Can we Speak of 'Moderate Arab states'? Discussing Moderation in the International Politics of the Middle East

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Abstract

Moderation has been a recurring theme in international politics. This has been particularly true in the international politics of the Middle East, where foreign and regional actors have often categorized others and selves as either 'moderates' or 'radicals'. However, very few works have sought to deconstruct the meaning of moderation in this context. The few works that have addressed the issue have mostly treated moderation as a Western attempt to simplify regional geopolitics and dichotomize regional actors to justify their choice of allies and their foreign policy toward the region. This article seeks to provide an explanation of the meaning and uses of moderation. It argues that the 'moderate' has evolved from a category of analysis to a category of practice. The so-called moderates have actively engaged with this category of analysis and, after negotiating its meaning, have embraced it as a description of themselves. Examining the evolution of the 'moderate Arabs' label since the Cold War to the Syrian Civil War, the article demonstrates how the meaning of moderation has evolved through negotiations between the foreign powers that introduced it, and the so-called moderates themselves. Furthermore, it demonstrates how the emergence of the 'moderate Arabs' as a category of practices has come to play in regional geopolitics.

Key words: Moderation; Arab states; Radicalism; Categories of practice; Middle East diplomacy; moderate opposition

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The label 'moderate' is a recurring theme in international politics. Actors constantly brand others and selves as moderate, or alternatively, as radical/extremist. This has been true as well in the Middle East. Foreign observers, in the media, academia and policymaking circles have often invoked the terms 'moderate Arab regimes', 'moderate Arab states' and similar conceptions in their analysis of regional geopolitics. Yet, albeit its popularity, very few works have approached the subject critically, trying to understand the roots, meanings and implications of the 'moderate Arab' label. The few studies that have paid attention to the concept often dismiss the 'moderate' as no more than empty words, without real meaning. This is in sharp contrast to the concepts of radicalism/extremism, which have gained much critical interest in previous year.[1]

This article challenges this general ignorance of the study of moderation in the Middle East, and in international politics in general. First, such a pervasive term in international politics must be understood more thoroughly. Beyond that, as the article demonstrates, the 'moderate Arab states' label, as controversial as it may be, has important implications. In contrast to the 'extremist/radical' label, actors actually embrace the moderate label to describe themselves and their actions. The so-called moderate Arabs have not only been branded as such by their allies in the West. They have also adopted this definition in self-reference, turning it from a *category of analysis* to a *category of practice*. And while it would be far-fetched that these states have set their foreign policies based on the desire to appear as moderates, this article demonstrates that the moderate category has had some impact on the policies of the moderates. Most importantly, it has confined them to depict their own policies as moderate, and forced them to justify actions that have seemed to not fit the moderate framework. On the other hand, the moderate label has also served them in rationalizing their actions, to both foreign and local audiences, and as a leverage on their Western allies. The relevance of the 'moderate' label becomes even more valid in the context of the Syrian Civil War, where the so-called moderate Arabs have developed a new category, that of the 'moderate opposition/rebels', to justify their choice of proxies in the conflict.

Operationalizing such a research is not an easy task. Many Arab states and regimes have been branded 'moderate' by many other foreign states. To illustrate its points, the article focuses primarily on four 'moderate' Arab states: Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab

Emirates (UAE).[2] Similarly, because the United States and Britain have been two of the key foreign actors in the Middle East since the early 20th century, the article focuses on their role in introducing this category. Here it must be made clear – by arguing that moderation is indeed a relevant way to describe regimes and their policies in the international system, this article does not endorse their policies or seek to legitimize them. The purpose here is purely to explore the relevance and potential implications of the use of moderation in international politics. To achieve that, the first section of this article further explains the need to investigate the meaning of moderation in the context of the Middle East. It also sets the framework for analysing moderation. The following section traces the manner in which moderation emerged as a category of analysis among American and British policymakers. The third section examines the manner in which the so-called moderates embraced this label as a category of practice, instilling it with new meanings and association. The final section shifts to the Syrian Civil War, where a new category began to emerge, that of the 'moderate opposition'.

Moderation in International Politics: Is It Relevant?

Two reasons render the study of moderation in international politics imperative. The first reason is the prevalent presence of the moderate label or category in international politics. The second reason is the significance of analysing moderation and its uses to understanding the so-called moderates and their policies. Because moderates actually embrace this label, it could potentially affect their policy-making. As for the first reason, one useful way to grasp the prevalence of a term is through its presence in the media. A probe into British and American media during the period between 1970 and 2017, based on the Nexis database of news articles, reveals that the terms 'moderate Arab states', 'moderate Arab regimes', 'moderate Sunni states' or simply 'moderate Arabs' appeared 1,001 in the British media and 5,487 in the American media.[3] This of course reflected the growing prominence of the term among policymakers in these countries, and their ongoing search for moderates among Arab states.[4]

Not only among policymakers and in the public discourse, but also in the academic literature moderation has gained a growing interest. Yet, this critical interest in moderation in the Middle East has been popular mainly among comparativists and sociologists. Those have been interested mostly in questioning the validity of the inclusion-moderation hypothesis, namely the

idea that radical movements may moderate their agenda when included in democratic systems.[5] The impetus for this interest has been the growing tendency among Islamist movements, such as the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, to claim to have moderated their agenda.[6] Studying moderation in domestic politics is not irrelevant for studying the concept in international politics. Beyond further establishing the relevance of the concept in the social sciences, the inclusion-moderation hypothesis actually provides an initial working definition for moderation, namely 'working within a political system rather than trying to overthrow it'.[7]

Amid this attention to moderation in comparative politics, little has been written on moderation by students of international politics. There are, to be sure, some exceptions. One early attempt to probe into the meaning of moderation in international politics was carried by sociologist Amitai Etzioni. In an effort to counter Samuel Huntington's 'clash of civilizations' thesis,[8] Etzioni has argued that the international system is divided between moderates, 'who view the use of force as abhorrent and instead rely largely on normative appeals', and radicals, who 'who see violence as a major and legitimate tool'.[9] James Stocker has examined the American search for Middle Eastern moderates during the Cold War.[10] Yaniv Voller's work demonstrates the manner in which Israel has perceived moderation as a key element in its post-2000s foreign policy in the Middle East, replacing its defunct periphery alliance paradigm with the 'moderate axis conception'.[11] The works by Morten Valbjørn and André Bank and Robert Malley and Peter Harling have criticized the George W. Bush administration for its dichotomization of Middle Eastern actors to moderates vs. radicals.[12] And Rosemary Hollis has taken a critical approach to Washington's branding of Hosni Mubarak's regime in Egypt as the embodiment of the 'moderate Arab leadership'.[13]

Though ground-breaking in identifying the uses of moderation in international politics, these works have focused primarily on external powers' reference to their local Arab allies/clients. Nevertheless, and this relates to the second reason for the need to study moderation in international politics, the so-called moderates have ended up embracing the term in self-reference. The leaders and policymakers of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan have come to depict their actions, policies and allies as moderate. They have done so before foreign audiences and the media. But they have also done so in Arabic, to domestic audiences. Hence, they have embraced the term not only to impress foreign observers, but as part of their identity.

Thus, these Arab regimes have turned moderation from a category of analysis to a category of practice. The distinction between categories of analysis and practice, and their reciprocal relations, have been long identified by sociologists and social psychologists. Categories of analysis are the tools that external observers use to define social, political and economic phenomena. Categories of practice, in turn, relate to 'everyday social experience, developed and deployed by ordinary social actors, as distinguished from the experience-distant categories used by social analysts'.[14] They perform something in real life. Categories of practice are diverse; being a migrant, belonging to a race, a nation, or even a religion, are all categories of practice.[15] Categories of practice serve as the basis for the development of categories of analysis, when social scientists identify and define social phenomena in the literature. Nonetheless, categories of analysis can also become categories of practice, when the subjects of investigation embrace the category of analysis applied to them. An example for that is actually directly linked to the topic of this article – social psychologists Nick Hopkins and Vered Kahani-Hopkins apply this to the study of extremism and moderation in the United Kingdom. Showing how Islamist activists in the UK tried to rebuff the 'clash of civilizations' theory by presenting the fundamentals of Islam as acts of moderation, Hopkins and Kahani-Hopkins criticize the tendency among social psychologists to treat extremism as 'reflecting individual pathology and irrationality' and moderation as 'the normative benchmark against which extremism can be identified'.[16] These taxonomies, they contend, 'typically reveal more about the perspective of their authors than they do about the positions and psychology of those to whom such taxonomies are applied'. Therefore, it is necessary to understand 'how social actors use such taxonomies to construct and communicate their own terms of reference and identity definitions', that is, as a category of practice.[17] The manner in which actors define themselves is essential for understanding their actions. The 'self' may perceive itself as unique while in other instances it may view itself as being part of a group. Grasping an actor's understanding of their position and the context and circumstances in which this takes place can explain the formation of new social actors and collective actions.[18]

Perhaps the only work to date that has identified moderation as a category of practice is Stacey Gutkowski's study of Jordan's claims to represent moderate Islam. Gutkowski shows that the Jordanian monarch, King Abdullah II, responded to the September 11 terror attacks by portraying the Hashemite Jordan as the embodiment of moderate Islam. This involved sponsorship of interfaith dialogues at the global level and emphasizing Jordan's peace agreement with Israel to

brand Jordan as a moderate.[19] Based on Jordan's case, Gutkowski describes moderation as an 'unstable category of practice', since '"Moderate" and "radical" and their cognates are labels – both self-claimed and endowed by others – which take on meaning only within social and political relationships'.[20] This statement is fundamental to the understanding of moderation in the international politics of the Middle East, and this article seeks to develop it further. Even if the 'moderate Arab' was initially a label introduced by foreign powers, the so-called moderates, such as in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the UAE have found moderation as a legitimate way to conceptualize their actions, justify them to a broad range of audiences, including their domestic audiences, and advocate controversial policies.

The Introduction of the Moderate Arab Category during the Cold War

As critiques of the moderate Arab category rightly point out,[21] the idea of the existence of a moderate Arab axis was in fact introduced by foreign powers. The background to the emergence of the moderate axis was the Western identification of a radical axis in the Middle East. In accordance to the political map of the Cold War, the radical forces were the anti-colonialist revolutionary regimes, and mainly Egypt under Gamal Abdel Nasser, Syria, Iraq after the overthrow of the Hashemite monarchy, and later Libya, Algeria and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), among others. Actions such as the nationalization of the Suez Canal and the closure of the Straits of Tiran by Nasser, or the radicals' flirtation with Moscow, bolstered their radical image in Washington and London. In the period leading to the Suez Crisis, the UK government described Nasser as irrational and obsessed with destroying the regional order.[22]

The moderate Arab states category emerged as the counteract to the Middle Eastern radicals. When initially using the term 'moderate Arabs', American and British observers referred to conservative regimes, especially monarchies, threatened by Arab nationalism's revolutionary message. Categorizing them as moderates served American and British policymakers in justifying their support for these regimes. Thus, James Lay, the executive secretary of the National Security Council, urged in 1958 the White House to 'seek to counterbalance Egypt's preponderant position of leadership in the Arab world by helping increase the political prestige and economic strength of other more moderate Arab states such as Iraq, the Sudan, Saudi Arabia, and Lebanon'.[23] The British Foreign and Commonwealth Office justified British presence in the Persian Gulf as

protecting the interests of the 'moderate or less radically orientated Arab states', namely Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the smaller Gulf protectorates.[24]

Gradually, the moderate category had gained more content. As Stocker notes in his examination of moderation during the Cold War, in the late 1960s, policymakers in Washington branded as moderate the conservative monarchies, which remained vulnerable to external interference by more radical regimes, and were willing to tone down criticism toward Israel. The prime example for that was King Hussein of Jordan, whom the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) depicted as having 'an "anchoring" role for Arab moderates', after he had shared his intelligence on PLO activities.[25] Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states as well were considered among this camp. A dramatic change to the constellation of the moderate camp took place in the 1970s, when Egypt, now under the presidency of Anwar Sadat, began shifting toward the moderate camp. Preoccupied with reforming the country's economy, Sadat withdrew from Egypt's cordial relations with the Soviet Union and accepted the idea of resolving the conflict with Israel. Even before the Camp David Accords, the CIA reported on the annual Arab Summit that 'President Sadat's efforts to assure that the moderate Arab states control the summit have pre-empted the radicals'.[26] Shortly after, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger explained to President Gerald Ford that 'The most moderate Arabs are the Jordanians. The most consistently moderate are the Egyptians. They almost broke with the Soviet Union and will be bellwethers to future progress'. As for the Saudis, Kissinger claimed that 'Faisal is a kook but a shrewd cookie. He is in a position where all Arabs come to him'.[27] By the late 1980s, the CIA divided the Middle Eastern states into three groups: "Moscow's traditional arms clients (Algeria, Libya, Syria, Iraq, Syria, North Yemen, and South Yemen), the moderate Arab states (Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Bahrain and Qatar), and Iran."[28] Hence, the 'moderate Arab states' became a fully acceptable category of actors in the region. The Gulf War in 1991 marked a milestone in the evolution of the 'moderate Arab' category. The participation of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Oman and Syria in the war against Iraq following its invasion and annexation of Kuwait, led General Brent Scowcroft, President George H. W. Bush's National Security Advisor, to describe the war as a 'triumph for the moderate Arabs'.[29] Dick Cheney, the Secretary of Defence, commented that 'instead of a more radical Middle East under Saddam's influence, our ties with moderate Arab states are stronger'.[30]

The post-Gulf War period provides a clear example for the importance of the 'moderate label' as something more than a label. In the aftermath of the war, the UAE approached Washington to purchase arms, and especially Apache Helicopters and F-16 fighters. The Congress, little informed about the UAE and concerned about regional stability, initially inclined toward rejecting the deal. At this stage, Richard A. Clarke, a senior member of the administration, rushed in support for the deal. Depicting the UAE as a moderate, he stated that 'The U.A.E is not now and never will be a threat to the security and stability in the Middle East. Indeed, it is a force for peace',[31] before proceeding to describe its support for the war efforts. The Congress then approved the deal. This short anecdote summarizes the importance of the moderate label – being categorized as a moderate meant for these states access to various kinds of support in Washington and the West, amid societies otherwise suspicious toward interaction with Middle Eastern actors. For the UAE, at this point, being branded a moderate was critical for its access to mass amounts of weaponry, which otherwise may not have been available.

The 1990s saw a decline in the use of the moderate category in the public discourse. During this time, Western efforts may have been diverted to other conflict zones. During that period, nonetheless, radicalism began to transform. With the end of the Cold War and following years of inter-Arab tensions, pan-Arabism ceased to be seen as the embodiment of radicalism and a threat to regional order. Instead, it was political Islam, or Islamism, that took its place. Much like pan-Arabism, Islamism emerged in the first half of the 20th century as a challenge to the existing order in the Middle East. Notable Islamist thinkers also rejected the borders between Muslim states and advanced the implementation of the Islamic *shari'a* law in place of the secular state law. It was following the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the assassination of Anwar Sadat in 1981, and the appearance of militant Islamist organizations, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas and the Islamic Jihad in the Palestinian territories, and later al-Qa'eda, that marked Islamism as the embodiment of radicalism.[32] Much like their pan-Arab predecessors, the Islamists have been perceived by Western governments as nihilists seeking to destroy international order, abolish Israel and undermine regional stability. This seeming change was embodied in the Iranian efforts to export their model to neighbouring states and undermine the legitimacy of conservative monarchies,[33] and terror attacks carried out by Islamist organizations, whether Sunni or Shi'i.[34]

With the September 11 terror attacks and the ensuing interventions in Iraq, American and British policymakers resumed their search for moderate Arab leaders. The attacks and the growing

disconcert even among the West on how to deal with terrorism gave birth in Washington to a Manichean understanding of international politics, of 'us against them',[35] which the Labour government under Tony Blair also adopted.[36] Once again, regional actors were classified, perhaps with even greater fervour than in the past, between a moderate and radical camp.[37] A notable advocate of this perception was Condoleezza Rice, the National Security Advisor and later Secretary of State in the George W. Bush administrations. Already as a foreign policy advisor to Bush as the Republican presidential candidate, Rice blamed Iran for trying to 'to destabilize moderate Arab states such as Saudi Arabia'.[38] In 2006 Rice blamed 'Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, Hamas, [for] trying to destabilize democratic and moderate forces. Trying to throw the region into chaos'.[39] The moderate Arab regimes, in turn, were expected to come out against the radicals, namely Iran, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in the Gaza Strip and Syria.[40] Already the day after the 11 September attacks, which marked the beginning of the War on Terror, Richard Holbrook, a veteran American diplomat explained that any response to the attack should involve 'the moderate Arab states, because the bulk of the Muslim world does not support this kind of thing'.[41] Rice added that she 'will be trying to find a way to rally moderate forces on behalf of emerging democratic moderate forces in the region to withstand what I think is a now quite substantial push against them by extremists and by Iranian-led extremism'.[42] And while Washington acknowledged the precarious position of the moderates toward the Iraq War, they were still expected to tacitly accept US interests in Iraq.

Going back to the earlier discussion in the article, it can be said that foreign observers and policymakers came up with moderation as a category of analysis – again, as a way to simplify regional geopolitics, legitimize alliance-making with authoritarian regimes and justify their own policies in the Middle East. However, their subjects of analysis were not blind to this depiction. As the following section demonstrates, policymakers and elites in countries such as Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have grasped the meaning that moderation may have for them, and the impact it can have on their standing and interaction with their allies and international community.

Turning Moderation into a Category of Practice

The moderate Arab leaders and their representatives, through their direct interaction with their Western counterparts and their exposure to the predominant discourses among Western

policymakers and the media, identified the dichotomy the latter have made of Middle Eastern actors. While they may have been reluctant at first to accept this dichotomy, soon they began using it. Initially this took place mainly in their personal encounters with their Western counterparts. At a 1969 meeting with the American Ambassador in Riyadh, King Faysal of Saudi Arabia described his kingdom as an 'island of moderation in what has now become leftist sea'.[43] The King then asked Washington to 'strengthen few Arab moderates who remain' against the pro-Soviet 'UAR [Egypt], Algeria, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and South Yemen'.[44] By which, the King meant a more even-handed approach to Israel. In 1973, the Saudi Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Omar al-Saqqaf, urged Washington in a meeting with the American ambassador to 'strengthen the hand of Arab moderates at the [Arab League] conference' by urging Israel to withdraw to withdraw to the ceasefire lines after the 1973 War.[45] He commented that 'Baghdad's and Tripoli's absence will make it much easier for the more moderate Arab states to dominate the session'.[46] Similarly, when Cairo tried to persuade President Ronald Raegan to keep American marine forces in Beirut after Hezbollah's attacks on their barracks, Egypt's former Prime Minister and a close ally of President Hosni Mubarak, Mustafa Khalil, warned that such move 'would weaken moderates, such as King Hussein, who must rely on American support should he decide to risk negotiations'.[47]

Hence, the moderate regimes saw their moderation as a leverage to make demands of their Western allies. They did not simply demand concessions in return for their support of American efforts; rather, they presented their demands as part of an effort to preserve a regional status quo and undermine the policies of radicals. In this fashion, the moderates distanced the meaning of moderation from simply being associated with compliance with Washington's demands. Instead of indicating compliance with Western dictates, the so-called moderates associated moderation with commitment to status quo and stability. Here it is worthy to mention that Realists and Neorealist approaches to international politics have emphasized the existence of status quo states or powers in the system.[48] Yet, this definition revolves mostly around what foreign powers would have defined as status quo. Even the applications of the term to the Middle East have mostly ignored from how the regional status quo powers, with Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan often mentioned among them,[49] defined their position and the meaning of status quo.

In this fashion, moderation also served the Arab leaders in defending positions that challenged the status quo designed by the West. When Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, or the 'moderate oil-producing states' as the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office described them,[50] decided to

use oil as a weapon and impose an embargo on Western governments, they guaranteed to British diplomats that this will be only a limited embargo, as 'gesture of solidarity and a safety valve for popular pressures'.[51] And so, the moderate Arabs were capable of presenting a hostile move against their allies (as they did again in 1973) as an act of moderation. This was also true for the moderate regimes' approach toward Israel, and their effort to balance between their strategic needs, American pressures, and popular demands. Indeed, in the mid-1970s, some observers described statements and policies by Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan as a 'peace offensive' on Israel, carried out by 'the moderate leaders of the Arab World'.[52] In turn, signing the peace agreement with Israel in Camp David served Sadat to distinguish Egypt from the 'radical regimes in Syria and Iraq', which, he predicted, 'were to collapse'.[53] After Egypt agreed to join the coalition fighting Iraq in 1991, the Egyptian Foreign Minister, Asmat Abdel Meguid, explained his government's decision to send forces to Saudi Arabia in that 'preserving regional security is a necessity, but such a security system must emanate from within and with the consent of countries in the region'.[54] This not only reflected the tensions Hosni Mubarak faced when making this decision, but also Cairo's need to present its policies as stemming from a local, Arab needs.

If we take Schwedler's definition of moderation, we can see an element of that in the analysis of the moderate Arab regimes. As in Schwedler's definition, the moderate regimes have agreed to participate in a system designed by others and according to their rules. On the other hand, it can also be seen that by agreeing to function as moderates, these regimes also began changing the meaning of moderation and instilling new content in this definition, one that exceeded the passive definition initially introduced by the Western powers. As the tension between moderation and pan-Arabism vanished in the 1990s, it became easier for these regimes to openly present themselves as moderates. Already in the late 1980s, as the new world order began to transpire, Bahrain's Information Minister, Tariq al-Moayyed, clarified the Gulf States' rapprochement with Egypt after a period of disconnect following the peace agreement with Israel in that 'Egypt is now an important member of the moderate Arab camp, and Mubarak's style makes it much easier (for the Arabs) to deal with the free world'.[55] And as the search for 'moderate Arabs' returned to the agenda after the launch of the War on Terror campaign by the Bush administration, in which cooperation between Western and Arab governments turned denser, the moderate regimes became even less reserved about identifying themselves as moderates.

True to that, the moderate regimes have proven useful in supporting the War on Terror efforts. Domestically, they denounced and delegitimized the jihadists, rooted them out of their enclaves and shared intelligence with their counterparts.[56] At the regional level, their actions concentrated on containing Iran and its allies and clients, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Gaza Strip.[57] Clearly, the moderates had their own reasons to counter jihadists and Iranian influence in the region, rather than merely appearing as moderates. Nevertheless, the moderate category, with its dichotomy of 'us against them', served the moderate regimes in justifying their participation in the War on Terror. Egyptian officers, who allegedly trained British intelligence officers in counterterrorism, claimed to have 'succeeded in explaining to the British services the difference between moderate and extremist Muslims'.[58] The UAE seemed to have been the keenest to present itself as a 'moderate Arab' in this context. In a meeting between US Congressman Christopher Shays and the Emirati Minister of Economy, Sheikha Lubna Al Qasimi, the US representatives asked the Minister 'a moderate Arab state looks like'. The Minister replied 'the UAE'.[59]

This discourse was not confined to communicating with Western audiences. The so-called moderate regimes grew more willing to describe themselves as 'moderate Arabs', especially to justify actions deemed controversial by their publics. King Abdullah, in a 2004 interview, whose Arabic version was uploaded to the Jordanian monarch's official website, did not hesitate to declare that 'al-Qa'eda represents a threat to Iran as much as it does to the moderate Arabs'.[60] When Omar Suleiman, the Director of the Egyptian General Intelligence Directorate, mediated between the Palestinian factions in 2003, he was cited urging Yasser Arafat to reorganize Hamas so that the Palestinian Authority would 'become a real moderate power in facing the extremist Islamic groups'.[61] *Al-Ahram* newspaper, traditionally a mouthpiece of the Egyptian government, described the Cairo Conference in October 2006 as the 'gathering of the moderate Arab states', meaning Egypt, Jordan and the Gulf Cooperation Council members (namely the Gulf States).[62] The UAE's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr Anwar Gargash, declared in the opening speech to a conference of Arab policymakers, which was also circulated by the Emirates News Agency, that 'the moderate Arab and Islamic bloc in the region has gained more power… that would enable moderate Arab states to develop a progressive agenda'.[63]

In turn, the moderate label remained useful in disparaging US policies even during the War on Terror, such as its seemingly biased support of Israel, or its actions in other parts of the Middle

East. One op-ed in al-Ahram proclaimed that the 'moderate Arab states… must stress it to the American president that he must distinguish between terrorism and jihad on the one hand, and resistance against the occupier on the other'.[64] On other instances, the official media used the moderate role to criticize Washington for damaging and compromising regional stability, namely the principle of moderation. An op-ed in the state-owned Jordanian newspaper *al-Dustur*, for example, condemned American policies in Iraq on behalf of the 'moderate states that are friendly toward Washington' for creating an 'industry of violence' in the country and failing to provide security and stability to the Iraqi people.[65] Elsewhere, a commentator in al-Ahram pointed that 'these were the moderate states that objected and prevented by any means possible any of the Bush's administration to militarily strike Iran'.[66]

On the other hand, beyond chastising their Western policymakers about their responsibility toward their moderate allies, categorizing themselves as moderates served as a framework for the moderates' efforts to mediate between Israel and the Palestinians. Mediation has played an important role in the evolving identity of the Arab states and in securing their international prestige.[67] But mediating between Israel and the Palestinians, the historical enemy of Arab nationalism on the one hand, and their symbol respectively, required a renewed framing of national interests and regional order. In 2002, in the midst of the Second Intifada, the Saudi Crown Prince, Abdullah Al Saud, presented during the Arab Summit in Beirut a comprehensive peace initiative, known as the Arab Peace Initiative (informally the Saudi Initiative). This plan offered Israel normalization with the Arab states in return for a withdrawal from the territories occupied in 1967. The plan was reified again in 2007, to accommodate some of Israel's misgivings. The initiative faced both suspicion from Israel and Washington, and hostility from Arab public opinion.[68] But the initiative was also Saudi Arabia's endeavour to establish itself in the role of 'regional coordinator'.[69] The initiative won the support of Egypt, Jordan and other Arab regimes. And they immediately turned to associate their mediation efforts with their moderate image, which allowed these regimes to present their actions to their Western counterparts as part of the alliance which is crucial to defeat radicals in the region. In a 2002 interview with CNN, King Abdullah of Jordan called Israel to speed up peace talks with the Palestinians 'so that moderate Arab states can tackle the issue of terrorism with their nationals'. He concluded the interview in that offering a peaceful future to the Arabs 'gives us moderate countries… the ammunition we need to be able to fight terrorism even more'.[70]

Such statements were backed by actions. The years following the initial Saudi Initiative saw two rounds of conflict between Israel and Arab actors. The first round saw Hezbollah and Israel clashing in summer 2006. The second round took place in winter 2008/2009, with Israel launching attack on Hamas-strongholds in Gaza. In both cases, the moderate regimes responded to the fighting in an unprecedented fashion. All Arab regimes rebuked Israel for the aggression, as in past cases. Yet, in 2006, Cairo, Riyadh and Amman condemned Hezbollah during the Arab summit for its 'unexpected, inappropriate and irresponsible acts'. The Saudi foreign minister, Prince Saud al-Faisal, warned that 'These acts will pull the whole region back to years ago, and we cannot simply accept them'[71] Hezbollah was a relatively easy target. Arab governments have seen the organization as an Iranian proxy. Hamas was a different story. Although a radical actor and an ad hoc ally of Iran, the Palestinian cause remained at the heart of Arab identity and gained mass popular support. Still, the Arab regimes in questions reprimanded both parties to the conflict. President Hosni Mubarak derided Hamas for 'seeking political gains at the expense of the Palestinian people.'[72] An editorial in the Saudi-owned Arabic-language *al-sharq al-awsat* newspaper warned of 'leniency' toward the 'extremist' Hamas and its allies in Tehran.[73] In parallel to their condemnation of Hamas, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan were quick to launch mediation efforts. Soon into the fighting, President Mubarak announced his readiness to mediate peace between Israel and Hamas.[74]

Again, the point here is not that the Arab regimes condemned Hezbollah and Hamas because they wanted to appear moderate. In addition to being perceived as Iran's allies, the willingness of both organizations to stand up to Israel projected badly on the Arab regimes. It was impossible for the Arab governments to vocalize these concerns without alienating even further their publics. Therefore, associating their actions, whether condemnation or mediation, with their moderate stand enabled the moderate leaders to frame their actions without alienating neither of their audiences, international nor domestic. Thus, Marwan Muasher, Jordan's Foreign Minister at the time of the initiative, urged Israel directly to accept the initiative. Over the pages of the Israeli daily, *Haaretz*, he reasoned that the 'moderate Arab peace initiative' is a mutual interest of 'the moderate camp, in both the Arab world and in Israel'.[75]

Policymakers in Washington did not remain indifferent to this conditioning between moderation, the War on Terror and peace process with Israel. Philip Zelikow, a counsellor to the State Department who played a prominent role in designing American counterterrorism strategies,

explained to an audience in Washington that: 'For the Arab moderates and for the Europeans, some sense of progress and momentum on the Arab-Israeli dispute is just a sine qua non for their ability to cooperate actively with the United States on a lot of other things that we care about'.[76] When asked what he meant by 'a moderate Arab state', since 'the two Arab countries that made peace with Israel – Egypt and Jordan – are not exactly democratic', Zelikow clarified that 'Arab moderates are those Arab governments that believe outside their borders in peacefully constructing a future for their region instead of violently destroying the status quo. And second, states that within their borders are trying to chart a better future for their people'.[77] Zelikow's words echoed the leverage that the moderate regimes had on policymakers in the Bush administration.

The Arab uprisings, and particularly the Syrian Civil War, have marked a watershed in the international politics of the Middle East. As such, it provided regional and international actors an opportunity to redefine realities and concepts. The 'moderate' category has remained relevant and highly used in this new context as well, though it has transformed into a new category – that of the 'moderate opposition/rebels'. The Arab moderates played a role in this transformation, which tells greatly about the importance of the moderate category in the international politics of the region.

The Syrian Civil War and the Appearance of the 'Moderate Opposition'

The collapse of the Syrian state following the outbreak of the civil war, and the chaos which the area was thrown into necessitated a revaluation of the existing order on the side of most regional actors. Initially, when the violence in Syria had still been limited to mass demonstrations and government crackdowns, most regional actors and their foreign allies were not keen on the removal of the Bashar al-Assad regime. The fear of regional disorder and the fate of the old regimes in Egypt and Libya drove Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Washington to negotiate with Assad.[78] But when violence deteriorated into a civil war, most Arab states, along with Turkey and the Western governments revised their stand. By 2012, they began demanding explicitly the removal of the Assad regime. In response, Assad intensified the crackdown on the opposition, which drove more Syrians to the arms of the rebels.

The first rebel movement was Free Syrian Army (FSA), which was composed of Syrian army defectors. The FSA was recognised by foreign governments as representing the uprising. Soon, though, the FSA began splintering along political lines and new forces mushroomed across

the county. The civil war was further complicated by the joining of Kurdish rebels, fighting for autonomy in the predominantly Kurdish provinces in the north of the country.[79] Though now openly seeking the overthrow of the Assad regime, the parties involved had neither the desire nor the capacity to intervene in the conflict directly. The Barack Obama administration was reluctant to get entangled again in the Middle Eastern after the withdrawal of American forces from Iraq. The moderate Arabs, in turn, could not intervene in Syria on their own. Under these circumstances, there rose a need to find local allies from amid the warring parties. After the FSA had lost its position as leading the rebellion, a process had begun to trace new proxies.

This task proved to be extremely difficult. The rise in the number of insurgent groups, and the growing prominence of Islamist factions, made it difficult for the anti-Assad axis to coordinate their support. While Washington remained suspicious of Islamist factions, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates saw some Islamist opposition groups, and particularly Salafi insurgents, as legitimate clients, unlike the jihadists and the Muslim Brotherhood.[80] The space here is too narrow to discuss the rationale of foreign participation in the conflict. What is relevant here is that the moderate category once again became relevant. Much as their Western counterparts in previous years, the moderate Arab regimes had to justify their choices of allies and proxies. To do that, the Saudi, Jordanian and Emirati regimes began to categorize the Syrian opposition groups as either moderate or radical. Much as the term 'moderate Arab regimes' and its derivatives had been popular in previous years, and while its use began to decline, the 'moderate opposition' category became especially popular in relation to the Syrian Civil War. To illustrate this point, in the decade preceding the civil war, the term 'moderate opposition' in relation to Syria appeared in the American media 4 times, and none at all in the British media. In the Arabic media, the term 'the moderate opposition' (*al-mu'arada al-mu'tadila*) in relations to Syria appeared only once before the beginning of the civil, and the term 'the moderate opposition' in general only 11 times.[81] However, between 2011 and 2018, the use of this term increased dramatically. In the American and British media, the term spiked to 2,788 uses. In Arabic language media, the term appeared 3,464 times.

Several empirical examples help to demonstrate the way in which the moderate Arab regimes came to refer to the moderate rebels. Addressing an Arab audience through the Saudi Press Agency (SPA), the Saudi Foreign Minister, Sa'ud bin Faysal explained Saudi resistance to Assad by blaming him for turning Syria into a 'haven for terrorist organizations… which enables him to

threaten Syria and the rest of the World'. Hence, Faysal added, 'it is necessary that increase our efforts to encourage and support the moderate opposition in anything they need in terms of supply and training so that they could face Assad's terror and the terrorist organizations'.[82] In a speech to the Saudi *Shura* (Consultative Assembly), King Salman declared that:

> The kingdom's stand on the Syrian Civil War has been clear from the start. It is to keep Syria united, bringing together Syrians of all sects. It [Saudi Arabia] calls for a political resolution… through the formation of a provisional government that would withdraw from the moderate forces, support Syrian unity and deport all foreign forces and terrorist organizations.[83]

Similarly, the Egyptian Foreign Minister, Sameh Shoukry, described the situation in Syria as 'an amalgamation of wars', with 'the terrorists fighting the regime, as well as against the moderate opposition, while the latter are fighting against it and each other'.[84] The Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs described Egyptian involvement in the Syrian conflict in the English-language State Information Service as involving 'Sponsorship of the Egyptian Intelligence for an agreement with the moderate Syrian opposition'.[85] The Jordanian monarch, King Abdullah, declared in a speech in 2014 that 'In Syria, there must be a political solution based on reforms that will ensure that all parts of society have a role in rebuilding their country. The international community must push both the moderate opposition and the regime to the negotiations table'.[86] He has continued to use the concept of moderate opposition in his communications, whether with the American public opinion,[87] Russian leadership,[88] and other audience, stressing the importance of protecting the 'moderate opposition'. The UAE, too, embraced this terminology. In a speech to the UN General Assembly in 2014 about the need to counter extremist organizations, and especially the rising Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (*Dawlat al-Islam fi-l-'Iraq wa-l-Sham*, henceforth ISIS), the Emirati Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, declared that 'At this critical juncture, we must support the moderate Syrian opposition as part of an effective strategy to counter extremism and terrorism'.[89] This message was circulated in UAE's English and Arabic news services.

Much like the Western governments, then, the moderate Arab regimes embraced the 'moderate' as a category of analysis. To a great extent, when employing the 'moderate opposition/rebels' label to describe their Syrian proxies, the moderate regimes preserved the traits

that they and their Western allies had used in previous years to describe the 'moderate Arab regimes/states'. In their description of the moderate opposition, the Arab observers have described them as those who resist extremism, reject foreign intervention in their country, are interested in preserving the borders of Syria and in general committed to the existing order in Syria and the region. This put them in contrast to the jihadist organization, and most notably ISIS and the al-Qa'eda-affiliated al-Nusra Front (*Jabhat al-Nusra*). The latter have relied extensively on foreign fighters and have declared their desire to annihilate the regional order based on the nation-state.[90] Perhaps the most succinct definition of the moderate opposition came actually from the Qatari Minister of Foreign Affairs, Khaled bin Muhammad al-'Atiyya. Defending his government's decision to support the Salafi *Ahrar al-Sham* group, which also gained Saudi support, 'Atiyya described the movement in an interview to CNN, which was translated into Arabic and uploaded on the Qatari Foreign Ministry's website, that 'it is our, and our friends', responsibility to do whatever we can to protect the Syrian people, through supporting the moderate opposition'. Ahrar al-Sham, according to 'Atiyya 'are not the allies of al-Qa'eda. They are a group of Syrians fighting to liberate Syria and we by no means consider them extremist and terrorist… they are part of the moderate opposition, struggling to liberate their country'.[91]

Here again, the moderate label was not simply a rhetorical exercise. It was about persuading various audiences – and the above statements were made both in English and Arabic – about the legitimacy of supporting certain factions and fighting others. Such legitimation has meant the provision of political, financial and military support. As the moderate category had dominated the discourse of alliance-making in the international politics of the previous years, it was maybe natural for the so-called moderates to recycle it into the new settings. There have been numerous allegations that the moderate regimes did not stick to supporting only moderate rebels at all times, and that at least circles or groups within these regimes have also supported rebels that have fallen into the radical/extremist category.[92] But the point remains that the need to identify moderates as the acceptable recipients of international support remained crucial to regional and international politics. And that 'moderation' has remained revolving around the same principles and ideas developed in previous decades by both foreign powers and the local actors in their interaction and debates.

Conclusion

This article has sought to explore the evolution of the use of the 'moderate' label in the international politics of the Middle East. The main focus here has been on the construction of the 'moderate Arab states'. An interesting point that has been brought up in this paper, and which had not received much attention in previous works on moderation in international politics, is that the 'moderate' label has been constructed not only by foreign powers, e.g. the US and the UK, in their search for local allies, but also by the so-called moderates themselves. Embracing this label and the roles associated with it, they have turned the 'moderate' from a simple category of analysis into a category of practice. While appearing as a moderate has not necessarily been the top motivation for these governments in their policy-making processes, it has affected their conduct. This is evident in their constant attempts to define their policies as representing moderation. Even more so, their interlocutors in the West have also accepted their own definition of moderation. And this has served both parties to legitimize their cooperation and exchanges to often suspicious audiences. When the regional setting began to transform, the moderate Arab regimes had moderation as a ready-made label to be used to define their proxies and clients in the Syrian Civil War. Thus, the 'moderate' has once again become a category of analysis, this time at the hands of the so-called moderate Arabs. And once again, it has become a tool aimed to legitimize alliance-making and collaboration. Nonetheless, that the traits of moderation that had characterized the definition of the moderate Arabs in the previous decades have remained relevant in the last decade, during the Syrian Civil War, indicates the power of this category, either used for analysis, or for practice.

This paper, then, is a call for a greater scrutiny of 'moderation', and of the 'moderate Arab' in particular, as a subject of analysis. For instance, the article identifies periods of decline in the use of the 'moderate' label in American and British discourses. But was that indeed an outcome of international circumstances, or has this also been affected by the incumbents in Washington and London, for instance? Furthermore, the paper has explored the manner in which both foreign powers and the so-called moderates have engaged with the concept. But what about the so-called radicals? How have they received this dichotomy? Has this categorisation affected their policies and conduct too? The conceptualization of moderation in this paper serves as a useful starting point for future enquiries.

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