | Preference for regional interventions | |
| Drives | | Allows/ Drives | Allows | Preference to support Pillar 1 of the Responsibility to Protect doctrine (R2P) ⁷⁰ | |
| Drives | | Allows/ Drives | | Preference to support Pillar 2 of the R2P | |
| Drives | | Drives | | Preference to oppose Pillar 3 of the R2P | |
| | | Drives | Perception that India was so powerful that it had little to fear from unwanted HI | | |
| Syria | Drives | | | Preference for international peace, including the peaceful resolution of conflict | Opposed intervention. Supported political solution. |
| | Drives | | | Preference for intra-state peace | |

⁶⁹ Pethiyagoda, “The Influence of Cultural Values.”

⁷⁰ “About R2P,” Global Center for the Responsibility to Protect, accessed December 3, 2015, <http://www.globalr2p.org/about_r2p>.

(Appendix 2, Cont'd)

| | | | | | |
|--|--------|----------------|--------|---|--|
| | Drives | | | Preference for caution in using force and for using it as a last resort / Perception that force would not likely work | |
| | Drives | Drives | | Preference for supporting sovereignty | |
| | Drives | Drives | Allows | Preference for UN, multilateral, or legal authorization or control of the intervention | |
| | | Drives | | Preference for caution in condemning the behavior of other states within their borders | |
| | | Drives | Allows | Preference for regional interventions | |
| | Drives | Allows/ Drives | Allows | Preference to support Pillar 1 of the R2P | |
| | Drives | Allows/ Drives | | Preference to support Pillar 2 of the R2P | |
| | Drives | Drives | | Preference to oppose Pillar 3 of the R2P | |
| | | | Drives | Perception that India was so powerful that it had little to fear from unwanted HI | |

ABOUT THE BROOKINGS DOHA CENTER

Established in 2008, the Brookings Doha Center (BDC) is an overseas center of the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C. As a hub for Brookings scholarship in the region, the BDC advances high-quality, independent research and policy analysis on the Middle East and North Africa.

In pursuing its mission, the BDC undertakes field-oriented research and programming that addresses and informs regional and international policy discussions, engaging key elements of governments, businesses, civil society, the media, and academia on four key areas:

- (i) The international relations of the Middle East, emphasizing ties within the region as well as regional ties between the Middle East, the United States, and Asia.
- (ii) Conflict and post-conflict transitions, including security, peace processes and reconstruction.
- (iii) Economic and fiscal strategies of Middle Eastern states, including the geopolitics and economics of energy.
- (iv) Governance and institutional reform, including democratization and state-citizen relations.

Open to a broad range of views, the BDC encourages a rich exchange of ideas between the Middle East and the global community. Since its founding, the BDC has hosted a number of leading scholars from a dozen different countries; put on a variety of events, including high-level roundtables, timely policy discussions, and the annual Doha Energy Forum; and published a series of influential Policy Briefings and Analysis Papers.

BROOKINGS DOHA CENTER PUBLICATIONS

2015

Dealing with Delhi: How Culture Shapes India's Middle East Policy

Policy Briefing, Kadira Pethiyagoda

Houses of Wisdom Matter: The Responsibility to Protect and Rebuild Higher Education in the Arab World

Policy Briefing, Sultan Barakat and Sansom Milton

Navigating Uncertainty: Qatar's Response to the Global Gas Boom

Analysis Paper, Naser al-Tamimi

Brookings Doha Energy Forum 2015 Policy Paper

Brookings Doha Center - Brookings Energy Security Initiative Report

Embracing Interdependence: The Dynamics of China and the Middle East

Policy Briefing, Chaoling Feng

The Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan: Time to Reform

Policy Briefing, Neven Bondokji

Sultans of Swing? The Geopolitics of Falling Oil Prices

Policy Briefing, F. Gregory Gause

Turn a Light On: Electricity Sector Reform

Policy Briefing, Luay Al-Khatteeb and Harry Istepanian

Collusion to Crackdown: Islamist-Military Relations in Egypt

Analysis Paper, Omar Ashour

Fortress Jordan: Putting the Money to Work

Policy Briefing, Sultan Barakat and Andrew Leber

Back to Gaza: A New Approach to Reconstruction

Policy Briefing, Sultan Barakat and Omar Shaban

2014

Profiling the Islamic State

Analysis Paper, Charles Lister

Qatari Mediation: Between Ambition and Achievement

Analysis Paper, Sultan Barakat

Brookings Doha Energy Forum 2014 Policy Paper

Brookings Doha Center – Brookings Energy Security Initiative Report

Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War

Analysis Paper, Gregory Gause

Dynamic Stalemate: Surveying Syria's Military Landscape

Policy Briefing, Charles Lister

Personnel Change or Personal Change? Rethinking Libya's Political Isolation Law

Brookings Doha Center – Stanford Paper, Roman David and Houda Mzioudet

Convince, Coerce, or Compromise? Ennahda's Approach to Tunisia's Constitution

Analysis Paper, Monica L. Marks