



Sayyid Hasan Nasrallah addresses supporters in Beirut's southern suburbs.

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# Signs of a New Arab Cold War

## The 2006 Lebanon War and the Sunni-Shi'i Divide

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**D**uring and after the 34 days of intense fighting between Hizballah and Israel in July and August 2006, observers advanced competing interpretations of the varied reactions in the Middle East. One popular narrative pointed to an emerging Sunni-Shi'i divide in what one might label a "post-Arab" Middle East. According to Vali Nasr, author of the much discussed volume *The Shia Revival*, the Lebanon war marked a spillover of sectarian tensions manifest in Iraq, confirming his prophecy that cleavages within Islam will

define the region's major conflicts in the future.<sup>1</sup> Another scholar saw the patterns of regional reaction as illustrating that the very notion of an Arab world had lost relevance to understanding politics in this part of the globe.<sup>2</sup>

At first glance, this sectarian, post-Arab frame of reference may appear quite convincing—and not merely because of the typical paralysis of the Arab League. Three Sunni Arab states, in an action at variance with Arab norms, chose to issue a public challenge to an Arab movement's decision directly

to confront Israel. In a joint statement, Egyptian President Husni Mubarak and Jordanian King 'Abdallah II charged Hizballah with "dragging the region into 'adventures.'" Saudi officials also spoke of Hizballah's "irresponsible adventurism," as did senior Sunni clerics like Sheikh 'Abdallah bin Jibrin and regime-influenced media outlets such as the newspaper *al-Sharq al-Awsat* and the satellite channel al-'Arabiyya. In addition, these three "moderate Sunni Arab states," as they are often labeled these days, criticized Hizballah for being nothing but a pawn of Shi'i, Persian Iran and its "quasi-Shi'i" Syrian ally.

Upon closer inspection, however, the picture begins to blur, not least in reference to the relations between the regional states. What initially appears as a Sunni-Shi'i split may in fact be a pattern of alliance making with motives far less sectarian in nature. The split not only coincides with the divide between pro- and anti-US orientations, but it also nicely complies with a classic balance of power logic, according to which other regional states will ally in order to balance a rising regional power, Shi'i or not. This anti-Iranian policy, however, is controversial in Sunni Arab public opinion, for Iran and Hizballah have attained considerable popularity. Anti-Shi'i rhetoric may therefore be explained as a way of selling a policy based on non-sectarian motives.<sup>3</sup>

When one looks at the level of society rather than the state, it becomes even more difficult to recognize a sectarian divide. Inter-sectarian sympathies not only arose between the Shi'i Hizballah and the Sunni Hamas, but popular expressions of sympathy and support for Hizballah resounded throughout the predominantly Sunni Arab world during the conflict. For instance, the influential Sunni Islamist Yusuf al-Qaradawi, famous for being very attentive to shifting currents in public opinion, expressed his support for Hizballah on al-Jazeera. The pan-Arab satellite channel, accused by non-Sunni Iraqis of being pro-Sunni, took a very pro-Hizballah stance. On behalf of al-Qaeda, which usually reviles the Shi'a as apostates, Ayman al-Zawahiri published a statement praising Hizballah for its fight against Israel. This pattern was also found at the popular level within the "moderate Sunni Arab states." According to a post-war poll, Egyptians ranked Hizballah Secretary-General Sayyid Hasan Nasrallah as the most important regional leader.<sup>4</sup> In Jordan's capital of Amman, the flags of Hizballah and the local Muslim Brotherhood waved side by side at demonstrations condemning "the Arab silence in the face of Zionist crimes."

At the societal level what emerges is thus less a Sunni-Shi'i split than what political scientist and blogger Marc Lynch has called "a regimes-people divide." This is, however, not the only striking feature about the regional debates on the Lebanon war. Notwithstanding the alleged post-Arab nature of Middle

East politics today, these debates were mostly framed within an Arabist narrative. Just as numerous accounts praised Nasrallah as "the only true Arab leader today," Egypt's opposition press played on the coincidence between the Lebanon war and the fiftieth anniversary of the nationalization of the Suez Canal by comparing "Nasrallah 2006" with "Nasser 1956." At demonstrations in Cairo, posters depicted the head of Hizballah next to the legendary Arab nationalist leader. In order to describe the electricity in Arab public opinion, some commentators even drew comparisons to the time before the fateful 1967 war. Others wrote about "the revival of a new sense of Arabism"<sup>5</sup> or a replay of a game from Arab politics in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>6</sup> Recalling that Malcolm Kerr famously described an "Arab cold war" in this period, it is tempting to wonder whether and to what extent the regional reactions to the 2006 Lebanon war might well reflect a new Arab cold war rather than an emergent Sunni-Shi'i divide in a post-Arab Middle East.

## The Old Arab Cold War

Kerr first floated the notion of an "Arab cold war" in his seminal study of ideology in international politics, where he examined the inter-Arab rivalry in the turbulent 1950s and 1960s.<sup>7</sup> While being linked to the global Cold War, the Arab cold war held a distinctly Arab dimension. Much of the tension revolved around the question of special bonds linking Arabs, more specifically whether the notion of an Arab nation constituted by a common language, history and culture also entailed an aspiration for some sort of political unity. The Arabist position, represented by the "conservative," pro-Western monarchies such as Jordan, Saudi Arabia and pre-1958 Iraq, answered this question in the negative. These states sought to balance the challenge from the "radical" and nominally socialist Arab republics such as Egypt, Syria and Iraq after 1958. The republics subscribed to an Arab nationalist position, and accordingly considered the Arab states system a pan-system, which, behind a façade of artificial territorial states set up by the Western powers, was based on a common Arab nation whose interests and security concerns should take precedence over those of the individual Arab states. Sooner rather than later, they should unite into a single Arab nation-state, including the territory of Palestine.

The Arab cold war was marked by a complex interplay between regional and domestic politics, where "hard" military power was sometimes less threatening than the "soft power" of being able to monopolize the meaning of "the Arab interest." Due to their lack of electoral legitimacy, the regimes often tried to gain popular support by presenting themselves in the service of a higher Arab cause. This inter-Arab rivalry took place in a "vast sound chamber" where ideas and opinions resonated with little regard to the usually very porous state frontiers.<sup>8</sup> A common way of discrediting a regional rival was thus to portray him as being at odds with "Arab interests." The classic example of soft power during the Arab cold war is Egyptian President Gamal Abdel

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Bush with Egyptian President Mubarak and Saudi Crown Prince (now King) 'Abdallah in Sharm al-Sheikh, June 3, 2003.

LARRY DOWNING/REUTERS/LANDOV

Nasser's famous speeches at the Egyptian radio station Sawt al-'Arab (Voice of the Arabs). These broadcasts to the entire Arab world allowed Nasser to bypass local leaders and appeal directly to populations. While the Arab cold war was to a large extent symbolic, seldom evolving into "hot" open warfare, the rivalry was anything but meaningless. The two decades saw a series of coup attempts, revolts and costly foreign policy adventures incompatible with strict *raison d'état* but sometimes necessary to counter charges of being in conflict with the "Arab cause."

## Arabism: Obsolete or Obstinate?

According to the conventional "rise and fall" narrative, the Arab-Israeli war of 1967 did not only bring détente to the Arab

cold war. It also marked the beginning of the "end of pan-Arabism."<sup>9</sup> Instead of being a pan-system in the making, inter-Arab relations were now expected to resemble a "normal states-system" in which foreign policies were based on *raison d'état*. Arab public opinion and non-state actors were attributed no relevance to regional politics.

It is, however, possible to interpret this period differently. While acknowledging that the Arab nationalist aspirations for unity are obsolete, this alternative reading calls attention to how identification between Arabs has proved much more obstinate than previously acknowledged. Against this background, a transformed or modified form of Arabism still can be seen to play a role in regional politics. In some cases, this new Arabism has occurred as a kind of weak inter-state Arabism in conformity with the charter of the Arab League, where expressions of solidarity and cooperation are supposed to be based on the respect of the full sovereignty of the Arab states. Other variants are less concerned with the state, locating the source of a new Arabism in wide popular

access to new media uncontrolled by the regimes.<sup>10</sup> In the absence of opportunities for free political deliberations in much of the Arab world, discontented citizens have turned their attention to the region as a whole. Focusing on Palestine or Iraq serves as an indirect, and less dangerous, way to criticize domestic leaders. Al-Jazeera, with its emphasis on news and political debate, provides the perfect platform. Also relevant is that al-Jazeera is a commercial channel, and thus concerned with reaching the largest possible audience in the Arabic-speaking world. Hence the channel zeroes in on Palestine, Iraq and other issues of broad interest. When al-Jazeera covers local issues, they are usually presented within an Arabist frame. By tying distant events together in a common Arab narrative and



**Gamal Abdel Nasser at the Sawt al-'Arab studios.**

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placing them together in the same virtual space, the new transnational Arab media have contributed to a creation of an Arab “imagined community.” A recent examination of the influence of Arab public opinion on foreign relations confirms this picture, as it appears that Arabs evaluate non-Arab countries on the basis of those countries’ policies toward key regional Arab issues, such as Palestine and Iraq, rather than their behavior toward the respondents’ home country.<sup>11</sup>

Against this background, Lynch suggests that the new Arab media have changed the conception of Arab identity and paved the way for a distinct new Arab public sphere. This is an identity-bounded enclave, internally open like the “vast sound chamber” but externally opaque because it is based on the Arabic language, an Arab-Islamic identity and a common political agenda. This common agenda defines a number of themes as “Arab issues” but does so without providing a final “Arab answer,” in contrast to the 1950s and 1960s, when transnational Arab media were also playing an

important role. While Sawt al-'Arab was an ideological tool wielded by a regional great power with hegemonic ambitions, al-Jazeera is a commercial, quasi-independent station driven by market demand and based in tiny Qatar. Similarly, Nasser’s radio addresses were based on a monological principle. Not only were listeners unable to talk back, but they were also assumed by the Arab nationalist logic of the time to be inside a binding consensus among Arabs that left little space for open deliberations and legitimate disagreements. Al-Jazeera is much more dialogical in nature. The dialogue is found not only in the frequent audience polls, but also in programs such as Faysal al-Qasim’s highly popular political talk show “The Opposite Direction,” in which guests and viewers are invited to disagree about the proper positioning vis-à-vis commonly accepted “Arab issues.”

While this new Arabism differs in various ways from the past and may also fall short of providing any definitive answer as to what “the Arab position” on a given issue is supposed to be, it does seem to ensure the continuing salience of an

Arab frame of reference and strong popular attentiveness to regional Arab issues.

## A New Arab Cold War

The initial reactions of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan to Hizballah's cross-border raid and the ensuing Israeli bombardment of Lebanon show that old-style Arab nationalism is obsolete. Major Arab governments declined to rally around the imagined pan-Arab flag. But some form of pan-Arab identification is obstinate: There was a strong Arabist dimension in popular reactions. Arab non-state actors, furthermore, were among the key figures in the conflict, not just in the "hot" military confrontation with Israel, but also in the "cold" clash between the "moderate Sunni Arab states," on one side, and Hizballah and Hamas, on the other.

The events of the 2006 Lebanon war, indeed, sketched the outlines of a new Arab cold war. It is new, as the present differs greatly from the 1950s and 1960s, and cannot be described as a mere flashback. First, an independent and more popularly driven Arabism has replaced state-led Arab nationalism as the dominant frame of reference within the Arab public sphere. Second, not only have relations between key players been transformed—Egypt and Saudi Arabia have turned from adversaries into allies, for instance—but the nature of the political actors has also changed. Non-state actors, not upstart republics, now represent the "radical" challenge—and these actors are Islamists. Hence the third difference: The basic challenge to the present inter-state order is not secular, quasi-socialist pan-Arabism, but a "transnational Islamo-Arabic order."<sup>12</sup> While depicting "Nasser 1956" alongside "Nasrallah 2006" of course establishes similarities between the two figures, at the same time the comparison aptly illustrates the differences between the old and new Arab cold wars. Whereas in the 1950s the "radical" torchbearer was the secular, socialist-leaning president of a leading regional power, during the Lebanon war it was the head of an Islamist non-state movement who was hailed as "the only true Arab leader today."

2006 was not 1956. Nevertheless, it makes sense to draw comparisons between then and now and to speak of another Arab cold war. Today, as 50 years ago, there is a primarily symbolic inter-Arab rivalry marked by a complex interplay between domestic and regional theaters, where part of the rivalry is about monopolizing the meaning of "the Arab interest" and discrediting the adversary's Arab credentials. Throughout the summertime war, Hizballah tapped into a standard Arabist discourse about the Arab nation, the illegitimacy of the Israeli state, solidarity with the Palestinians and the need for changes on the regional level.<sup>13</sup>

Hizballah was not alone in drawing on a distinct Arab frame of reference. Although denunciation of Hizballah and Hamas by Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan is often presented as proof of a post-Arab Middle East, it is worthwhile to look more closely at how and why those regimes launched their

critique. Mubarak and the Saudi and Jordanian kings substantiated their charge of "adventurism" with reference to how Hizballah and Hamas actions did "not serve Arab interests." A likely explanation is the general fear among authoritarian Arab regimes of Arab-Islamic non-state movements, which are largely beyond their control and champion issues holding great popular resonance. From this perspective, Hizballah's challenge of Israel under Arab-Islamic colors presented an indirect threat to the regimes, but also an opportunity. On the one hand, by acting to aid an Arab cause, rather than simply talking about doing so, Hizballah exposed the hollowness of the Arab regimes' own promises. But, on the other hand, the head-on clash with Israel's military superiority held out the possibility that—in the case of a swift Israeli victory—Hizballah would be cut down to size, literally and figuratively. The "moderate Sunni Arab states" seem to have reacted to the Lebanon war in terms not that distant from the old Arab cold war, namely in attempting to discredit a rival with accusations of harming "the Arab interest" and in being sensitive to the interrelation of Arab regional issues and (a lack of) domestic legitimacy.

Another reflection of the regimes' sensitivity to Arab public opinion can be seen in their abrupt change of course as the civilian casualties of Israeli bombings multiplied in the full glare of the cameras of al-Jazeera and other Arab media. The three pro-Western Sunni Arab states began distancing themselves—at least rhetorically—from the US and Israel, and instead tried to raise their Arab profiles. Saudi Arabia warned of a looming regional war if King Abdallah's plan for peace in Palestine had to be abandoned due to "Israeli arrogance"; Egypt tried in vain to broker a ceasefire; and Jordan refused to host an international peace conference, which in the end was placed outside the Middle East, in Rome.

An obvious objection to the new Arab cold war framing is that Iran, a non-Arab state, is Hizballah's primary patron. At first glance, this non-Arab dimension highlights the difference between the 1950s and 1960s and today, when key players in the inter-Arab rivalry are neither Arab nor post-Arab. But Iran's attempts to gain influence in the Arab world may still fit into a new Arab cold war. In earlier times, Tehran pursued an "Arab option," where its foreign policy assumed a populist, pro-Arab and (most importantly) pro-Palestinian orientation.<sup>14</sup> So, today, one way to interpret Iran's moral, financial and military support for Hizballah (and, to a lesser extent, Hamas) is to see the Islamic Republic fishing in troubled waters among Arab populations agitated by anti-Israel and anti-US sentiment. One can point to former Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani's recent performance on al-Jazeera. In a dialogue with Yusuf al-Qaradawi, he endeavored to reassure the Sunni Arabs who were watching about Iranian support for Iraq's territorial integrity. He also called for a broader Sunni-Shi'i rapprochement, perhaps seeking to repair the damage done to the reputations of Iraqi Shi'a and Iran

among Sunnis by the controversial timing of the execution of Saddam Hussein. In view of how Iran has almost tried to be more Arab than the Arab states, it is interesting to note that the controversial Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, came in second in the Egyptian post-war poll about the identity of “the most important leader in the region.” Only Nasrallah surpassed him, and another Arab-Islamist leader, Khalid Mishal of Hamas, followed close on his heels. This profile has not gained the Iranian president much credit at home, where he has been lashed for being more concerned with the Palestinians than with Iran’s own population.

## Back to the Eighties

Two dimensions of the new Arab cold war stand out: the growing importance of Arab-Islamist non-state actors and the increased relevance of the non-Arab state of Iran. So we return to the questions of whether regional reactions to the 2006 Lebanon war demonstrate a distinct Sunni-Shi’i divide, and whether sectarian division accounts for how and why Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan are now increasingly viewed as “the moderate Sunni Arab states” concerned with the threat from a waxing “Shiite crescent.”

To understand this development it may be useful to recall the Eighties. Not the 680s—the decade of the Shi’i Imam Hussein’s martyrdom at the battle of Karbala’ against the Sunni Yazid—but the 1980s, a decade also marked by attention to differences between Shi’i and Sunni and warnings from Arab regimes of a Shi’i threat. At the time, the Middle East was embroiled in the Iran-Iraq war, in which the Arab states, except for Syria, were allied with Iraq. A great deal of popular mobilization around the war took place along a Sunni-Shi’i, as well as an Arab-Persian, divide. The authoritarian Arab regimes were also concerned with the Islamic Republic of Iran, as they feared that the example of a popular revolution bringing down a hated, pro-Western autocrat could inspire emulators at home.

Notwithstanding differences, there are also striking similarities in how an ascendant Iran pursues an “Arab option” and authoritarian Arab regimes worry about popular Arab-Islamist non-state movements. Today, just as then, relying on a dichotomous and sectarian rhetoric appears useful for these regimes. One set of rationales is related to the balance of power among the regional states. Moreover, the construction of a Shi’i threat by the pro-Western Arab regimes, expressed for instance in (almost always unverified) accounts of Shi’i proselytization, may counter Iran’s popular appeal within the Arab world. In view of a Shi’i threat led by Persian Iran, close alliance with the US and links to Israel might also appear less noisome. The fomenting of anti-Shi’i feelings could also be useful for staving off the challenge from Arab-Islamist non-state movements, perhaps driving a wedge between the Shi’i Hizballah and the distinctively Sunni Hamas, as well as the other Muslim Brotherhood movements.

The Sunni-Shi’i split during and after the Lebanon war bears many signs of such regime-led orchestration. Whereas sectarian tensions were low at the popular level, the three “moderate Sunni Arab states” engaged in a kind of “Shiitization” of the conflict. Since sectarian disputes usually arise where Sunnis and Shi’a live side by side, as in Lebanon or Iraq, it is even more remarkable how the issue has been hyped in almost exclusively Sunni Jordan and Egypt. It was, after all, the Jordanian king who coined the term “Shiite crescent” and the Egyptian president who remarked that Arab Shi’a are more loyal to Iran than to their own country.

Orchestration from above does not imply, however, that the sectarian hype cannot acquire a life of its own. The Sunni-Shi’i question has become a major issue in large parts of the Middle East, and at a popular level. As an indication of how sentiments may be shifting, it is noteworthy to observe how the populist al-Qaradawi has alternated between statements skeptical of Shi’ism and calls for Muslim unity against outside foes, after having supported Hizballah over the summer. While echoing Rafsanjani’s calls for more Sunni-Shi’i dialogue and a common front against US plans to divide the Islamic *umma*, al-Qaradawi also used the opportunity of the al-Jazeera conversation to refer to extreme opinions among Shi’i scholars about Sunnis. The growing attention to a sectarian divide on talk shows like “The Opposite Direction,” which thrive on confrontation, may not only expose but also reify sectarian feelings among Arabs. In this way, the Sunni-Shi’i divide may very well become a defining element in future conflicts in the Middle East. This development should not, however, be interpreted as disproof of an emerging new Arab cold war, but rather as a major effect of it. ■

## Endnotes

1 See Vali Nasr’s testimony before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, January 17, 2007, accessible at the website of the Council on Foreign Relations.

2 Asher Susser, “Between Iran, the Shiites and Sunni Arab Weakness,” *Bitterlemons.org*, July 24, 2006.

3 F. Gregory Gause III, “Saudi Arabia: Iraq, Iran, the Regional Power Balance and the Sectarian Question,” *Strategic Insights* (February 2007).

4 *Christian Science Monitor*, August 29, 2006.

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6 Barry Rubin, “Arab Politics: Back to Futility,” *Middle East Quarterly* 14/1 (2007).

7 Malcolm Kerr, *The Arab Cold War, 1958–1964: A Study of Ideology in Politics* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965).

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9 Fouad Ajami, “The End of Pan-Arabism,” *Foreign Affairs* 57/2 (1978).

10 See Shibley Telhami, “Power, Legitimacy and Peace-Making in Arab Coalitions: The New Arabism” in Leonard Binder, ed. *Ethnic Conflict and International Politics in the Middle East* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1999), pp. 43–60; and Marc Lynch, *Voices of the New Arab Public: Iraq, al-Jazeera and Middle East Politics Today* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

11 Peter Furia and Russell Lucas, “Determinants of Arab Public Opinion on Foreign Relations,” *International Studies Quarterly* 50/3 (2006).

12 Khouri, *op cit*.

13 Graham Fuller, “The Hizballah-Iran Connection: Model for Sunni Resistance,” *Washington Quarterly* 30/1 (2006).

14 Trita Parsi, “Israel and the Origins of Iran’s Arab Option: Dissection of a Strategy Misunderstood,” *Middle East Journal* 60/3 (2006).