The New Arab Cold War And The Struggle For Syria

By: Curtis Ryan

Abstract

In his classic study, The Arab Cold War, Malcolm Kerr charted the machinations of inter-Arab politics during an era dominated by Egypt's President Gamal Abdel Nasser. In another renowned work, The Struggle for Syria, Patrick Seale documented the links between Syria's tumultuous domestic politics and the broader contest for supremacy in the region, stemming from factors ranging from inter-Arab conflicts to the global cold war. Today, amid the chaos in Syria and the transformations in the region, these texts, both originally published in 1965, seem all too contemporary. Once again, regional politics shows many signs of an Arab cold war and, once again, that broader conflict is manifesting itself in a struggle for Syria. In the Arab cold war of the 1950s and 1960s, inter-Arab relations were characterized by power struggles between "revolutionary" republics, led by pan-Arab nationalist military officers, and more conservative or even reactionary monarchies. The republics saw themselves as the future of Arab politics, with the aim of changing not only the type of regime in Arab states, but also the map of the region through repeated unification efforts. This pan-Arab project led to extensive intervention in the affairs of various states, by both sides, as the republics and monarchies waged proxy wars in civil conflicts in Yemen, Lebanon, Jordan and elsewhere. Many of the same elements - power struggles, ideological and identity conflicts, and proxy wars - are present today. The main difference is that the 2012 version of the Arab cold war does not array revolutionary republics on one side. Over time, the radical republics of the 1950s and 1960s became deep-seated authoritarian states, neither revolutionary nor particularly republican. Many of them have now experienced actual national revolutions, as opposed to the military coups of past decades that tended to be cast as "revolutions." On the other hand, the greatest similarity to the earlier cold war is the mobilization of conservative monarchies attempting to block another wave of change across the Arab regional system.

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Curtis Ryan, “The New Arab Cold War and the Struggle for Syria,” How to cite this article: Intelligence and Security Cooperation. Though Saudi Arabia had proposed the invitations to Jordan and Morocco, at press time the GCC Jordanians also made the case that they had much to offer the GCC: a highly educated workforce and extensive and formalized military.

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[5] Curtis R. Ryan, “The New Arab Cold War and the Struggle for Syria,” How to cite this article: Intelligence and Security Cooperation. Though Saudi Arabia had proposed the invitations to Jordan and Morocco, at press time the GCC Jordanians also made the case that they had much to offer the GCC: a highly educated workforce and extensive and formalized military. In this article, we discuss the dynamics of the new Arab Cold War, the implications for Syria, and the role of external powers in shaping the conflict.

Arab identity politics, a public sphere expanded by a revolution in media and communication, a rise of Islamist social and political movements, and perhaps most importantly, a shift in the balance of power have all contributed to the reemergence of the Arab Cold War. Unlike its predecessor, this new conflict is not driven by the Cold War, but rather by the instability engendered by the Arab Spring. The region is now home to a new generation of leaders who have not seen the Cold War firsthand, and who are therefore less constrained by the legacy of that conflict.

The Syrian imbroglio bears all the hallmarks of the new Arab Cold War, including domestic struggle between a regime and opposition groups, transnational support and opposition, and proxy wars. The conflict has drawn in external actors from around the world, including the United States, Russia, China, and Iran, who have all contributed to the region’s instability. The result is a complex web of alliances and rivalries that is difficult to unravel.

The battle lines outside Syria are already drawn, with the US, Britain and France in conflict with Russia and China, while regional non-Aligned states such as Qatar are also playing a role. The conflict has also drawn in external actors from around the world, including the United States, Russia, China, and Iran, who have all contributed to the region’s instability. The result is a complex web of alliances and rivalries that is difficult to unravel.

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