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# New Middle East Cold War: Saudi Arabia and Iran's Rivalry

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NEW MIDDLE EAST COLD WAR:  
SAUDI ARABIA AND IRAN'S RIVALRY

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Joseph Korbel School of International Studies

University of Denver

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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by

Tali R. Grumet

August 2015

Advisor: Dr. Joseph Szyliowicz

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### **Abstract**

The competing powers of Saudi Arabia and Iran continue to redress and reverse the strategic imbalance and direction of the Middle East's regional politics. The 1979 Iranian Revolution catapulted these two states into an embittered rivalry. The fall of Saddam Hussein following the 2003 U.S. led invasion, the establishment of a Shi'ite Iraq and the 2011 Arab Uprisings have further inflamed tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Iran and Saudi Arabia have not confronted each other militarily, but rather have divided the region into two armed camps on the basis of political and religious ideology in seeking regional allies and promulgating sectarianism as they continue to exploit the region's weak states in a series of proxy wars ranging from conflicts in Iraq to Lebanon. The Saudi-Iranian strategic and geopolitical rivalry is further complicated by a religious and ideological rivalry, as tensions represent two opposing aspirations for Islamic leadership with two vastly differing political systems. The conflict is between Saudi Arabia, representing Sunni Islam via Wahhabism, and Iran, representing Shi'ite Islam through Khomeinism. The nature of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry has led many Middle East experts to identify their rivalry as a "New Middle East Cold War." The Saudi-Iranian rivalry has important implications for regional stability and U.S. national security interests. Therefore, this thesis seeks to address the question: Is a cold war framework applicable when analyzing the Saudi Arabian and Iranian relationship?

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

The interaction between politics and religion in the Middle East has driven the region into a period of intense crisis and confrontation. Out of the ashes of the Ottoman Empire and Western colonialism, competing powers within the region continue to redress and reverse the strategic imbalance and direction of the Middle East's regional politics. During the past four decades, a major determinant of Middle Eastern politics has been Saudi-Iranian relations. Since the 1979 Iranian revolution, Saudi Arabia and Iran have been engaged in a bitter rivalry. Their ongoing dispute and Sunni-Shi'ite proxy wars will continue to have important implications for regional stability and U.S. national security interests.

The fall of Saddam Hussein following the 2003 U.S. led invasion, and the subsequent establishment of a Shi'ite Iraq, has changed the balance of power between Iran and Saudi Arabia, increasing tensions between the rival countries to unparalleled heights. In their struggle for Middle East hegemony, Iran and Saudi Arabia have not confronted each other militarily, but rather have divided the region into two armed camps on the basis of political ideology. As a means of seeking regional allies and increasing



their power and influence in the region, Saudi Arabia and Iran continue to disseminate sectarianism and exploit the region's weak states through a series of proxy wars in Iraq, Yemen, Syria, Lebanon and Bahrain. Furthermore, Iran and Saudi Arabia's proxy wars in the region, following the Arab Uprisings, provided a fertile ground for the rise of extremist groups such as ISIS to emerge as powerful players in the region.

### **Significance of the Topic and Thesis Question**

Stability in the Middle East is integral to the national security interests of the United States. Saudi Arabia and Iran's exploitation of weakened political institutions will have serious effects on security, stability and economic growth in the region. The geopolitical struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran presents an increasingly complex set of challenges for the Middle East. The Saudi-Iranian rivalry is further complicated by a religious and ideological competition, with structural tensions representing two opposing aspirations for Islamic leadership that overlap with the strategic and geopolitical rivalry. These religious and ideological tensions encompass a competition between Saudi Arabia, representing Sunni Islam and its Wahhabi interpretations, and Iran, representing Shi'ite Islam through its Khomeini doctrines. This Sunni-Shi'ite identity and the state collective have fed into the bitter enmity that exists between Saudi Arabia and Iran, influencing the foreign policies and bilateral relations of these two nations. In turn, this rivalry is defining the strategic landscape of the Middle East

Though the competition between these two states is enduring, paying attention to the rivalry now is principally crucial. In order for the United States to understand the full implications of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, it is important to understand the relational dynamics between Saudi Arabia and Iran and analyze how Saudi Arabia and Iran politicize these tensions by supporting their proxies and encouraging sectarianism. When addressing the rivalry, many renowned Middle East experts have begun to identify the current conflicts in the Middle East as “New Middle East Cold War” between Saudi Arabia and Iran. There are many vast and wide implications of a cold war in the Middle East and it is central to address how accurate a description this cold war framework is when analyzing the Saudi Arabian and Iranian relationship. Thus, to comprehend the current tensions occurring in the Middle East, this thesis seeks to address the following question: can the regional conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran be framed as the new Middle East “cold war”?

### **Thesis Methodology and Design**

This thesis is meant bring readers an understanding of the current reality surrounding Middle East history, politics and identity while focusing on the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. In order to analyze whether Saudi Arabia and Iran are engaged in a cold war, this thesis will explore four different time periods: 1924-1979; 1979-2003; 2003-2011; 2011-Present. These time periods will address the historical relations between the Saudis and Iranians prior to the 1979 Iranian Revolution, outline the respective goals of Saudi Arabia

and Iran, and how these two states are implementing their foreign policies in their quest for regional power and influence. Additionally, this thesis will look to comprehend the shift in the balance of power that occurred since the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and the Arab Uprisings in 2011.

This study primarily focuses on qualitative methodology, using a case study approach. Data will be collected based on an evaluation of primary and secondary sources. These published sources range from government documents, journal articles and scholarly books. Key information has been drawn from reports from prominent U.S. and foreign think tanks, newspaper articles, especially Arab newspapers in English, and an assortment of books by prominent observers of U.S. policy and Middle East Experts. This paper also uses a variety of quantitative data, analyzing data sets on war, conflict and economic trends.

In this thesis, chapter two looks towards foreign policy theories on interstate rivalries in world politics and will provide a theoretical foundation of warfare. This thesis then provides an alternate way to define warfare by adding a fourth dimension, cold war. Using the case study of the United States and Soviet Union Cold War, this thesis identifies characteristics of a cold war in order to compare and contrast them to the conflict trends occurring in the Middle East between rival states Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Chapter three analyzes the rivalry within its historical context in order to understand just how the conflict behavior of and between Saudi Arabia and Iran is influenced. This chapter first focuses on the origins of schism that exists between the Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims. It then explores how Saudi Arabia and Iran have consolidated and pursued state power during the years 1924-1979. Chapter three highlights the significant events surrounding phases of normalized bilateral relations and enmity.

In chapter four, this thesis will demonstrate how the Islamic Revolution of 1979 altered Saudi-Iranian relations. Events following the 1979 revolution increased tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran to such a degree that it locked them in a state of enduring enmity. Although there was a brief time period in the 1990's where the two nations reach a state of détente, it was not destined to last.

Chapter five begins with the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and examines how the creation of the first Arab Shi'ite state changed the balance of power between Saudi Arabia and Iran. This chapter then seeks to identify the political, religious and security dimensions of the events leading up to 2011 by considering the affects of Iran's nuclear pursuit and by mapping out the geography of their conflict in Iraq, Yemen, the Palestinian Territories, and Lebanon.

In the sixth chapter, this study seeks to explain the intensification of the competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. The ideological dimensions of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry continue to encompass the growing

sectarian character of political conflict in the region, as Saudi Arabia and Iran increase their capitalization of the weakened political institutions in the Gulf and the wider Middle East. This chapter will then look at the nature of the rivalry following the Arab Spring, as Saudi Arabia and Iran continue to fight proxy wars and institute military interventions in Bahrain, Syria and Yemen in order to maintain their spheres of influence in the Gulf and in the Levant.

## **Chapter Two: Cold War Framework**

In order to understand and explain the inter-state relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran, it is fundamental to look towards foreign policy theories on interstate rivalries in world politics. This section will provide a theoretical foundation of warfare and an evolutionary approach to inter-state rivalries. Following this section, this paper will use the United States-Soviet Union Cold War literature as a case study to identify dimensions of a cold war and analyze how the current tensions in the Middle East compare or contrast. In order to fully consider the political history and current foreign policy trends of the Middle East, this thesis will also incorporate the concept of state identity and its role.

### **Systemic Rivalries**

The evolution of geopolitics is ongoing. Powers rise, fall and shift. Such transitions have often coincided with warfare. The history of the nation-state has been fraught with conflict and violence. In the fight for sovereignty and political legitimacy, nations have been willing to fight for their beliefs, interests and objectives. War, here, is defined as sustained combat between/among military contingents involving substantial casualties (with the criterion being a minimum of 1,000 battle deaths). Wars can be

subdivided into three categories: Interstate, intrastate and extra state.<sup>1</sup> In fact, studies of rivalries have shown that not only are rivalries a major component of international relations, but one study even found that 12 percent of the dyads account for more than 60 percent of the total militarized disputes.<sup>2</sup>

Most interstate conflict occurs between countries that are long-time rivals. While some dyads (pairs of states) are able to manage or resolve their issues, countries that have engaged in frequent confrontations over extended periods of times become engaged in a situation that is known as an “enduring rivalry.” These rivalries are dynamic and evolve out of multiple interactions between the two adversaries. Inter-state rivalry theory explains that as two adversaries accumulate a history of protracted conflict, “their rivalry relationship tends to become ‘locked in’ or entrenched, with future conflict becoming increasingly difficult to avoid...” In addition, for a rivalry to be considered enduring the two adversaries must be engaged in a competitive relationship over one or more interests and each nation must perceive the other as a significant security threat with hostile intent and capabilities.<sup>3</sup> This concept of rivalry can involve a wide range of applications that have political, economic, social or military dimensions. Additionally, it is important to note that the relationship between rivals may change based on each nation’s relative

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<sup>1</sup> *Correlates of War Project*, in the COW War Data, 1816 - 2007 (v4.0), accessed May 8, 2015, <http://www.correlatesofwar.org/data-sets/COW-war>.

<sup>2</sup> G. Goertz and P. F. Diehl. 1993. Enduring rivalries: Theoretical constructs and empirical patterns. *International Security Quarterly* 37:147-71.

<sup>3</sup> Paul R. Hensel, 1999. An Evolutionary Approach to the Study of Interstate Rivalry. *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 17, (2): 177

perception of threat and competitiveness regarding the other. Rivalries are not static but rather change over time and thus may shift between states of enduring rivalry towards cooperative (if not peaceful) relations at any time based on their interactions.

Enduring rivalries have traditionally led nations to resort to militarized means to resolve their differences. This causative viewpoint of rivalries and warfare has been elaborated by Carl von Clausewitz's conceptual framework for how to think of warfare and strategy. The infamous 19<sup>th</sup> century military theorist, Carl von Clausewitz, explained that war is instigated by a rational calculation to meet a political objective; war is the "continuation of political intercourse with the addition of other means."<sup>4</sup>

In order to achieve the principal objective of overthrowing the enemy, the "will of the people" must be taken into consideration. It is only by destroying the will of the enemy that victory (and peace) can be achieved; "the activities of hostile agencies cannot be regarded as ended so long as the will of the enemy is not subdued..."<sup>5</sup> Additionally, the psychology of an army's combatants and their will to succeed must constantly be adhered to.

The destruction of the enemy to achieve a political objective is, therefore, been predominantly accomplished by the consequent destruction of the enemy's military forces via direct military action. For war to occur, policy makers believe that the best way to pursue a state's goals and interests is through military means. Furthermore, once

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<sup>4</sup> *The Book of War*. New York: Modern Library, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid



conflict becomes protracted, hostility and tensions between the two nations become rooted in the state's identity and thus become embedded in the domestic politics of a nation and national security is defined in juxtaposition with the rival country.<sup>6</sup> A last theme regarding inter-state rivalries that is important to note is that once established, those individuals and groups that stand to benefit the most from rivalry will see these rivalries as an inherent reinforcement to their positions of influence. As Paul Hensel explains, "In short, domestic politics seem likely to both be affected by rivalry, and to exert an important degree on foreign policy making in rivalry situations."<sup>7</sup>

#### **Adding a Fourth dimension to Wars and Rivalries:**

Perhaps no greater rivalry had greater implications for the world than that which existed during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century between the United States and the Soviet Union. Warfare changes and the experiences of World War II shaped the transformation of how wars were fought. At the end of World War II, a bipolar world was created in which the United States and its allies and the Soviet Union and its satellite states engaged in the struggle for supremacy. Although they were allies during World War Two, by 1946 existing tensions between the Soviet Union and United States peaked and resulted in a globalized Cold War that lasted over four decades. The Cold War dominated much of Russian and American life after 1945. The United States believed

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<sup>6</sup> Paul R. Hensel, (1998b). "Evolutionary Perspectives on Recurrent Conflict and Rivalry." Paper presented at the Conference on Evolutionary Perspectives on International Relations, Bloomington, IN, December 1998.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 183.

that the American system was destined to inspire a unified international system, which included an open Eastern Europe. Russia, on the other hand, sought to introduce their brand of communism to nations and territories that they occupied at the end of World War II and thus viewed Eastern Europe as central to its security and power.

The rivalry that existed between the United States and Soviet Union can not be classified as an inter-state war, as the political, social and economic tensions that existed became exacerbated to such a degree that the two nations foreign policies expanded, culminating in a series of both small and large wars that were fought in almost every corner of the world.<sup>8</sup> During the Cold War, the superpowers intervened in domestic politics of both allied nations and in the bloody conflicts in the developing world where American and Russian surrogates (and sometimes Russian and American soldiers) would fight each other. These conflicts killed tens of millions of people in Korea, Vietnam, the Middle East, Central America and Afghanistan.<sup>9</sup> What is important about the Cold War relationship in the context of inter-state rivalries is that while the rivalry that existed between the United States and Soviet Union qualifies as an enduring rivalry, the militarized disputes between the two superpowers did not involve the destruction of the enemy via direct military action. Additionally, the rivalry had overlapping elements of interstate, extra state and intra state wars. These distinctions are incredibly important to

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<sup>8</sup> James R. Arnold and Roberta Wiener, eds., *Cold War: the Essential Reference Guide* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2012), xiv.

<sup>9</sup> Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945-2006*, 10th ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill Humanities/Social Sciences/Languages, 2008), 1.

understanding not only the foreign policies of different states but also are essential in order to understand the implications of varying relationships in international politics. Thus, this paper will identify a cold war as a 4<sup>th</sup> dimension of wars and rivalries.

While the situation between the United States and Soviet Union did not directly include fighting or bloodshed, it was a battle nonetheless. In most cases, the west backed one side while the East supported the other. In the 1940's, it was evident that the cost of the Cold War to both the superpowers and to the global world would be significant. Thus, new characterizations of war were adopted to discuss this emerging warfare. By analogy with "cold" war, the term "hot war" was coined to describe open military conflict; an armed conflict between nations. The phrase "cold war" was originally used by George Orwell and in its specific context is attributed to Bernard Baruch, a past advisor to multiple presidents on economic and foreign policy issues. In a speech that he gave in 1947, Baruch warned,

Let us not be deceived-we are today in the midst of a cold war. Our enemies are to be found abroad and at home... The peace of the world is the hope and the goal of our political system; it is the despair and defeat of those who stand against us. We can depend only on ourselves."<sup>10</sup>

This phrase soon caught on to describe the bipolar military and diplomatic rivalry that existed between the nuclear superpowers. The term specifically describe the rivalry as confrontations that did not involve direct military battle, but that involved confrontations via political maneuvering, military coalitions, espionage, propaganda,

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<sup>10</sup> Andrew Glass "Bernard Baruch Coins Term 'cold War,' April 16, 1947," *POLITICO*, 4/16/2010, 1, accessed May 17, 2015, <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0410/35862.html>.

arms buildups, economic aid, and proxy wars between other nations.<sup>11</sup> The Cold War era featured three major and prolonged conflicts in addition to the many small wars, such as the Korean War, which lasted from 1950-1953, the Vietnam War from 1946-1975 and the Afghanistan War from 1979-1989. The Cold War period also marked a time when a massive arms race took place, causing what many historians have indicated to be a time where everyday life in both the East and the West was “militarized.”<sup>12</sup> Trillions of dollars were spent on advancing weaponry, building powerful defense industries and large standing armies. With military preparedness an essential survival tool, each side armed itself and its proxies to fight large-scale battles. No nation in the world remained immune to Cold War influences, with society, culture, the economic and international politics being widely affected by the costs and consequences of the Cold War.

### **Cold War Theory Applied**

The Cold War that lasted between the Soviet Union and the United States was an all-encompassing zero-sum game. Conflict and competition between the two rival countries touched essentially every issue in the immediate post World War II period. It was a conflict that lasted four decades and its affects are still felt in present day international security issues. In the recent years, many Middle East experts have begun to identify the current rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran as part of a larger war in the

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<sup>11</sup> "The Cold War." John F. Kennedy Presidential Library & Museum. Accessed March 26, 2015. <http://www.jfklibrary.org/JFK/JFK-in-History/The-Cold-War.aspx>.

<sup>12</sup> James R. Arnold and Roberta Wiener, eds., *Cold War: the Essential Reference Guide* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2012), ix

entire Middle East, with Saudi Arabia and Iran both fueling and encapsulating the Sunni-Shi'ite conflict. While the Sunni-Shi'ite rivalry is not the root cause of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, it has been politicized in such a way that it has come to reflect an older conflict between sects and states and is an outcome of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry for regional hegemony.<sup>13</sup> The classification that these experts have framed this conflict with is a cold war.

Experts state that while the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran date back to the mid 1920's, ultimately the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the 2003 U.S. led Iraq invasion, and the most recent Arab Uprisings have launched the Middle East into a new cold war. For instance, in a Brookings Doha analysis paper published early in the Summer of 2014, Gregory Gause III states,

The best framework for understanding the complicated and violent regional politics of the Middle East is as a cold war among a number of regional players, both states and non-state actors, in which Iran and Saudi Arabia play the leading roles. It is a cold war because these two main actors are not confronting and most probably will not confront each other militarily. Rather, their contest for influence plays out in the domestic political systems of the region's weak states. It is a struggle over the direction of the Middle East's domestic politics more than a purely military contest.<sup>14</sup>

Other experts have also addressed this security dilemma as a cold war such as Daniel Serwer explains that "it's what the US and Soviet Union were involved in [during]

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<sup>13</sup> Toby Matthiesen, interviewed by Iran Wire, July 8, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> F. Gregory Gause III, "Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War," *Brookings Doha Center Publications*, No. 33 of 44 (July 2014): 3, accessed February 2015, <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2014/07/22-beyond-sectarianism-cold-war-gause/english-pdf.pdf>.

the Cold War...”<sup>15</sup> Roxane Farmanfarmaian, a specialist on Iran and Senior Research Fellow at the Global Policy Institute, posits that it’s a,

Reincarnation of the Arab Cold War...often called the Iran-Saudi proxy war, it is a sectarian confrontation...today, the second Arab Cold War has a different tinge. The Saudi-led moderates have changed little; the radicals however are now no longer secular, but Islamist and primarily Shia, led by Iran’s anti-Western, anti-Israeli ideology.<sup>16</sup>

In his article titled, “Iran and Saudi Arabia Square Off: The Growing Rivalry between Tehran and Riyadh” Dr. Mohsen Milani, warns that the cold war will strengthen anti-democratic forces in the region. He further elaborates by stating that,

The two countries, at odds since the 1979 revolution in Iran and ever more so in the wake of the Arab Spring, are competing for dominance in global energy markets and nuclear technology and for political influence in the Persian Gulf and the Levant. Their conflict, with its sectarian overtones, has the potential to weaken pro-democracy forces in the Middle East and North Africa, empower Islamists, and drag the United States into military interventions.<sup>17</sup>

As evidenced, many renowned Middle East experts have described the current rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran as a cold war with many vast and wide implications for the Middle East and the United States. It is therefore crucial to address how accurate a description this cold war framework is when analyzing the Saudi Arabian and Iranian relationship.

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<sup>15</sup> Zack Beauchamp, “Iran and Saudi Arabia's Cold War Is Making the Middle East Even More Dangerous,” *VOX*, March 30, 2015, accessed April 11, 2015, <http://www.vox.com/2015/3/30/8314513/saudi-arabia-iran>.

<sup>16</sup> Roxane Farmanfarmaian, “Redrawing the Middle East Map: Iran, Syria and the New Cold War,” *Al Jazeera*, November 15 2012, accessed June 18, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/11/2012111311424048459.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

During the Cold War that existed between the Soviet Union and the United States, the world experienced the effects of two superpowers whose ambitions for hegemony intensified all global political concerns and marked a time when both nations increased their arms and search for resources in order to support their missions of sustained interventions in regional politics. Cold wars between two rival nations include a dominating rivalry within their ranks, resulting in the inevitable causatum that the rivals will forcefully project their own conflicts into the periphery.<sup>18</sup> While during the Cold War, entire regions were impacted by the global conflict between the two rival super powers, regional cold wars are also significant as local rivalries and antagonisms in the Middle East and North African region will more likely be capitalized and will retain very little autonomy regarding resolution. Thus, if the growing rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran marks a cold war in the Middle East, it can only be assumed that Saudi Arabia and Iran's continued capitalization of weakened political institutions will have similar significant effects on security, stability and economic growth in the Gulf and wider Middle East and will lead to protracted conflicts that will last for decades.

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<sup>18</sup> Barry Buzan, "New Patterns of Global Security in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," *International Affairs* Vol. 67, No. 3 (1991)

### **Cold War Dimensions:**

Based on this analysis of Cold War literature, in order to highlight the current realities of the Middle East, it is possible to identify seven dimensions that will be important to consider in our analysis of the degree to which the application of the “Cold War” framework fits the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran. These themes will be further elaborated upon in the succeeding chapters.

The first dimension is **ideology** for a major issue of contention between the Soviet Union and the United States was their competing worldviews, fostered by domestic values. While the Soviet Union had a revolutionary ideology to create a Communist utopia, the United States envisioned a free, unified international system upholding values of democracy and free trade. These ideological differences came to dominate Soviet-US relations, fueling the enduring and contentious Cold War. The second dimension that has been identified as central to the Cold War is **diplomacy**. When World War II ended so did the alliance between the Soviet Union and United States. As their political, economic and social rivalry increased, a period of tense and hostile relations dominated their relations. With only brief periods of *détente*, Soviet Union and United States’ suspicions towards the other made negotiations and treaties virtually non-existent.<sup>19</sup> The third dimension identified is the role of **alliances**. Alliances played a major role during the Cold War as the ideological contest between the capitalist West and communist East was

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<sup>19</sup> "Truman Library: Ideological Foundations of the Cold War Online Research File." Truman Library: Ideological Foundations of the Cold War Online Research File. Accessed February 12, 2015.



exported all throughout the world, pitting Western alliances against Eastern alliances. Those in the West generally represent popularly elected, multiparty governments that supported individual freedoms and private enterprise. Those allied with the East generally supported a way of life with central government regulation, no private property, and on the collaborative collective.<sup>20</sup> The fourth dimension is **economic**. The defense budget of both countries increased substantially. As much of the national budget went to the advancing technology, defense, and weaponry, it often took away from social welfare programs, education, healthcare and housing. Economic inflation and stagnation became serious consequences of the cold war. Additionally, economic spending generally went to the funding and exportation of the East vs. West ideology globally, as the Soviet Union and United States pressed to fill the void left by power vacuums that resulted from World War II. Another dimension that is important to note as central to the Cold War was the **arms race**. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union and United States were engaged in a competition to have the best armed forces, including greater armies, superior military technology, larger numbers of weapons, etc. Especially unique to the Cold War was the nuclear issue, in which the superpowers competed in supremacy in nuclear warfare, developing tens of thousands of nuclear warheads. The sixth important dimension to consider is **proxy conflicts**. Proxy wars are fought as a way for the rival powers to retain— or expand— their control in a given region. The Cold War witnessed a world in which satellites or surrogates of the United States and Soviet Union fought dozens of

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<sup>20</sup> James R. Arnold and Roberta Wiener, eds., *Cold War: the Essential Reference Guide* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2012), xiv.

“proxy wars”. These proxy wars constantly shifted the balance of power between these two superpowers. They also caused protracted wars that ended in deaths of millions of individuals caught in the crossfire. These proxy wars are dangerous, as they tend to inflame conflicts for elongated time periods, disrupt regional stability and heighten mutual fears. Lastly, the seventh dimension identified is the United States and Soviet Union’s **involvement in wars**. While proxy wars provide these superpowers with the ability to indirectly try to achieve their aims during conflict, there are also cases where one or both powers directly intervene in accordance with its interests.<sup>21</sup> The Korean War, the Vietnam War and the War in Afghanistan are all prime examples of this phenomenon.

### **Identity and Foreign Policy**

Although identifying these dimensions is essential in order to apply the framework of a cold war to the growing Saudi-Iranian rivalry, when considering the political history and current foreign policy trends of the Middle East, it is important to also incorporate the concept of state identity and its role.<sup>22</sup> Saudi Arabia and Iran’s rivalry has often been cited to result from differences including: “Sectarianism,

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<sup>21</sup> James R. Arnold and Roberta Wiener, eds., *Cold War: the Essential Reference Guide* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2012, 367.

<sup>22</sup> Shibley Z. Telhami and Michael Barnett, eds., *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 1.

nationalism, revolutionary ideology, competition over regional hegemony, oil prices, policy towards U.S. military presence in the Gulf, and disagreements over the hajj.”<sup>23</sup>

While these differences are fundamental in explaining the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, there are also defining moments of rapprochement that existed between these two states. In order to fully understand the cessation and resurgence of rivalry and cold war status, it is important to take into account identity politics. Identity politics, here, refers to movements that mobilize around ethnic, racial or religious identity in order to claim state power.<sup>24</sup> Focusing on ideational and material factors demonstrates how “changes in state identity - particularly in the official foreign policy discourse - indicated changes in policy, and therefore a shift in the amity-enmity pattern between the two states.”<sup>25</sup> Constructivists who looked towards developing theories of identity and politics in the Middle East have found that a shared identity can be linked to either constructive or destructive forms of nationalism and also encourages periods of conflict or cooperation.<sup>26</sup> Professor David Little, rationalizes that the identity of a nation is formed by ethnic and religious impulses, and that these impulses directly correlate to nationalistic conflict. For,

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<sup>23</sup> Adel Altorai. “Understanding the Role of State Identity in Foreign Policy Decision-Making.” diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2012, 4

<sup>24</sup> Mary Kaldor. *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 80

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 4

<sup>26</sup> Shibley Z. Telhami and Michael Barnett, eds., *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 5.

Although ethnic groups or peoples do not necessarily need a religious reason to seek to preserve and promote their identity by achieving political sovereignty, a claim of religious legitimacy is likely to strengthen and intensify such a campaign.<sup>27</sup>

This is important to note for the state is an administering institution that is defined by three major structural components: 1) Ideational component, the purpose of which includes basic governing functions of providing civil order, protection from internal and external threats, and providing resources/collective goods; 2) Institutional component, which includes the executive, legislative and judicial bodies that compromise the governing system and provide basic laws, procedures and norms; 3) Physical component, the population which acts as the potential resource pool that a territory can mobilize through economic development and contributes to the state by providing man-made capital. This physical component also includes the territory of a state and all natural resources.<sup>28</sup>

Collective identities provide individuals with the information that they need in order to form opinions about themselves and the other. Furthermore, identities are formed in relation to and out of interaction with the other. Identification runs on a continuum of negative and positive and when viewing the other, conception can be related to the other

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<sup>27</sup> Timothy D. Sisk, 2011. *Between terror and tolerance: Religious leaders, conflict, and peacemaking*. Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press. 12

<sup>28</sup> Barry Buzan, *People, States, and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era*. ECPR Classics (Colchester: ECPR Press, 2007), pgs. 83-88

as a perversion of or as an inclusion to their self.<sup>29</sup> Identities also provide a framework for guiding action. When considering collective identity, the state (the administering institution) claims supreme authority in both political allegiance, its state identity, and also over instruments of power and force. State identity affects the foreign policy that a state will be pursue and in return, foreign policy may influence state identity. Thus, the political elites that make up the state can manipulate the politics of identity to justify war.<sup>30</sup>

In line with this theory of identity being used to encourage conflict and violence, Johann Galtung, the famous Norwegian sociologist and peace researcher, posits that violence is a result of three interacting forces: structural, cultural, and physical. Structural violence provides the foundation of an unjust system as it institutionalizes unequal opportunities for education, resources, and the goods essential to meet one's basic human needs. Structural violence is built into the social, political and economic fabric of society, and privileges some classes, ethnicities, and nationalities over another. Cultural violence refers to the prevailing attitudes and beliefs that have been taught to us from birth, shaping assumptions about "us" and the world. Cultural violence is important to understand as it legitimizes structural violence by justifying notions of inferiority or

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<sup>29</sup> Rothman, Jay. 1997. *Resolving identity-based conflict in nations, organizations, and communities*. San Francisco, Calif: Jossey-Bass.

<sup>30</sup> Mary Kaldor. *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 80

superiority regarding race, religion, nationality(etc). Together, cultural violence and structural violence causes physical violence, which can take on many forms such as war, killing, torture, physical force against material infrastructure, rape and more.<sup>31</sup> Physical violence further reinforces cultural and structural violence.<sup>32</sup> Thus, the role of social norms, beliefs and behaviors can powerfully influence and mobilize ethnic conflict.

Additional factors that are critical in understanding the fragmentation of armed violence and its linkages to political mobilization are: 1) State weakness, in regards to lack of legitimacy and government functionality; as well as 2) external involvement, ie influence via political and economic means or actual military intervention and/or occupation. For instance, external forces might intervene because a state has failed or a state might fail because a foreign partner intervened and a new functional and legitimate state was unable to replace it.<sup>33</sup> In regards to this concept of legitimacy, theorists have explained that weak states usually create societies with scarce opportunities, wealth and resources. Not only do these elements fuel violence but they also encourage “legitimacy bids” by political leaders and elites in an attempt to sway the general public. Political legitimacy is important for political leaders, for the hearts and minds of the people must

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<sup>31</sup> J. Galtung, 1969. 'Violence, Peace, And Peace Research'. *Journal Of Peace Research* 6 (3): 167-191. doi:10.1177/002234336900600301.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid

<sup>33</sup> Ekaterina Stepanova. “Chapter 2: Trends in Armed Conflicts.” In *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Yearbook 2008: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 200

be satisfied with the government in order for it to effectively implement policy.<sup>34</sup> In democratic governments, the consent of the governed is derived by a government's ability to 1) be transparent, 2) guarantee fundamental rights and 3) prioritize freedoms and liberties. Authoritarian governments, however, do not derive their "right to rule" via these means and must therefore base their governing system on a different form of legitimacy; ethnic and/or religious nationalism. Religious or ethnic nationalism is where political leaders make appeals to individuals within a community based on a common culture, language, or shared history and is employed to directly include or exclude members from this national core identity. Essentially, "legitimacy bids" allow political leaders to favor one religious or ethnic group in lieu of another.<sup>35</sup> Professor Little contends that the potential for violence increases when weak states utilize national intolerance. In fact, he applies this to authoritarian states as well, "authoritarian states appear to draw life from ethnic or religious intolerance as a way of justifying the degree of violence required to maintain power."<sup>36</sup>

For weak or authoritarian states, uncovering the roots of violent ethnic or sectarian conflict is a major concern as it is the key to maintaining political stability and security. Throughout the lands of Islam, religion remains a major component of an individual's identity. During the post-World War Two era, much of the Muslim world

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<sup>34</sup> İbrahim Kalin, "Soft Power and Public Diplomacy in Turkey," *Perceptions* 2011, 5

<sup>35</sup> David Little, "Religion, Nationalism, Intolerance" Sisk, Timothy D. 2011. *Between terror and tolerance: Religious leaders, conflict, and peacemaking*. Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press. P. 15

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 17

regained autonomy. The newly emergent nations, such as Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Pakistan and Syria were created by European colonial states with artificial or arbitrarily drawn boundaries that shared few similarities with the Ottoman boundaries that once existed. As such, when political leaders attempted to build the new nation, they ran into the issues of political legitimacy and national identity.<sup>37</sup> Ethnic and political mobilization are fundamental factors in attempting to explain the rise of sectarianism through the Middle East. As Dr. Nader Hashemi has explained, “most mainstream forms of political Islam are religious forms of nationalism whose actors have accepted the borders of the postcolonial countries and are fundamentally concerned with the internal national politics of their home countries.”<sup>38</sup>

Identity politics in the Middle East differs from most other regions as the schism that exists between the Sunnis and Shi’ites is an issue that encompasses transnational legitimacy contestations and identity-based claims that provide an important perspective of both inter-Arab dynamics and Arab-Persian dynamics.<sup>39</sup> State identities, “are tied to residents’ relationships to those outside the boundaries of the community and territory,

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<sup>37</sup> Von Sivers, Peter , Rüdiger Seesemann, John Schoeberlein, Dru C. Gladney, Bruce B. Lawrence, Kamran Bokhari, M. B. Hooker, Fred R. van der Mehden, P. S. Van Koningsveld, Jocelyne Cesari, Frederick Mathewson Denny and Kathleen M. Moore. "Islam." In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*. Oxford Islamic Studies Online, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com.du.idm.oclc.org/article/opr/t236/e0383> (accessed 16-Mar-2015).

<sup>38</sup>Nader Hashemi, ed., “‘Religious Leaders, Sectarianism, and the Sunni-Shi’a Divide in Islam’,” in *Between Terror and Tolerance: Religious Leaders, Conflict, and Peacemaking*, ed. Timothy Sisk (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2011).

<sup>39</sup> Shibley Z. Telhami and Michael Barnett, eds., *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 5.



respectively.” Identity is a significant source of the state’s national interests. Thus, being attentive to how deeply the Islamic identity is important in the shifting of practices and meanings attached to that identity. National identities, especially in the Middle East, are fluid and constantly changing, identities are not mutually exclusive.<sup>40</sup> Essentially, the Saudi-Iranian structural tensions represent two opposing aspirations for Islamic leadership with two vastly different political systems. Conventional foreign policy explanations without this understanding of identity politics,

Cannot account for the temporal aspects of the state, especially the identity that the state chooses for itself... [Moreover], identities change over time as the as the international or regional environment forces them to compete, cooperate, or oppose each other. In this sense, foreign policy can be seen as a symbolic battlefield for identity conflicts.<sup>41</sup>

Understanding identity in the role of state rivalry in the Middle East is essential as it reveals insight as to why the current environment of continuous violence and chaos exists and why Saudi-Iranian relations transform from enmity to friendly and back to enmity at different historical and modern intervals. Defining moments, such as the Iranian Revolution, the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq and the 2011 Arab Uprisings have changed the state identity of Saudi Arabia and Iran, thereby altering the perception of each state towards the other.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 19

<sup>41</sup> Adel Altorai. “Understanding the Role of State Identity in Foreign Policy Decision-Making.” diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2012, pgs. 37-50

## **Conclusion**

Thus, as the evolution of geopolitics is ongoing, foreign policy theories on evolutionary interstate rivalries in world politics are important to comprehend. In the analysis of the traditional Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States, this section explained that rivalry that existed between these two Superpowers could not be classified as a mere interstate war. In their struggle for supremacy, the Soviet Union and the United States became engaged in a zero-sum game contesting for land, resources, weapons and influence. The political, social and economic tensions eventually created a global political environment that culminated in a series of wars fought in almost every corner of the world. Thus, as their rivalry included overlapping elements of interstate, extra state and intrastate wars, this thesis has provided an alternate way to define warfare by adding a fourth dimension, cold war.

Many Middle East experts have begun identifying the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran as a New Middle East cold war. As such, this thesis will research to what degree the seven “cold war” characteristics identified in the analysis of Cold War literature can be applied to the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Additionally, identity politics in the region differs from most other regions. Therefore, in order to fully consider the political history and current foreign policy trends of the Middle East, this study will also incorporate state identity and its role.

### **Chapter Three: The Origins of Saudi-Iranian Relations 1924-1979**

An understanding of long-term historical trends is necessary to comprehend the development of the Middle East cold war. History is dynamic. It is a process that is constantly evolving and it reveals a story of seemingly unconnected events that are in fact crucial to understanding the variety of perspectives and beliefs defended by the nations, tribes and ethnicities formed by these historical narratives. The culture of the Middle East is deeply imbedded in its history. The region looks towards the past in order to define and explain present situations and is used as a guide for future developments. Thus, the history of the land is transparent in the identity of its people. By examining the span of the modern history of the Middle East, it is evident that individual events, domestic and foreign policies, and significant moments have built upon one another to shape the current tensions and will continue to shape the future in a notable manner. Looking at the early relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran will explain how these countries have been “conditioned” to act and react in a certain manner.<sup>42</sup> While attempts to analyze the

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<sup>42</sup> James R. Arnold and Roberta Wiener, eds., *Cold War: the Essential Reference Guide* “Causes of the Cold War”(Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2012), xvii.

modern history of the Middle East may be rendered insignificant due to new and unexpected happenings in the current politics of the region, it is still important to identify trends and developments that were important events of the time and identify those moments that have the potential to act as defining situations in the years to come.

The early years of Saudi-Iranian relations provide important insight to the roots and causes of the recurring rivalry between the two states. This section will explore how Saudi Arabia and Iran have consolidated and pursued state power and authority. Additionally, by comparing and contrasting Saudi Arabia and Iran's state building during these formative years, this section serves to provide a brief background surrounding the phases where a clear alignment and mutual understanding existed. This section will also highlight the significant events that kept both states highly guarded and cautious towards the other.

### **Origins of the Schism: "Two Branches of the Same Tree"<sup>43</sup>:**

To understand just how the conflict behavior of and between these two adverse countries is influenced, it is useful to analyze the rivalry within its historical context.<sup>44</sup> There are many who view the divide as an intractable conflict characterized by a deep schism and age-old enmity that exists between the Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims that can be traced back to the origins of the religion itself. After all, the leading players are the two states, Saudi Arabia and Iran, who have consciously and adamantly proclaimed

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<sup>43</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (ABC international Group, Inc, 2013), 172

<sup>44</sup> Hensel, Paul R. 1999. An Evolutionary Approach to the Study of Interstate Rivalry. *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 17, (2): 175-206

themselves and their polities to be the “true Islamic state.” Both Iran and Saudi Arabia contend that their societies and polities are based on true Islamic normative values and that their regimes govern their people on the basis of divine law and Sharia, a legal code derived from the Quran and supplemented by the traditions of Muhammad and the early generations of Muslims. In regards to this point, a further examination of the relationship between Islam and politics must take place. For even on a rudimentary level, it can be understood that both Iran and Saudi Arabia have two very different and vast interpretations of the forms and rules of governance. In order to understand the current political environment, it is important to first concentrate on the fissure that exists between the Sunni and Shi’ite Muslims.

The Sunni-Shi’ite conflict is a political and religious divide whose origins date back to the death of Muhammad in 632 CE and the subsequent debate of who is the rightful heir to Islam. Of the 1.6 billion Muslims in the world, about 1.3 billion are Sunni and roughly 200 million are Shi’ite, while the remainder identify with other denominations of Islam. Around the rim of the Persian Gulf, coveted for both its economic and geostrategic glory, it is actually Shi’ites who constitute the majority of the population.<sup>45</sup> As scholars explain, this divide is a conflict of identity that is deeply felt by Muslims. And yet, Sunni and Shi’ite Muslims have lived peacefully together for centuries. In his book, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr portrays Islam as a religion that encompasses various ethnic and racial groups. Islam is

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<sup>45</sup> Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future*, Reprint ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 34

not monolithic and from the very beginning of Islam, there had already existed two different perspectives: Sunnism and Shi'ism. He makes a distinction here, as he compels his reader to look past the idea that Sunnism and Shi'ism are two sects of a religion and towards the more advanced theory that they are both "orthodox" interpretations of Islamic revelation.<sup>46</sup> Unlike the two other Abrahamic religions of Judaism and Christianity, Professor Nasr observes that Sunnism and Shi'ism were not the result of a defection within the religion that led to the reformation and creation of religious factions. Shi'ism and Sunnism are rather two integral parts that constitute the unity of the Islamic tradition.

### **Important Divergences**

There are, however, important differences within the two orthodoxies that have led various Middle East scholars to conclude that the Sunni-Shi'ite divide is an intractable conflict characterized by a deep schism and age-old enmity that can be traced back to the origins of the religion itself. The first concerns political rule. With the death of the prophet Muhammad, a difference of opinion materialized regarding the rightful successor to the Prophet as leader of the Islamic community. Those who believed that leadership should stay within the family backed Ali and became known as the Shi'ites.<sup>47</sup> The majority of the community believed that Abu Bakr should be Muhammad's

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<sup>46</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (ABC international Group, Inc, 2013), 141.

<sup>47</sup> "Shii Islam." In *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, edited by John L. Esposito. Oxford Islamic Studies Online, <http://0-www.oxfordislamicstudies.com.bianca.penlib.du.edu/article/opr/t125/e2189> (accessed 28-Jun-2015).

successor and, as no instruction was left behind regarding this matter, leadership should be based on the consensus of opinion. This majority group is more widely known as the Sunnis.<sup>48</sup> Regarding political leadership, the Sunnis and Shi'ites also diverge on ideas regarding the political authority of the leader. Where the Sunni ulama supports the status quo and the existing political institutions as a ruler, the Shi'ites believe that the successor should also be the interpreter of religion and the guardian of his esoteric knowledge as any rightful successor will also possess the Prophet's powers.<sup>49</sup>

Another main distinction that exists concerns the role of intermediaries in Islam. Traditionally, Sunnis believed in the Prophet and in saints as intermediaries between God and man. Today's more puritanical Sunnis, however, believe that God is transcendent. As such, any intermediaries between God and man should not exist. As Shi'ites believe that political leadership acts as a trustee of sorts, intermediaries are roles filled together by both the Prophet and the Imams. Further differences exist between Sunnism and Shi'ism regarding interpretation of Islamic law and regarding aspects of faith and ritual. While there are distinguishing features that separate Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims, they ultimately share a faith and are united in the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad and in the word of

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<sup>48</sup> "Sunni Islam." In *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, edited by John L. Esposito. Oxford Islamic Studies Online, <http://0-www.oxfordislamicstudies.com.bianca.penlib.du.edu/article/opr/t125/e2280> (accessed 28-Jun-2015).

<sup>49</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (ABC international Group, Inc, 2013), 144

the Qur'an.<sup>50</sup> Sunni and Shi'ite Islam share ideologies in the fundamentals of the religion; in its doctrines of unity, prophecy, the belief that God is just, and eschatology (pertaining to the end of history such as death, judgment, etc). As such, "Sunnism and Shi'ism are dimensions within Islam placed there not to destroy its unity but to enable a larger humanity and differing spiritual types to participate in it."<sup>51</sup>

### **Islamic Interpretation and Adaptations in the Modern Middle East**

Ultimately, the Sunni-Shi'ite divide is not a simple religious dispute that dates back to Islam's origins. What separates these two orthodox dimensions of Islam is the creation of an identity that has been forged by 1400 years of different political, cultural, technological and social history.<sup>52</sup> Theology and history are but two dimensions, that when combined with today's concerns, grievances, regional conflicts and foreign interventions, have created a sectarian conflict that is both old and modern.<sup>53</sup> Dr. Vali Nasr, explains that sectarian conflict is a,

Thread that has long run through the fabric of social and political life across the broader Middle East-at times invisible within a regional politics that can be more intricate and colorful than the latter on an Isfahan carpet, but at other times as obvious as the stripe running down the middle of a highway.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Geneive Abdo et al., "The Sunni-Shia Divide," *Council on Foreign Relations (CFR)* (2014): 1, accessed January 2015, <http://www.cfr.org/peace-conflict-and-human-rights/sunni-shia-divide/p33176#/#origins-of-the-schism>

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 143.

<sup>52</sup> Mohammed Ayoob, *The Many Faces of Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Muslim World* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 24-25.

<sup>53</sup> Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future*, Reprint ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 20

<sup>54</sup> Ibid



In the Middle East, religion and identity are interwoven. This merging of identities can lead to periods of coexistence. The Sunnis and Shi'ites main provinces overlap geographically, and from North Africa to Southeast Asia, Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims have shared struggles against common enemies, engage in friendships, pray together at the same mosques, and even intermarry.<sup>55</sup> And yet, the sectarian struggle is one that remains lurking just beneath the surface.

As the Muslim Empire continued to expand, “denominations” in the sense of divisions, sects, and schools of thoughts over various issues emerged within the Shi'ite and Sunni branches of the Islamic community.<sup>56</sup> Within the political realm of the Shi'ite *ulama*, opinions are divided among those who endorse politically activist interpretations of religious doctrines to those who endorse more politically quietest interpretations.<sup>57</sup> Within the Sunni Muslim community, an even larger multitude of religious voices developed, as varying interpretations and compromises were instituted in order to contend within the specific contexts of institutions, and at the same time, uphold the integrity and unity of the Sunni community.

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<sup>55</sup> Geneive Abdo et al., “The Sunni-Shia Divide,” *Council on Foreign Relations (CFR)* (2014): 1, accessed January 2015, <http://www.cfr.org/peace-conflict-and-human-rights/sunni-shia-divide/p33176#/#origins-of-the-schism>

<sup>56</sup> "Are There Any Divisions in Islam?" Oxford Islamic Studies Online. Accessed November 1, 2014. [http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/book/acprof-9780199794133/acprof-9780199794133-div1-34?\\_hi=0&\\_pos=15](http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/book/acprof-9780199794133/acprof-9780199794133-div1-34?_hi=0&_pos=15).

<sup>57</sup> Mohammed Ayoob, *The Many Faces of Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Muslim World* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 24-25.

From the eighteenth century to present day, the Islamic world “witnessed a protracted period of upheaval and renewal.”<sup>58</sup> In response to the political challenge of Western intellectual and political change, movements of reform and national independence developed. Muslims, struggling to comprehend the failures of society, the impact of European colonialism, and the superpower rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union following World War Two, retriggered the vital question of the true authority of Islam. In the face of the jarring and tumultuous European colonialism, the *ulama* was viewed as largely discredited and revivalist movements spread across much of the Muslim world, such as Wahhabis in Saudi Arabia. Many of these movements sought to restore the practice of the “Golden Age,” creating communities of believers committed to the creation of such revisionist Islamic societies. These movements determinedly became political movements that established Islamic states, the same states that would become the forerunners of the modern states that delineate the post World War II Middle East and North African region.

Faced with this challenge of modernity and Western domination, a further divide occurred within the region, with political movements using Islam to further their objectives of reserving Western hegemony. Some movements responded by supporting a fusion of Islamic heritage and modernity. To restore and rejuvenate the Islamic spirit,

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<sup>58</sup> Von Sivers, Peter , Rüdiger Seesemann, John Schoeberlein, Dru C. Gladney, Bruce B. Lawrence, Kamran Bokhari, M. B. Hooker, Fred R. van der Mehden, P. S. Van Koningsveld, Jocelyne Cesari, Frederick Mathewson Denny and Kathleen M. Moore. "Islam." In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*. *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*, <http://0-www.oxfordislamicstudies.com.bianca.penlib.du.edu/article/opr/t236/e0383> (accessed 10-Nov-2014).

they advocated that Islam is compatible with the West's interpretation of reason, science and technology. They emphasized the need to reform religious, legal and social aspects of society in order to revitalize the Muslim community and to face and reinterpret Islam in light of this new force. Other Muslim reformers insisted that *Islam* is the alternative way of life as it is self-sufficient, comprehensive and holistic. They claimed that the political subjugation of Muslims to foreign authorities was the immediate and direct result of Muslims failing to adhere to their own authoritative religious norms. These reformers strived to revivify Islam's Golden Age and they proclaimed that the only and best way for Muslims to change their circumstances was to renew their Islamic piety and adherence to God's command. Islamic governance was thus the only solution and this governance would be created.

#### **Union of Saudi Power and Wahhabi Teaching:**

In 1924, Abdul Aziz al-Saud captured Mecca, the holiest place in Islam and by 1932, he united the two kingdoms of the Hejaz and Nejd, thereby establishing the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The nation integrated the beliefs, norms and values of the indigenous populous into a national identity with a sense of a shared moral purpose and mutual trust.

Wahhabis claim to be the "true Sunnis," and, in principle, Wahhabism is both a religious and political movement. Wahhabism is the eighteenth-century reformist movement for sociomoral reconstruction of society. Named after its founder, ibn Abd al-Wahab, Wahabbism is a movement that strives to purify Islam by returning Muslims to

the “original principles” of Islam. In doing so Wahhabism rejects *Bid’ah*, religious innovations, and *shirk*, polytheism,. It began in response to the perceived moral decline and political weakness of the Muslim community in Arabia. Wahhabism denounces the practices of shrine cults, saint worship, and requests for intercessions from anyone other than God, and assigning authority to anyone other than God as heretical. This included the worship of saints, pilgrimages to their mausoleums, use of alcohol, chapels, tobacco, music, etc.<sup>59</sup> Abd al-Wahhab, in the early eighteenth century, proposed to return to original Islam in order to restore Islam’s Golden Age at the time of the Prophet and his companions. Abd al-Wahhab situated that in order to retrieve a puritanical Islam, the “infidel” customs would need to be replaced by the full and uncompromising implementation of Sharia.<sup>60</sup> He projected that in order to return to original Islam, violence and political power would be necessary to achieve these goals, and instated a *fatwa* of Jihad. The Wahhabists described themselves as *muwahhidun*, Unitarians.<sup>61</sup>

Although Wahhabism represents a divergence from the more traditional branches of Sunni Islam, it propagates great significance to the fact that its polities are Islamic. In fact, Saudi Arabia has based its entire governing system on the legitimacy of its religious

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<sup>59</sup> "Wahhabis." In *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam.*, edited by John L. Esposito. Oxford Islamic Studies Online, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e2467> (accessed 15-Nov-2014).

<sup>60</sup> Daniel Ungureanu, “Wahhabism, Salafism and the Expansion of Islamic Fundamentalist Ideology\*” (this study was funded by CNCSIS–UEFISCSU, project number PNII–IDEI 1993/2006, “A.I.I. Cuza” University of Iasi (Romania), 1993/2006), accessed October 24, 2014, [http://www.fssp.uaic.ro/argumentum/Numarul%2010/11\\_Ungureanu\\_tehno.pdf](http://www.fssp.uaic.ro/argumentum/Numarul%2010/11_Ungureanu_tehno.pdf).

<sup>61</sup> Wahhabis." In *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam.*, edited by John L. Esposito. Oxford Islamic Studies Online, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e2467> (accessed 15-Nov-2014).

creed. The marriage of Saudi power and Wahhabi teaching began when Abd al-Wahhab found refuge under the protection of Ibn Saud and his tribe in 1744. Viewed as a radical, al-Wahhab was forced to leave his hometown. When al-Wahhab found refuge with Ibn al-Saud, a local chieftain from Najd, al-Saud saw Wahhab's teachings as a "means to overturn Arab tradition and convention...a path of seizing power."<sup>62</sup> Together, they formed an alliance that allowed al-Saud control over military, political and economic matters and established al-Wahhab as the sole religious figure in charge of religious creed. This alliance resulted in the first Saudi dynasty and remains the basis for Saudi Arabia's monarchical rule. This first dynasty was short lived. It is significant, however, as it combined the warriors of Ibn Saud with the reformist message of al-Wahhab into a politico-religious force that expanded throughout northern Arabia and succeeded in capturing Mecca in 1803. The merger was broken up when the Ottoman Empire felt threatened by the movement and sent Muhammad Ali and Egyptian troops to destroy the movement.<sup>63</sup>

As Shi'ism grew more popular in Persia and Iraq and the Ottoman Empire began showing the first signs of decline, Wahhabis' assumed the objective to build another Sunni state that would extend not only to the Najd, but also to all Arab countries in order

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<sup>62</sup> Alastair Crooke, "You Can't Understand Isis If You Don't Know the History of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia," *Huffington Post*, August 8, 2014, accessed September 30, 2014, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alastair-crooke/isis-wahhabism-saudi-arabia\\_b\\_5717157.html?utm\\_hp\\_ref=world](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alastair-crooke/isis-wahhabism-saudi-arabia_b_5717157.html?utm_hp_ref=world).

<sup>63</sup> William L. Cleveland and Martin Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 4th ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2009), 123-124

to restore Islam to its original purity.<sup>64</sup> Beginning in the late eighteenth century and continuing through the interwar years (WWI, WWII), the second Saudi-Wahhabi emirate emerged. The political revival of Wahhabism began in 1902 when Abd al-Aziz Ibn Saud (grandson of the original Ibn Saud) emerged from his exile and seized the city of Riyadh. What was truly unique about this political revival was that the twentieth century witnessed the “emergence of a state imposed on people without a historical memory or unity or national heritage which would justify their inclusion into a single entity.”<sup>65</sup> The significance of this was monumental. Ibn Saud was able to use Islam to unify the politically divided rival tribes and peoples under a single consolidated authority. He combined his secular position as a victorious tribal leader with his religious status as the head of the Wahhabi order.<sup>66</sup> During the conquest, the Ikwahn Warriors destroyed venerated domed tombs and Shi’ite religious sites.

Ibn Saud understood the culture and traditions of the region and recognized that although tradition demanded that the newly integrated tribes be loyal to him due to his military prowess, their loyalties could be just as easily withdrawn. Thus, he created a reason for the people to be committed to him in a higher form of loyalty, and this was via

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<sup>64</sup> Daniel Ungureanu, “Wahhabism, Salafism and the Expansion of Islamic Fundamentalist Ideology\*” (this study was funded by CNC SIS–UEFISCSU, project number PNII–IDEI 1993/2006, “A.I.I. Cuza” University of Iasi (Romania), 1993/2006), accessed October 24, 2014, [http://www.fssp.uaic.ro/argumentum/Numarul%2010/11\\_Ungureanu\\_tehno.pdf](http://www.fssp.uaic.ro/argumentum/Numarul%2010/11_Ungureanu_tehno.pdf).

<sup>65</sup> Madawi al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, 2 ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 3.

<sup>66</sup> William L. Cleveland and Martin Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 4th ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2009), 231

the use of the puritanical Wahhabi doctrine.<sup>67</sup> Ibn Saud built mosques for the communities and sent the *ulama* into them to disseminate the Wahhabi code. He also provided the communities with material assistance via the supply of agricultural equipment and arms. Ibn Saud provided the tribes with a desire and sense of mission, for their commitment to Ibn Saud became enshrined and bound to their commitment to the expansion of their belief and faith.

It is evident that for Saud to achieve his goal of creating a state based on his name, his success was contingent on the unequivocal and full support of the Wahhabi religious establishment.<sup>68</sup> As the partnership between the Wahhabi religious establishment and the House of Saud grew, the *ulama* began to indiscriminately issue religious justification to Saudi rule via use of religious statutes. This set the ultimate precedent that the Saud family and those related to them via marriage had a monopoly of religious and political power. Saudi Arabia's role as the "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques" continues to make it vital for Saudi Arabia's religious rhetoric to be deemed victorious in the battle of ideology and belief in the Muslim world.

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 232-233

<sup>68</sup> Mohammed Ayoob, *The Many Faces of Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Muslim World* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 45

## The Shah of Iran

By the 1500s the Safavids had regained control of Persian lands from the Mongols and adopted Shi'ism as the state religion.<sup>69</sup> From the beginning, Persians were vastly responsive to the Shi'ite cause and its long congruent history has led scholars to conclude that Shi'ite Islam has "an intimate connection with the Persian soul."<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, the Safavids were eager to advance Shi'ism by military means in order to build a state that was separate from the Ottomans. Iranians form the largest population of Shi'ites in the world.

In the 1920s, a soldier by the name of Reza Khan rose to power. In 1925, He declared a coup d'état with the support of the British and overthrew the Qajar dynasty. Reza Shah's mission was to reassert Iran's role in the Gulf.<sup>71</sup> Reza Khan took an opposite approach to Ibn al Saud in consolidating state power. Inspired by Kemal Ataturk's westernization of Turkey, he undertook a radical transformation of Iran. He believed that religious traditions kept Iran backward and vulnerable to foreign occupation and rule and thus challenged the Shi'ite religious establishment, established a large central

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<sup>69</sup> Persia "became" Iran in 1935 when the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent out a circular to all foreign embassies in Tehran, requesting to be called "Iran." Diplomatic courtesy obliged, and by and by the name "Iran" began to appear in official correspondence and news items. - See more at: [http://www.iranchamber.com/geography/articles/persia\\_became\\_iran.php#sthash.XAr9pT7B.dpuf](http://www.iranchamber.com/geography/articles/persia_became_iran.php#sthash.XAr9pT7B.dpuf)

<sup>70</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (ABC international Group, Inc, 2013), 173

<sup>71</sup> Rouhollah K. Ramazani, *The Persian Gulf: Iran's Role* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1972), 22



government and rebuilt the Iranian army.<sup>72</sup> Reza Shah saw Saudi Arabia both as a regional competition on the regional level and also as a threat to his developments in the Gulf.<sup>73</sup> Iran had many historical claims to land that were located on the Arabian side of the Gulf. The Shah saw that Saudi Arabia was making major advances and thus, wanted to not only engage with Saudi Arabia as a contending power, but also to monitor it closely, worried that the resurgence of Wahabbism would have lasting implications on the practice of other forms of Islam. The first main outreach occurred in 1927 when the Shah sent delegations to express willingness to establish diplomatic relations.

### **Relations and Early Tensions**

Between 1925 and 1930, the two monarchs competed locally and regionally to assert hegemony. One of the first instances that caused major tension between these two modern Middle East states occurred during these formative years. On April 20<sup>th</sup>, 1925 the Shah annexed Khuzistan to Persia, greatly alarming King Abdul Aziz. As a contrast, Saudi Arabia signed a bilateral treaty with the British in 1927, to establish additional buffer governments in the Gulf, recognizing the governments of Bahrain, Kuwait and Oman. Reza Shah deemed this as a direct challenge to Iran's sovereignty as he believed these treaties to undermine Iranian claims to the Gulf, specifically over Bahrain.<sup>74</sup> The Shah sent over a Memorandum of Objection, demanding the return of Bahrain to Iranian

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 24

<sup>73</sup> Adel Altorai, "Understanding the Role of State Identity in Foreign Policy Decision-Making" (diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2012), 95.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 96

soil and even launched a formal complaint with the League of Nations. Despite territorial agreements, mainly regarding claims of sovereignty to the two islands of Farsi and al-Arabi in the Persian Gulf, the Saudis concluded a Friendship Agreement. Originally declared in 1929, this treaty set out the basic principles for establishing political, diplomatic and commercial relations between the two countries. This treaty held relatively stable until 1943. By this time, Reza Khan was ousted and replaced by his son, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi. The new Shah did maintain normal relations with the Saudis until the Saudi Kingdom arrested and executed a Shi'ite Pilgrim that was accused of defaming the holy shrine in Mecca, the *Ka'ba*. Saudi-Iranian diplomatic relations were resumed for a short while in 1947. By 1950, Iran was experiencing major issues with its domestic politics, mainly dealing with Iranian oil nationalization and the majlis committees rejection of the poor profit-sharing provision offered by the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC).<sup>75</sup> By 1950, Saudi-Iranian Bilateral relations catapulted towards complete derailment. 1955 further strained already poor relations as Iran joined the US-proposed Baghdad Pact and later Turkish-Iraqi Pact of Mutual Cooperation after the United States helped the Shah regain power and oust Mossadegh. Saudi Arabia was very threatened by this Pact as it undermined their key position and role in the region, threatened to further divide the region between pro-Western and anti-Western sides, and also included Jordan and Iraq, Hashemite Kingdoms that had lasting feuds with the Kingdom. While the two nations attempted to solidify their relations following the Iranian decision

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 100

to join the Baghdad Pact, King Saud was deeply upset by the Iranian's refusal to consider Saudi reservations. King Saud lashed out, ordering Saudi authorities to deny access to any Bahrainis that they suspected to be of Persian origins. On his side, the Shah of Iran criticized Saudi Arabia in various media outlets. The seriousness with which Iran viewed its claim to Bahrain was re-manifested when the Shah cancelled his state visit to the monarchy of Saudi Arabia in 1968. By this point, Saudi Arabia and Iran had re-normalized their relations and found themselves unified against developments in the region. And yet, just mere days before the Shahs visit to Saudi Arabia, Saudi Arabia had announced full support of Bahrain and even inferred the impending construction of a 12-mile bridge to link Bahrain to Saudi Arabia. This conflict over Bahrain remained a major source of contention between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Despite previous antagonism, bilateral relations between Iran and Saudi resumed stronger than ever when both countries realized the significant implications associated with imminent British withdrawal and that it was a major strategic problem that concerned the whole Persian Gulf. Iran understood that accommodating with the largest Arab state in the Persian Gulf was essential to preserving Iran's greater interests. This important event paved the way for closer cooperation between the two nations.<sup>76</sup> Upon the accession of King Faisal to the Saudi throne in 1964, this new phase began. The first significant step was that Saudi Arabia and Iran resolved their contentious standing over the continental shelf in the Persian Gulf. After years of negotiation, Saudi Arabia and Iran

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<sup>76</sup> Rouhollah K. Ramazani, *The Persian Gulf: Iran's Role* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1972), 49

signed an agreement in 1965 that resolved the question of the median line but also stipulated sovereignty regarding the islands of Farsi and al Arabia, with each country sharing, in effect, the enormous seabed of oil resource in the Persian Gulf. From the British departure in December 1971 until the Iranian Revolution in 1979, Saudi-Iranian relations increased to an all time high, with the relations improving their mutual relations and interests. Both countries became more active regionally under the “Twin Pillar” strategy initiated by the Nixon Doctrine, which was aimed at supporting conservative, pro-Western policy. Economic, diplomatic and military support was brought to both countries in exchange for protecting the law and order of the region.<sup>77</sup> The Nixon doctrine effectively armed and subsidized these two regional “policemen” of the gulf. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran were utterly committed to maintaining the status quo in the region, supporting states such as North Yemen, Somalia and Oman, destabilizing those radical states such as South Yemen, and cooperated in a coordinated policy to diminish the power of the Ba’athist regime, where they supported Kuwait against Iraq’s attempts to gain concessions to its ports. They also supported each other in their attempts to subvert the Iraqi government. At this point in their friendly relations, the Shah reflected,

I had traveled on several occasions to Saudi Arabia, a country whose integrity and independence are sacred for all Muslims. As a faithful Muslim and Defender of the Faith, I hope that Saudi Arabia will always remain the guardian of these holy places, Mecca and Medina.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Adel Altorai, “Understanding the Role of State Identity in Foreign Policy Decision-Making” (diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2012), 110.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 112.

## Conclusion

In looking at the modern history of Saudi-Iranian relations, it is clear that while this early period marked a time when significant tensions existed between these two states, it also corresponds to a time when they engaged in collaborative and even friendly relations. While an overview of the cold war dimensions outlined in chapter two reveals that the consolidation and formation of these two states set the stage for their upcoming feud, it is evident that the period from 1924-1979 (pre-1979 Revolution) did not feature a cold war between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Saudi Arabia and Iran differ in many aspects. State consolidation and the formation of both countries overlapped greatly with both religious and ethnic collective narratives, forming both its political systems and state narrative. Iran, for many centuries, has maintained itself as the protector of Shi'ite Islam. Iran has many ethnic groups and several autonomous movements. Its Shi'ite heritage, however, has been a significant unifying factor that has allowed it to withstand ethnic division.<sup>79</sup> The very foundation of this social bond stands in juxtaposition to Saudi Arabia's inherent religious nationalism. Moreover, these two states share a history that extends beyond the modern nation-state system, a history of animosity and ethnocentrism, of looking down upon one another. Since the origin of the schism following the death of Muhammad, Sunnis and Shi'ites have held competing Islamic ideologies. From the battle of Karbala to the battle of

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<sup>79</sup> Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, Updated ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006, 318

Chaldiran in the early sixteenth century and the dominance of Sunni Islam via the power of the Ottoman Empire, Shi'ite Muslims have developed the religious and political conscience of a persecuted minority. This Sunni dominance was further integrated into the creation of the modern-state of Saudi Arabia.

As the birthplace of Islam, Saudi Arabia upholds the status of protector of Mecca and Medina, Islam's most holy cities. From the partnership of Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab and Muhammad ibn Saud, Saudi Arabia's ruling family created a state executive order that granted them the authority to protect the religious beliefs of the community, without question. The advent of Wahhabism in the nineteenth century was designed as a puritanical form of Islam that defined itself in opposition to the "heretical" beliefs and values of the Shi'ite Muslims. Seizing on Abd al-Wahhab's doctrine, Ibn Saud's clan reintroduced the idea of martyrdom under the banner of *jihad*, targeting both non-Muslims and denouncing those Muslims who have gone astray, *ahl al-dhalal*. They used this auspice of Jihad to justify raiding neighboring villages and robbing them of their possessions.

As the origins of the Saudi-Iranian modern state maintained strong ties to these early Sunni-Shi'ite religious and political antagonisms, the relations were characterized by major suspicions regarding the other. As is evident, Saudi-Iranian relations, even from these early years, played a highly important role in the political and ideological history of

the modern Middle East.<sup>80</sup> And yet, these differences did not deter them from building a strong relationship. While differences resulting from faith and nationality did arise, both Saudi Arabia and Iran were willing to dismiss these differences in order to pursue their mutual national security interests. This was especially true in the foundational years of the 1950's through the 1970's, specifically the withdrawal of the British from the Gulf and how Saudi Arabia and Iran collaborated via diplomatic means to focus on these mutual interests.

What is most important to consider is that the Shah's vision of Iran's state identity to be modern, secular and even Westernized did not threaten Saudi interests. In Saudi Arabia, while its formation was imbedded in Wahhabi thinking, it wasn't until the reign of King Faysal in the mid 1960's that a centralized state was consolidated. In the 1970's, as Saudi Arabia's wealth increased due to oil profits, King Faysal began to change the political system by centralizing the decision making process and by eliminating rival contestants. In addition, Saudi Arabia began to sincerely advocate and promote the country as the Islamic state with a mission to spread Islam and piety globally and to ultimately develop institutions that would embody this pursuit.<sup>81</sup>

The political leadership of both states garnered foreign policies that were oriented at protecting the status quo of the region and joined forces to fight communism and

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<sup>80</sup> Rouhollah K. Ramazani, *The Persian Gulf: Iran's Role* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1972), 9

<sup>81</sup> Madawi Al-Rasheed, *Kingdom Without Borders* (New York. C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd, 2008), 13

nationalist forces, whether they be Pan-Arabism, Nasserism or Ba'athism. Therefore, prior to the fall of the Shah in 1979, Saudi Arabia and Iran cultivated state identities that were in alignment with the other. As such, numerous opportunities arose for the two states to collaborate and cooperate with one another in shared national security objectives and foreign policy interests in the region. The 1979 Iranian Revolution transformed both Saudi Arabia and Iran's identities to such a radical degree, taking both Saudi Arabia and Iran on a new path that embodied a highly competitive clash of Islamic ideologies.



#### **Chapter Four: The Dawn of a New Cold War? 1979-2003**

In 1979, a significant event reversed the strategic balance of the Middle East, and this was the Iranian Revolution. The Pahlavi dynasty conclusively ended in revolution and the establishment of a new form of government in the Middle East, a republic that held a deep Islamic identity. While Iran's Islamic message resonated in the region, it was the Iranian revolutionaries creation of new policies, institutions and procedures based on their views of Islam that challenged and renewed old tensions. Since 1979, Saudi Arabia and Iran's enmity has grown and has resulted in the dissolution of relations between these two states as well as the establishment of two competing entities. During the time period of 1979-2003, confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran, along with their allies, impelled these two states into a new kind of conflict, one that goes beyond the traditional elements of war and that more closely parallels the enmity that existed between the United States and Soviet Union during the Cold War. Tensions amassed to not only represent a competition between the opposing doctrinal beliefs within Islam, but also perpetuated two different responses to the West, specifically the United States. Politically, they represented two competing systems, with Iran representing the revolutionary bloc and Saudi Arabia leading the status quo bloc.

These two natural rivals, whose diplomatic efforts allied them during the previous decades, now began to compete aggressively to preserve and expand their power and influence in the region. While state interests vastly influenced this new Middle East rivalry, the ideological positions held by Saudi Arabia and Iran drove them to exploit sectarian and ethnic divisions, features that not only came to define their rivalry but also used as political tools. This section will look towards the state identity and foreign policy actions of Saudi Arabia and Iran in order to understand the defining features that drove this rivalry towards cold war status. This will include Saudi Arabia's containment policies of Iran its billion-dollar soft power projection to export Wahhabism as well as its support of Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war. In looking at Iran's role, this section will address Iran's mission to export revolution and its Islamic rhetoric across the globe as well as its forging of new alliances with Syria and funding of terrorism in Lebanon.

### **The Iranian Revolution**

By the 1970s, the Iranian population was becoming increasingly discontent with the despotic Shah. Iran is a historically traditional society and when the Shah sought to modernize and westernize Iran, he severely marginalized Iran's Shi'ite clergy. In addition, political repression grew more pronounced and after the 1977 economic downturn, the Iranian population lost faith in the Shah's ability to produce economic

decentralization.<sup>82</sup> As a result, the enlistment of the masses towards revolution culminated in one of the largest revolutionary movements the world has ever seen. Central to this movement was the Ayatollah Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini. Although the overthrow of the “the most stable Muslim governments” governed by Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi was considered monumental, the revolution signified a much greater transition.

Though not the sole factor in the 1979 Revolution, religion played a major role in enlisting the masses towards revolution. Khomeini had actually devised the ultimate Islamic transformation as he motivated the masses by posing to them the objective of a pure Islamic government in lieu of the Shah’s corrupt authority. This ideology was central to the success of the revolution as scholars note that it contained both “domestic and indigenous origins,” thereby equipping the state with a dual legitimacy of both religious doctrines and popular consent.<sup>83</sup> Led by Khomeini, the Iranian population believed that a vital ingredient of the reformation was the reinstatement of “true Islam.” They believed that freeing Iran from Western dominance and “cultural colonization,” of ridding Iran from Pahlavi’s secular influences and instead setting up Islamic political and

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<sup>82</sup> Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, Updated ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006)

<sup>83</sup> Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: the Ideological Foundation of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2006).

economic institutions would provide solutions for all of Iran's problems.<sup>84</sup> The overthrow of the Shah not only marked a "rare occasion" where Islamists have successfully taken over a constituted political authority, but where Shi'ite Islamists, who have long maintained a quietist political stance towards government, were able to accomplish this feat.<sup>85</sup>

### **Iran and Saudi Arabia**

One major outcome of the Iranian Revolution was the political empowerment of the ulama and the imposition of his theocratic doctrine. Khomeini advocated for direct clerical rule, *velayat-e faqih* (rule by supreme Islamic jurisprudence). This is unique as while many revolutions have had religious ideologies, the establishment of clerical rule post revolution was an entirely new concept. In addition, he re-established the legal and religious authority of the Shi'ite *mojtahed's* and was ultimately concerned with reinforcing the "Islam of the past." The most important aspect of this transformation lies in the assignation of political authority to the political figure of the Shi'ite jurist, the *faqih*, a role that transcends the traditional organization of command and obedience in Shi'ism.

Ayatollah Khomeini's formation of the first Islamic Republic and his popularization of Islamic fundamentalism posed a substantial challenge to Sunni

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<sup>84</sup> Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, Updated ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 213

<sup>85</sup> Roxanne L. Euben and Muhammad Qasim Zaman, eds., *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought: Texts and Contexts from Al-Banna to Bin Laden* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 155

sensibilities, thereby directly affecting the Saudi Kingdom. Khomeini made it clear that his ambitions extended beyond Iran and that he wanted to be accepted as *the* leader of the Muslim world. Khomeini was vastly popular in the Shi'ite world and quickly rose to be seen as a Shi'ite leader through his appeal to Shi'ite popular beliefs and myths. He also aimed to transpose the Iranian Revolution as an Islamic Revolution, so that Sunnis would accept his authority. In its publication regarding the Sunni and Shi'ite divide, the Council on Foreign Relations explains that Iran began its Islamic experiment by trying to inspire Islamic revivalism throughout the Muslim world. Although it preached Muslim unity, Iran “supported groups in Afghanistan, Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, Pakistan, [Saudi Arabia, etc.] that had specific Shia agendas.”<sup>86</sup>

Much of Khomeini's activist tendencies are a product of historical context. Specifically, the encroachment of modernity via European colonialism and post-World War Two western interference by the two camps of the United States and the Soviet Union. As such, he focused his attention on anti-Israel and anti-American (“the outsiders”) rhetoric and activism. As an additional target of these idealist claims, Khomeini sought to delegitimize Saudi Arabia. Khomeini saw the Saudi monarchy as a mere extension of American interference and aimed to overthrow what he viewed to be a

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<sup>86</sup> Geneive Abdo et al., “The Sunni-Shia Divide,” *Council on Foreign Relations (CFR)* (2014): 1, accessed January 2015

corrupt and unpopular dictatorship, using the same methods that he used to successfully overthrow the Iranian Shah.<sup>87</sup>

At first, relations remained fairly friendly. Saudi Arabia immediately recognized the new government and King Khalid send a letter to Ayatollah Khomeini congratulating the success of the new republic and expressed their willingness to continue their good relations and cooperation stressing that “Islamic solidarity” could form the basis of close ties between the two countries.<sup>88</sup> The second deputy Prime Minister, Prince Abdullah bin Abd al-Aziz further elaborated this position regarding cooperation between Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran,

Islam is the organizer of our relations. Muslims interests are the goals of our activities and the Holy Qur’an is the constitution of both countries...the fact is that we are very relieved by the Islamic Republic of Iran’s policy making islam, not heavy armaments, the organizer of cooperation, a base for dialogue, and the introduction to a prosperous and dignified future.<sup>89</sup>

By mid-1979, Khomeini began to define Iran’s role as one of exporting the revolution and of protecting the rights of the Shi’ites in neighboring countries. The new constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran even announced these “Islamic” overtures and outlined its intention to form a “single world community.” Khomeini began this

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<sup>87</sup> Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future*, Reprint ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 150.

<sup>88</sup> Abdulrhman A. Hussein, *So History Doesn't Forget.: Alliances Behavior in Foreign Policy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 1979-1990*(Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouseUK, 2012), 174.

<sup>89</sup> Nadav Safran,. *Saudi Arabia: the Ceaseless Quest for Security*. 2nd ed. 4 vols. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1991, 308

strive for a single Islamic community under Khomeinism by focusing on various Islamic groups within the Middle East in order to secure unity on political, economic and cultural fronts. Iran targeted Saudi Arabia as a focal point to spread revolution, constantly voicing their contempt of the Saudi government and encouraging young followers and other Shi'ites to demonstrate their support of the true Islamic regime, Iran. For Instance, Khomeini sent individuals to stage protests during the annual Hajj in order to spread its revolutionary message to the millions of Muslims visiting from around the world. He also made public statement ridiculing Saudi Arabia's namesake (the royal family) and further claiming that the Saudi government was neither legitimate nor genuinely Islamic.<sup>90</sup> He accused Saudi Arabia, as the center of Wahhabism of constant espionage and sedition. Although Khomeini's idealist aims to unify Sunnis and Shi'ites managed to escalate anti-Americanism throughout the region, he underestimated the distrust that Sunnis had for the Shi'ites. Furthermore, while Iran may have constantly publicly dismissed any divide between Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims, their constant support of Shi'ite parties in the region suggested a deeper commitment to the members of their own sect. Sunni Islamists, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, although deeply admired Khomeini's success, did not accept his leadership. Furthermore, when Khomeini called for control of Mecca and Medina, under current guardianship of Saudi Arabia, Khomeini was dismissed. The Sunnis saw Khomeini's idealism as a Shi'ite plot.

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<sup>90</sup> Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future*, Reprint ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 151

The results of the revolution created an immense sectarian battle between Sunnis and Shi'ites. While Iran and Saudi Arabia have extensive military means and economic capabilities, they both understood that neither actually have the resources to establish dominance over each other via such "hard power" means. Through this realization, the way that Saudi Arabia and Iran sought regional influence was actually through the dissemination of their cultural and political wars, specifically via the core religiosity of the Middle East population.<sup>91</sup> The bond formed via Saudi Arabia's prior strategy of strengthening Islamic identity was renewed with vigor in order to thwart Khomeini and contain the Shi'ite resurgence. Investment from oil wealth gave the Kingdom the ability to not only resist Khomeini's challenge of a "Shia Revival" but also the means to influence the Muslim world to usurp Iran's message.<sup>92</sup> Consequently, Saudi Arabia began to encourage sectarianism, inducing a more profound Sunni identity against the Shi'ites and also encouraging Sunni governments to subdue Islamic activism and any attempts of political reform.<sup>93</sup> This image of Saudi Arabia as the Sunni defender and the creation of a strong Sunni identity (as a contrast to Shi'ism) pushed Wahhabism towards a concerning direction that would have dire consequences in the region. Many regional experts provide much evidence of a causal link between these sectarian policies and Sunni extremism.

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<sup>91</sup> Sabri Ciftci and Güneş Murat Tezcür, "Soft Power, Religion and Anti-Americanism in the Middle East," *Forthcoming at Foreign Policy Analysis* (2014): 1, accessed March 10, 2015, [http://www.academia.edu/9309722/Soft\\_Power\\_Religion\\_and\\_Anti-Americanism\\_in\\_the\\_Middle\\_East](http://www.academia.edu/9309722/Soft_Power_Religion_and_Anti-Americanism_in_the_Middle_East).

<sup>92</sup> David Dean Commins, 2006; 2005. *The wahhabi mission and saudi arabia*. 1st ed. Vol. 50. New York; London: I.B. Tauris, "Challenges to Wahhbi Hegemony"

<sup>93</sup> Ibid



The Saudi petrodollar enabled Saudi Arabia to push a geographical distribution of *Salafism*, the export version of Wahhabism through the entirety of the Middle East and North African region. Vali Nasr writes, “the band of radical Islam that began spreading across Central Asia and the Caucasus in the 1990s...was a Sunni radicalism born of the deliberate Saudi policy of containing Iran.”<sup>94</sup>

Saudi Arabia’s beliefs regarding the forms and rules of government has led the country to use Wahhabism to consolidate and pursue state power. The discovery and nationalization of Saudi Aramco completed Saudi Arabia’s influence in the region. The outward flow of oil and influx of money enabled Saudi Arabia to pursue its goals of spreading Wahhabism across the Muslim world in order to “wahhabise” Islam into a single monolithic creed. Saudi Arabia’s billion-dollar soft power projection to export Wahhabism has severely impacted the region and has played a major role in shaping the current sectarian politics that continues to dominate and divide the Middle East.

### **Oil Profits and Wahhabism**

The discovery of and nationalization of Saudi Aramco completed Saudi Arabia’s influence in the region. On May 19, 1933 the signing of an agreement between the Saudi minister of finance and a representative of Standard Oil of California signified a major development in the region and forever changed the dynamic of Saudi politics. As Bernard

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<sup>94</sup> Nasr, Vali. *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future*. Reprint ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007, 158

Lewis explains, “Saudi politics and Wahhabi doctrines now rested on a solid economic foundation.”<sup>95</sup>

As the French scholar Giles Kepel describes, Saudi goals were, and still are, to spread Wahhabism across the Muslim world and it has invested billions of dollars into this manifestation as the self-proclaimed manager of Sunni Islam.<sup>96</sup> As aforementioned, Saudi Arabia was already an influential government in Islam as the “Custodian of the two holy sites” of Islam and the host of the annual pilgrimage, *hajj*, where millions of Muslims from all around the world come to participate. The discovery of oil, however, allowed Saudi Arabia to further this influence, as they were now in a position to provide their Wahhabi teachers and religious figures with the financial resources to promote and spread their brand of Islam. According to various literatures, it has been estimated that in the past two decades Saudi Arabia has spent at least \$87 billion propagating Wahhabism abroad. The funding has been said to go towards the construction and operating expenses of religious institutions (madrasas, mosques, etc.) that sermonize Wahhabism. This funding also goes towards the training of imams, dominating mass media and publishing outlets, and distributing Wahhabi textbooks. In fact, in some Muslim countries, Wahhabi sponsored schools and colleges represent the only education available. The exploitation

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<sup>95</sup> Bernard Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror*, Later ed. (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 126.

<sup>96</sup> Alastair Crooke, “You Can't Understand Isis If You Don't Know the History of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia,” *Huffington Post*, August 8, 2014, accessed September 30, 2014, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alastair-crooke/isis-wahhabism-saudi-arabia\\_b\\_5717157.html?utm\\_hp\\_ref=world](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alastair-crooke/isis-wahhabism-saudi-arabia_b_5717157.html?utm_hp_ref=world).

of oil has therefore enabled Saudi Arabia to carry their message all over the Islamic world and to Islamic minority communities, including Europe and North America.<sup>97</sup>

Evidence of Saudi Arabia's soft power projection can also be seen in many Western countries. As Joseph Nye explains, soft power rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others. Saudi Arabia has an attractive traditional and religious culture and has created hundreds of Wahhabi institutes around the world to further its reach. In his book, *The Crisis of Islam*, Bernard Lewis writes that even in European and North American countries, where the quality of public education is high, Saudi Arabia's Wahhabi institutions provide for Muslim families a place where they can receive an Islamic education. In some cases, these institutes represent the only means for new converts and for Muslim parents to provide their children with access to learn religious and cultural tradition. Such institutions include but are not limited to "private schools, mosques schools, holiday camps, and increasingly, prisons."<sup>98</sup> The profits from oil wealth are essential for these soft power objectives to be successful as financial resources sometimes provide the only means for religious institutes to assert their presence and influence. This is true in countries where funding for schooling is low or nonexistent, or even in countries where governments remove themselves from religious matters.

Saudi Arabia's soft power investment to manage Sunni Islam also solidified its role in international politics, strengthening its alliance with the United States. The

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<sup>97</sup> Bernard Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror*, Later ed. (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 126.

<sup>98</sup> *Idem*

alliance between the two countries first occurred in 1945 in a meeting between Roosevelt and Abd-al Aziz ibn Saud on board the USS Quincy and continues until today.<sup>99</sup> As noted in Crookes article “westerners looked at the Kingdom and their gaze was taken by the wealth; by the apparent modernization; by the professed leadership of the Islamic world. They chose believe that the Kingdom was bending to the imperatives of modern life.”<sup>100</sup>

When Saudi Arabia nationalized oil in 1974, rising oil prices literally filled Saudi reserves with billions of dollars. This increase in oil profits allowed the kingdom to subsidize various Islamic causes through charities and funds such as Rabita al-Alam al-Islam. Oil profits furthered Saudi’s claim to leadership in the Islamic world as well, transitioning its influence for not only sponsoring Islamic activism but also accelerated its ideological expansion. From Africa to Southeast Asia, thousands of Islam’s most prominent and aspiring preachers and scholars travelled to Saudi Arabia to study Islamic thought and joined Saudi funded research institutes. These individuals then returned to their homeland or travelled to other places abroad, spreading Saudi Arabia’s Wahhabi message. Vali Nasr notes, “many of those who studied and worked in Saudi Arabia then spread throughout the Muslim world to teach and work at Saudi-funded universities,

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<sup>99</sup> Adam Taylor, “The First Time a U.s. President Met a Saudi King,” *Washington Post*, January 27, 2015, accessed March 2, 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2015/01/27/the-first-time-a-u-s-president-met-a-saudi-king/>.

<sup>100</sup> Alastair Crooke, “You Can’t Understand Isis If You Don’t Know the History of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia,” *Huffington Post*, August 8, 2014, accessed September 30, 2014, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alastair-crooke/isis-wahhabism-saudi-arabia\\_b\\_5717157.html?utm\\_hp\\_ref=world](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alastair-crooke/isis-wahhabism-saudi-arabia_b_5717157.html?utm_hp_ref=world).

schools, mosques, and research institutes.” He furthers his point by explaining that these individuals, in effect, have become ambassadors of Saudi Arabia’s Wahhabi traditions and religion, “influenced by the harsh simplicities of Wahhabi theology and financially dependent on Saudi patronage, work not only to entrench conservative attitudes....but also defend Saudi Arabia’s interests and legitimacy.”<sup>101</sup> This investment of oil wealth in Islamic causes implanted Wahhabism educationally, socially and culturally throughout Islamic lands and produced powerful actors ranging from policy makers to social activists entrenched in leading religious, educational and political establishments. The enormous influx of wealth encouraged Saudi Arabia to seek a hegemonic position. In addition, it has allowed Saudi Arabia to maintain its old belief system regarding the role of governance while pursuing its vested interests both at home and abroad. Thus, this so called “petrodollar” actually fueled the ambitions of Saudi political leaders to spread Wahhabism as a political means to consolidate and pursue state power and authority.

### **Forging New Alliances**

#### ***Saudi Arabia:***

Saudi Arabia and Iran are gripped in a zero-sum game, contesting for land, resources, weapons and, most specifically, influence. While Saudi Arabia and Iran were indeed rivals from the inception of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, tensions escalated to an unprecedented degree after Iran’s 1979 Islamic Revolution, where Shi’ite Muslims

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<sup>101</sup> Nasr, Vali. *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future*. Reprint ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007, 155.

successfully overthrew the pro-Western Shah's constituted political authority. In summation, perceiving Iranian actions and rhetoric as a major threat to its influence in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia developed a foreign policy strategy to contain and counter Iran.

In addition to its export of Wahhabism, another manner in which Saudi Arabia pursued reciprocal containment was through the formation of alliances and the support of any event that would counter Iran's ideological and geopolitical interests in the region.

The Iran-Iraq war was a significant event as although the war was instigated by Saddam's Ba'athist regime, the real battle that took place was a fight to contain Iran's ideological and geopolitical role in the region.<sup>102</sup> One of the forefront issues that divided these two countries ranged from the long-standing cultural rivalry between Arab and Persian civilizations. Thus, even though Saudi Arabia had its own issues with Iraq, the advent of the Islamic Republic and its militant Shi'ite outsourcing caused Saudi Arabia and its allies in the international system, including the United States to provide highly advanced weaponry to the Ba'athist regime. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar (and the smaller Gulf States) Egypt, Jordan, and other conservative Arab countries (with the exception of Syria) provided Saddam with political and financial support, perceiving Iraq's fight as an extension of their own security struggles, as Iran's ideological Khomeinism was

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<sup>102</sup> John Tirman and Abbas Maleki, eds., *U.S.-Iran Misperceptions: a Dialogue* (New York; London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 92

anathema.<sup>103</sup> In fact, together with Kuwait, Saudi Arabia supplied Iraq with roughly fifty to sixty billion dollars worth of assistance.<sup>104</sup> The Iran-Iraq war was the longest conventional war of the twentieth century, one that cost hundred of billions of dollars and took thousands of lives. This war is an example of how the revolution transformed Iran from being Saudi Arabia's strategic partner, if not ally, in the region to Saudi Arabia's main ideological rival.

Containing Iran's regional role also resulted in the formation of various organizations and coalitions, such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), in which Saudi Arabia has played a central role in the regional politics concerning the Gulf. The GCC was monumental in containing Iran's political evolution. The GCC has also served as a dominant instrument for US influence and as a means to curb Iran's role in the region's political and security concerns. By coordinating military/security arrangements in the region, Saudi Arabia and other GCC members joined the West in their coercive economic sanctions against Iran helped implement campaigns to pass political resolutions condemning Iran. As a result of the GCC's support for US policies, GCC countries received large advances weapons deals and were signed under the defensive nuclear umbrella of the United States. All of which was under the security requisite to counter and contain the Iranian threat.

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 93

<sup>104</sup> William L. Cleveland and Martin Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 4th ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2009), 417

## *Iran*

On its end, Iran continued to look for ways to challenge the regional order, such as supporting Hezbollah and Hamas and allying with Syria's Assad regime. When Khomeini rose to power, one of his main goals was support the formation of Islamic government and various Islamic groups. The Syrian-Iranian relationship is one that is worth taking a great look at. When Hafez al- Assad took power in September of 1970, he sought to make Syria into a power among the Arabs. Assad ruled through the Ba'ath Party, using its secular ideology as a means to bring the Alawite minority into key positions. Eventually, the Alawites, who once made up the servant class, held positions that ranged from commanders of special forces to intelligence to the armored corps. Additionally, Assad exploited the minorities' existential fear with regard to the Sunni majority and even campaigned against the Sunnis through massive and indiscriminate violence, deliberately radicalizing them.<sup>105</sup> Assad, though initially inspired by Arab nationalism advocated by Egypt's President, Gamal Abdel Nasser, became embittered by the constant scheming and backstabbing among Arab states that countered the rhetoric of unity.<sup>106</sup> It is in light of this regional political reality that Iran and Syria became what many experts dub as the "odd couple." When the Ayatollah Khomeini came into power in

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<sup>105</sup> Thomas Pierret, *The Reluctant Sectarianism of Foreign States in the Syrian Conflict*. Peace Brief 162 (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2013).

<sup>106</sup> Neil MacFarquhar, "Hafez Al-Assad, Who Turned Syria Into a Power in the Middle East, Dies at 69," *New York Times*, June 11, 2000, accessed March 4, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/06/11/world/hafez-al-assad-who-turned-syria-into-a-power-in-the-middle-east-dies-at-69.html?pagewanted=1>.



1979, he recognized the Alawites as branch of the Shi'ites. Essentially, establishing political and cultural relations was based on Syria and Iran's shared heritage, and the concepts of anti-imperialism and anti-Zionism.<sup>107</sup> For instance, in the cultural agreement made between post-Revolutionary Iran and Syria, the opening paragraph laid out a concordance that began with the belief that they share a cultural heritage and civilization, a history that represents the struggle of two peoples, and with this foundation of friendly relations between two brother peoples, the two states expanded their cultural relations in line with the politics of resistance of both Zionism and Western Imperialism.<sup>108</sup>

Syria and Iran entered an alliance for strategic purposes. Both Syria and Iran had clear geopolitical interests and this alliance provided them with the opportunity to promote their influence in the region. Initially, the two countries allied themselves with one another during the Iran-Iraq war. Iraq had long been Syria's competitor for supremacy in the Arab world and Syria became Iran's only and therefore crucial Arab ally in its war against Iraq. Additionally, for Iran, Syria represented the state with access to the Shi'ite community in Lebanon that was currently the midst of a civil war. Lebanon became a major goal for Iran as Iran hoped to not only increase its influence in the region, but it also made Lebanon a crucial location for Iran to continue to export its revolution and continue its targeted attacks against Israel. As aforementioned, Syria and Iran were firmly in opposition and vastly antagonistic to the state of Israel. The civil war

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<sup>107</sup> Nadia von Maltzahn, *The Syria-Iran Axis: Cultural Diplomacy and International Relations in the Middle East*. 137. Vol. New York; London: I.B. Tauris, 2013.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 95

in Lebanon led to the foundation of Hezbollah, a radical Shi'ite non-state actor based in the south of Lebanon who constantly engaged Israel's army in guerrilla warfare. Both Iran and Syria greatly supported Hezbollah. Syria's geographic location provided Iran with the opportunity and access to influence the Shi'ite community in Lebanon by increasing the radical Shi'ite militias and by funding, training and arming them. Hezbollah became Iran's most important non-state actor ally in the Middle East. This is one important example of how Iran's competition for influence in the region has catapulted it to mobilize its resources in order to keep and gain friends.

By the mid 1980s, Saudi Arabia and Iran enmity had escalated to such a degree that the two nations began to utilize sectarianism as a means to undermine each others religious authority and security. Both countries embraced a state identity that was highly dependent on Muslim causes. Iran used Khomeinism to spread its revisionist message and took its role of *vilayat-i faqih* very seriously. On its end, Saudi Arabia focused its regional agenda on preserving the status quo, believing its Islamic leadership as a state chosen by God integral to the region's security and stability. The clash and intense rivalry that ensued produced a clash of two very distinct discourses regarding the regional order of the Middle East.

On every issue that presented itself, Saudi Arabia and Iran pitted themselves against the other, locking themselves in a cycle of vicious enmity and rivalry. In 1987, during the annual Muslim pilgrimage, a time when the city of Mecca is open to all

Muslims, a tradition that stipulates that all forms of strife and bloodshed are forbidden, became a site of tragedy. Iranian pilgrims were sent to demonstrate and riot and clashed with Saudi Arabian security forces in a confrontation that was so bloody that it claimed the lives of over four hundred individuals. While Saudi Arabia blamed Iran entirely for the incident, claiming it to be provoked and premeditated violence, Iran and their sympathizers labeled the event a premeditated massacre, where Saudi security forces has conspired to kill Iranian pilgrims. The traditional peace of the pilgrimage was destroyed by the Iranian-Saudi conflict, a time when the confrontation between two rivals of Islam escalated to a point of no return. For three years, Iranians boycotted the pilgrimage and Saudi Arabia completely severed ties with Iran, making it impossible for Iranian pilgrims to secure visas. In 1988, on the first anniversary of the 1987 Mecca incident, Khomeini gave a speech that provided to a historical analogy, alluding to Sunni and Shi'ite historical conflict, portraying the Saudis as Sunni agents whose aim was to annihilate and inflict massive pain on the Sh'ite Muslims,<sup>109</sup>

The sword of blasphemy and division, which has been hidden in the hypocritical cloak of Yazid's followers and descendants of the Umayyad dynasty, God's curse be upon them, had to come out again from the same cloak of Abu Sufyan's heirs to destroy and Kill.<sup>110</sup>

Saudi Arabia and Iran's normative divergence of foreign policy regarding regional security and stability found its way on the battlefield of Afghanistan's war with

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<sup>109</sup> Kramer, Martin. "Khomeini's Messengers in Mecca." Martin Kramer on the Middle East RSS. Accessed July 2, 2015. <http://www.martinkramer.org/sandbox/reader/archives/khomeinis-messengers-in-mecca/>.

<sup>110</sup> Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, sermon, Radio Tehran, Quoted in Fbis, 21 July 1988., July 20, 1988)

the Russians. The 1979 Russian invasion of Afghanistan coincided with Iran's Islamic revolution. Khomeini, whose recent estrangement with the United States over the Iranian hostage crisis and their war with Iraq entangled Iran in a multitude of domestic and international problems. While Iran was cautious not to antagonize the Soviet Union, it did immediately condemn the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and demanded its withdrawal. Eventually, however as the Cold War between the Soviet Union and Iran reached the Afghan frontier, Khomeini maintained relations with both the Soviet Union and its own satellite regime in Kabul. Iran saw the Soviet Union as a counterweight to US influence in the region. Furthermore, in conjunction with its own revisionist mission and desire to counter Saudi Arabia's spread of Wahhabism in the region, Iran supported the Hazara Shi'ites (constituted 20 percent of Afghan population) in Afghanistan as a means to battle the US-Saudi Arabia-Pakistan axis that financed and managed the Afghan resistance against the Soviets.<sup>111</sup> When the Cold War ended and the United States and Soviet Union pulled out Afghanistan in 1989, the war-torn state became a battleground for a proxy war among Iran, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. After a long battle with Iraq, Iran was desperately in need of allies in the region and thus sought to establish a friendly government in Kabul that reflected Iran's revolutionary aims.

On its end, Saudi Arabia saw the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan as an external threat to Saudi security, as the Soviet Union's invasion led it closer to the Gulf

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<sup>111</sup> Mohsen Milani, "Iran Primer: Iran and Afghanistan" (video), October 28, 2010, accessed July 5, 2015, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2010/10/iran-primer-iran-and-afghanistan.html>.

and even empowered radical Arab states, such as South Yemen, to overthrow Arab leaders. As part of Saudi Arabia's new religious state identity, Saudi Arabia saw Afghanistan as an important campaign to promote Wahhabi Islam and contain Shi'ite expansionism abroad. In the early 1980s, Saudi Arabia sent its youth to join the war in Afghanistan and even offered financial assistance to the Afghan Arabs, political Sunni fundamentalist Islamic movement—Pashtun mujahedeen—such as Hezb-e Islamic. When Afghanistan descended into a devastating civil war, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Iran all rejected the new government and thus made every attempt to undermine it in order to pursue a victory that would create a new power alignment in line with their visionary goals. Saudi Arabia and Iran continued to push the Pashtun and Shi'ite groups to continue their in fighting by providing them with weapons, training and financials. Additionally, while Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Iran fought over influence on the Afghan turf, as did the Afghan warlords who had rose to power and prominence during their fight against the Soviets. Fueling the civil war was also to their benefit and they created their own fiefdoms, forming fleeting alliances with high bidders.

Eventually, the Taliban, a young Pashtun religious group influenced by Wahhabism, rose to power. By 1996, they had overthrown President Rabbani, which signified a monumental victory for Saudi Arabia and Pakistan as Sunni states and a major defeat for Iran on an economic, ideological and security level. Unwilling to give up, Iran supported the formation of an anti-Taliban coalition composed of Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara factions. Saudi Arabia and Pakistan continued to support the Taliban and for its

part, the Taliban backed Sunni Islamist militants launching attacks against the Iranian regime. By the end of 1998, the Taliban forces had captured a major Shi'ite town, Mazar-e Sharif in northern Afghanistan from an Uzbek warlord, Abdul Rashid Dostum, and massacred thousands of Hazara Shiites in addition to nine Iranian diplomats. In reaction, Iran amassed over 250,000 troops along the Afghanistan border, ready to engage in military confrontation.<sup>112</sup> Thus, the Islamic revolution of 1979 and the propagandization of religious legitimacy via the politicization of the of differences between Sunnism and Shi'ism not only contributed to a deepened hostility between the two Muslim states, but a complete severing of relations by 1988.

### **Saudi-Iranian Détente**

In 1989, Ayatollah Khomeini died, leaving Iran with a relatively strong and centralized government, but with major political, economic and social issues. In 1989, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei took Khomeini's place as the Supreme Leader of Iran and in August, Hashemi Rafsanjani, a “pragmatist” was elected as President.<sup>113</sup> This change in leadership and need to reconstruct the economy and Iran's image and geographic conditions paved the way for Saudi-Iranian détente.

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<sup>112</sup> "Iran and Afghanistan." Institute for the Study of War. Accessed July 6, 2015. <http://www.understandingwar.org/iran-and-afghanistan>.

<sup>113</sup> Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, Updated ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006, 213

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August of 1990 helped the restoration of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia and with several additional Arab states. This changing regional landscape in addition to changes in leadership in both states (King Prince Abdullah in Saudi Arabia) facilitated an easing of relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. By 1991, Saudi Arabia and Iran had come to reach an agreement on the *hajj*. While throughout most of the 1990s, Saudi Iranian relations remained primarily stagnant and complicated, in the later portion of the decade, when Khatami was elected as President of Iran, additional shifts in relations helped pave the way to normalize relations.<sup>114</sup> When Khatami took over in 1997, Saudi Arabia and Iran united on additional issues such as drug and smuggling trafficking. Additionally, the fall of oil prices in the late 1990s brought the two states together, in order to cut oil production and increases prices. Saudi Arabia and Iran also had common interests regarding Iraq, security and the Arab-Israeli peace process.<sup>115</sup>

What is most important to note about this *détente* era, is that despite the exceptional improvement in bilateral relations, a number of important issues remained unresolved. Saudi Arabia and Iran did not have a “meeting of the minds on foreign policy.”<sup>116</sup> The geopolitical circumstances of the late 1990’s Saudi-Iranian

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<sup>114</sup> Gawdat Bahgat. 2000. *Iranian-Saudi rapprochement: Prospects and implications*. World Affairs 162, (3): 108-115

<sup>115</sup> Ibid

<sup>116</sup> F. Gregory Gause III, “Iran's Incoming President and the New Middle East Cold War,” *Markaz* (blog), *Brookings*, July 8, 2013, accessed July 5, 2015.

rapprochement allowed for this improvement of bilateral relations to occur, however they were unable to form a security alliance or even establish an understand of each other' regional international politics. For instance, as aforementioned, they had vast differences and even a proxy war of sorts regarding the Afghanistan, as they supported opposing factions. Also, while Riyadh tolerated the Madrid Conference in October of 1991 regarding the Palestinian-Israeli peace process, Tehran greatly contested any form of peace with Israel, citing it as slowing the process on larger cooperation regarding common regional security issues.<sup>117</sup> Iran's attempt to assert its claims over other GCC territories was another issue that prevented relations from being completely normalized.

### **Conclusion**

Ultimately, this section clearly shows that the Islamic Revolution of 1979 altered relations to such a degree that the Saudi-Iranian rivalry encapsulated an enmity that justifies defining it as an enduring rivalry. The Islamic Revolution of 1979 altered the state identity of both Saudi Arabia and Iran. Where once Iran was a state that advocated its foreign policy towards preserving the status quo, the revolution transformed it into a radical state with a revisionist policy aiming to transform the entire region under a single Islamic unity, Khomeinism, and a region that would uphold all of the Islamic Republic of Iran's norms and values. Saudi Arabia's reactions to Iran's rhetoric and actions created an

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<sup>117</sup> R. K. Ramazani, *Independence Without Freedom: Iran's Foreign Policy* (Palo Alto, CA: University of Virginia Press, 2013), 153.



even more conservative state. Utilizing its economic fortune, Saudi Arabia aimed its foreign policy at countering and containing revolutionary Iran and built institutions, both at home and abroad, to advance its Islamic revivalist movements under its Wahhabi version of Islam. The result was a religious nationalism, which occurs when, the “preservation of traditional values is linked to the preservation of the nation or the state as a citadel of religious values.”<sup>118</sup>

The heated rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran envelops both the complex histories regarding Sunnis and Shi’ites and the centuries of political contestation that is now embodied by the modern nation States of Saudi Arabia and Iran. This question of religious legitimacy is so intrinsically tied to these two Muslim states that when Iran’s revolution began advocating itself as the protector of Islam and incited revolutionary zeal across the Shi’ite minority populations, Saudi Arabia tightened its own unique claim to the state and its status protector of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. The outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war the following year further complicated relations between these two great Gulf States. Saudi Arabia was expected to contain Iranian influence and the opportunity to do so was presented and evidenced by its support and involvement in the Iran-Iraq war, attempting to bolster Saddam Hussein against Shi’ite influence. Afghanistan also presented another opportunity for both Iran and Saudi Arabia to push their normative orders on the regional scene.

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<sup>118</sup> Jonathan Fox, *The Rise of Religious Nationalism and Conflict: Ethnic Conflict and Revolutionary Wars: 1945-2001*. Journal of Peace Research 31, no. 6 (2004).

Saudi Arabia and Iran sought regional and external alliances in their quest as well. Iran reached out to Syria and helped fund, arm and train Hezbollah during the Lebanese Civil War also provided Iran with access to influence regional politics in Lebanon and further its anti-Israel policies via an Islamic fundamentalist non-state actor. Saudi Arabia sought to further its alliance with the United States and the European Union in addition to forming new coalitions composed of the Arab Gulf States, neighboring powerful Sunni states and funding and influencing the new political power of the Taliban, who further supported Sunni fighting militia forces against Shi'ite influences.

Deteriorating diplomatic relations reached an all time low in 1987 when 450 pilgrims, mostly Iranian, were killed by Saudi security forces during the annual *hajj*. Both countries increased their sectarian rhetoric, locking the two states in a vicious cycle of competition, enmity and suspicion. While diplomatic relations were somewhat restored during the formative years of the 1990s, following the death of Khomeini, and rapprochement occurred in the latter years of the 1990s, a common understanding of regional international politics and a security alliances was not formed. Ultimately, while reconciliation did seem apparent, the deep exchanges of enmity and hatred prevailed. The cold war that seemed to come to a halt in the 1990's was renewed with vigor following the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq. The Middle East has therefore found itself in the throes of heated tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran, representing a competition between opposing doctrinal beliefs with Islam and vastly differing political systems.

## **Chapter Five: Saudi Arabia and Iran's Growing Rivalry 2003-2011**

The events of 2003 and the American-led Invasion in Iraq completely changed the power of balance between Saudi Arabia and Iran. This thesis will discuss how sectarian violence has taken root after the 2003 invasion and how Iran's regional influence has increased as its allies in the region have accumulated power. In order to understand this struggle for Middle East hegemony between Iran and Saudi Arabia, this section will explore the political, religious and security dimensions of this struggle. This section will analyze the consequences of Iran's pursuit of a nuclear program and in addition, will map out the geography of the conflicts, specifically regarding Iraq, Yemen, The Palestinian Territories and Lebanon.

### **Sectarianism in Iraq**

“Authoritarian states appear to draw life from ethnic or religious intolerance as a way of justifying the degree of violence required to maintain power.”<sup>119</sup>

In attempting to understand the modern Middle East and why the current environment consists of continuous violence and chaos, it is important to readdress the

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid, 17

schism that exists between the Sunnis and the Shi'ites. The issue of sectarianism has the potential to present itself wherever people of different faiths live in close proximity to one another. Traditionally, sectarianism has been explained as an institutional set of arrangements that determines familial, local, regional and even global loyalties or affiliations.<sup>120</sup> It has been shown that sectarian conflict leads to what experts identify as sectarian violence, which implies "a symmetrical confrontation between two or more non-state actors representing different population groups."<sup>121</sup> This definition refers to violence between members of different sects (inter-sectarian violence) and violence between different groups in the same sect (intra-sectarian violence). In the recent years, the Muslim world has experienced an increase in sectarian conflict, which in this case, has begun to be the result of the collapse of authoritarian rule and a struggle for political power, specifically, over which interpretation of Islam will influence societies and the next generation of leaders.<sup>122</sup>

While keeping in mind the theoretical framework outlined in chapter two regarding ethnic and religious identity, this section will address how sectarian conflict was further inflamed by the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq. Postcolonial Iraq was established in 1921. The creation of a state post World War I was artificial, in that it was

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<sup>120</sup> Geneive Abdo, "The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide," *Brookings Institution* (April 2013): 7

<sup>121</sup> Ekaterina Stepanova, "Chapter 2: Trends in Armed Conflicts." In *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Yearbook 2008: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

<sup>122</sup> Geneive Abdo, "The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide," *Brookings Institution* (April 2013): 7

drawn up to match the geopolitical imperial interests of the British and the French. States were created not necessarily to provide self-determination to the multiple indigenous groups living in the area at the time, but rather to create a state that would meet the political and economic interests of colonial powers in the region.<sup>123</sup> This also meant that the founding government would not be immediately viewed as legitimate by the population that they were contracted to govern. In addition, Iraq consists of a highly diverse ethnic and religious population; Kurds, Sunnis and Shi'ites fissure Iraqi demographics. An urban-rural divide further heightens these divides.<sup>124</sup> These artificial governments were faced with not only needing to find a way to earn the consent of the governed, but to also fuse these very distinct and often conflicting ethnic and religious identities.

After the establishment of Iraq, the Arab Sunni population, a mere minority of the Iraqi population, began its authoritarian rule. For the next 82 years, the Sunnis dominated in Iraq and the Shi'ites were brutally suppressed and marginalized. This oppression was particularly apparent under Saddam Hussein and the Ba'ath party.<sup>125</sup> For instance, the Shi'ite community was mainly centered in the Southern region of Iraq. Saddam Hussein

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<sup>123</sup> William L. Cleveland, and Martin Bunton. *A History of the Modern Middle East*. 4th ed. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2009.

<sup>124</sup> A.I. Dawisha 2009, *Iraq: A Political History from Independence to Occupation*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.

<sup>125</sup> "The Real Roots of Iraq's Sunni-Shia Conflict." Vox. June 20, 2014. Accessed March 11, 2015. <http://www.vox.com/2014/6/20/5827046/who-are-sunnis-who-are-shias>.

would purposefully neglect these Shi'ite communities by restricting them from meeting their basic human needs, including psychological well-being. He would neglect and starve these cities of required services, drain their wetlands so that they could not shelter rebels, and would ruthlessly assault the Shi'ite community. In addition, the Ba'thists systematically murdered Shi'ite popular religious figures and banned Shi'ite festivals and celebrations.<sup>126</sup> Thus, although the political rulers presented themselves as nationally oriented, the fact remains that the Sunni minority constituted the ruling elite at the expense of the Shi'ite majority, creating a system of resentment.

It is important to note here that during the first 80 years of Iraq's history, the sectarian identity of the Iraqi populace was not primarily relevant to the political agenda of Iraq's leaders. Rather, they built state institutions with the purpose of narrowing the vast divides between the ethnic and religious groups in order to indoctrinate them under the secular ideology of an all encompassing nationalism.<sup>127</sup> This does not mean that the sectarian conflict did not exist or present itself in the 80 years, for this structure did in fact present both problems and opportunities for the ruling classes. The difference rendered is that the political institutions consistently presented themselves as national institutions and propagated their national agendas.

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<sup>126</sup> Nasr, Vali. *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future*. Reprint ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007, 187.

<sup>127</sup> Dawisha, A.I. 2009, *Iraq: A Political History from Independence to Occupation*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.

On September 11, 2001 a terrorist attack occurred in the United States, causing the Bush administration to launch its “global war on terror.” In 2001, a U.S. combat mission into Afghanistan was launched, Operation Enduring Freedom, which targeted al-Qaeda training camps. As part of the “continuing” effort to fight this war on terror, the United States invaded Iraq in 2003. The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq was also part of a broader U.S. plan to overthrow Saddam Hussein and establish a democratic model in a Middle Eastern nation.<sup>128</sup> Not only did the American invasion fail to establish the sought after basis for democratic modernization in the region, but the fall of Baghdad led to the unmaking of the “unified” Iraqi identity. Iraq’s discord and tensions unleashed an entrenched sectarian mindset that was exploited as various local Sunni and Shi’ite groups (including extremists) fought for control.

When the U.S. launched their campaign in March of 2003, the Shi’ite community, led by Iraq’s grand ayatollah, Sayyid al-Sistani, did not resist the American march to Baghdad. They saw a great opportunity presented to them, the ability to sway the Americans to their side in order to establish political dominance. As Vali Nasr describes in his book, “the only face of Shi’ism revealed itself to American troops as they entered one of Shi’ism’s holiest cities was a distinctly quiescent and even spiritual one.”<sup>129</sup> The Americans interpreted this acquiescence as a “pro-American stance” and saw the Shi’ite

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<sup>128</sup> Adel Altorai, “Understanding the Role of State Identity in Foreign Policy Decision-Making: The Rise and Demise of Saudi–Iranian Rapprochement (1997–2009)” (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2012).

<sup>129</sup> Ibid, 169

community as the quintessential hatchery to implement its interests of building a democratic, secular, and economically prosperous Middle East. The United States, through its early alliance with the Shi'ites, helped reshape Iraq by bringing about the fall of the Saddam regime and the subsequent end to the Sunni rule over Iraq. Al-Sistani was monumental in bringing about this "Shi'ite revival" and understood that for Shi'ites to continue to remain powerful, they would need to build upon a unified identity that is common to all Shi'ites.

For many Sunnis, the United States "de-ba'athification" of political institution was not a positive sign. When the United States further disbanded the Iraqi military, both Sunni religious and political leaders felt alienated and greatly angered. They began to lash out by reverting back to their sectarian roots. For instance, the Sunni leaders accused the Shi'ites of being the "cat's paws" of an Iranian campaign to control Iraq. Furthermore, in 2005, the United Iraq Alliance, a Shi'ite political organization, selected a Prime Minister candidate who won 48 percent of the vote and roughly half of the seats in Parliament. Not only did this confirm the Shi'ite dominance, but it also angered many Shi'ites, viewing it as further proof of Iran's influence in Iraq, as most of the government officials who won had maintained close ties with Iran since the 1980's. The Sunni's increased their rhetoric regarding the claim that Shi'ites were not true Muslims, but were in fact imposters masquerading as Muslims. Prejudices regarding the Shi'ite grew more pronounced including "Shi'ites have tails and they are provincial, plebeian and



uncouth.<sup>130</sup> In contrast, the Shi'ites, under the guide of al-Sistani, united under a single Shi'ite identity. When Al Maliki came to power, he used these “de-ba’athification” laws to keep members of Saddam Hussein's regime out of government. Although the election results were in favor Maliki and his Shi'ite allies, they did not win by enough votes to form a government that could rule without any coalition partners. Though many Shi'ites did not agree to the politics of the Maliki government, they had the desire to protect and promote their Shi'ite identity.

This marginalization of Sunnis actually established a Sunni identity. The summer of 2005 gave rise to violent sectarianism. Sunnis, who believed that many of the Iraqi security operations were sectarian provocations, began to rebel. When attacks on Sunni mosques and clerics grew more pronounced, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi formed the Umar Brigade to target Shi'ites. This resulted in massive suicide bombings aimed at “ordinary” Shi'ites, ranging from policemen, community leaders, children at play, people at work, people during prayer and aimed at locations such as markets, hospitals, etc.<sup>131</sup> Although the rebellion movement does contain elements of religious fanaticism, not all members are religious extremists. Scholars have explained that there are many Sunnis who view this rebellion as a revolution of sorts, a nationalist movement.<sup>132</sup> Unfortunately, the

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<sup>130</sup>Nasr, Vali. *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future*. Reprint ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007, 187.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, 203

<sup>132</sup> "The Real Roots of Iraq's Sunni-Shia Conflict." Vox. June 20, 2014. Accessed March 11, 2015. <http://www.vox.com/2014/6/20/5827046/who-are-sunnis-who-are-shias>.

United States did not realize this in time: the Shi'ites claim for Iraq not only changed the balance of power between the Sunnis and the Shi'ites in Iraq, but also changed the balance of power between the Sunnis and Shi'ites in the entire Middle East.

Sectarianism is as much a product of time and place as it is an exploitation of identity. When attempting to understand the Sunni-Shi'ite divide, it is important to note that sectarianism is being used as a form of ethno-religious political mobilization since religion is a key factor of one's identity within the Muslim world.<sup>133</sup> Furthermore, political leaders began to think strategically in sectarian terms and began to shape their domestic and foreign policies in these terms.<sup>134</sup> What began as a political rivalry evolved into mass conflict and chaos, reverting individuals back to their most basic sectarian identity. When the U.S. invaded and occupied Iraq, it toppled one of the three largest Sunni powers in the region and instituted competitive elections that led a Shi'ite majority to dominate the parliament and produce its prime ministers, creating the first Arab Shi'ite state.

### **The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry in Iraq**

The fall of Saddam's regime and the ensuing Shi'ite rise to power did not go unnoticed in either Riyadh or Tehran. In fact, when looking at the civil war conflict in Iraq, it is more beneficial to view the conflict in terms of the aims and goals of Iran and

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<sup>133</sup> Nader Hashemi, ed., "'Religious Leaders, Sectarianism, and the Sunni-Shi'a Divide in Islam,'" in *Between Terror and Tolerance: Religious Leaders, Conflict, and Peacemaking*, ed. Timothy Sisk (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2011).

<sup>134</sup> Toby Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab Spring That Wasn't (Stanford Briefs)* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), xiii

Saudi Arabia and how these two regimes continue to use Islam as an instrument to further their political power and become the ultimate hegemon in the Middle East. The removal of Saddam Hussein and the civil war in Iraq have changed the regional security paradigm, engaging Saudi Arabia and Iran in a struggle for power. Iraq, once perceived as a hostile enemy to both Saudi Arabia and Iran, is now more than ever a central concern. Neither state wishes to content with the emergence of a new hostile regime in Baghdad. For Iran, Iraq is hugely important. Not only is the majority of Iraq's population Shi'ite Muslims, but Iraq is also home to the Askari shrine as well as to Najaf and Kerbala, two holy cities in Islam, sites that represent the heart of Shi'ite history for the Islamic Republic.<sup>135</sup> Since the ousting of Saddam Hussein, however, the Middle East has begun to see a challenge to the Sunni political prominence, making Sunni governments, especially Saudi Arabia fearful that they are losing their influence in the region. The forceful removal of Saddam Hussein has created a fear within the al-Saud family. Iran has made significant efforts to influence the post-Saddam Shi'ite governments, leading to powerful improvements in its relations with Iraq. Saudi Arabia fears that that these Shi'ite dominated governments in Baghdad will establish an alliance that will allow them to organize themselves diplomatically and perhaps even make subversion efforts, which would ultimately be detrimental to Saudi's interests in the region.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Imran Khan, "Why Is Iraq so Important to Iran?," *Al Jazeera*, June 19, 2014, accessed July 7, 2015, <http://blogs.aljazeera.com/blog/middle-east/why-iraq-so-important-iran>.

<sup>136</sup> Andrew Terrill, *The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry and the Future of Middle East Security* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute (SSI), 2011), 45.

While Saudi Arabia had sincere concerns regarding the U.S. led invasion of Iraq, Saudi Arabia initially took more of a back seat to influencing the new Iraqi government. Following the 9/11 bombings, Saudi Arabia-U.S. relations took a major hit as fifteen of the hijackers were Saudis. Desiring to preserve friendly relations, Saudi Arabia slightly adjusted their domestic and foreign behavior in order to accommodate and provide the United States.<sup>137</sup> Saudi Arabia was not fearful of an expanding U.S. regional influence, but rather had reservations about the 2003 U.S. led invasion for fear that the Shi'ites would seize control, inevitably curtailing Saudi leadership and influence. Saudi Arabia's principal interests therefore can be outlined as 1) prevent instability and conflict in Iraq from threatening Saudi Arabia's homeland security; 2) prevent the repression of Iraq's Sunnis by the newly dominant Shi'ite government 3) limit hostile Iran's regional influence.

As the years went on and the United States imposed de-bathification orders, Saudi Arabia became deeply critical of the United States policies in Iraq, viewing them as pro-Shi'ite and anti-Sunni. In few instances, Saudi Arabia even rendered U.S. policies as manipulated by the Iranians.<sup>138</sup> In an interview with the Council of Foreign Relations in 2005, Saudi Arabian Foreign minister accused the United States of effectively handing

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<sup>137</sup> Madawi Al-Rasheed, ed., *Kingdom Without Borders: Saudi Arabia's Political, Religious and Media Frontiers* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 92

<sup>138</sup> Idem

the country to Iran. When talks of an Iraqi constitution arose, Saudi Arabia began to voice its fears of the constitution encouraging sectarianism and splitting the country's populations, further disenfranchising the Sunnis that lost power when Saddam Hussein was ousted by the U.S. in 2003. King Faisal warned that such a constitution and policies would drive Iraq into a civil war and that Iran, only interested in the Shi'ite sect of the population, would take advantage due to its foreign policy ambitions in the region. Faisal criticized the United State's lack of foresight by claiming, "We fought a war together to keep Iran out of Iraq after Iraq was driven out of Kuwait...now we are handing the whole country over to Iran without reason."<sup>139</sup>

Following the invasion of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia completely severed ties with Iraq. When Saddam was toppled and the Sunni government was replaced with a predominantly Shi'ite government, Saudi Arabia refused to restore diplomatic ties and establish an embassy in Baghdad. Saudi Arabia's failure to open an embassy was in fact a means of protesting this new rise of a Shi'ite led government in Iraq. In addition to this reasoning, Saudi Arabia feared that accepting a Shi'ite government would reignite protests from Saudi Arabia's Shi'ite community. For Saudi Arabia, the Iraq War of 2003 represented a major foreign policy setback on the regional level.<sup>140</sup> While Saudi Arabia did not necessarily become heavily involved in the initial years, Saudi Arabia took a highly

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<sup>139</sup> Robert Gibbons, "Saudi Says U.s. Policy Handing Iraq Over to Iran," *Assyrian International News Agency*, September 20, 2005, accessed June 9, 2015, <http://www.aina.org/news/20050920195256.htm>.

<sup>140</sup> Ibrahim Al-Marashi, "Saudi's Bold Political Gambit," *AlJazeera*, January 05, 2015, accessed July 7, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/01/saudi-bold-political-gambit-20151545814291980.html>.

critical and vocal stance against Maliki. For instance, at an international conference in Egypt, King Abdullah refused to meet the new Prime Minister of Iraq. King Abdullah described Maliki as an individual “embodying sectarian divisions.”<sup>141</sup> Saudi Arabia’s refusal to meet Maliki was a snub that resonated throughout the Middle East and worked to diminish the legitimacy and recognition of the new government. Saudi Arabia was greatly upset with Maliki’s lack of reaching out to Iraq’s Sunni minority to reconcile escalating sectarian tensions and of his refusal to address its controversial laws. For Saudi Arabia, the success of Iraqi reconciliation efforts and the choices made by the government were a major determining factor as to whether they will continue or cease to fear the empowerment of Shi’ite Arabs and the growth of Iranian influence. Iraq’s choices regarding key areas such as energy and military policy had major impacts for Iraqi-Saudi relations and how far Saudi Arabia was willing to go to influence Iraq and contain Iran.<sup>142</sup> In light of Saudi-Iraqi diminishing relations, Saudi Arabia has also been accused of not closing down the border in order to allow Saudis to join the Sunni insurgency against the government.<sup>143</sup>

In 2010, during the lead up to the March Iraqi election, Saudi Arabia’s deep concern for the growing influence of Shi’ite ruled Iran and its backing of Maliki led it to

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<sup>141</sup> “Iraq-Saudi Relations Hit New Low,” *Middle East Online*, May 28, 2009, accessed July 7, 2015, <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=32357>.

<sup>142</sup> Joseph McMillan, *Saudi Arabia and Iraq: Oil, Religion, and an Enduring Rivalry*, USIP, Special Report No. 157, January 2006, p. 14.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid*

become more involved in Iraqi politics and favor secular Shi'ite leader Dr. Ayad Allawi. Allawi led a political coalition that was friendly to Iraq's Sunni Arab community and advocated for their interests and concerns. Saudi Arabia funded Dr. Allawi during his organization's campaigning efforts. Additionally, Allawi maintained a highly critical disposition against Iran's continued interference in the political negotiations that followed the election and of its meddling of Iraqi politics. Despite Saudi refutation, some observers have even speculated that the Saudi government may be offering financial support to Sunni Arabs and groups in Iraq, including tribal leaders, who are associated with the Awakening movement.<sup>144</sup>

Iran, suffering from the legacy of the protracted Iran-Iraq war, understood that it needed to seize upon the opportunity to influence Baghdad. Thus, from the fall of Saddam in 2003, Iran became highly involved in Iraqi politics. Iran's conventional forces were aging and its older Russian/Soviet and Chinese aircrafts would be demolished in a fight against an Iraq that had modern Western supplies aircrafts and military technology. In addition, Iran was appalled by the notion of the U.S. army increasing its influences in neighboring states of Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>145</sup> As a means to mitigate Iraqi conventional forces and U.S. influences, Iran immediately and actively

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<sup>144</sup> Christopher M. Blanchard, *Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations*, Washington D.C.: Congressional research Service, June 2010.

<sup>145</sup> Armin Rosen, "Iran Might Be More Worried About the Us Military in Iraq Than It Is About Isis," *Business Insider*, September 17, 2014, accessed June 7, 2015, <http://www.businessinsider.com/iran-might-be-more-worried-about-the-us-military-than-it-is-about-isis-2014-9>.

sought to influence post-Saddam Iraq. Iran has involved “diplomacy, economic investment, cover action, and cultivating Iranian clients within the Iraqi political system including the leadership of armed militias.”<sup>146</sup> The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force, known for its training of terrorist organizations and for spreading the revolutionary message, has been organizing, training, funding, and equipping Iraqis to fight against Coalition and Iraqi security forces. In fact, regarding Shi’ite militia groups, since 2006, U.S. military officials estimate that the Quds Force provides between \$750,000 and \$3 million worth of equipment and funding to these groups every month.<sup>147</sup> These influences have been greatly felt and have resulted in many positive results for Iran. For instance, previous Prime Minister Maliki, constantly emphasized the strategic importance of an alliance between the two nations.<sup>148</sup> Iran was instrumental in brokering important agreements between divergent Shi’ite groups, such as encouraging the formation of governing Shi’ite led coalition in the Iraqi parliament composed of opposing populist leader Muqtada al-Sadr and Maliki. Iran’s aims in Iraq led it to support and seek to develop a working relationship with all major factions in order to hasten the departure of the Americans from Iraq. To Iran, Sadr’s leadership is essential

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<sup>146</sup> Andrew Terrill, *The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry and the Future of Middle East Security* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute (SSI), 2011), 45.

<sup>147</sup> Kimberly Kagan, Frederick W. Kagan, and Danielle Pletka, *Iranian Influence in the Levant, Iraq, and Afghanistan* (Washington D.C.: American Enterprise Institute (AEI), 2008), 19, accessed June 27, 2015, <https://www.aei.org/publication/iranian-influence-in-the-levant-iraq-and-afghanistan/>.

<sup>148</sup> Thomas Erdbrink and Leila Fadel, “Maliki, Iran's Leaders Talk About the Future of Iraq's Government,” *Washington Post*, October 19, 2010, accessed July 7, 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/10/18/AR2010101805903.html>.



due to his commitment to Iran's goals of a speedy withdrawal of all US troops and opposed any ties to Saudi Arabia and the United States. Additional influences stem from diplomatic and economic factors. In 2008, for the first time in the history of relations between Iran and Iraq, a high level Iranian diplomat was hosted in Iraq, President Ahmadinejad. Additionally, in early 2008, Iraq and Iran signed a wide variety of trade agreements fostering economic ties, transforming Iran into Iraq's largest trading partner.

Most essential to Iran's goals and most detrimental to Iraq's stability was its funding and exercise of influence via Shi'ite militia organizations. These "Special Groups" engaged in terrorism and military strikes against U.S. troops and against the Sunni Iraqi population. One such group that is well known is Sadr's Mahdi Army, who at its peak strength included roughly 60,000 men. Dismantled in 2008, the Mahdi Army was accused of operating death squads and was armed with various weapons, including IEDs.<sup>149</sup> While al-Sadr no longer holds an official title within the Iraqi government, at one point he held around 40 seats in the 325-member Iraqi parliament. Additional Iranian-supported militias in Iraq included Asaib al Haq, a brigade of over 1000 militiamen and also Kata'ib Hezbollah, in which Iranians have supplied both of these groups with rocket assisted exploding projectiles, and other destructive weapons.

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<sup>149</sup> "Al-Mahdi Army / Jaysh Al-Mahdi (JAM) Active Religious Seminary / Al-Sadr's Group." Al-Mahdi Army / Active Religious Seminary / Al-Sadr's Group. Accessed July 7, 2015.

Iraq has essentially become an important testing group and proxy conflict for Saudi Arabia and Iran. The United States' war in Iraq disposed of Saddam Hussein and its Sunni dominated government. In doing so, it empowered an oppressed Shi'ite population into an emboldened community that came to dominate the next regime, bringing conflict back to the territory of Iraq, "The change from a Sunni-dominated government to a Shi'a influence shifted Baghdad from 'Riyadh's orbit into Tehran's' where it has remained for the past decade, much to Saudi Arabia's discontent."<sup>150</sup> Iran has capitalized on the new Iraq to expand its influences. Developing joint oil fields, trade between Iran and Iraq now stands at nearly eight billion dollars per year. The competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia over Iraq continues to escalate, further destabilizing an already shaky and failing political state.

### **The Nuclear Issue**

The development of a "Shi'ite bomb" may cause Saudi Arabia to develop its own nuclear program. On July 14, 2015, the United States along with world powers, the U.K, France, Russia, China and Germany negotiated a nuclear deal with Iran. This nuclear accord has been vociferously criticized by U.S. and Iranian hardliners, as well as among

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<sup>150</sup> Kelsey Hampton, "Doctrinally and Politically Opposed On the Battlefield in Syria: Iran and Saudi Arabia's Cold War in the Middle East" (tenth Biennial Graduate Student Conference-Conflict Studies and Global Governance: The New Generation, Boston, MA, October 31-November 1, 2014), 6

regional allies in the region, such as Israel and many Arab countries.<sup>151</sup> Saudi Arabia views this as the U.S. providing Iran's nuclear program with its "stamp of approval." As Iran's main ideological and strategic rival, Saudi Arabia has announced its plan to build its own nuclear program with a minimum of 16 nuclear reactors as a way to bridge this gap.<sup>152</sup> Saudi Arabia believes that it has the resources to purchase nuclear capabilities from an outside source. As Saudi Arabia has a history of acting clandestinely in the nuclear arena, the production of a Sunni bomb to counter the Shi'ite bomb remains a possibility. A nuclear Iran threatens the fragile stability of the global world by bringing nuclear proliferation to the Middle East.

Since 2003, a salient political development in Iran has been the strengthening of conservative and hard-line tendencies in the government. This has been especially true after the election of Mahmud Ahmadinejad in 2005.<sup>153</sup> While Iran's nuclear program began in the 1970s under the era of the Shah, the issue of the nuclear program became salient under Ahmadinejad. Originally, the goal was to build 20 nuclear power reactors,

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<sup>151</sup> Carol E. Lee, "Obama Blasts GOP Critics of Iran Nuclear Deal President Says Opponents of Accord Are Playing 'fast and Loose' with Facts," *Wall Street Journal*, July 27, 2015, accessed July 27, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/obama-blasts-gop-critics-of-iran-deal-1438004208>.

<sup>152</sup> Yoel Guzansky and Udi Dekel. "Recognizing Iran as a Nuclear Threshold State: Implications for Israel and the Middle East." The Institute for National Security Studies. March 25, 2015. Accessed April 21, 2015. <http://www.inss.org.il/index.aspx?id=4538&articleid=9004>.

<sup>153</sup> Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, Updated ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 322

with research and development focusing on the conduction of fissile and material production. The Iranian Revolution, however, hindered these initial nuclear efforts.<sup>154</sup>

For Iran, gaining a nuclear weapon is a nationalist issue. When Ahmadinejad came to power, he attempted to vitalize Khomeini's ideological zeal. Benefitting greatly from the overthrow of Iraq and yet surrounded by enemies, Iran became determined to acquire all the technologies that would be acquired for a nuclear weapon. A nuclear weapons program would both act as a deterrent and also provide Iran with vast political, military and diplomatic power, not to mention prestige. While Iran claimed that its nuclear program was for purely peaceful purposes, it continued to hide many of its nuclear activities from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), leading to the international arenas speculation that Iran was indeed intending to create a nuclear weapons program. Additionally, after months of extended negotiations with Europe, the Iranian government concluded that it would slowly resume the acceleration of its enrichment program. Each year, Iran implements another step of nuclear enrichment. For instance, by 2006, Iran was able to convert uranium ore into uranium gas whose purpose could be used in both nuclear reactors and weapons. By 2007, Iran announced that it would end its "voluntary" cooperation with the IAEA and begin the full production of enriched uranium. IAEA inspectors were no longer allowed to do voluntary inspections and furthermore, lost access to many sites. From what knowledge experts have been able to

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<sup>154</sup> Joseph Cirincione, Jon B. Wolfsthal, and Miriam Rajkumar, *Deadly Arsenals: Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical Threats*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005), page 298.

accumulate, Iran's nuclear stockpile includes 15 power reactors and two research reactors are under full construction.<sup>155</sup> Iran, learning from the mistakes of its predecessors, including Iraq, dispersed these nuclear reactor programs all around the vast country, including to underground location in order to avoid detection

In the nuclear age, nuclear weapons dominate strategy, specifically the diplomacy of violence. Although the world has been able to enjoy an era of nuclear peace as a result of the military strategy of deterrence, unfortunately there are those who fear that new global developments are shifting the international system to experience state and non-state actors who challenge the assumptions of the deterrence theory. As nuclear proliferation occurs, the international system is once again experiencing nuclear states with radical revolutionary global objectives. These objectives will first threaten their regional enemies and thus, proliferation may come in hostile pairs, which can set off a chain reaction of other neighbors fearing for their existence or strategic power position in their region. With so many unstable forces dominating the current arena, the fear of nuclear war is becoming more realistic and more eminent.

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<sup>155</sup> Bernard Gwertzman, "Cirincione: Iran's New 'Hard Line' President Pushing Iran toward Security Council Action on Nuclear Issues." Council on Foreign Relations. January 5, 2006. Accessed July 8, 2015. <http://www.cfr.org/iran/cirincione-irans-new-hard-line-president-pushing-iran-toward-security-council-action-nuclear-issues/p9495>.

It has been proclaimed that “nuclear proliferation is inevitable, at best it can be managed, not prevented.”<sup>156</sup> One nation of serious concern to the security of the global world is Iran. Not even at its core did the Cold War have an age-old enmity such as the Sunni-Shi’ite and Arab-Iranian conflict. An Iranian bomb would be perceived in the Arab world as an Iranian (anti-Arab) and Shi’ite (anti-Sunni) capability. During the Cold War, just the ideological threat led each nation to believe that an improvement in the defense system was essential in order to meet the requirements of deterrence. As a direct result, each nation acquired a multitude of nuclear weapons that had the potential to bring the world to thermonuclear war and utter destruction. If the technology to create nuclear weapons fell into the hands of such powerful enemies, such as the Sunni and Shi’ite Muslims, it would offset and destroy the strategic balance of the Middle East and lead to catastrophic results. The power vacuum left in the failed state of Iraq and Iran’s nuclear weapons program has magnified the danger of the fissure, as an Iranian bomb would be perceived as an Iranian and Shi’ite capability.

Iran is concerned with gaining security for the regime and strengthening its prestige in the Middle East. The acquisition of an Iranian bomb would redress and reverse the strategic imbalance of the Middle East and guarantee Iran regional dominance. The Cold War proved that superpowers are hesitant to use military tactics to challenge national policies of nations with nuclear powers, in fear that results would end

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<sup>156</sup> William Potter, “New Look of Nuclear Proliferation,” *The Nonproliferation Review* 12, no. 2 (July 2005): under “ISSN1073-6700, <http://cns.miis.edu/npr/pdfs/122potter.pdf> (accessed November 9, 2013).

in a nuclear holocaust. Iran hopes to gain a nuclear weapon with the deterrence strategy in mind as played out during the Cold War. Superpowers will not risk war with a state with nuclear weapons. Furthermore, if the Iranian bomb does develop, Iran's funding to extreme terrorist groups such as Hezbollah, and Hamas will not be able to be controlled by sanctions invoked by other nations. Currently, the Shi'ites hope to unite the Sunnis in their cause against the ultimate enemy, the West.

The fear is that if the Iranian Shi'ites succeed in developing the bomb, it will completely usurp the balance between the Gulf States. Nuclear non-proliferation has been for years a major goal of Middle East politics. In the 1970's, Saudi Arabia immediately opted for a nuclear free zone in the Middle East, as paralleled by other Arab gulf countries and Persian Iran. Saudi Arabia and Iran are both members of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Due to its alliance with the United States, Saudi Arabia is held under the U.S. nuclear umbrella. According to former Secretary Hillary Clinton at the April 2010 Nuclear Security Summit, "The United States and Saudi Arabia... face a common enemy [Iran]...cooperation is essential to keeping both of our countries safe...the United States would pledge to defend its friends and allies in the region from Iranian aggression."<sup>157</sup> The 2013 United States Central Command (CENTCOM) statement also supports this posture,

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<sup>157</sup> Hillary Clinton, interviewed by Abdel Al-Ghamdi, February 6, 2010, interview PRN: 2010/T22-08, U.S. Department of State Diplomacy in Action, Channel 2, Dar Al Hekma College Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/02/136775.htm?goMobile=0> (Accessed November 7, 2014).

For decades, security cooperation has been a cornerstone of our relationship with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. As we face sophisticated regional challenges in the Middle East, helping to enable the upgrade of Saudi Arabia's defense capabilities...helps the Kingdom prepare to meet regional threats.<sup>158</sup>

Despite these claims of assurance, when Iraq was invaded by the United States and dismantled, Iran took the opportunity to attain its national goal of nuclear proliferation. Experts have maintained that if Iran were to acquire such nuclear weapons, it is inevitable that Saudi Arabia might initiate or revive their own nuclear weapons program.<sup>159</sup> Saudi Arabia worries that it will become a pawn in Iran's game to become the sovereign nation in the Islamic World. Regional hegemony and Islamic leadership would finally provide Iran with an unprecedented power that other leading nations would be hesitant to provoke. Rival state, Saudi Arabia, is not concerned that Iran is going to use the bomb against them, or even that Iran will use the bomb to attack the United States or Israel. The theory of deterrence is still upheld. Rather, Saudi Arabia (and other powerful Sunni nations) will not tolerate the political, military, and diplomatic power that a nuclear Iran would possess. The growing threat of Iran's proliferation, coupled with Ahmadinejad's increasingly antagonistic public rhetoric and foreign policy actions, has forced Saudi Arabia's governing system to reevaluate its strategic positioning in the Middle East and explore its own nuclear options. In an interview between Hillary Clinton

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<sup>158</sup> "2013 Posture Statement," United States Central Command, <http://centcom.ahp.us.army.mil/en/about-centcom/posture-statement/> (accessed November 12, 2013).

<sup>159</sup> Mustafa Alani, "How Iran Nuclear Standoff Looks from Saudi Arabia," Bloomberg, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-02-16/how-iran-nuclear-standoff-looks-from-saudi-arabia-mustafa-alani.html> (accessed November 8 2013).



and Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal, when asked what measures can be taken to establish an international stand against Iran in the event that an announcement threatening the economical interests of oil-exporting countries, Saud al-Faisal responded,

If this is true, this is considered an act of war – this announcement will be received as an act of war and this...would be threatening [to] the international peace and security and [will be received as] hazardous action.. taken by the Iran authority. We hope that this announcement [is] false, but if it is true, it would be very hazardous and threatening.<sup>160</sup>

The implications of Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal's claim is that in such a case, despite any pacts that the United States and Saudi Arabia might have, national and territorial security is prioritized. The Iranian nuclear program is "terrifying" to the Saudis.<sup>161</sup> Based on the Saudi's reactions, the real concern is that Saudi Arabia might take a nuclear "shortcut." Ever since 1988, it has been known that Saudi Arabia has purchased and made agreements with nuclear countries such as China, Pakistan, and even Brazil (when Brazil was pursuing nuclear proliferation). In 1988, Saudi Arabia purchased from China 36 DF-3 (CSS-2) intermediate-range ballistic missiles. Both countries denied that these weapons were equipped with nuclear warheads and insisted that not only were they equipped with conventional warheads, but also that many of the missiles remain at the

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<sup>160</sup> U.S. Department of State. "Remarks With Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Saud Al-Faisal." file://localhost/U.S. Department of State. <http://www.state.gov/secretary:rm:2012:03:187245.htm> (accessed November 12, 2013).

<sup>161</sup> Bernard Gwertzman and Rachel Bronson. "Bronson: Saudis 'Deeply Concerned' Over Iran's Nuclear Program." Council on Foreign Relations. April 3, 2006. Accessed July 8, 2015. <http://www.cfr.org/energy-policy/bronson-saudis-deeply-concerned-over-irans-nuclear-program/p10328>.

Chinese Military bases.<sup>162</sup> There are theories indicating that Saudi Arabia has a secret agreement with Pakistan regarding Nuclear weapons.<sup>163</sup> Pakistani experts are believed to be providing Saudi Arabian scientists with nuclear intelligence. It is argued that in consideration of a nuclear option, Saudi Arabia would either purchase nuclear weapons as David Albright stipulates that the Saudis “would be the first of the world’s...nuclear powers to have bought rather than built the bomb.” There are also theories that Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have an agreement that if Saudi Arabia deems it necessary to acquire nuclear weapons, then Pakistan will protect Saudi Arabia and base nuclear weapons on Saudi land, a caveat that would actually be considered legal under the NPT. This is all plausible as Saudi Arabia funded the Pakistani nuclear program.

Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have always had strong bilateral relations, which, in the last few decades, have exponentially strengthened. As a result of Iran's nuclear weapons program and its refusal to abide by the IAEA's demands, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia understand that the world will once again see the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Following the logic of Pakistan's past offer of protection during the early 1990's, it is evident that in the case that an Iranian bomb does develop, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia will also have arranged a program for nuclear weapons cooperation. Saudi

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<sup>162</sup> Joseph Cirincione, Jon B. Wolfsthal, and Miriam Rajkumar, *Deadly Arsenal: Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical Threats*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005), 399.

<sup>163</sup>Simon Henderson, “The Nuclear Handshake,” *Foreign Policy*, November 8, 2013, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/11/08/the\\_nuclear\\_handshake\\_saudi\\_arabia\\_pakistan?page=0\\_1](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/11/08/the_nuclear_handshake_saudi_arabia_pakistan?page=0_1) (accessed November 8, 2013).

Arabia, for the first time in the history of nuclear proliferation, will most likely purchase the bomb. In addition, Pakistan will probably base missiles on Saudi land in order to offer nuclear protection. In the German magazine, *Cicero*, further analysis of this secret nuclear program is provided. The magazine states that between October of 2004 and January 2005, Pakistani scientists came to Saudi-Arabia under the guise of pilgrims. According to the security expert Udo Ulfkotte, some of the scientists sporadically left their hotel rooms, occasionally for periods of three weeks. The most pointing evidence of the reality of a secret nuclear program lies in the fact that half of Pakistan's nuclear weapons have Saudi barcodes on them, as John Pike, US military analyst explains that, "Saudi Arabia...co-financed the Pakistani atomic nuclear programme."<sup>164</sup> The magazine also said that dozens of underground silos were found by satellite images, proving that Saudi Arabia is preparing to house long-range missiles, specifically of Pakistan origins.

When the United States was confronted with allegations of Saudi's potential nuclear proliferation with the help of Pakistan experts, they immediately denied them and explained that Saudi Arabia signed and ratified the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and that Pakistan is in agreement with their concerns regarding proliferation of nuclear weapons. As President Barak Obama's nonproliferation adviser, Gary Samore states, "I do not think that the Saudis believe that they have some understanding with Pakistan that, in extremis, they would have claim to acquire nuclear weapons from Pakistan." Unfortunately, the NPT has major holes in it. It is vital to understand that when it comes

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<sup>164</sup> "Saudi Arabia Pursuing Secret Nuclear Program," *Cicero-Magazin Fur Politische Kultur*.

down to regional security, despite ties with the United States, Saudi Arabia is going to attempt every avenue it has to ensure that it will be able to deter Iran if/when the Shiite bomb is developed.<sup>165</sup>

This pattern of thinking dominates the majority of Middle Eastern country's policies regarding nuclear proliferation. Despite whether or not Saudi Arabia is seeking nuclear proliferation, based on its military spending, it is evident that it is incredibly concerned with national security and is seeking to strengthen its conventional army. According to a U.S. Congressional research service report, in 2008 Saudi Arabia spent 8.7 billion dollars on an arms-transfer agreement. In 2009, Saudi Arabia received the first 72 Eurofighter Typhoon aircraft, and increased an order for Airbus A330 MRTT tanker/transport from two to six. Furthermore, according to Military Technology's consensus report, there is a clear trend in the increase of missile defense illustrating Saudi Arabia's need to promote deterrence in the Middle East against the overwhelming threat of an Iranian bomb. Billion dollar deals with Russia have also been noted, following this same pattern of missile defense with the purchase of S-300- the same defense weaponry previously purchased by Iran. Saudi Arabia is an incredibly significant case as the country is a rich and powerful nation that although continues to maintain close relations with the United States, will engage in relations and activities independent of U.S. involvement to ensure national security. Thus the arms race mentality that dominated

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<sup>165</sup> Mark Urban, "Saudi Nuclear Weapons 'on Order' from Pakistan," *BBC*, November 7, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-24823846> (accessed November 10, 2013).

much of the Cold War between the United States and Soviet Union is once again becoming between rival powers Saudi Arabia and Iran in a turbulent region that is dominated by unstable authoritarian governments and fanatical religious non-state actors.

### **Saudi-Iranian Rivalry in Yemen**

Traditionally, the most important arena of conflict between rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran has been the Gulf. While Saudi Arabia does maintain a high level of political influence with local Gulf monarchies, Iran seeks to mobilize with local Arab Shi'ite communities as a means to leverage pressure on the Gulf governments on issues important to Iran. For Saudi Arabia, its bordering neighbor, Yemen, has been a state where Saudi Arabia has actively sought influence. Saudi Arabia and Yemen share a 700-mile border that is highly penetrable and often used by criminals, smugglers, terrorists and insurgents.<sup>166</sup> To ensure its authority, Saudi Arabia has contributed numerous funds to boost the Yemeni economy and has provided a multitude of financial resources during times of political upheaval.<sup>167</sup> Saudi Arabia and Iran have brought their differences to the turf of the Yemeni conflict between Yemen's Houthis minority and the Yemeni government.

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<sup>166</sup> Andrew Terrill, *The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry and the Future of Middle East Security* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute (SSI), 2011), 14.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid, 18

The Houthis movement merged out of a group known as the Believing Youth, a moderate theological movement founded in the year 1992.<sup>168</sup> According to Ahmed Addaghasi, this movement was a religious group affiliated with the Zaydi sect of Shi'ite Islam, that originally held a broad-minded cultural and educational vision. Based in the Northern province of Sa'ada, the group eventually split, with one side becoming radicalized after the 2003 Iraqi invasion, chanting anti-Western and later, anti-government slogans. In 2004, the movement turned to arms and the first war with the government erupted. President Ali Abdullah Saleh saw the Houthis rebel group, officially known as *Ansarallah* (partisans of God), as a challenge to his rule, arresting group members and demanding a cease to their worshipping and protesting in mosques in the capital. The war lasted for six years until it ended in a ceasefire agreement in 2010.<sup>169</sup>

Saudi Arabia, highly suspicious of Iran's motives in the region and domination over the Shi'ite Crescent (the crescent-shaped region of the Middle East where the majority population is Shi'ite or where there is a strong Shi'ite minority), has been especially protective of Yemen. Both Saudi Arabia and Yemen have accused Iran of backing the Houthis rebels, a Shi'ite group belonging to the Fiver Shi'ite sect. The Iranian leadership has supported the Houthis rhetorically, advocating religious solidarity. As this is an issue that is greatly important to the Shi'ite community, many observers

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<sup>168</sup> Saeed Al Batati, "Who Are the Houthis in Yemen?," *Al Jazeera*, August 21, 2014, accessed July 8, 2015, <https://web.archive.org/web/20140823035209/http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/08/yemen-houthis-hadi-protests-201482132719818986.html>.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid

claim that Iran is supporting the Houthis with funding, training and material aid. These claims are further backed by the fact that the BY summer camps attended by the now Houthis faction, included lectures by Hassan Nasrallah, the Secretary General of Hezbollah.<sup>170</sup> Saudi Arabia grew increasingly worried, as it seemed like Houthi leadership sought to move its organization to an even more radicalized form of Shi'ite Islam, modeled after the Iranian approach to religion.<sup>171</sup>

By 2009, the Yemeni government's conflict with its Shi'ite took a turn for the worse when Saudi Arabia militarily intervened in northern Yemen. By November 2009, Saudi's borders with Yemen infiltrated Saudi villages.<sup>172</sup> With permission from the Sana'a government, in its largest military engagement since the 1991 Gulf War, Saudi Arabia intervened, using heavy artillery and airpower, in order to destroy large elements of the Houthis forces. The strategic plan was to then defeat the residual military forces. In response, Iran increased its assistance to the Houthis rebel forces and Hezbollah was sent to train Houthis forces. The war ended in February 2010 when the Houthis withdrew from Saudi territory and a cease-fire was established. While this conflict may not have been covered, it is important for this thesis to consider as not only does it carry grave

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<sup>170</sup> Nabeel Khoury, "A New Hezbollah in Yemen?," *Atlantic Council*, January 29, 2015, accessed July 8, 2015, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/a-new-hezbollah-in-yemen>.

<sup>171</sup> "Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb, Middle East Report N\*86." International Crisis Group. May 1, 2009. Accessed July 8, 2015. <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/iraq-iran-gulf/yemen/086-yemen-defusing-the-saada-time-bomb.aspx>.

<sup>172</sup> "Jazan Residents Recall Houthi Attacks of 2010," *Arab News*, March 29, 2015, accessed July 8, 2015, <http://www.arabnews.com/news/724791>.

risks for Yemen's political and sectarian stasis, but it shows Saudi Arabia and Iran's willingness to directly become engaged in civil conflicts within the region as a means to foster their influence.

### **Saudi Iranian Rivalry in Palestinian Territories**

A regional issue that is important to explore in regards to Saudi-Iranian competition for influence is the Palestinian issue. For many Muslims, the 1967 Six Day War, fought between Israel and the neighboring states of Egypt, Jordan and Syria, was a war that established Israel as the dominant regional military power. This was perceived as a great defeat and as a result, religious revivalism and retrenchment spread throughout much of the Muslim world. This religious revival affected all aspects of public life and popularized notions of political Islam.<sup>173</sup> The Palestinian national movement emerged as a major actor after 1967 as both political and military organizations that made up the Palestinian Liberation Organization and later Hamas, the militant and internationally recognized terrorist organization. Thus, as Saudi Arabia and Iran both contend to be the true protectors of Islam, they have actively championed and supported Palestinian national rights and are sharp critics of Israel. Both hold different views of the Peace Process, however.

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<sup>173</sup> Marc Lynch, ed., *Islamists in A changing Middle East* (Foreign Policy Magazine, 2012), accessed November 9, 2013, <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/files/042ff47cd92e3ca8a4bc92e94b3f6ccc.pdf>, 67



While Saudi Arabia has been known to support Palestinian terrorism, they also have shown somewhat of a moderate perspective regarding the Arab-Israeli peace process. For instance, in a 2002 Beirut summit conference, Saudi Arabia proposed a peace plan that offers comprehensive recognition of Israel by all Arab league states in exchange for the territories conquered in the 1967 war.<sup>174</sup> Saudi Arabia's purposes do not necessarily pertain to progress regarding the peace process. Rather, Saudi leaders fear that the lack of peace will enhance Iran's power at the expense of their own. Saudi Arabia maintains stable and normal relations with both Palestinian groups, Fatah and Hamas. Saudi Arabia has made many efforts to support the Palestinians, by providing both financial resources and political influence on their behalf. Saudi Arabia has contributed significant donations directly to Palestinian organizations and causes, most of which has been provided to the West Bank government, Fatah. During the early 2000s, Saudi Arabia also heavily financed Hamas, with funds estimated to be around half of the Hamas operating budget.<sup>175</sup> Since then however, sources show that while Saudi private money flowing to Hamas has diminished when Hamas leaned more heavily on Iran. Additionally, since Hamas has shifted to Iran, the Saudi government has been more vocal

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<sup>174</sup> "The Arab Peace Initiative, 2002," *Al-Bab*, 2002, accessed April 11, 2015, <http://www.al-bab.com/arab/docs/league/peace02.htm>.

<sup>175</sup> "Military: Hamas Funding." Global Security. Accessed July 4, 2015. <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/hamas-funds.htm>.

of condemning Hamas while making sure to emphasize that Israeli actions are acts of genocide against the Palestinian people.<sup>176</sup>

Iran, on the other hand, since the 1979 Revolution has presented itself as completely opposing any type of peace plan and instead portrays itself as the “leading military power supporting Palestinian Rights and opposing Israel, through a variety of means, including supplying weapons and funding to Palestinian Islamic militants.”<sup>177</sup> Iran's support of the Palestinians has actually been fundamental to its regional ambitions as it has consolidated support for the regime internally and also has vastly elevated its role and status in the region. Iran’s support of Hamas has been so substantial that Hamas is often considered to be a proxy of Iran. Fatah leaders have many times stated that Iran is using Hamas to impose its own agenda on the Palestinian people. This alliance with Hamas is a key aspect of Iran’s strategy in the Levant. Iran’s connection to the Sunni organization has brought it closer to fermenting the seeds of the Islamic revolution and uniting all Islam under a single creed, Khomeinism. Since the early 2000s, Iran has smuggled a massive amount of weapons into Gaza through tunnels from Egypt. Experts have been able to identify that many of these weapons and explosive originate from the Iranians.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid

<sup>177</sup> Andrew Terrill, *The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry and the Future of Middle East Security* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute (SSI), 2011), 35

<sup>178</sup> Idem

## Saudi-Iranian Rivalry in Lebanon

The Saudi-Iranian contestation for land, resources, weapons and influence in the Levant is also widely present in Lebanon. From 1975 until the early 1990s Lebanon was engaged in a brutal civil war. For centuries Lebanon had acted as a refuge for the region's minorities, leaving it a multifaceted ethnic and religious state priding itself on being a land of liberty, tolerance and culture whose main population groups included Sunni Muslims, Shi'ite Muslims, Druze and Christians. When the civil war ended, Lebanon became a weak state influenced by both external actors and regional actors, such as Syria, Iran, the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia.

When considering the Saudi-Iranian rivalry in Lebanon, it is evident that Iran has important ties to the Lebanese political organization, Hezbollah, which has provided Iran with a superior ability to influence politics in the country. Founded during the Lebanese civil war, Hezbollah has become one of the most powerful political organizations in Lebanese affairs. Hezbollah has often been described as a "state within the state," as it manages an extensive security (military arm) apparatus, political organization and social service networks in Lebanon as a means to resist Israeli and Western involvement in the Middle East.<sup>179</sup> Hezbollah is widely recognized as a global terrorist threat and perilous to stability in the Middle East. Hezbollah has been led by Hassan Nasrallah since 1992 and

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<sup>179</sup> Jonathan Masters and Zachary Laub, "Backgrounds: Hezbollah," *Council on Foreign Relations (CFR)* (January 3, 2014): 1, accessed May 8, 2015, <http://www.cfr.org/lebanon/hezbollah-k-hizbollah-hizbullah/p9155>.

operates an extensive welfare and education network for Lebanese Shi'ites, who in turn are expected to provide the organization both loyalty and support. Hezbollah has consistently maintained representative in the Lebanese parliament and cabinet. Iran has been one of Hezbollah's largest supporters, making Hezbollah an effective proxy for Iranian foreign policy. Iran's influence is maintained through generous financial and material aid, funneled into Lebanon via Syria.<sup>180</sup> Iran provides Hezbollah with tens of thousands of rockets, millions of dollars a year-annual \$200 million-in addition to training and logistical support.<sup>181</sup> Iran has also given Hezbollah Scud, tactical ballistic missiles, with up to 10 SCUD-D (long range) missiles.<sup>182</sup> Hezbollah's founding manifesto vowed its loyalty to Iran's supreme leader, called for the expulsion of the United States, France and Israel from Lebanese territory and for the destruction of the Israeli state.<sup>183</sup> Iran has greatly profited from the growing power of Hezbollah, especially after its apparent success in defending itself against Israel. Thus, as Hezbollah conducts operations around the world at Iran's command, Iran gets, "an extended reach-to the

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<sup>180</sup> Augustus Richard Norton, *Hezbollah: a Short History*, Chapter 15, New ed. (Oxford, UK: Princeton University Press, 2014).

<sup>181</sup> Matthew Levitt, "Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God" (lecture), accessed July 8, 2015, <http://www.cfr.org/world/hezbollah-global-footprint-lebanons-party-god/p35535>.

<sup>182</sup> Andrew W. Lehren and Michael G. Gordon, "And," *New York Times*, December 6, 2010, accessed July 8, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/07/world/07wikileaks-weapons.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/07/world/07wikileaks-weapons.html?_r=0).

<sup>183</sup> Ibid

Mediterranean and beyond-and a means of targeting its enemies from afar with reasonable deniability.”<sup>184</sup>

Saudi Arabia has viewed Lebanon as an important base long before its rivalry with Iran. Even prior to the Lebanese Civil War, Saudi Arabia attempted to influence Lebanese politics yet kept a low profile due to Abdel Nasser’s popularity in the country. Saudi Arabia first accessed Lebanese politics via its press. The Al-Hayat newspaper became a main instrument for Saudi’s propaganda. Additionally, Lebanon's prime minister during this time period, Hajj Hussein al-U’wani, made his fortune in Saudi Arabia and even became a quasi-official Saudi political representative in Lebanon.

Based on religion and petrodollars, Saudi Arabia saw the Civil War in Lebanon as a mean to pursue their campaign to spread the Wahhabi doctrine, promote Arabism, and Islamicize Lebanon in the Middle East, particularly on behalf of the Sunni population.<sup>185</sup> In fact, it was Saudi Arabia’s influence that finally brought an end to the 15-year long civil war. Negotiate in Ta’if, Saudi Arabia, Saudi Arabia assisted in the mediation of the agreement and designed the agreement to politically accommodate the demographic shift to a Muslim majority and reinforced Lebanese authority in the South, which has been occupied by Israel since the early 1980’s. Saudi Arabia became heavily involved in Lebanese politics following the 1989 Taif Agreement. Saudi Arabia contributed vast

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<sup>184</sup> Matthew Levitt, *30 Years of Terror Sponsored by Iran* (The Washington Institute, 2013), accessed July 8, 2015, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/30-years-of-terror-sponsored-by-iran>.

<sup>185</sup> Mordechai Nisan, “Saudi Arabia’s Jihad in the Middle East and the World: Implications for the United States and Thoughts for American Policy,” *Ariel Center for Policy Research (ACPR)* (April 2007): 5-34.

funds to help with Lebanese reconstruction. Saudi Arabia's influence became even more substantial when Rafiq al-Harir, a dual citizen of Lebanon and Saudi Arabia became the acting Prime Minister of Lebanon. Rafiq al-Hariri made a great fortune in Saudi Arabia and when during his time as the Lebanese Prime Minister (1992-1998; 2000-2004), he was a great friend to Saudi Arabia. As Hariri dominated the country's post war political and business life, Saudi Arabia received the opportunity to play a major role in Lebanon's economic rebuilding. When viewing the Saudi relationship with Hariri, many observers claim that Hariri represented Saudi interests in Lebanon. Hariri became one of the most prominent Sunni politicians in the Middle East until his assassination in 2005. Syria and its powerful Shi'ite ally, Hezbollah (and thus an extension of Iran) have been prominently accused of being behind Hariri's murder and his death has served to heighten the country's sectarian divisions and the role of external powers, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

The 2006 summer military intervention in Lebanon by the Israeli Defense Forces marked a turning point in Lebanese politics. Israel's war in Lebanon was launched as a response to Hezbollah's continuous attacks and kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers. Widely viewed as a failure, the second Lebanon War did not meet its objectives and instead served to elevate Hezbollah's status in the country, and as an extension, tipped the balance in favor of Iranian influence. Attempting to counterbalance Iran's activities in Lebanese politics, Saudi Arabia constantly condemned Hezbollah, and therefore Iran's, role in instigating the war and blamed Hezbollah's leader for all the Lebanese deaths and

massive damage to Lebanese civilian infrastructure and economy.<sup>186</sup> Saudi attempts to condemn Hezbollah backfired, however, as many Arabs around the world lauded Hezbollah's efforts, viewing their success as a symbol of success for all Arabs.<sup>187</sup> Following the 2006 War, Saudi Arabia has invested even more funds to Sunni and Christian communities as an attempt to reinforce their importance in Lebanese politics. Saudi Arabia has providing financial backing for the construction of 55, 000 residential units and to once again assist in post war reconstruction civilian infrastructure. As Hezbollah gained further prominence in Lebanese politics, Sunni and Shi'ite faction movements began emphasizing their pro-Saudi stance in lieu of falling under an Iranian satellite.<sup>188</sup> Thus, Lebanon is an important case to consider as the conflict between regional powers Saudi Arabia and Iran has been exported to Lebanese politics. The two states' support rival factions as a means to increase their own influence in the Levant has only served to increase political, sectarian and security turmoil in Lebanon.

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<sup>186</sup> "Saudi Sideswipe at Hezbollah," *Al Jazeera*, July 14, 2006, accessed July 2, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/archive/2006/07/200849161856252250.html>.

<sup>187</sup> Saleh Ambah Faiza, "Many Arabs Applaud Hezbollah," *Washington Post*, July 30, 2006, accessed July 8, 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/07/29/AR2006072900633.html>.

<sup>188</sup> Hussein Dakroub, "Hariri slams Iranian interference," *Daily Star*, April 8, 2011.

## **Conclusion**

Saudi Arabia and Iran are key players in the region. In their quest to control different parts of the Middle East, Saudi Arabia and Iran have divided the region into two armed camps on the basis of political ideology. The 2003 U.S. led invasion of Iraq, the disposition of Saddam Hussein and the subsequent de-baathification policies, has shifted the balance of power between rival states Saudi Arabia and Iran. Iraq, for centuries a major Sunni power in the Middle East, became a regime governed exclusively by its Shi'ite majority, creating the first Arab Shi'ite state. In shaping their domestic and foreign policies, Saudi Arabia and Iran have used sectarianism as a form of ethno-religious political mobilization. The chaos and conflict in Iraq has reverted Iraqis back to their most basic sectarian identity, an identity that Saudi Arabia and Iran have exploited in their political rivalry,

Saudi Arabia's worries regarding Iran's asymmetric power and regional ambitions have been further increased as during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency and the renewed development to create a "Shi'ite bomb." Iran's pursuit of a nuclear weapon may cause Saudi Arabia to develop its own nuclear program, instigating proliferation and the next arms race in the Middle East. As Saudi Arabia has a history of acting clandestinely in the nuclear arena, the production of a Sunni bomb to counter the Shi'ite bomb remains a possibility, further derailing stability and security in the Middle East.



The events leading up to 2011 have further encouraged the two nations to support their proxies through funding, military arms, soldiers, and by encouraging sectarianism. Saudi-Iranian proxy wars have grown more significant in the period post 2003, as Saudi Arabia and Iran have engaged in a series of proxy wars, both hot and cold, in the Middle East and have played an increased role in the civil conflicts within the region. Iran supports Hezbollah in Lebanon and Saudi Arabia has also competed for influence in Lebanon, supporting Sunni and Christian movements. Saudi Arabia and Iran have also supported rival factions in the Palestinian cause for self-determination. Additionally, in order to counter Iran's expanding geopolitical footprint and contain it from completing influence within "Shi'ite Crescent" Saudi Arabia has been willing to militarily intervene in another country's conflict as seen in the Yemeni government's fight against the Iranian backed Houthi rebels. These proxy wars have escalated conflicts within the region, heighten mutual fears, and severely disrupt regional stability. Rival countries Saudi Arabia and Iran have exported their tensions to all corners of the region. The Arab Spring in 2011 has escalated the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, further derailing the fragile stability and security of the region.

## **Chapter Six: Saudi-Iranian Relations in the Aftermath of the Arab Uprisings 2011-Present**

Beginning in the winter of 2011, a series of cascading events shook the Arab world. Amidst the political upheaval of the Arab Spring that overturned status quos, also known as the Arab Uprisings, the Saudi-Iranian rivalry once again began to manifest itself in the domestic conflicts that shaped the region. In their competition for hegemony, these ideological and political rivals have now, more than ever, exploited conflicts in the region, from the Levant to the Gulf, supporting opposing political parties, funding rival armies and waging military action against the other's proxies in Bahrain, Syria, Iraq and Yemen. The historical events of 2011 have further exacerbated hostilities between Iran and Saudi Arabia, drawing upon each affront committed by the other as justification for their current foreign policy actions and positions. This section will serve to explore how the 2011 Arab Uprisings have further intensified the struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

### **The Arab Uprisings**

On the 17<sup>th</sup> of December in the year 2010, Mohammed Bouazizi, a Tunisian citizen, set himself on fire in front of the local municipality in protest of the confiscation

of his vegetable cart and its contents; his actions that day ignited the Tunisian Revolution and the larger Arab Uprisings. Mohammed Bouazizi was a 26-year-old, educated Tunisian street vendor in the city of Sidi Bouzid, whose family depended on the income that he received from selling vegetables. On the 17th, a municipal officer humiliated Bouazizi and confiscated his cart and goods. When he went to the provincial headquarters, a beautiful and elegant white building, to protest the continued targeting and harassment that he and many other Tunisians experienced by the local police, the government refused to see or listen to him.

Bouazizi's ordeal and protests against the Tunisian government inspired demonstrations all throughout Tunisia and other Arab countries. His actions eventually brought about the end of Ben Ali's rule of Tunisia and of Mubarak's 28-year rule of Egypt, contribution to "historic changes in the Arab World." In analyzing the contagion of human right struggles throughout the region of the Middle East and North Africa, a variety of key common elements can be seen. Causes such as the deepening legitimacy issues of the authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, global economic growth that in turn raised the global middle class, increased education and individual living standards, and gender restrictions were instrumental catalysts in the spread of human rights.

Specifically, as seen via the very symbolic act of Bouazizi's self immolation, many individuals in the Middle East and North Africa region suffer from severe social, political and economic grievances. As the population continues to increase, and as the

percentage of individuals under 30 begins to overwhelm, the aging authoritarian regimes are simply unable to meet the political and economic demands of this immense growth. In essence, the authoritarian regimes were unable to provide the basic needs of human welfare to their populations. A culmination of high unemployment, inflation of food prices, unfettered corruption, political restrictions, etc., led to the wave of social and political protests that shook the Arab world.<sup>189</sup> Although the majority of individuals were experiencing the same human rights struggles, the true mobilizing force was the unifying message sent by neighboring countries.

The 2011 pro-democracy and anti-regime protests known as the “Arab Uprisings” have brought down regimes in the Arab countries of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen and have sparked mass protests and uprisings in many other countries across the Arab world ranging everywhere from Morocco, Algeria to the Palestinian territories, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia.<sup>190</sup> Although it was clear that Arab regimes were deeply unpopular and faced serious social, political and economic issues, the upheavals came as a shock and surprise to many academic experts of the Middle East and North African region and to many of the region’s regime leaders. Unfortunately, the promises of the Arab Uprisings continue to remain elusive. While there were some successes, the Uprisings led to the toppling and

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<sup>189</sup> James L. Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pgs. 4-6

<sup>190</sup> Garry Blight, Sheila Pulham, and Paul Torpey. "Arab spring: an interactive timeline of Middle East protests." *theguardian.com*. Guardian News and Media, 5 Jan. 2012. Web. 7 Apr. 2014. <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/interactive/2011/mar/22/middle-east-protest-interactive-timeline>>.

transformation of existing power structures that increased interstate aggression, threatening the socio-political and economic security of multiple states,

The Arab uprisings have unleashed internal dynamics of protest and political change in most of the states of the region, its impact transcending national systems, and affecting the political order in the Arab world. The region is at a crossroads...<sup>191</sup>

As the Arab Uprisings continue to transform the balance of power, states are not becoming stronger as originally hoped, but rather are becoming weak and fragile, creating opportunities for different actors with wide ramifications concerning regional and international security.<sup>192</sup>

### **A New Dynamic?**

The Arab Spring has introduced new political variables that Saudi Arabia and Iran must consider when pursuing their foreign policy regional priorities. When the Arab Uprisings moved from Tunisia to Egypt, both states took an invested interest in the outcome of the struggle. What is most interesting when considering the post Arab Uprisings is that the Saudi's appeal to maintain the status quo and Iran's quest to spread its Islamic revolutionary message have become somewhat adjusted.<sup>193</sup> For instance, while

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<sup>191</sup> Zaki Samy Elakawi, "The Geostrategic Consequences of the Arab Spring," *Open Democracy: Free thinking for the world*, 22 November 2014, accessed July 2, 2015, [https://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/zaki-samy-elakawi/geostrategic-consequences-of-arab-spring#\\_edn1](https://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/zaki-samy-elakawi/geostrategic-consequences-of-arab-spring#_edn1).

<sup>192</sup> Michael Shkolnik, *The Arab Uprisings and Al-Qaeda's Peripheral Infiltration: A Tour D'horizon* (United Nations Association in Canada, June 25, 2012), accessed July 11, 2015, <http://unac.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Security-Concerns-and-the-Arab-Uprisings.pdf>.

<sup>193</sup> Andrew Terrill, "The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry and the Future of Middle East Security," *The International Relations and Security Network* (April 3, 2013): 1, accessed July 11, 2015.

Saudi Arabia watched the toppling of the Mubarak regime in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen and around the region with acute horror, Iranian leadership viewed the events with enthusiasm, seeing the spread of its own revolutionary message come to fruition, calling the political upheaval as a defeat for the U.S. and a “liberating Islamic movement” part of an “Islamic awakening” in the Middle East, except in Syria.<sup>194</sup> While this thesis will explore the case of Syria in depth later in the chapter, Syria is not only Iran’s closest Arab ally in the region but also provides Iran with access to its most important proxy, Hezbollah. As such, when the Arab Uprisings occurred in Syria, Iran did not support the civil resistance or the rebel groups, but rather has stood by its ally and has contributed funds, weapons and personnel to support the Assad regime in its fight to maintain power. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, while terrified when Mubarak fell, has been a main supporter of the Sunni rebel groups in their fight to overthrow Syrian President Assad.<sup>195</sup>

These new concerns became synonymous with the uprisings that spread throughout the region, with both nations contributing efforts and resources to improve relations with the newly transitioning leadership. Moreover, as Saudi Arabia and Iran seek to uphold their spheres of influence in the Gulf and the Levant, the two enemies have taken advantage of security vacuums in weak states as a means to cultivate influence in the failing countries’ domestic politics. Now, not only have Saudi Arabia and

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<sup>194</sup> Meris Lutz, “Iran's Supreme Leader Calls Uprisings an 'Islamic Awakening',” *LA Times*, February 4, 2011, accessed June 12, 2015, <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/feb/04/world/la-fg-khamenei-iran-egypt-20110205>.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid

Iran engaged in proxy wars against each other, but within the context of the Arab Uprisings, the rivalry between the two states has also resulted in direct military interventions in Bahrain, Yemen, Syria and Iraq.

### **Dividing the Protestors: Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Bahraini Uprisings**

On February 14, 2011, influenced by the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, opposition movements within Bahrain began calling for constitutional reforms, free elections, and the release of prisoners of conscience from the firmly established Khalifa monarchy. Bahrain is a country of 1.3 million people, and although the Shi'ite Muslims constitute 70% of the population, political power remains in the hands of the Sunni minority. Though the demonstrations were originally limited to Bahraini youth within the Shi'ite majority, the movement expanded following violent government repression to include doctors, teachers, laborers, union workers, journalists, lawyers, and other workers. At the peak of the uprising, up to 200,000 people (25% of the adult population) participated. The movement, which had successfully engaged a large portion of the Shi'ite population, did not reach wider segments of Bahraini society. Recent tactics have been limited to marches and protests, some of which have become violent, due in large part to a lack of internal organization. Bahrain represents the first country to deploy Gulf Cooperation Council forces to assist its own internal security forces in the violent repression against the resistance movement. To date, eighty-nine resistance members have been killed and several thousand injuries have been suffered by both sides of the uprising. When examining the protest movements in the Gulf, regional players have

played on and strengthened sectarian divisions between Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims in order to weaken the "cross-sectarian opposition front" that presented itself during the formative days of the Bahraini uprising. As Toby Matthiesen explains,

The sectarian Gulf was encouraged by sectarian identity entrepreneurs...a close look at their role indicates that sectarianism was not just a government invention but the result of an amalgam of political, religious, social, and economic elites who all used sectarianism to further their personal aims.<sup>196</sup>

Bahrain is a country that is of interest to both Saudi Arabia and Iran. To begin with, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia are both Sunni monarchies and both are members of the Gulf Cooperation Council. In fact, Al Khalifa and many Bahraini Sunni families trace their tribal origins back to the Najd.<sup>197</sup> Bahrain and Saudi Arabia share close proximity to one another and are connected by a 16-mile causeway. Saudi Arabia's political leverage is also tied to its financial aid contributions to Bahrain. Bahrain's main oil revenue is derived from Saudi Arabia as Bahrain and the Saudi Kingdom share the Abu Safa offshore field, making the Bahraini economy and state budget largely dependent on Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia's support is widely welcomed by the Khalifa monarchy.

Iran's intentions towards Bahrain are long standing and date back to the Shah. Bahraini independence has always been a contentious issue for Iranian leadership as Iran maintains historical claims to Bahrain and in the 1970's even announced its intent to reunite Bahrain with what it claims to be its "Iranian homeland." This claim was further

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<sup>196</sup> Toby Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab Spring That Wasn't* (Stanford Briefs) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), ix.

<sup>197</sup> Yitzhak Nakash, *Reaching for Power: the Shi'a in the Modern Arab World*, "Chapter One: The Burden of the Past" (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006)



reasserted when Khomeini came to power. Additionally, as the pivot of Shi'ite Muslims, Bahrain's majority Shi'ite population (a portion of which are actually of Persian descent) remains of great interest to Iran. If Iran were to empower the Shi'ite sect to dominate society and politics, Iran would be able to gain a strategically positioned island. Iran would be in a position to have a commanding presence over the Arabian Gulf and also be provided with opportunities to threaten the oil shipment of other rich oil states.<sup>198</sup>

When the 2011 Uprisings occurred, given the Bahraini demographic, it is not surprising that the majority of the protestors were Shi'ite. Thus, as a result, archrival Shi'ite Iran was viewed as an instigator of the uprisings, with Bahraini and Saudi leaders attacking the state for planning the coup attempt. Iran, however, denied these claims with Ayatollah Khamenei, thus far only condemning the government of Bahrain's severe attack against its citizens, "I tell them we were involved in the anti-Israel activities...we are not afraid of saying this... that Iran interferes in [Bahrain's] internal affairs; this is a lie. If we had interfered, the conditions would have been different."<sup>199</sup> While Saudi Arabia and Bahrain's Sunni leaders remain deeply concerned about Iran's history of interference in Bahrain and believe that Iran and their Hezbollah agents continue to have design for sovereignty, experts on the subject doubt the ability of Iranians to influence

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<sup>198</sup> Tallha Abdulrazaq, "Bahrain: A New Front in the Battle between Sunni and Shia Muslims," *Heptagon Post*, April 4, 2011, accessed February 9, 2015, [http://www.heptagonpost.com/Abdulrazaq/Bahrain\\_A\\_New\\_Front\\_in\\_the\\_Battle\\_between\\_Sunni\\_and\\_Shi\\_a\\_Muslims](http://www.heptagonpost.com/Abdulrazaq/Bahrain_A_New_Front_in_the_Battle_between_Sunni_and_Shi_a_Muslims).

<sup>199</sup> Abbas Qaidaari, "Does Iran Have a Card to Play in Bahrain?," *Al-Monitor*, March 17, 2015, accessed March 20, 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/03/iran-bahrain-saraya-mukhtar.html#ixzz3fi32AhpV>.

Bahrain's Shi'ite communities given that Bahrain's Shi'ite clergy maintains a quietist stance. For instance, some of the largest Shi'ite opposition groups in Bahrain, such as the al-Wiqaf, rejected all accusations of foreign ties and organized their protest so that they did not appear to be instrumentalized by foreign Shi'ite actors, namely Iran.<sup>200</sup> Nevertheless, there were factions within the Shi'ite political opposition groups that did maintain public displays and encouragement of foreign influence. The *shirazi* movement, led by al-Mudarassi, an individual of Iraqi-Iranian descent, publicly announced on satellite television his condemnation of the ruling family and of Saudi Arabia. Some of the youth protestors also claimed ties to the "Hezbollah" movement, a political Shi'ite Islamic movement who follow Khomeini. They believe that their spiritual leader is the Ayatollah Khomeini, and that they stand in line with the doctrines advocated by the Ayatollah Khomeini, that society should be led by clerics and that they should adhere to the *vilyat al-faqih*. The existence of these groups leads credence to the fact that there could be a hint of involvement from Iran or Lebanese Hezbollah.<sup>201</sup>

Saudi Arabia, fearing that the Bahraini uprising would influence its own Shi'ite population to rebel, took a vested interest in supporting the Al Khalifa family in their crackdown against the uprising. When the protests took on an anti regime stance and as the crisis escalated, Bahrain invoked a GCC security clause that called for assistance. Saudi Arabia sent in 1000 troops to help the Bahraini government suppress the protests

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<sup>200</sup> Toby Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab Spring That Wasn't (Stanford Briefs)* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 41.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid, 44

and invoked a brutal crackdown. The presence of Saudi Arabia's troops acted as a means to prevent the Shi'ite of Bahrain from gaining more power and to prevent their future collaboration with Iranian military and intelligence.<sup>202</sup> Iran, in response, condemned the crackdown and summoned the Bahraini ambassador in Tehran as a sign of official protest. When the inter-sectarian protests began to take a more Shi'ite dominated, anti-regime message, many Sunnis withdrew their support from the cause. Coupled with Saudi Arabia's arrival, the regime media took advantage of the increasingly sectarian nature of the protests and attacked the Shi'ite protesters, accusing them of being pawns in an Iranian plot. The politicization of Sunni and Shi'ite divides made it even more socially acceptable to "hate the other."<sup>203</sup> For a while, the King even halted Bahrain airlines to Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon in an attempt to distance Shi'ite populations from one another. This presentation of a Sunni-Shi'ite struggle for dominance has internationalized the battle between regional players, bringing in Saudi support via military intervention and the politically motivated statements of Shi'ite leaders, primarily Iranian leaders. Thus, the conflict in Bahrain became an interplay of both bottom-up processes that divided the Bahrain movement, as well as important top-down processes that made Bahrain a proxy conflict instead of an adherence to the legitimate demands of Gulf citizens.

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<sup>202</sup> Simon Mabon, "The Battle for Bahrain: Iranian-Saudi Rivalry," *Middle East Policy Council* 19, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 1, accessed July 12, 2015, <http://www.mepec.org/journal/middle-east-policy-archives/battle-bahrain-iranian-saudi-rivalry?print>.

<sup>203</sup> Ramee Mossa, "Hijacked by Elites: Bahrain's Protests," *Heptagon Post*, April 11, 2015, accessed July 12, 2015, [http://www.heptagonpost.com/Mossa/Hijacked\\_by\\_Elites\\_Bahrain%E2%80%99s\\_Protests](http://www.heptagonpost.com/Mossa/Hijacked_by_Elites_Bahrain%E2%80%99s_Protests).

## **The Saudi-Iranian Battle in Syria**

In examining the aftermath of the Arab Spring, the Syrian civil war lies at the heart of Saudi Arabia and Iran's contention regarding the future of the Middle East. In March of 2011, the Arab uprisings found a voice among the Syrian people. For decades, Syrians have been suffering from severe political and economic grievances and were subjected to massive government corruptions and human rights abuses under the Bashar al-Assad Regime. Fighting for political freedom, social justice and dignity, the demonstration movement originally took on civil and non-violent approach. Thousands took to the streets in the cities of Homs, Aleppo and Damascus. By April of 2011, however, the situation had escalated and Assad began a massive campaign to remove the anti-regime oppositional forces. He deployed the widely feared *Shabiha* militia and police troops to enforce a vicious onslaught against the Syrian protestors that ultimately resulted in the deaths of hundreds of Syrians and the wounding of thousands. By July of 2011, a rebel group, formed out of defected military personnel, created the Free Syrian Army, in order to establish a formal military opposition group to the Assad regime. By 2015, the Syrian Uprising has turned into a bloody and divisive sectarian civil war that has resulted in more than 160,000 deaths, 6.5 million internally displaced persons and 2.7 million refugees in Turkey, Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon.<sup>204</sup> Furthermore, the fractionalization created room for the emergence of ISIS in Syria. Due to these intractable

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<sup>204</sup> Eline Gordts, "Death Toll In Syria's War Tops 160,000: Activists." *The Huffington Post*. Accessed May 19, 2014 Web. 20 May 2014. <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/05/19/syria-war-death-toll\\_n\\_5353021.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/05/19/syria-war-death-toll_n_5353021.html)>.

circumstances, it has become widely forgotten that the Syrian Uprising was born out of the desire to replace the Assad regime with a “free, democratic state in a sovereign, independent Syria.”<sup>205</sup>

Taking over for his father in 2000, Bashar al-Assad has continued the Assad rule of pro-Alawite favoritism, using his Alawite minority status to his advantage. By playing on sectarianism and a deep historical distrust of the Sunni population, Assad established himself as a protector of minorities and thereby secured their unconditional support and loyalty. They also manage the elite Sunni business class by offering them a continuation of state contracts, foreign exchange and political protection.<sup>206</sup>

External regional actors have infiltrated the domestic political upheaval occurring in the Syrian Civil War. Syria is Iran’s closest ally and as such, the 2011 Uprising has been met with considerable concern from Tehran. Syria is the “primary hub in Iran’s power projection in the Levant.”<sup>207</sup> Iran has used Syria as a gateway to fund, train, arm and provide logistical assistance to Hamas and Hezbollah. This Iranian-led alliance between Syria, Iran, Hezbollah, and most recently, Shi’ite militant groups (such as Hamas), has been dubbed the “Axis of Resistance” as they represent the Shi’ite, anti-

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<sup>205</sup> الرئيسية " SYRIAN Nonviolence Movement/ الحراك السلمي السوري. November 1, 2011. Accessed October 1, 2014. <http://www.alharak.org/>.

<sup>206</sup> Ambassador Frederic Hof and Alex Simon, *Sectarian Violence in Syria's Civil War: Causes, Consequences and Recommendations for Mitigation* (The Center for the Prevention of Genocide United States Holocaust Memorial Museum), 1.

<sup>207</sup> Marisa Sullivan, "Hezbollah in Syria." *Middle East Security*, no. 19. April 2014. Accessed June 18, 2015, 9

Western, anti-Israel ideology. For Iran, the implications of the Syrian Civil War resulting in the removal of Assad from power are catastrophic, threatening to compromise its access to Hezbollah, its range of spreading its Islamic revolutionary beliefs, and thus its stronghold in the Levant. As Geneive Abdo explains, “Without his [Assad’s] loyalty, the second line of defense--Hezbollah and Hamas--would crumble.”<sup>208</sup>

In April of 2011, Iran began provided the Syrian government with aid, training and surveillance equipment. Shortly thereafter, direct material assistance and personnel was sent from Iran, with Iranian fighters and its own Quds force, from Hezbollah, and from the Shi’ite Iraqi community in order to help Syria suppress the protest and rebel movement and stay in power.<sup>209</sup> Iran has such a high stake in the outcome of Syria that they sent the Quds Force’s third in command to train the security services fight against the movement. In addition, the Iranian regime has provided Assad with technologies to monitor e-mail, social media and mobile phones.<sup>210</sup> The future of Syria is an important determinant for Iran and even in the case that Syria does fall, Iran is determined to influence the succeeding government.

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<sup>208</sup> Geneive Abdo, “How Iran Keeps Assad in Power in Syria.” *Foreign Affairs*, August 25 2011. Accessed May 18, 2015. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2011-08-25/how-iran-keeps-assad-power-syria>

<sup>209</sup> Ambassador Frederic Hof and Alex Simon, *Sectarian Violence in Syria's Civil War: Causes, Consequences and Recommendations for Mitigation* (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum), 20

<sup>210</sup> Joby Warrick, “Iran Reportedly Aiding Syrian Crackdown,” *Washington Post*, May 27, 2011, under “National Security,” accessed July 12, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/iran-reportedly-aiding-syrian-crackdown/2011/05/27/AGUJe0CH\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/iran-reportedly-aiding-syrian-crackdown/2011/05/27/AGUJe0CH_story.html).

As the pivot of the Sunni cause, Saudi Arabia has also played a determining role in Syrian relations. Since the 1970s, Saudi-Syrian relations have been greatly strained with Saudi Arabia viewing the Syrian government with distrust and suspicion. When the 2011 uprisings occurred, Saudi Arabia took a hardline approach against Assad. At first, Saudi's influence presented itself in more of a subtle quality, as Saudi Arabian King Abdullah demanded an end to the killing and bloodshed unleashed by the Syrian regime against the population. Following Saudi Arabia's lead, August 2011 also saw the removal of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain's Syrian ambassadors in a move to further protest these policies.<sup>211</sup> In a statement promoting the Saudi stance, Nawaf Obaid posited that Saudi Arabia would continue to resist Iranian involvement in the Syrian civil war, "[Saudi Arabia] will be there to stop them wherever they are in Arab countries," he said. "We cannot accept Revolutionary Guards running round Homs."<sup>212</sup>

Saudi Arabia increased their ground support of the anti-regime movements and has provided material weapons and training to the Syrian rebels, prepared to spend millions of dollars to arm and train thousands of Syrian fighters. Jordan has been an acting portal of Saudi and Gulf equipment donations. In its union with the Wahhabi school of thought, Saudi Arabia's involvement in the Syrian war has been supported by Wahhabi religious clerics, advocating for Sunnis all around the world to support the

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<sup>211</sup> "Bahrain Recalls Envoy from Syria," *Now Lebanon*, August 8, 2011, accessed July 9, 2015, [https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/archive/bahrain\\_recalls\\_envoy\\_from\\_syria\\_foreign\\_minister\\_says](https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/archive/bahrain_recalls_envoy_from_syria_foreign_minister_says).

<sup>212</sup> Damien McElroy, David Blair, and Peter Foster, "Saudis 'turn Away from Us' After Iran's Nuclear Deal," *Gulf News*, November, 2013, accessed July 3, 2015, <http://m.gulfnews.com/news/gulf/saudi-arabia/saudis-turn-away-from-us-after-iran-s-nuclear-deal-1.1259908>.

Syrian rebels by any means necessary. This tacit support was provided by the Grand Mosque in Mecca and by the Saudi grand mufti.<sup>213</sup> As aforementioned, Saudi Arabia's soft power influence via the Wahhabi doctrine has been a major force of spreading Saudi legitimacy to Muslim populations across the globe. There has also been Saudi intent to build and strengthen additional Sunni militias, with the aim of backing the future leadership of Syria. Saudi Arabia has been working closely with other Sunni nations such as Pakistan, Qatar, and Turkey to ensure that these objectives are met.<sup>214</sup>

Bringing together various opposition forces, Saudi Arabia's role has contributed to the Syrian rebels gains against regime forces and in fighting against Hezbollah in the regions closest to Lebanon. Saudi Arabia and Iran's infiltration of Syria's civil war has catapulted the state into the largest proxy battlefield for the Sunni and Shi'ite conflict. In 2014, the Meir Amit Intelligence and Information center in Tel Aviv released a study revealing there to be between 6,000 to 7,000 Sunni foreign fighters in Syria battling Assad and the number of Shi'ite foreigners fighting on Assad's behalf against Sunni forces is estimated to be between 7,000 and 8,000 fighters.<sup>215</sup> By providing military

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<sup>213</sup> Ian Black, "Syria Crisis: Saudi Arabia to Spend Millions to Train New Rebel Force," *Guardian*, November 7, 2013, accessed April 22, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/07/syria-crisis-saudi-arabia-spend-millions-new-rebel-force>.

<sup>214</sup> Hassan Hassan, "Saudi Effort Isn't the Beginning of the End of Assad," *National*, May 5, 2015, accessed May 5, 2015, <http://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/saudi-effort-isnt-the-beginning-of-the-end-of-assad>.

<sup>215</sup> William Booth, "Israeli Study of Foreign Fighters in Syria Suggests Shiites May Outnumber Sunnis," *Washington Post*, January 2, 2014, accessed July 12, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2014/01/02/israeli-study-of-foreign-fighters-in-syria-suggests-shiites-may-outnumber-sunnis/>.



weapons, funding, personnel, and religious sectarian rhetoric, Saudi Arabia and Iran has widened the Syrian conflict into a microcosm of the Sunni-Shi'ite conflict that has become expressed within the context of Saudi Arabia and Iran's clash for geostrategic influence. Perhaps the most significant consequence of the exacerbation of the political upheaval in Syria has been the spillover effect into neighboring Iraq and the emergence of fundamental terrorist organizations such as ISIS.

### **Iraq and the Emerging Jihadist Threat**

#### ***Iraqi Civil War***

As explored in the chapter five, sectarian identity in Iraq was institutionalized when the new Iraqi government came into political power. Sunni Arabs, who had once held the most elite positions of power in the country, were left out of the new government system, leaving them with little faith that the Iraqi government is representative or even responsive to its needs. In December of 2011, the United States officially withdrew its military troops from Iraq, leaving Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, re-elected in 2010, free to fully pursue majoritarian government. Maliki immediately embarked on staging high profile raids and arrest on prominent Sunni leaders, such as Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi, forcing them to leave the country and then sentenced them to death in absentia.<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> Aaron Reese, "Sectarian and Regional Conflict in the Middle East," *Middle East Security Report*, July 2013, 11.

Maliki focused on creating a strong leadership of a majority, if not sole, Shi'ite government assembling loyalists within its most elite political institutions. By establishing influence over the Iraqi judiciary, the Iraqi electoral commission, the Central Bank, etc., Maliki was able to create a governing system of unchecked political power, enabling him to suppress his political rivals while safeguarding his allies. Maliki's consolidation of state power and constant Shi'ite militia attacks against Sunni communities has generated serious backlash by the Sunni population. The Sunni members who held government positions boycotted cabinet meetings and launched no-confidence votes. While these tactics generally failed, they also stripped the community of what little political influence they had left in the government.

In 2012, however, Maliki's actions pressed the Sunni Iraqi population into a broad protest movement. In December of 2012, Maliki ordered his security forces to raid the home of the "moderate" and secular Sunni Finance Minister, Rafia al-Issawi. This target against prominent Sunni members sparked a Sunni protest movement, which renewed sectarian violence, with clashes between Sunni and Shi'ite groups continue to worsen.

In 2013, concerns over the targeting of Sunnis political rivals propelled Iraqi Sunnis to protest. Tens of thousands of Sunni individuals joined the demonstrations, setting up camps for over six months in provinces such as Anbar, Ninewa, Salah, ad-Din, Diyala and also in Kirkuk and Baghdad.<sup>217</sup> The demonstrations eventually evolved into a

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<sup>217</sup> Liz Sly, "Arab Spring Style Protests Take Hold in Iraq," *Washington Post*, February 8, 2011, accessed January 19, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/arab-spring-style-protests-take-hold-in-iraq/2013/02/08/f875ef7e-715f-11e2-b3f3-b263d708ca37\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/arab-spring-style-protests-take-hold-in-iraq/2013/02/08/f875ef7e-715f-11e2-b3f3-b263d708ca37_story.html).

deeper expression of the Sunni Iraqi's many unresolved grievances, such as disproportionate abuse against Sunni communities and the perception of an unequal distribution of power, that escalated when the US forces withdrew from Iraq. In response to this protest movement, as seen during the Arab Spring, the Maliki regime increased his security forces in order to suppress the movement. In January, the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) fired on crowds in Anbar after protestors threw rocks. Maliki delayed the provincial elections in Anbar and Ninewa and in April, an ISF raid on a protest site in Hawija left over 200 dead.<sup>218</sup> When the protests appeared to fail in producing results, some Iraqis began to appeal to the regional Sunni community, calling for the use of force. While there is no doubt that Iraq's Sunni community had genuine and legitimate grievances that they faced under Maliki's time in office, the Iraqi community has entered into a vicious cycle of sectarian repression. Since the establishment of the state of Iraq, Iraq's Sunnis were disproportionately empowered by the government, a factor that belied its minority stance. In the aftermath of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, this same majoritarian government was empowered, with now the Shi'ites in rule at the expense of the Sunni minority. The grievances experienced by both Sunni and Shi'ite Iraqis has once again manifested itself into Saudi Arabia and Iran's regional politics. As the battle grounds around Syria and Iraq continue to widen, rather than contract, more regional players are making a venture in its future. Tensions between Sunnis and Shi'ites have been aggravated more than ever as regional powers continue to politicize the ethno-religious identities in their fight for

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<sup>218</sup> Marisa Cochran Sullivan, "2013 Iraq Update 17B: Iraq on Edge," April 28, 2013. Institute for the Study of War, <http://www.understandingwar.org/background/2013-iraq-update-17b-iraq-edge>

influence. The exploitation of Sunni-Shi'ite sectarian has further weakened and catapulted the Iraqi state, attracting radical and fundamentalist elements.

### ***ISIS***

Emerged from the remnants of al-Qaeda, the Islamic State of Iraq & al-Sham (ISIS) has posed a serious threat to stability, security and development in the Middle East. As civil war in Iraq and Syria continues to be exploited by regional powers, the conflict has reached unprecedented heights, showing no sign of resolution. As populations in the Middle East continue to grow increasingly discontented, jihadist organizations exploit these grievances, gaining not only popularity but also legitimacy. Inspired by a distinctive ideology, certain extremists believe that the United States symbolizes liberalism, democracy and secularism, a political system that is not only in direct contradiction to Islam but that its very existence is against Islam. Moreover, certain Muslim states and leaders have been infiltrated by this anti-Muslim ideology. Islamic fundamentalists hold that these acts of aggression against Islam must be eliminated via *jihad*.<sup>219</sup> Generated by increased conflict and chaos in the Middle East, jihadi extremism has grown more pronounced in Muslim communities in the region and even around the world. This growing extremist that has resulted from the political vacuums in weak and failing states make non state actors a clear and present threat that confronts the Middle East and the international system.

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<sup>219</sup> Mary Habeck, *Knowing the Enemy: Jihadist Ideology and the War On Terror* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 162.

When the uprisings occurred in Syria in 2011, they were initially civil and non-violent. Eventually, the movement took on violent characteristics and the rebel army was created. In addition to Assad's brutal and ruthless suppression of the 2011 nonviolent and pro-democracy struggle, he also released hundreds of prisoners who were Islamists linked to al-Qaeda, such as Abu Othman.<sup>220</sup> By the end of June 2011, Othman and his fellow "graduate" jihadists began to mobilize against Assad, collecting intelligence on Assad's security forces and purchasing weapons. In August of 2011, Abu Mohammed al-Golani, a young veteran of the Iraq War, had been authorized by his commander, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, to fight against the Alawite Syrian forces, with the intent to bring down the Assad regime and establish an Islamic state in its stead. With their first operation an attack on a Damascus State Security branch in December, Othman, Golani and their fellow al-Qaeda affiliated jihadists formally announced themselves in January of 2012 as Jabhat al Nusra.

While the Free Syrian Army was highly suspicious of al-Nusra's motives, they needed their support as a disciplined, capable and effective fighting force. Many of al-Nusra's actions utilized acts of terrorism, such as suicide bombings and various other attacks against the regime. Furthermore, al-Nusra's ideology maintained harsh sectarian values, especially against the Alawites, however avoided brutal executions and sectarian attacks that Al-Qaeda Iraq (AQI) was made unpopular from. While al-Nusra committed terrorist attacks, when they were labeled as a terrorist organization, a number of anti-

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<sup>220</sup> Rania Abouzeid, "The Jihad Next Door," *Politico*, June 23, 2014, 1, accessed July 12, 2015, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/06/al-qaeda-iraq-syria-108214.html#.VaMwmLDF-7E>.

government forces protested the designation.<sup>221</sup> In April of 2013, in a startling turn of events, an audiotape from the AQI emir, Baghdadi, announced that his AQI unit not only had created Jabhat al Nusra but that he was merging the two under a single organization, ISIS. Golani and al-Qaeda's leader, Zawahiri, publicly rejected the merger. Al-Nusra, quickly divided, however, with many of the foreign fighters called to help fight in Syria, the *muhajirun*, following Baghdadi's edict and joining ISIS.<sup>222</sup> ISIS soon after began establish its state and in August of 2013, after conquering the city of Raqqa in the northeast of Syria from the rebels, made it its capital. ISIS was an even more radicalized sect, adhering to the a fundamental Jihadist ideology that enforced women to wear the full *niqab*, made daily prayers mandatory, pronounced other Muslims as infidels and carried out strict punishment under the Sharia.

Aside from the Saudi-Iranian call for foreign Sunnis and Shi'ites to join the fight in Syria, ISIS' roots link back to the fundamentalist beliefs of al-Wahhab and his partnership with the Saud family in the eighteenth century. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is using the language of religion to construct the Islamic State with him as the revived Caliph.<sup>223</sup> While Saudi Arabia has united against ISIS, it is evident that Saudi Arabia's innovation and exportation of Wahhabism has created the Salafi creed of ISIS. ISIS'

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<sup>221</sup> "Mapping Militants," FSI Stanford, accessed July 7, 2015, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/493>.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid

<sup>223</sup> David Kirkpatrick, "Isis' Harsh Brand of Islam Is Rooted in Austere Saudi Creed," *New York Times*, September 24, 2014, under "Memo from Iraq," accessed July 13, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/25/world/middleeast/isis-abu-bakr-baghdadi-caliph-wahhabi.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/25/world/middleeast/isis-abu-bakr-baghdadi-caliph-wahhabi.html?_r=0).

leadership has expressed their open commitment to the Wahhabi movement of Sunni Islam, circulating images of Wahhabi religious textbooks in the schools that it mandates. In line with the Wahhabi thinking is ISIS approach to embracing violence to reform Muslim states and societies who have fallen into “unbelief.”<sup>224</sup> For ISIS fighters, they believe that they are involved in struggles that are beyond their own lives, that they must embrace the killing of unfaithful Muslims and act against foreign domination in order to purify the Islamic community and return to Islam’s Golden Age.

As Syria’s civil war has had spillover effects into Iraq, many foreign fighters have continued to cross the border into Iraq. Drawn together by the increasingly autocratic and sectarian rule of the Iraqi government, with no resolution in sight, ISIS has begun to march across Iraq. The fight in Syria provided ISIS with a base of operation and with the ability to openly recruit fighters who can move between the Syrian and Iraqi battlefields. Sunnis from all across the region and political spectrum are joining on behalf of the Sunni faction in the Iraqi civil war. In fact, it is estimated that over 20,000 fighters from around the world have joined extremist organizations in Iraq and Syria, around 3,400 from Western countries.<sup>225</sup> On June 10, 2014, ISIS members seized Mosul, Iraq’s second largest city and has conquered more territory since then. Major cities that ISIS captured but were forced to relinquish include Tikrit, Falluja and the strategic Kurdish town of

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<sup>224</sup> Ibid

<sup>225</sup> Ken Dilanian, "US Intel: IS Militants Drawing Steady Stream of Recruits." *AP*. 11 Feb. 2015. Web. 6 Apr. 2015.

Kobane. Most recently, in May 2015, the central city of Ramadi fell to ISIS, marking another significant conquest. In an analysis regarding ISIS' progress in Iraq, the coalition fighting against ISIS is missing a key aspect in their strategy: ISIS has rooted itself within many Sunni communities. For many within the Sunni community in Iraq, ISIS represents a means to defend their cause. Sunni leaders have both actively and passively enabled ISIS to advance, as one tribal leader explains, Sunni leaders have formed their own military council to "defend their areas" while Maliki allowed terrorists to overturn "legitimate Sunni resistance."<sup>226</sup> Furthermore, when looking at the composition of ISIS fighters, most of those serving directly under Baghdadi are ex-Iraqi military and intelligence operators. This is also the case when looking at the number of forces in Iraq. With over 15,000 forces in Iraq, the number continues to increase ISIS' popularity and religious authority has allowed them to recruit local men--who have already taken up arms in the Sunni struggle--whenever they enter a new town.<sup>227</sup> In order to understand the full dynamics of the ethno sectarian dimensions in Iraqi society and their view of ISIS, Nussaibah Yunis explains,

As the Iraqi government wages war against the Islamic State, it is severely underestimating the extent to which continued, deep-seated mistrust among Iraq's ethnosectarian communities is undermining its effort. Iraqi Shia have largely failed to understand the fears that are keeping Iraqi Sunnis away from the fight against the radical jihadist group; Iraqi Sunnis have long miscalculated their [political] leverage...and have backed themselves into a fatal corner with the

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<sup>226</sup> Nussaibah Yunis "A Cross-Sectarian Vision for Defeating the Islamic State in Iraq," *Carnegie Middle East Center*, July 6, 2015.

<sup>227</sup> Samiha Shafy, online conference with Charles Lister, August 13, 2014



Islamic State; and Iraqi Kurds are single-mindedly pursuing a vision of independence... standing in the way of cooperation in the war against the Islamic State.<sup>228</sup>

As can be seen, Iranian-Saudi tensions, as expressed in the rhetoric of religious legitimacy, has unleashed radicalized forces that have taken on a transnational character and is impossible to contain within the physical borders of states.

### **Yemen Revisited**

In 2011, the human rights contagion that swept through the Muslim world also found a home in Yemen. As previously discussed, Yemeni President, Ali Abdullah Saleh, was an authoritarian leader who repressed economic and civic life. In order to ensure government loyalty, Saleh designated the security and military apparatus with his relations. Other relatives also established monopolies over tobacco trade, real estate, and hotel tourism. Those outside of the family were ensured loyalty via pay offs by both Saleh and Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia regularly flooded money into Yemeni tribal systems in order to keep followers happy and submissive.<sup>229</sup> Yemen is a failing state and is the poorest state in the Arab World. The Yemeni government's income has generally been kept by the ruling family and was not invested into state institutions or establishing any civilian infrastructure. This left Yemen with an unemployment rate of 35 percent and

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid

<sup>229</sup> James L. Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pgs. 69

over half of its citizens illiterate.<sup>230</sup> In the recent years, Yemen has also had the unfortunate position of serving as the home base for Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

When the Arab Uprisings occurred in Yemen, Saleh was unable sustain control over the state apparatus and in late 2011 a political transition began to occur. By 2011, despite its defeat by Saudi forces, the Houthis movement had been transformed into an organized and disciplined militia. Continuously gaining popularity in the North of Yemen, when the 2011 uprisings occurred, the Houthis movement reworked the movement's rhetoric to support revolution and the youth protestors in Sana'a rather than on religion and the Islamic revolutionary principles that it was founded upon. Since 2011, the Houthis have been on the rise and in January of 2015, the organization pressured the country's acting President, Abd Rabbu Mansour, to resign. Their continuous expansion has allowed them to effectively seize control over Yemen's capital.<sup>231</sup> The recent political instability of the Republic of Yemen, instigated by the Houthi rebels, may push the country into a full-scale war. While many Yemenis support the Houthi cause, they also continue to face resistance from former President Saleh, Sunni tribes in the Marib oil province, and other various tribal and political movements. The political instability has also pushed the conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran to become very "hot."

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<sup>230</sup> "The Challenge of Youth Unemployment," *Yemen Times*, April 17, 2014, accessed July 8 2015, <http://www.yementimes.com/en/1773/report/3744/The-challenge-of-youth-unemployment.htm>.

<sup>231</sup> Robert Kiely. 2014. Saudi Arabia. Arab-Israeli Conflict: The Essential Reference Guide: 167-172

Since the Houthis expansion, Iran has been cited to be smuggling weapons into Yemen. For instance, in March of 2012, The New York Times cited U.S. military and intelligence officials stating that the Quds force was supplying the Houthis rebels with AK-47 rifles, rocket grenades, and other arms. In January 2013, a shipment bearing Iranian markings was seized just off the coast of Yemen with weapons including air missiles and C-4 explosives.<sup>232</sup> In March 2015, Saudi Arabia moved in with airstrikes against the Houthis. In response, the Iranian government has condemned the Saudi-led offensive against the Houthis. In both April and May; Iran had sent aid ships in a direct challenge to the Saudi and US blockade of Yemen's ports. The first attempt by Iran to send in aid failed, however this time around Iran asked its navy to provide special protection for the ship, promising retaliation if the ship, the *Iran Shahed* is prevent from its mission. The ship carried 2,500 tons of aid and was bound for the Shi'ite Houthis controlled port. The conflict in Yemen is important to both Iran and Saudi Arabia. As a border-country of Saudi Arabia, Yemen constitutes a national security matter. While the Iranian government still insists that it does not support any foreign intervention in Yemen, many of its actions have shown that Yemen might be Iran's latest quest for regional power against the Saudis. As Yemen continues to be torn apart by war, the future of Yemen is left uncertain.

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<sup>232</sup> Martin Reardon, "Saudi Arabia, Iran and the 'great Game' in Yemen," *Al Jazeera*, April 23, 2015, accessed July 13, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/09/saudi-arabia-iran-great-game-ye-201492984846324440.html>.

## **Conclusion**

Amidst the upheaval of the Arab Uprisings, the Saudi-Iranian competition has been greatly intensified. Their struggle for regional dominance continues to challenge the power dynamics of the Middle East. In their quest for influence, Saudi Arabia and Iran became involved in the regions domestic politics following the crash of popular and peaceful protest. Supporting opposing factions within the conflict, Saudi Arabia and Iran engaged in proxy wars from the Levant to the Gulf, contributing vast resources, including funds, arms, training, public support, and even personnel in order to improve relations with what they hope will become the transitioning leadership. In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, both Saudi Arabia and Iran increased their politicization of sectarian rhetoric in order to legitimate their claims to Islamic leadership and their role in the domestic politics of the state. Saudi-Iranian proxy conflicts and military interventions have taken place in Bahrain, Syria, Iraq and Yemen. Furthermore, Iran and Saudi Arabia's proxy wars in the region provided a fertile ground for the rise of extremist groups, such as ISIS, to emerge as powerful players. If left unmitigated, these jihadist non-state actors have the potential to change the map of the Middle East.

## **Conclusion**

In order to comprehend the current tensions occurring in the Middle East, the central question of this research project is, “Can the regional conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran be framed as the New Middle East cold war?” With the many vast implications of an ongoing cold war in the Middle East, this question is crucially important.

To attain the answer as to whether this description of Saudi-Iranian relations is applicable, this thesis analyzed four different time periods: 1924-1979; 1979-2003; 2003-2011; 2011-Present. These periods provided us with insight regarding Saudi-Iranian relations during the times when they engaged in friendly bilateral relations and when they were archrivals. Examining these time periods was critical in order to deduce if Saudi Arabia and Iran are involved in a current cold war and, if so, what the defining moments were that turned these two states from collaborative partners to embittered cold war rivals. Based on various Cold War literature and the theoretical framework of a cold war defined in chapter two, there are seven dimensions that this thesis has identified that can

be applied to Saudi Arabia and Iran's relations in order to highlight the current reality of the Middle East.

One dimension assessed was **religious and political ideology** as the collective national memories of conflict between the competing Islamic ideologies continue to sway foreign policies and diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The Cold War between the United States and Soviet Union was a largely political contestation. The struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran, however, while imbued with strategic and geopolitical underpinnings, is largely influenced by religious and ethnic ideology. Each states' collective narrative reinforces the differences between the two states. The competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran represent two opposing aspirations for Islamic leadership with two vastly differing political systems. The clash is between Saudi Arabia, representing Sunni Islam and its Wahhabi interpretations and Iran, representing Shi'ite Muslims through its Khomeini doctrines. The conflict between Wahhabi Saudi Arabia and Khomeini Iran is not the result of an ancient schism that exists between the Sunnis and the Shi'ites. Rather, it is the byproduct of centuries of political and religious contestation that existed between empires that now has manifested itself into the politics of these modern-nation states.

Another dimension identified as central to the Middle East cold war was **diplomacy**. Since the inception of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Iran and Saudi Arabia have reverted from friendly bilateral relations to severe conflict. During Saudi Arabia's formative years as a modern nation state and under the era of the Shah, relations tended

to lean towards collaboration, as both Saudi Arabia and Iran's collective identity influenced its foreign policy objects to protect the status quo. Most recently, heightened tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran ascribes back to Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution. In an attempt to export the Iranian-style theocratic uprisings around the Middle East, the Iranian Ayatollah, Ruhollah Khomeini, sought to delegitimize Saudi Arabia, perceiving the monarchy as an extension of American interference. This has engaged Saudi Arabia and Iran in a security dilemma. Saudi Arabia was already an influential government in Islam as the "custodian of the two holy sites" and viewed Iranian actions and rhetoric as a threat to its influence in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia developed a foreign policy strategy to contain and counter Iran, as seen via the formation of the Gulf Cooperation Council, as well as through its funding of Iraq during the 1980's Iran-Iraq war. On its end, Iran continued to look for ways to challenge the regional order, such as supporting Hezbollah and Hamas and allying with Syria's Assad regime. Although relations were normalizing during the 1990's, the 2003 U.S. led invasion of Iraq provided Iran with the opportunity to strengthen pro-Iranian Shi'ite militia groups and back a Shi'ite ruling government. The Arab Uprisings further exacerbated Saudi-Iranian tensions as Saudi Arabia and Iran continue to take advantage of the security vacuums of weak states in the Middle East as a means to compete for influence in the failing countries' domestic politics.

The third dimension identified was the role of **alliances**, both internal (within the region) and external. During the formative years of the Islamic Republic, Iran, with the

exception of the Assad regime in Syria and the rising power of Hezbollah in Lebanon, found itself highly isolated in a containment policy enacted by many of its surrounding Sunni Arab states. The 2003 American-led invasion of Iraq changed the power of balance between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Iran's regional influence has significantly increased as its allies in the region have accumulated power.

Saudi Arabia's greatest foreign alliance has been the United States. First established through its oil industry partnership and then through security and government agreements during the Russian-American Cold War, Saudi Arabia and the United States established a close alliance that has lasted for over 70 years. Saudi Arabia also has built significant alliances with the European Union, Egypt, Jordan and the Gulf states. Additionally, although there are various competing influences within the Sunni world (such as between Saudi Arabia and Turkey), as tensions with Iran continue to grow, Sunni players may form a greater coalition to counter growing Iranian influence in the Arab World. For example, the recent Saudi military intervention in Yemen drew in regional players such as Turkey and Pakistan. Powerful countries in the region currently do not want to be entangled in the geopolitical and sectarian struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran. However as regional affairs grow tenser, Sunni countries are unlikely to remain uninvolved.

A fourth dimension explained was **economic**. The oil reserves that both countries have at their disposal have allowed them to fund and export their rivalry and ideology throughout the entire Islamic world. The relationship between oil profits and the role of



Wahhabism in the Middle East is specifically important to note as oil profits have allowed Wahhabism to have a preeminent position of strength in the Middle East region. As the “Guardian of the two holy sites,” Saudi Arabia’s creation of the Wahhabi brand of Sunni Islam via its religious training and soft power influence, has garnered the country a legitimacy endorsed throughout most of the Sunni world. The oil profits from wealth have provided Saudi Arabia with the funds to spread Wahhabism transnationally. Additionally, Saudi Arabia has led the United States, European Union, and several individual countries to implement sanctions against the Iranians for human rights abuses and for their nuclear program.

Another dimension that parallels the Cold War between the United States and Soviet Union was the **arms race**. Specific to the Saudi-Iranian rivalry is the nuclear issue. While both Saudi Arabia and Iran have weak conventional forces and arms, both countries have invested in researching and developing nuclear weapons. The development of a “Shi’ite bomb” may cause Saudi Arabia to develop its own nuclear program. The recent nuclear accord with Iran may be catapulted Saudi Arabia’s urgency to develop its own nuclear program, viewing the Nuclear deal as the U.S. providing Iran’s nuclear program with its “stamp of approval.” As Iran’s main ideological and strategic rival, Saudi Arabia has announced its plan to build its own nuclear program with a minimum of 16 nuclear reactors as a way to bridge this gap.<sup>233</sup> Saudi Arabia believes that it has the resources to purchase nuclear capabilities from an outside source. As Saudi

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<sup>233</sup> Yoel Guzansky and Udi Dekel. "Recognizing Iran as a Nuclear Threshold State: Implications for Israel and the Middle East." The Institute for National Security Studies. March 25, 2015.

Arabia has a history of acting clandestinely in the nuclear arena, the production of a Sunni bomb to counter the Shi'ite bomb remains a distinct and concerning possibility.

The sixth important dimension considered was **proxy conflicts**. Proxy wars are fought as a way for the rival powers to retain— or expand— their control in a given region. Saudi Arabia and Iran continue to exploit the region's weak states in a series of proxy wars ranging from conflicts in the Gulf and the Levant, from Iraq to Lebanon. These proxy wars are dangerous, as they tend to escalate conflicts for protracted time periods, disrupt regional stability and heighten mutual fears.

Lastly, the seventh dimension analyzed was Saudi Arabia and Iran's **involvement in wars**. While proxy wars provide these great regional powers with the ability to indirectly try to achieve their aims during the conflict, there are also cases where one or both powers directly intervene in accordance with its interests. Iran is heavily involved in Syria and Iraq and the Saudis have been heavily involved in Bahrain and Yemen.

In revisiting the cold war dimensions, we saw how the Saudi-Iranian rivalry measured in comparison to Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union Cold War. While there are distinct and important differences, such as that the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is between regional powers and not superpowers and the arms race is mainly a nuclear race and not part of the technological imperative that existed between the United States and Soviet Union, it is clear that many of the dimensions do compare. The 1979 Iranian Revolution, the 2003 U.S. led invasion of Iraq, and the most recent Arab Uprisings have launched the Middle East into a new cold war.

Therefore, in order to understand how the competing interests of Saudi Arabia and Iran continue to affect the Middle East, it is useful to apply a cold war framework.

### **Implications for the United States**

Both Saudi Arabia and Iran are key players in the Middle East. In their quest to control different parts of the region, Saudi Arabia and Iran have divided the Middle East into two armed camps on the basis of political ideology in seeking regional allies. Saudi Arabia and Iran are divided by long-standing structural tensions. Each has aspirations for Islamic leadership, and each possesses different visions of regional order. It is beneficial to view the conflict in terms of the aims and goals of Iran and Saudi Arabia in addition to how these two regimes continue to use Islam as an instrument to further their political power to become the ultimate hegemon in the Middle East. Though the competition between these two states is enduring, paying attention to the rivalry is now principally crucial. This rivalry is defining the strategic landscape of the Middle East, threatening U.S. National Security interests and endlessly challenging U.S. foreign policies in the region.

A significant implication of the Middle East cold war is the effect of ideology on the region. As seen during the U.S. Cold War with the Soviet Union, the role of ideology was part of an all-encompassing zero-sum game. Conflict and competition between the two rival countries touched essentially every issue in the immediate post-World War II period; the Cold War lasted for four decades. The cold war between Saudi Arabia and Iran is part of the larger war in the Middle East, and at the same time, is a reflection of an

old conflict between sects and states. Hence, it can only be assumed that Saudi Arabia and Iran's continued capitalization of weakened political institutions will have similar influential effects on security, stability and economic growth in the Gulf and wider Middle East, with protracted conflicts that will last decades. Saudi Arabia and Iran have enormous influence, both economically and culturally, and their bitter rivalry has already played out all across the region, from Iraq to Lebanon. Stability in the Middle East is integral to safeguarding vital U.S. interests and key objectives in the region. Thus, one key implication is that the U.S. will be unable to focus its full attention on its pivot to Asia and will be required to continue to maintain a policy of long-term engagement in the Middle East.

The United States will also need to be aware that the tensions and differences that exist between Saudi Arabia and Iran will be reflected in many other regional countries. Saudi Arabia and Iran's conflict is part of a larger war that engulfs the entire Middle East. While these tensions are old and have remained relatively peaceful, underlying factions do exist. Violent conflict between the Sunnis and Shi'ites emerges when political leaders who seek some form of political prize exploit these identities. In their struggle for regional hegemony, Saudi Arabia and Iran fuel and encapsulate the Sunni-Shi'ite conflict. The New Middle East cold war between Saudi Arabia and Iran will inevitably result in a spillover affect of this conflict. We have already begun seeing this in the civil war conflict in Iraq and the bloody sectarian civil war that is dominating Syria. These cold war enemies have serious military, economic, political and social costs. Therefore,

the United States will need to generate a multifaceted solution that incorporates methods of defense, diplomacy and development in order to prevent the conflict from escalating further and managing or ending the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Another threat to U.S National security interests is the rise of non-state actors and religious extremists. Currently, the role of non-state religious extremist actors are being driven by the sectarian policies and ideologies of the Sunni and Shi'ite regimes with no outlet in sight. Although the phenomenon of terrorism is not new, it has reached greater and unprecedented heights in the past few years, specifically jihadi extremism. Inspired by a distinctive ideology, certain Islamic extremists believe that the United States symbolizes liberalism and democracy, a political system that is not only in direct contradiction to Islam, but that is an act of aggression against Islam that must be eliminated via revolutionary force, jihad. The political vacuums created by Saudi Arabia and Iran's sectarian policies in Muslim communities and around the world has allowed for jihadist organizations to exploit grievances, allowing them to gain not only popularity but also legitimacy. Religious extremists who exploit terrorism as a political tool are a top danger facing the United States. Various research reports indicate that states that are engaged in ongoing interstate rivalries have incentives to support terrorism as a means of advancing their power and influence.

Iran is a known state sponsor of terrorism through groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas, the Houthis Rebels in Yemen, and other such groups. Saudi Arabia upholds the image of a Sunni defender. In attempting to create a strong Sunni identity throughout

Islamic world, Saudi Arabia has pushed Wahhabism towards a concerning direction that continues to have dire consequences in the region. Many regional experts provide evidence of a causal link between sectarian policies and Sunni extremism. The Saudi petrodollar enabled Saudi Arabia to drive a geographical distribution of *Salafism*, the export version of Wahhabism. Vali Nasr writes, “the band of radical Islam that began spreading across Central Asia and the Caucasus in the 1990s...was a Sunni radicalism born of the deliberate Saudi policy of containing Iran.”<sup>234</sup> Jihadist attacks on the United States has already led the country to have two protracted wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that has resulted in an immense cost of human life and dollars. As civil wars in Syria and Iraq continue, to lure of violent jihad and the lethality of terrorist attacks will continue to increase, presenting non-state actors as the preeminent threat to U.S. interests and its national security.

Thus, in order for the U.S. to understand how the competing interests of these two nations affects U.S. national security, it is useful to apply the framework of a cold war between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran are key players in the Middle East and their aspirations for regional hegemony have predisposed the nations to be entrapped in a state of everlasting hostility. In their quest to control different parts of the Middle East, Saudi Arabia and Iran have divided the region into two armed camps on the basis of political ideology in seeking regional allies. Saudi Arabia and Iran are divided by long-standing structural tensions. Each has aspirations for Islamic leadership, and each

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<sup>234</sup> Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future*, Reprint ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 158

possesses different visions of regional order. Whereas Iran regards Saudi Arabia as America's proxy and a buffer against Iran's rightful primacy in the Gulf, Saudi Arabia worries about Iran's asymmetric power and regional ambitions (especially its expanding influence in post-Saddam Iraq and its alleged pursuit of a nuclear weapon). It is more beneficial to view the conflict in terms of the aims and goals of Iran and Saudi Arabia and how these two regimes continue to use Islam as an instrument to further their political power and become the ultimate hegemon in the Middle East. Therefore, the fall of Saddam Hussein and the events leading up to the 2011 Arab Uprisings have changed the regional security paradigm of the Middle East and have further catapulted the two nations to support their proxies through funding, military arms, soldiers and by encouraging sectarianism. It will be important for the United States to remain aware of political changes that will continue to occur in the region as a result of the new Middle East cold war between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

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