

# Security Implications of Axes Rivalry in the Middle East

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## Abstract

The Arab Spring led to the collapse of dictatorships that ruled the region for decades, creating a void that triggered increased rivalry between three axes seeking to expand influence and control in the region. Using the theoretical framework of 'offensive realism' developed by Mearsheimer, this paper analyzes the build-up and circumstances surrounding the intensification of the rivalry between Qatar/Turkey, Saudi Arabia/the UAE and Iran and how this rivalry has become a major driver behind conflicts in the region.



# Security Implications of Axes Rivalry in the Middle East

## Introduction

The Middle East region is shattered by conflicts in Syria, Libya, and Yemen. Other countries in the region, such as Lebanon and Iraq, are shaken by disturbances. Governed by authoritarian regimes for decades, the region has stagnated socially, politically, and economically. In some countries, the Arab Spring resulted in armed conflicts in Syria and in Libya. Those conflicts were exacerbated by the rivalry of the different regional powers and their quest for influence. Today, a main driver of the conflicts in the region is the rivalry between three axes: Turkey -Qatar, Saudi Arabia-UAE and Iran. The Arab Spring resulted in a void and chaos that created a perception of threats and a perception of opportunities for these three different axes. With the Syrian crisis, the influence of Iran in the region became more apparent. Following the second Gulf War, Iran's influence started to pose a threat to the Arab Gulf. Facing the emergence of Iranian prowess, Saudi Arabia adopted a more interventionist policy, especially as relations deteriorated under the Obama administration and the Saudis felt they could no longer rely on their American ally. With the rise of Mohammed bin Salman to power, a Saudi-UAE axis in foreign policy was created to counter Iranian expansionism and Turkey's rising influence. The void created by the collapse of the dictatorships was perceived by Turkey as an opportunity to capitalize on the emerging Islamic grassroots movement in order to garner regional influence. The conflict in Syria involved a sectarian aspect that gave Turkey an opportunity to present itself as the defender of Sunni Islam. This put them in direct confrontation with Saudi Arabia which traditionally presented itself as the leader of the Sunni Islam, and with the UAE whose foreign policy mantra is fighting political Islam. The Qatar crisis<sup>1</sup> led to the emergence of Turkey-Qatar axis facing the Saudi-UAE axis. The paper analyzes the origins and explains the persistence of this ongoing rivalry between the three main axes and how it materialized in conflicts that affect the stability of the region.

## Theoretical Background

This paper uses John Mearsheimer's work on offensive realism as a framework to explain the behavior of the different players (Mearsheimer, 2000). The work of Mearsheimer contrasts with liberalism where economic relations are expected to push countries to cooperate. According to offensive realism, the principal actor in international affairs is the state. In this perspective, each state needs to survive in a dangerous world where there is no real agent to regulate interstate relations; hence each state needs to secure its own survival. In this logic, power is the sole currency to secure survival. Survival is assured by hegemony and states seek gains at each other's expense. Therefore, each state's priority is not to have a stable region but rather to maximize influence. This explains the willingness of regional powers to venture into proxy wars despite the negative externalities they generate, such as instability, terrorism, famine, civilian casualties etc. According to this theory, the fortune of all states depends on the decision of the hegemon. This is quite visible in the Middle East region where the competition between the three axes has an effect on other countries like Yemen, Libya, or Syria. The theory advocates that the aim is not always to defeat, but to drain the other state, and turn the conflict into a war of attrition. This is evident in Yemen where Iran is draining the resources of Saudi Arabia without aiming to score a final

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1. On June 5, 2017, Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Bahrain severed diplomatic relations with Qatar and banned Qatar registered airplanes and ships from using their airspace and sea routes, with Saudi Arabia blocking Qatar's sole land crossing.

victory. Similarly, the UAE does not seek to defeat Turkey, a country with a population of 80 million, but rather to drain its resources, and to make its outreach to countries in the region difficult and costly. The rivalry is also driven by a zero-sum logic where each country views the other country's gain as a loss for itself, thus intensifying competition in the different territories. In Tunisia, while Qatari channel Al Jazeera promotes Ennahda - an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood - its Saudi and UAE rivals, Al Arabiya, Al Hadath, and Sky News Arabia give airtime to and promote its opponents (Girra, 2020). In Somalia, to counter relations between Ankara and Mogadishu, the UAE supports Somaliland, the separatist movement (Somaliland.ae). Also, the theory assumes states have revisionist intentions aiming at changing existing systems and affecting the status of other countries in order to maximize influence instead of just adapting to the status quo. The UAE and Saudi Arabia interfered to support the Tamarod movement in Egypt aimed at overthrowing the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood instead of adapting with the Morsi government (Kirkpatrick, 2015). They deemed the Brotherhood rule a danger. The theory states that multipolar systems that have several strong states with the potential to become hegemon are the most dangerous systems of all. This is the case in the Middle East region with Saudi, Turkey, and Iran as strong states that have the potential to become hegemon.

The conditions for offensive realism to play out are: anarchy; possession of offensive military capabilities; mistrust in each other's intentions; survival as the primary state goal; and the fact that the states are rational actors. Anarchy as a precondition for offensive realism behavior has been intensified in the last decade due to two factors: American retrenchment and the Arab Spring. The Arab Spring led to the collapse of existing dictatorial regimes that had imposed a state of stagnation on their respective countries. Those regimes focused on control of power and did not leave deep-rooted state institutions or strong national identity and belonging which resulted in the emergence of many sub-national and trans-national identities (Salem, 2018). Countries like the UAE and Saudi Arabia feared that the change that happened in Egypt could spread to them.

American retrenchment from the Middle East is a reaction to Bush's wars and a reflection of the U.S. isolationist domestic mood where the U.S. perceived itself as the cause of the region's problems instead of a solution to them. To some extent, American hegemony was creating a sort of agent for the Gulf system protection, hence tempering the sense of anarchy. The American retrenchment, starting with the withdrawal from Iraq, emphasized the sense of self-help among the regional states, as prophesied by offensive realism, and with it the desire to become the most powerful state in the system as a means for survival. The absence of the U.S. as an offshore balancer disrupted balance between the three main powers in the region: Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. U.S. hegemony had previously prevented any ambitious power from dominating the region. The Iraq-Iran War, instigated to stop the export of the revolution, and the first Gulf War are clear examples of this attitude. American retrenchment opened the door for competition among the different powers. It also opened the door for 'alliances formation' which this paper refers to as an 'axis'. Offensive realism calls them a 'marriage of convenience' dictated by interest. Alternatively, those alliances can unravel once interest no longer exists. In the axis formation, countries seek cooperation with other countries when they face destruction. Hence facing the absence of the U.S. as a guarantor of order in the Gulf system, smaller countries were pushed to forge alliances with larger countries. The UAE forged an alliance with Saudi Arabia, and Egypt and Qatar forged an alliance with Turkey. Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon had already been in the Iranian orbit for a while. Offensive realism advocates that when the power gap is large, it is less likely that the weaker state will confront the stronger state, thus creating a sort of stability. However, those alliances resulted in three powers with similar capabilities, hence the strong desire to confront each other and achieve hegemony.

The alliances are called ‘axes’ in this paper because each alliance is trying to promote its norms to other states. Though ideology has little weight in the behavior of states, each axis is adopting a certain narrative to differentiate itself and give itself a sort of legitimacy or justification for its actions, both domestically as well externally. Iran has adopted the ‘resistance axis’ – resistance to Israel – but it is referred to as the ‘Shia crescent’ by its opponents.

Turkey is adopting a Pan-Islamic narrative, breaking from the Kemalist secular tradition. The Qatar/Turkey axis is positioning itself as the guardian of popular democracy (Chulov, 2017). However, its opponents present it as promoting the Sunni Islamist model of the Brotherhood and as a neo-Ottoman model, whereby Turkey seeks to control the Arab world. While the UAE/Saudi Arabia axis says it advocates moderate Islam, it is accused of promoting authoritative regimes, like the rule of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in Egypt, and strangling any quest for democratization.

The interventions of those three axes span the entire region and are very complex and intertwined. In order to illustrate the dynamics between them the behavior of each axis will be featured only in three cases: Yemen, Libya, and Syria. The cases embedded in the description of each axis will be used in an instrumental manner i.e. the purpose is not the case itself, but the case is a means to demonstrate how the increased rivalry between these axes is igniting local conflicts and increasing instability in the region.

## The Iranian Axis

The Iranian revolution erupted in 1979. It was based on Wilayat al-Faqih ideology, the guardianship of the jurist. The revolution in Iran extended beyond toppling the Shah. Exporting the revolution is mentioned as a preamble in constitution. The export of the revolution is an overarching theme framing the Islamic Republic of Iran’s foreign policy. Therefore, by default, Iranian foreign policy is an interventionist expansionist one. Two main concepts are the basis for Iran’s outreach to the Arab world. The first one revolves around the liberation of Palestine and the anti-U.S., anti-Western stance where Israel is called the little Satan and the U.S. is the great Satan (Qassem, 2005). The other concept places Iran as the defender of Shias around the world. These two premises have put Iran at odds with Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia’s close alliance with the U.S. has irritated Iranian revolutionaries. They accused the U.S. of protecting the fleeing Shah. Relations between the U.S. and Iran were further complicated with the hostage crisis<sup>2</sup> which reflected on Iran’s relation with Saudi Arabia. Khomeini accused the House of Saud of being U.S. stooges and contested their jurisdiction over the two holy mosques (Nasr, 2006). Saudi Arabia was the main funder of Saddam Hussein who conducted a seven-year war against Iran. The Iranians view it as a war waged unjustly against them, whereas Saudi Arabia perceived it as a necessity to stop the tide of the Islamic revolution as a concept. The American and Arab Gulf reaction facing the Islamic revolution increased the Iranian regime’s sense of the need for survival in a ‘dangerous’ environment as it feels that the Arab Gulf and the U.S. seek regime change. To compensate isolation that resulted in its inability to forge regular alliances and acquire modern artilleries, Iran started cultivating influence at the grassroots level. Hence, it uses militias and sleeping cells it planted in Arab states to create deterrence and ensure its survival. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was created from militias close to clerics at the beginning of the revolution. Their mandate is to protect the revolution as well as to extend

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2. On November 4, 1979, Iranian revolutionaries raided the U.S. embassy and held 52 diplomats hostage for 444 days. They were released on January 20, 1981.

Iran's influence by fetching partners and training them (Ostovar, 2018). An additional reason for the animosity was the attitude of Saudi Arabia towards the Shia faith. Saudi Arabia adopts the Wahhabi doctrine which is a strict interpretation of Sunni Islam. Wahhabism considers the Shia as 'Rafidis' or rejectionists (Nasr, 2006). By default, this puts Iran in a confrontational position with Saudi Arabia.

Since the inception of the revolution, the only success of its export has been in Lebanon with Hezbollah. Prior to the Israeli withdrawal in 2000, Hezbollah was well received as an armed militia in Lebanon, and perceived by most of Lebanese society as a legitimate resistance fighting a much-loathed Israeli occupation. However, other than Lebanon, there was no successful export of the revolution. To add to that, Hezbollah adapted to the Lebanese context instead of calling for an Islamic republic copying the Iranian model, and tried to position itself as a national resistance movement.

The tide changed with the U.S. invasion of Iraq. The power vacuum created by disbanding the army and the police was filled by Shia militias and Sunni fundamentalists. The Shia militias had a direct connection with Iran. The Badr Brigade, the armed wing of Ayatollah Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim's Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) is one of the main militias trained inside Iran. Other examples of pro-Iran militias include Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Kata'ib Hezbollah, Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (Jones, 2019). The rise of Iran has created a reaction on the Saudi side who saw Iranian expansionism as a direct existential threat. Iran started becoming a real threat with the invasion of Iraq. The late Minister of Foreign Affairs Saud al-Faisal said that the U.S. had given Iraq to Iran on a silver plate (Nasr, 2016). Pro-Iran forces in Iraq were few hundred kilometers away from the rich oil fields in the eastern province. The perceived dangers of Iranian expansionism increased with the Syrian crisis and Iran's direct intervention to support Assad.

The Arab Spring created an opportunity for and a threat to Iran. It endorsed the uprisings that removed pro-Western dictatorships like Mubarak in Egypt calling them "Islamic awakenings" (Radio Free Europe, 2011). However, Iran changed position when the Arab Spring reached its long-term ally: the Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad. The Arab Spring was also an opportunity to challenge the U.S. presence in the region. When Assad was losing and his army was defecting, Hezbollah came to his rescue. Assad is necessary for Hezbollah's survival, as shown in 2006 during the war with Israel. Assad's support to Hezbollah was crucial to their ability to last for thirty-four days. Losing Assad meant losing a vital link to Iran. When Hezbollah intervened in Syria, the balance of power started changing in favor of Assad. However, the intervention of Iran rendered the conflict a sectarian one. Clerics in Iran started issuing fatwas calling for Jihad in Syria (AP, 2013). Since 2012, Iran had an extensive media campaign to call the rebels no matter what their affiliation is as "Takfiris" (Smyth, 2015).

Iran has helped Assad by deploying 100,000 Shia fighters (Jones, 2019). Hassan Nasrallah, the head of Hezbollah, stated that he is sending fighters to protect the tomb of Zaynab the granddaughter of the prophet from the assault of the Umayyads. Iran initially sent Hezbollah fighters from Lebanon, then it established local paramilitary groups called the National Defense Forces that would later morph into Local Defense Forces. Iran also sent IRGC members and brought in fighters from Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Hezbollah's interference on the Shia side invited fundamentalist groups on the Sunni side to join the fight. The nucleus of the opposition was formed of soldiers and officers who defected from the Syrian army as they refused to execute orders to shoot at the peaceful protestors. Initially, the free Syrian army was able to score many victories against the regime. However, it was mainly Jabhat al-Nusra, an Islamist group allegedly funded by Qatar that rose to prominence in the winter of 2012-2013 (Lister, 2016). The funding of Islamist groups by Qatar, then by Saudi Arabia,

diluted secular opposition mainly composed of defectors from the Syrian Army (Lister, 2016). The rise of Islamist groups culminating in the emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, known as ISIS, played into Iran's narrative of fighting 'Takfiris', or fundamentalists. It even offered a credible narrative to Hasan Nasrallah who every now and then struggled to justify sending young men to defend a brutal dictator, giving a different pretext each time.

Also, Iran benefitted from Qatari and Saudi hesitation compounded by their competition. Iran's consistency in supporting Assad, even when he was losing, paid off. Therefore, if it were not for Iran, Assad would have been toppled at the beginning of the revolution, long before Russian intervention, as his army was defecting and he was short of manpower and ammunition. Initially, the protesters demanded democratic rights and social justice. They were not demanding a Sharia-run state or an Islamic state (Yambert, 2013). The intervention of Iran gave it a sectarian spin that was emphasized by the entry of Sunni groups funded by the Gulf.

Positioning itself as the protectors of Shias around the world, Iran has trained and supported Houthis since 2004 in Saadah, their northern stronghold, against the central government (Bayoumy & Ghobari, 2014). Houthis have been sent to Lebanon to be trained by Hezbollah (Jones, 2019).

Yemen was also a tool for Iran to divert Saudi Arabia from Syria. When the Yemen crisis erupted in 2014, Iran started helping the Houthis while the international community supported Abd- Rabbu Mansour Hadi, Vice President to former President of Yemen Ali Abdallah Saleh who was deposed by the popular unrest in 2011. After ten months of protests, Ali Abdulla Saleh transferred power to his Vice President in a deal brokered by Saudi Arabia. The deal was supposed to shield him and his family from prosecution (Finn, 2011). When protests erupted in 2014 to show discontent with corruption and unemployment, Saleh found an opportunity to regain power. He joined the Houthis who ended up ousting Hadi in September 2014 (BBC, 2014). Saudi Arabia considered the take over as a coup d'état but refrained from direct intervention. When the Houthis took over the strategic waterway of Bab al-Mandab in March 2015, Saudi Arabia started a bombing campaign. Saudi Arabia could no longer tolerate Iranian influence in both Hormoz and Bab al-Mandab. 4.8 million of barrels pass through the Bab al-Mandab strait every day, hence its importance to Saudi Arabia and the global oil market. Most Gulf oil transiting through the Suez Canal passes through the 20 km waterway which makes it an easy target (Al Arabiya English, 2018). It was an opportunity for Iran to drain the resources of Saudi Arabia while incurring relatively minimal costs by supporting the Houthi guerillas. In addition to the deaths by bombardment, more than 85,000 children died from famine (McKernan, 2018). Hence, the war also played to the advantage of Iran, painting Saudi bombing as responsible for those deaths. The support Houthis got from Iran made them unwilling to negotiate with Hadi's government. The UN brokered mediations in Kuwait, Switzerland, and Sweden did not result in a sustainable agreement (Jalal, 2020, Feb 13). The Iranian intervention moved the war in Yemen from an internal tribal conflict to part of a regional conflict. Also, by being in Yemen, which is Saudi Arabia's backyard and in southern Iraq, a few hundred kilometers away from the oil field, Iran was strangling Saudi Arabia from the south and from the north. In addition to the maritime route that passes via Hormuz and Bab al-Mandab straits, Iran has plans for a highway linking major Iranian cities with Iraqi and Syrian cities, reaching as far as the Mediterranean, to allow better communication and connection between Iran and its proxies (Jones, 2019).

Iran's advantage over other actors lies in the network it has established with Shia group, as well as its long experience in training militias. It was easily able to outpace Saudi Arabia with far fewer resources. Hence the Arab Spring was an opportunity to challenge the U.S. and ostracize Saudi Arabia. As the invasion of Iraq created a power vacuum that Iran rushed to fill, the Arab Spring also created a vacuum that Iran tried to fill.

## The Saudi Arabia-UAE Axis

The rise of Iran has helped the formation of the Saudi/UAE axis, which Egypt and Bahrain joined. Inter-Gulf relations have always been marked by rivalry and suspicions, especially from Saudi Arabia. It is the largest country, with a population of over 20 million, while the other countries are much smaller, with populations of less than a million. Relations between Abu Dhabi and Riyadh witnessed tensions inflated by historic border disputes which were partly settled in a 1974 agreement (Seddiq, 2001). The Gulf Cooperation Council that was established in the eighties was never able to create trust among member states, nor overcome the competition among members. However, the ascension to power of Mohammed bin Salman, known as MBS, changed that. The young ambitious Prince MBS wanted to modernize Saudi Arabia, to make it more like the UAE: a thriving economy; a magnet for foreign investments; and a prime tourist destination. He forged strong relations with Mohammed bin Zayed, the de facto UAE ruler. Both royals looked negatively upon the Arab Spring and regime change, as well as the demands for democratization from the masses. They were both alarmed by the rise of Iran, and both adopted an interventionist foreign policy aimed at garnering regional influence, contrary to their predecessors who had advocated a more reserved foreign policy focusing on soft power and diplomacy.

In Syria, when the revolution started, Saudi Arabia was reluctant to get involved as it did not have any connections with groups on the ground. One year later, Saudi Arabia started getting involved by funding rebel groups. Saudi policy was crafted as a reaction to Iranian expansion in Syria. Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia used its soft power to oust Syria, represented by the Assad regime, from the Arab League. It also managed to get all members of the Arab League - except Algeria, Iraq and Lebanon - to designate Hezbollah as a terrorist organization in 2017. Saudi Arabia, along with the CIA, had a program to train rebels, Timber Sycamore, which started in 2013. In July 2012, Saudi Arabia appointed Prince Bandar bin Sultan to manage the Syria portfolio (McDowall, 2014). Ammunition was bought from eastern Europe and channeled to Syrian rebels. However, there was a lack of coordination with the U.S.. The U.S. had concerns that some of the funding went to groups connected with Al Qaeda (Mazzetti & Apuzzo, 2016). The Saudi position - more concerned with Iranian influence in Syria than removal of the dictator - was not consistent with its support to the opposition. On several instances, they tried to reach out to Assad, bypassing the opposition.

In May 2016, Saudi Foreign Affairs Minister Adel al-Jubeir asserted that Assad would leave power, either politically or militarily (Perelman, 2016). A few months later in October, in an interview with Russian media, Bashar al-Assad said that Saudi Arabia had reached out to him, offering to help him if he severed ties with Iran (euronews, 2016). In August 2017, an opposition source announced that their Saudi backer told them they had to relinquish the goal to remove Assad in the transitional period. Saudi Arabia reversed the 2015 Riyadh consensus stating the departure of Assad as a condition for the start of a political transition (Hassan, 2017). In 2018, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman used an interview to send an overture to Assad by saying that "Bashar is staying." He added, "But I believe that Bashar's interest is not to let the Iranians do whatever they want to do," (Hennigan, 2018). Therefore, the policy was not consistent. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia also initially tried to create a rift between Russia and Assad. It tried to use oil leverage as a coercive measure (Mazzetti, Schmitt, Kirkpatrick, 2015). It also used positive incentives, trying to lure Russia with arm deals. Saudi Arabia tried directly engaging with Assad and creating a wedge between him and his Iranian patron (Reuters, 2017). This did not work. Actually, the oscillation in the Saudi position strengthened the alliance between Assad and Iran and led Assad to further snub Arab overtures.

Arab countries tried to re-admit Assad into the Arab league as a trial to distance him from Iran, however those attempts were soon blocked by the U.S. (Sly, 2019). The inconsistent Saudi position faced a firm position from the Iranians who doubled down on their support for Assad, prolonging the war. Witnessing the Arab hesitation, Assad became less and less likely to offer any compromise to the opposition in order to end the war. This oscillation in the position of Saudi Arabia created factions among the ranks of the opposition. The use of the opposition as a negotiating card did in fact weaken the opposition and led to mistrust and defections. With the defeat of Jaysh al-Islam in Eastern Ghouta in 2018, the main opposition group funded by Saudi Arabia, the latter lost all its influence on the ground (Karam & Mroue, 2018).

As for the direct military assistance, initially Saudi cooperated with Turkey in setting a control center to transfer arms to the leaders of the free Syrian army. It funded Jaysh al-Islam, previously known as Liwa al-Islam, an Islamist faction of the Free Syrian Army, however this funding faced two major problems. Firstly, the attitude of supporting one element then abandoning it when results are not swiftly obtained, weakened the opposition. Initially, Saudi Arabia supported General Idris, a defector from the Assad army who commanded the moderate factions of the free Syrian army, before letting him go later on (Morris, 2014). Also, Saudi Arabia unlike Iran, does not have experience with non-state actors, nor did it have previous contacts on the ground. It started funding whoever was willing to fight Assad without real control over the armed groups. The chaos in arming the rebels allowed the Jihadists to take advantage of the power and leadership vacuum. Many arms given to rebels ended up in the hands of the Islamic State as a result of the rebels changing ranks. The rise of the Islamic State led fingers to be pointed at Saudi Arabia, which provided a sort of relief to Iran. Iran was no longer seen as the main destabilizer in the region. In a speech given at Harvard Kennedy School in October 2014, Joe Biden accused Saudi Arabia and Arab Gulf states of fueling Sunni extremism in Syria. He later apologized for his comments (BBC, 2014). However, his comments reflect the general anti-Saudi mood that was created by Saudi interference in Syria to counter Iranian influence, especially as Saudi clerics had been calling for Jihad in Syria (McDowall, 2015). Saudi intervention was focused on countering Iran more than reaching a compromise that would end the war. Also, the Saudi/Emirati blockade on Qatar played to Assad's advantage as one of the accusations that faced Qatar was that it funds terrorism (Prentis, 2019). The UAE, which saw a greater threat in Turkey and Qatar and wanted to hedge its bets, re-opened the embassy in Damascus and resumed diplomatic relations with the Assad regime in 2018. During the 2020 pandemic, it sent aid to Syria. Even though Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Gargash said the donation was purely humanitarian in nature, the move was perceived as a signal of warming up to Assad. However, relations between the UAE and Assad are likely to be greatly affected by the Caesar Act that entered into force on June 17, 2020, that sanctions any individual or company dealing with the Assad regime or anyone related to it (Sly & Khattab, 2020).

Nonetheless, Saudi interest in facing Iran in Syria decreased when the Yemen war erupted. Saudi Arabia was more concerned in preserving its own backyard than securing influence in Syria. In Yemen, Saudi Arabia also acted in a reactive mode to Iran's interventionism. The Houthis took power in September 2014, but it was only when they took Bab al-Mandab in March 2015, that Saudi Arabia decided to interfere. The war that was supposed to last few weeks has lasted for five years. Initially, Qatar and the UAE were belligerents. However, Qatar left after the embargo in 2017. The Houthis were also empowered when Saudi Arabia abandoned Abdullah Saleh, the president of Yemen. Saleh, who had been a Saudi ally for 30 years, went back to Yemen in 2014 and joined the Houthis. Later, Saudi Arabia tried to win over Ali Abdullah Saleh who turned against the Houthis and ended up being killed

by them (Wintour, 2017). However, despite heavy and costly bombardment, the Houthi guerillas are still operational. Also, several attempts by Saudi Arabia to clinch a deal with the Houthis were prevented by Iran. With a limited ground operation, Saudi Arabia mainly relied on an air campaign and a blockade. This resulted in a human disaster leading the international community to slowly reverse their position and stop supporting the coalition (BBC, 2018). Also, cracks in the coalition started appearing after the death of Saleh. As Saudi Arabia wanted a strong front to support, it opened a channel with Al Islah, a group related to the Muslim Brotherhood. The UAE categorically opposes any overture to any Brotherhood offshoot (Partrick, 2017). The UAE reluctantly agreed to deal with Al Islah on the conditions that the latter cut its links with the Brotherhood. Nevertheless, the UAE remains suspicious of the Islamist group and vice versa (Leaf and Delozier, 2018). Later on, the UAE showed reluctance to stay in the fight with Anwar Gargash, the UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, announcing that only a political settlement can end the war in Yemen, dismissing a final win against the Houthis (Gargash, 2019). The UAE's reluctance to stay in the coalition was caused by a perceived important presence of the Muslim Brotherhood within the government. With the appointment of Lt General Mohsen al-Ahmar as Vice President in 2016, seen as sympathetic to the Brotherhood, the UAE started changing course on its Yemen policy (Jalal, 2020). On the other hand, the UAE started funding the secessionist movement which directly challenges the Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi government. On Feb 2020, the UAE totally withdrew from Yemen, though the drawdown had started in July of the previous year. Following the breakout of COVID-19, and facing economic problems at home, Saudi Arabia stopped unilaterally the bombardment in Yemen.

A pro-Brotherhood government in Libya was seen as a threat to the Sisi government which is very close to the UAE. In 2013, the UAE and Saudi Arabia supported Tamarod, the popular protests that brought down Morsi and led to the rise of al-Sisi. Following the toppling of the Brotherhood and the incarceration of Morsi, the Brotherhood leadership fled to Turkey (Arsu, 2014). This started the tensions between the UAE and Turkey.

On Libya, U.S. indecisiveness opened the door for the UAE and Egypt to compete with Turkey. Saudi Arabia and the UAE were keen to decrease Erdogan's influence, whose model of moderate Islamism was seen as a model of success to be followed in the Arab world. On the other hand, the regime change in Egypt was a strong blow to Erdogan's regional connections. He was eager to forge new relations and Libya offered a new opportunity.

In 2011, both the UAE and Qatar contributed to the NATO campaign to depose Gaddafi. Following the 2011 events that led to the toppling of Gaddafi, the UAE started supporting the Zintan militias whereas Qatar supported the Misrata militias. Facing the defeat of its local ally, the UAE started supporting Haftar, a former Gaddafi commander in 2014. The UAE also needed a local ally who is strong in the East to secure the border with Egypt, unlike the Zintans who were located in the north west of the country. Haftar became the UAE's main ally and the main recipient of its military support, given despite the objection of the Obama administration. He launched the Dignity offensive which opposed the Tripoli Misrata Dawn coalition (Steinberg, 2020).

Egypt's strategy to contain Turkey included creating a coalition of eastern Mediterranean countries against Turkey. In 2019, it launched the inaugural meeting of the East Med Gas forum to which Turkey was not invited. In 2015, Egypt started joint operations with Greece on Rhodes Island, close to Turkey. The ambiguous U.S. position - where it supports the UN-approved Government of National Accord (GNA) but meets and deals with Haftar - has encouraged the GNA to tie its future to Turkey

(Cagaptay, Yukzel, Hernandez, 2019) Trump, following a call with the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, supported the Haftar offensive on Tripoli in April 2019. (Cagaptay, Fishman, 2019)

The intervention of Egypt and the UAE to support Haftar has pushed him to refuse any mediation to end the conflict. Though international backers of Haftar stepped back following Haftar's offensive in Tripoli, the UAE doubled down on its local ally. Haftar has tried to block any negotiation between the house of representatives in Tobruk, headed by Aguila Saleh, and by the GNA, as a negotiated settlement might kill his quest to be the sole ruler of Libya. Emboldened by the UAE's unwavering support, which gave Haftar critical air superiority, he walked out of Moscow without signing a deal brokered between Erdogan and Putin in January 2020, greatly embarrassing the Russian president (BBC, 2020). In April 2020, Haftar declared the UN-brokered political agreement to be null and void (Eljarh, 2020).

After eight months of siege by Haftar forces, the GNA felt it had no choice but to delegate its fate to Turkey, whose intervention changed the balance of power. After the defeat of Haftar and the withdrawal of the Russian mercenaries supporting him, Egypt launched an initiative paraphrasing the Berlin initiative launched by Germany in 2019 which Haftar initially rejected. However, the initiative accepted by Haftar was not well received by the GNA due to the deep mistrust between the two parties as well as among their foreign backers.

## The Turkey-Qatar Axis

Erdogan had initial success with the model of political Islam at home that led to major improvement in healthcare and transformed Turkey into an industrial country between 2002 and 2010. He transformed the country and eradicated corruption (Nafaa, 2011). However, Erdogan, unlike his predecessors who were focused on being part of the West, wanted more integration with the region. Erdogan's Turkey wanted to portray itself as a model for the Muslim world (Khatib & Ghanem, 2019). In several of his speeches, Erdogan mentions the word Ottoman, when the Turks were the head and the center of the Arab world. With Erdogan, the policy of engagement with the East started. Erdogan's policy was a clear break with the Kemalist view. This strategy has, at times, put him at odds with Turkey's prime ally: the U.S.. Turkey wanted to craft an regional policy independent of the U.S. where Turkey takes the lead decision. In the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Turkey refused to let the U.S. use Turkish bases. Erdogan started getting more and more vocal on regional issues. The first step in showing integration with the region was when freedom flotilla was sent to break the Gaza siege (Nafaa, 2011). Erdogan sensed a vacuum in Arab leadership that he tried to fill, hence the outreach to the Arab world. In this outreach, Turkey has taken Sunni Islam as a common denominator with the people in the Arab world. Also, the rise of Iranian expansionism, that fueled sectarianism, allowed Turkey to position itself as the defender of Sunni Islam. Unlike Saudi Arabia that was focusing on fending off Iran, Turkey branded its intervention as protecting Sunni Islam. Also, Turkey positioned itself as the hub for liberation movements across the Arab world. Istanbul as a city gathered dissidents from all over the Arab world (Hubbard, 2019). Whereas Saudi Arabia and the UAE resented regime change and democratization movements, Turkey saw them as an opportunity to gain outreach in the Arab world. Qatar has always adopted an Islamic tone with Al Jazeera that covered Islamic movements positively. Al-Qaradawi, who is considered part of the Brotherhood, had his program on Al Jazeera for 20 years: Ash-Shariah wal Hayat (Arab News). Therefore, there was a natural ideological rapprochement between Qatar and Turkey. In 2017, following a ransom paid by Qatar to pro-Iran militias to release members of the Qatari

royal family who went on a hunting trip to Iraq, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Egypt cut diplomatic relations with Qatar and started a blockade on the small emirate. The reason for the blockade was that Qatar funded pro-Iran militias in Iraq and used the ransom as a cover (Worth, 2018). As the blockade was put in place, Qatar asked Turkey for help. In two days, 3,000 soldiers arrived in Qatar (Alexander, 2017). This was the beginning of an axis and a strong commitment from Qatar to Turkey. Qatar sees Turkey as a necessary ally to protect it from its strong neighbor. Qatar always had competition with Saudi Arabia in trying to fill the role of the mediator of inter-Arab spats. Through its alliance with Turkey, Qatar had a strong backing, nevertheless it had less freedom in conducting foreign policy which became tied to the Turkish foreign policy. The confrontation was more prominent following the murder of the journalist Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul which was followed by a huge international outrage. Turkey presented proof incriminating Saudi Arabia. Shortly after that Mohammed bin Salman gave a speech that was reconciliatory towards Turkey, and even towards Qatar. However this incident deepened the rivalry between the Turkey-Qatar and the Saudi Arabia-UAE axes (Al Jazeera, 2018).

In Syria, at the wake of the revolution, Qatar had started to fund rebel groups affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood with whom it had connections. Qatar's aim was to establish a Brotherhood friendly government with which it can connect. Qatar in general had a certain level of a working relations with Iran with whom it shares the South Pars/North Dome natural-gas field (Offshore energy Today, 2019). In Syria, though it funds the rebels, it did clinch a deal with Iran as part of the ransom arrangement to free the Qatari royals held in Iraq. The deal consisted of funding the population swap between Zabadani and al-Qusayr and Fua and Kefraya whereby the Sunni populations that were on the border with Lebanon were moved near Aleppo and the Shia populations of Fua and Kefraya were brought to Zabadani and al-Qusayr (Worth, 2014). Turkey also was able to cooperate with Iran in the Astana talks, along with Russia. Though Qatar and Turkey are on a different course than Iran in Syria, there is no inherent animosity, only conflict of interests. On the other hand, Turkey's policy in Syria has not conflicted with Saudi Arabia's for most of its course. Actually, Saudi Arabia initially channeled support to the opposition groups through Turkey. In 2016, Turkey was a main element of the North Thunder exercise that was supposed to increase readiness for joint operations. The Independent reported that Saudi jets and troops were deployed in the Incirlik airbase in Turkey (Eleftheriou-Smith, 2016).

In Libya, starting in 2019 with the Haftar assault on Tripoli, Turkey has shown a very confrontational attitude, especially towards the UAE. The fight in Libya has been intensified and prolonged by external backers who hope to achieve regional goals that extend beyond Libya. Turkish intervention has economic as well as political purposes. A main purpose was to counter the UAE, Egypt, and to a lesser extent Saudi Arabia who are seen as forces that try to limit Turkish influence in the region. Qatar is fully aligned with Turkey on Libya as it does not want a government in Libya that is allied with its foes. Turkey also found an ally in the eastern Mediterranean in Libya. An agreement between Greece, Cyprus, and Israel for special economic zones, which are zones for economic exploitation, left Turkey with a smaller area in the east Mediterranean than it wishes. Greece, Cyprus, and Israel have agreed to build a pipeline transporting gas from the Eastern Mediterranean to Europe via Greece, by-passing Turkey. Turkey's agreement with Libya would outflank this agreement as no energy company will conduct exploration activities in contested waters. A maritime demarcation line with Libya was set to change the balance in the Eastern Mediterranean. Additionally, intervention in Libya is supposed to reward Turkey with many reconstruction deals, once stability is restored (International Crisis group, 2020). Since Turkish-made weapons provided by Turkey were successful in stopping advances by Haftar on Tripoli, the conflict represented an important stage to demonstrate Turkish military prowess. The

intervention of foreign backers, who see the conflict from a zero-sum perspective, does not encourage actors on the ground to reach a compromise. Foreign backers are ignoring the arms embargo put on Libya in February 2011. The whole narrative of fighting Islamism or preserving national sovereignty is lost in this conflict. Syrian fighters are being brought by Turkey to fight along with the GNA government of al-Sarraj. Russia is also bringing Syrian fighters to support Haftar (Fishman & Hiney, 2020). Salafi Islamist groups, namely the Madkhalis, fight along with Haftar (International crisis group, 2019). Brotherhood Islamists are also involved on the other side of the fight.

## Key Findings

The competition between the three axes is leading to an increase in conflicts across the region. While each camp is trying to propagate an ideology, it is giving a boost to the other camp's ideology. While Iran stresses Shia Islam, this generates a reaction on the Sunni side, representing an opportunity for Turkey to promote itself as the savior of Sunni Islam. Turkey is also using the cultural appeal to engage with the Arab grassroots. Turkish series are among the most popular TV programs in the Arab world. Saudi Arabia is trying to market itself, especially to the West, as the guardian of moderate Islam.

Israel on the other hand is always trying to shield itself and find friends in a rough environment. It plays on the difference between its neighbors in the region. Now that Turkey has changed course from a Kemalist approach and adopted a pan-Islamic pro-Palestinian course, it is at odds with Israel. Israel's tension with Turkey escalated following the signing of a deal with Cyprus and Greece which Turkey is trying to block by demarcating maritime borders with Libya. Because of their antagonistic relations with Turkey and Iran, the UAE and Saudi Arabia are now Israel's new allies. The rapprochement has resulted in the UAE and Bahrain signing a normalization deal with Israel. The axis gathering UAE-Saudi Arabia and Egypt can also include Israel.

The U.S. retrenchment has opened the doors for these regional middle powers – Saudi, Iran and Turkey - to play a larger role. The tipping point for the American retrenchment has been the U.S. position on the Syrian war. The U.S. failed to intervene and strike Assad when he used chemical weapons in 2013. The American hands-off approach towards Syria under Obama, who was so focused on clinching a deal with Iran to mark his legacy, led to a lot of confusion and to competition in supporting and controlling the Syrian opposition. The competition between Qatar and Saudi Arabia led to the dilution of the Syrian opposition funded by those two countries. They even created competing structures representing opposition. Saudi formed the National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and opposition forces, while Qatar sponsored the Syrian National Council. In an interview with *The Atlantic*, Obama said that Saudi Arabia needed to learn to share the region with Iran (Goldberg, 2016). The nuclear deal, which was agreed behind Saudi Arabia's back, and the potential rapprochement with Iran, coupled with a show of force from the latter, rendered Saudi very nervous. It increased Saudi Arabia's sense of self-help which, feeling left out by the U.S., started countering what it perceived as Iranian expansionism by crafting policy independent of the U.S.. Later on, Turkey came on board. Erdogan sensed the Sunni grievances. He started trying to fill the void by championing Arab Sunni cases. In Syria, Turkey's intervention was partly due to the perceived threat from the People's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG), which are considered as the Syrian arm of the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK). The PKK is labeled as a terrorist organization and has carried out many attacks on Turkey's mainland. However, the American retrenchment has allowed Turkey to get involved in Syria and make the situation even more complex. Its withdrawal from the east of Euphrates has positioned

Turkey against the Kurds, whereas an American presence would have provided guarantees to both the Turks and the Kurds.

Here also those middle powers are finding local partners in the conflicts. Turkey found in the Arabs in northern Syria, who were anxious as a result of Kurdish expansionism, a local ally to give them Turkey some sort of legitimacy. Similarly, Iran under the pretext of protecting Shia minorities around the Arab world has been interfering and trying to use this pretext to gain influence at grassroots level. To add to that, the Qatar crisis put Qatar at odds with Saudi Arabia and the UAE and deepened the rift between those two countries and Turkey. Those divisions are playing out in Libya where each axis is doubling down on its ally. The worst part in this competition is the use of mercenaries and the funding of non-state actors which make the idea of a functional state close to impossible. Syrians are recruited to fight with Haftar and with the GNA. In short, the American retrenchment coupled with the Arab Spring has intensified the state of anarchy in the system, opening the door for these middle powers to try to fill the vacuum.

Nevertheless, these axes are facing challenges. Though chemistry binds the two royals, MBZ and MBS, they have divergent priorities and diverging policies on some issues. As stated by offensive realism, alliances are marriages of convenience that are quick to unravel when common interest ceases to exist. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt have not always been on the same page. The UAE's main enemy is the Muslim Brotherhood. Hence the UAE views that any empowerment of the Brotherhood abroad might embolden the movement at home and give it support, especially given that the Brotherhood is a transnational movement. The 2013 alleged planned coup in the UAE involved Egyptian citizens affiliated to the Brotherhood government in Egypt (Peel and Hall, 2013). The zero-sum perspective regarding political Islam framed the UAE's foreign policy, leading to support for groups antagonistic to the Brotherhood across the region and worldwide. The UAE even put 80 Islamic organizations in the West on the terrorist list, including Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) and Muslim American Society (MAS), two prominent Muslim-American organizations (Taylor, 2014). Saudi Arabia on the other hand is more concerned with Iran as it sees a clear and present danger in the Islamic Republic. As mentioned above, in Yemen, the UAE joined the coalition created by Saudi Arabia before withdrawing from it later on. It also started supporting the secession movement in the south which challenges the authority of Hadi and further isolates Saudi Arabia in Yemen (Jalal, 2020, Feb 25). On the issue of Libya, Saudi Arabia, which is busy with its domestic transformation in accordance with the 2030 vision, is passing the buck when it comes to the threat of Turkey to the UAE, leaving its partner to take the lead in managing the Libya portfolio. As the UAE leads more independent and more assertive policies of its own, a rift is likely to emerge between Abu Dhabi and Riyadh which still wants to position itself as the dominant regional power. Egypt rebuffed Arab countries' previous calls to intervene in Yemen. Similarly, it is showing resistance to the pressure from the UAE to intervene militarily in Libya.

On the other hand, Iran's influence in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq seems shaky. The popular protests that erupted in late-2019 in Lebanon and Iraq expressed a clear rejection of the sectarian system including Iran-backed militias and groups. A large faction of the Lebanese protestors called for Hezbollah's arsenal to be dismantled. The protests are going against Iran-backed militias in the South of Iraq, a predominantly Shia area. In Syria, Iran finds itself more and more marginalized by the Russian presence and weakened by Israeli military strikes. Though Russia, like Iran, supports Assad, it is Russia who has been the main actor preventing Assad's fall in 2015. To add to that, Russia has been entering into ceasefire agreements with Turkey independently of Iran, despite the Astana process

that gathered Iran, Turkey, and Russia. Therefore, Iran's entrenchment in the Levant seems shaky. Iran no longer can totally rely on its regional influence to create deterrence. Qatar, on the other hand, has almost delegated its foreign policy to Turkey. Nevertheless, due to its size and to the engrained mistrust it has with the UAE and Saudi Arabia, it is unlikely that it will break from the alliance with Turkey anytime soon.

However, the loosening of the Iran and Saudi Arabia/UAE axes does not mean that competition will decrease, or that the different states will have less desire to confront each other. Looking to the future, the factors that lead to competition are on the rise, namely: anarchy; sense of threat which reinforces the struggle for survival; mistrust in each other intentions; and military buildup. American retrenchment is not likely to be compensated by any other external power. Despite Russian intervention in both Syria and Libya, Russia does not have the weight to replace the U.S. in the region. Despite Russian efforts to engage with Saudi Arabia in trying to push to them the Russian S-400 missile system, this attempt did not go too far (Rumer, Weiss, 2019). Though China has huge trade activities with the region, Beijing is careful not to get too involved in regional problems (Lons, 2019). Therefore, the void caused by American retrenchment is not likely to be filled by any external hegemon in the short or medium term which creates space for competition.

As for the mistrust, it is unlikely to decrease. Despite some local adjustments like Abu Dhabi's agreement with Al-Islah in Yemen in return for the latter severing ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, it is unlikely that the UAE will reconcile with political Islam. It is unlikely that Saudi Arabia, even if it breaks with Wahhabism, will build better relations and trust with the Iranian regime. On the contrary the Bahrain-UAE-Israel deal will likely increase Iran's mistrust in its Arab neighbors. The deal was perceived by Iran as a front to counter the Islamic Republic. Following the announcement, Iran threatened the UAE and Bahrain. The UAE State Minister for Foreign Affairs responded that the deal was not aimed at Iran. The military buildup is also increasing. The UAE is seeking to acquire F35, Iran announced that it can export arms once embargo is lifted (Mehdi, 2020). Turkey's drone, shipbuilding, military electronics, and armored vehicles technologies have been growing exponentially (Bekdil, 2020).

Both Iran and Turkey have revisionist policies. Iran feels its status has been undermined by U.S. sanctions and by international isolation, while Turks lament the treaty of Lausanne where they feel they had to make unjust concessions following the Ottoman empire defeat in WWI. Turkey, able to prove itself as an economic powerhouse, wants to translate this might into geopolitical weight. Saudi Arabia/the UAE want to fend off those revisionist policies, while the UAE wants to play an oversized role in geopolitics. All those factors predict more anarchy, more insecurity, more struggle for survival, and more quest to achieve hegemony.

Until there is an offshore balancer that will force a kind of balance between the three axes, it will take a long time to reach the equilibrium point. History shows that the Treaty of Westphalia was signed after 30 years of war. Negotiation started when there was no more money in the coffers and no more young men left to fight. The sad truth is that the Middle East is far from this scenario. The problem is that the three axes are of similar weight, and it is unlikely that one power will dominate anytime soon. Despite the economic strain posed by the COVID-19 crisis, and the long-term trend of decreasing oil prices, countries like Qatar and the UAE have bottomless sovereign wealth funds. Therefore, if left to take its natural course - whereby the different actors perceive that cooperation is the only way to prevent destruction - the equilibrium point lies a long way off. The other option is the U.S. reinstating itself as an offshore balancer that will reduce the anarchy that its retrenchment created in the first place.

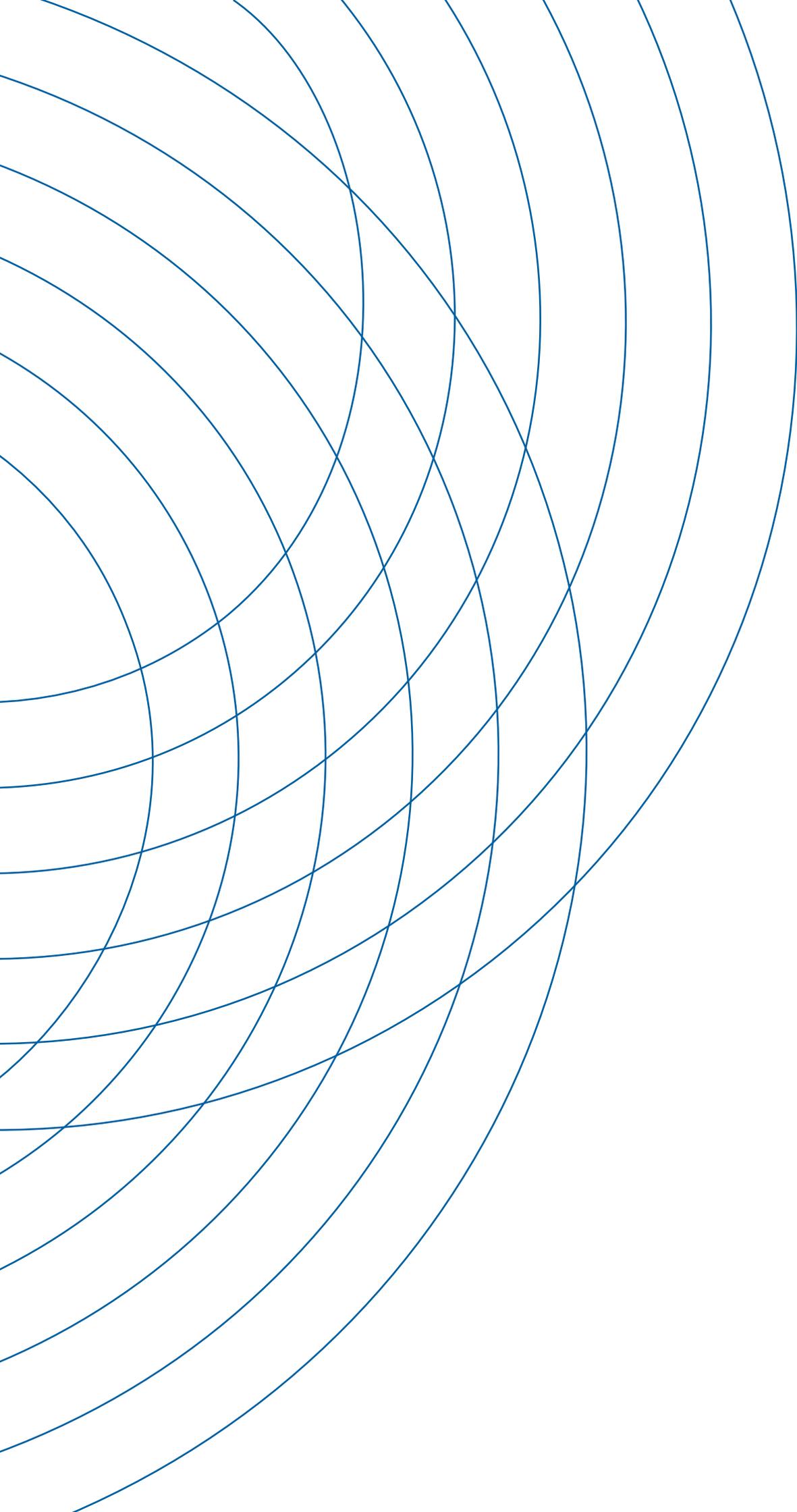
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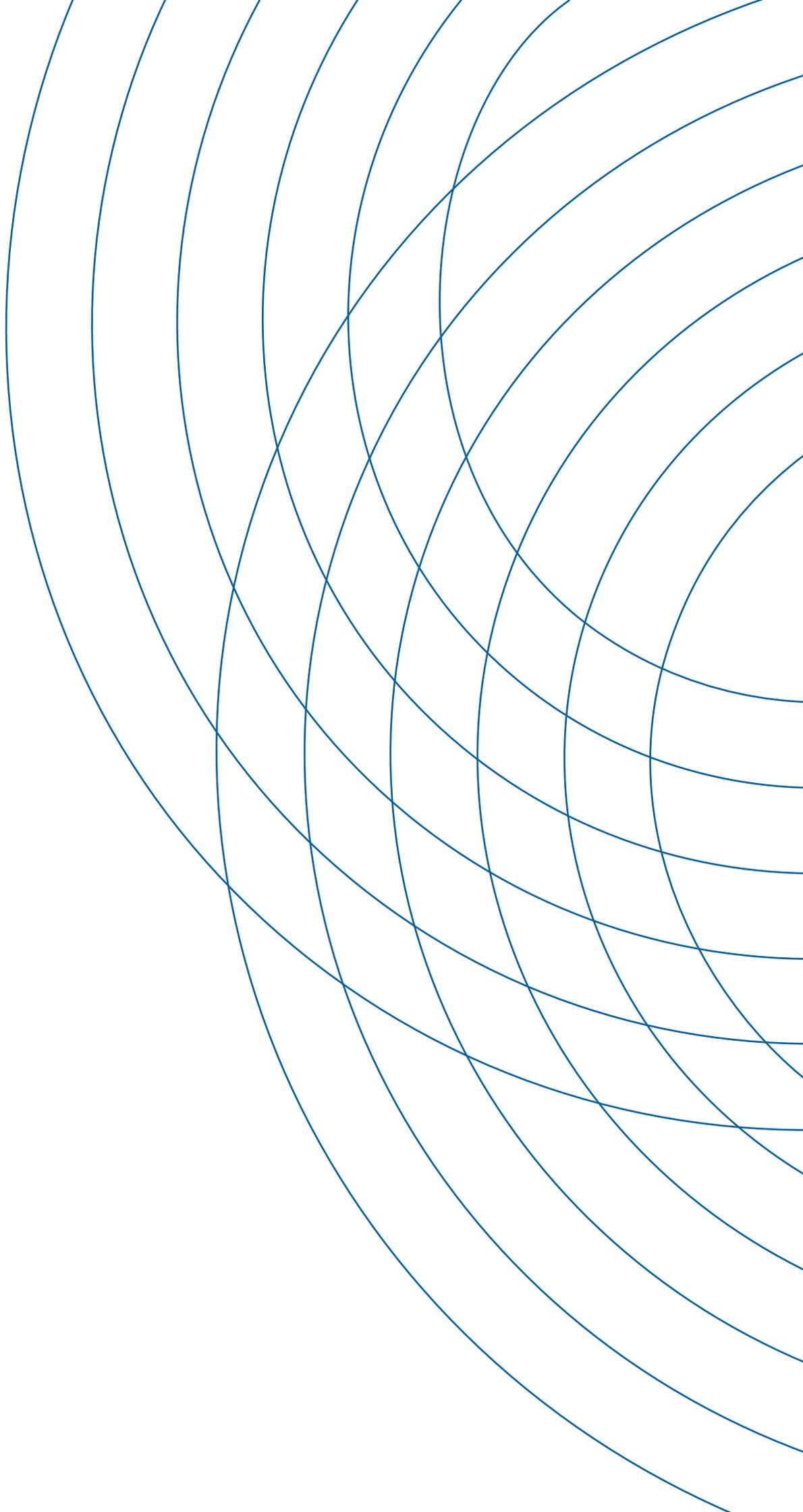
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