# Saudi Arabia and Iran:
## The Struggle to Shape the Middle East

# Executive Summary

This report examines the impact of the increasingly fractious rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran upon politics across the Middle East, focussing upon Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen. It documents the devastating impact of the rivalry and the mechanisms in which Riyadh and Tehran have become involved in, what have become viewed as 'proxy arenas'. Since the Iranian revolution in 1979, the two states have become embroiled in an increasingly vitriolic rivalry that is shaped by geopolitical aspirations but given existential importance by claims to Islamic legitimacy, with repercussions felt across Muslim communities worldwide.

As the rivalry took on a sectarian dimension it began to play out in divided societies such as those covered in this report, where domestic politics took place within the context of broader geopolitical events. The presence of allies and proxies across the region, often along sect-based lines, provided Riyadh and Tehran with the means of shaping political life and countering the influence of their rival.

Regimes across the region have used sectarian language as a means of maintaining power, entrenching divisions within society. Political, social and economic life quickly became viewed through the prism of sectarian difference, deepening divisions and creating opportunities for grassroots 'sectarian entrepreneurs' to capitalize on such conditions.

Whilst there are links between sectarian groups and their kin in the Gulf, it is important to recognise that many of these groups exercise their own agency independent of Saudi Arabia or Iran. The report argues that whilst the rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran plays a prominent role in shaping regional politics, we must not ignore domestic forces that find traction within the fallout from the struggle between the two states.

As life in Syria and Yemen – in particular – worsens, leaving millions in need of humanitarian assistance, facilitating dialogue and ultimately rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran is a necessity.

The report makes a number of recommendations:

- Work towards creating a 'grand bargain' that brings both Iran and Saudi Arabia into the system of regional states through creating space for discussion of regional issues;
- Facilitate dialogue and trust building between Riyadh and Tehran;
- Work towards a cease-fire in Yemen and Syria;
- Reject the use of language such as 'Shi'a Crescent' that plays such a damaging role in deepening divisions within and between communities;
- Western states must avoid the mobilisation of sect-based groups who advocate violence as proxies or allies;
- Encourage adherence to the rule of law and recognition of individual rather than community rights;
- Respect the development of political projects which cut across sectarian, ethnic and tribal cleavages such as those seen in Beirut and the YOU STINK movement;
- Advocate and support the development of interest-based political projects that cut across social cleavages.

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**Introduction: Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Struggle to Shape the Middle East**
Dr Simon Mabon[1]

On 22nd September 2018, an attack on a military ceremony in Ahvaz, a city in the southwest of Iran, resulted in the deaths of 25 people and left many more injured, including members of Iran's elite Revolutionary Guards Corps. Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei quickly blamed a number of states for this event. In a statement posted on his official website, Khamenei stated that "*this cowardly act was committed by the same people who are saved by the Americans whenever they are trapped in Syria and Iraq and whose hands are in the pockets of Saudi Arabia and the UAE*".[2] Khamenei's comments were followed by similar remarks from Javad Zarif, the Foreign Minister of Iran who blamed "*regional terror sponsors and their US masters*",[3] and General Hossein Salami, the acting commander of the IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps), who vowed revenge against the perpetrators, referred to as the "*triangle*" of Saudi Arabia, Israel and the United States.[4]

This report seeks to critically engage and analyse the impact of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the Middle East. Whilst there are a myriad other factors and forces at play in shaping the contemporary Middle East, we will focus purely on the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran which is, as Gregory Gause suggests, '*the best framework for understanding the regional politics of the Middle East*'.[5] As a consequence, we must put aside the roles played by Turkey, Qatar, Russia and many others (including the US and UK), along with intra-Sunni tensions for examination at a future point.

The rhetoric that emerged in the aftermath of the attack in Ahvaz has been a common feature of tensions between Riyadh and Tehran. Comments from prominent figures in the Iranian regime match those of their Saudi counterparts, who have routinely accused Iran of funding terrorist groups across the region, propping up the regime of Bashar Al Assad in Syria, supporting Houthi rebels in Yemen, and provoking political unrest in Bahrain. Adel Al Jubeir, the Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia, suggested that Iran sought to "*obscure its dangerous sectarian and expansionist policies, as well as its support for terrorism, by levelling unsubstantiated charges against the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*". He later suggested that Iran is "*the single-most belligerent actor in the region*".[6] Al Jubeir's views are shared by many across the Kingdom, who view instability across the Middle East as a direct consequence of nefarious Iranian intent. Such positions stem from decades of enmity between the two states that dramatically escalated in the aftermath of the 1979 revolution that resulted in the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The emergence of the Islamic Republic added a theological dimension to a rivalry that was predominantly based upon geopolitical competition and a long-standing suspicion of the ethnic 'other'.

Khamenei's words were the latest incident in a fractious rivalry that has played a dominant role in shaping the Gulf – and wider Middle East – since the Iranian revolution of 1979. More recently, the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq created space for the intensification of the rivalry following the removal of the Ba'ath regime of Saddam Hussein from regional politics. After the Arab Uprisings, the rivalry escalated as relations between

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[2] Lauren Said-Moorhouse and Sarah El Sirgany, Iran accuses Saudi Arabia, UAE of financing military parade attackers, CNN, September .2018, https://edition.cnn.com/2018/09/24/middleeast/iran-attack-military-parade-intl/index.html
[3] Javad Zarif, 9.08AM 22.09.18  https://twitter.com/JZarif/status/1043411744314601472
[4] Richard Spencer, Iran vows bloody revenge on US, Israel and Saudis, The Times, September 2018 https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/iran-vows-bloody-revenge-on-us-israel-and-saudis-jvh0fswtn
[5] F. Gregory Gause III, Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle Eastern Cold War, Brookings, 2014,  https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/English-PDF-1.pdf
[6] Adel Bin Ahmed Al-Jubeir, Can Iran Change?, The New York Times, January2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/19/opinion/saudi-arabia-can-iran-change.html?_r=2

regimes and societies began to fragment, creating new arenas of competition either directly or through proxies.

Yet the rivalry is not fixed across time and space. Indeed, consideration of the rivalry reveals five distinct time periods: pre-revolution, characterised by mutual suspicion but a capacity to work together; 1979-1991, a period of intense enmity driven by the revolution and Iran-Iraq war; 1991-2003, a period of burgeoning rapprochement where security was seen in a mutually beneficial manner after Khomeini's death and the emergence of more reform- minded politicians in Iran, along with shared fears of Iraqi belligerence[7]; 2003-2011, the re-emergence of hostilities driven by the War on Terror and belligerence of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013); and 2011-present day, where the rivalry takes place amidst the backdrop of the Arab Uprisings. Across these periods, the rivalry plays out in a number of different arenas, shaped by opportunity and building on networks often – but not exclusively – constructed along sectarian lines.

Underpinning much of this geopolitical tension is an incongruent vision of the organisation of security in the Gulf. For Saudi Arabia, security in the Gulf is maintained through a long-standing alliance with the United States. However, from Iran's perspective, security should be maintained solely by those within the region.[8] This contradiction was exacerbated in the years after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, where Saudi officials urged their American counterparts to curtail the burgeoning Iranian influence across the state. The late King Abdullah urged the US at the time to "*cut off the head of the snake*"[9] whilst similar comments were made by members of the Bahraini ruling family, the Al Khalifa, who are long-standing Saudi allies.

The rivalry is also shaped by US policies towards the Gulf States. During the presidency of Barak Obama, diplomatic overtures to Iran caused a great deal of consternation amongst many in Saudi Arabia, prompting a more pro-active foreign policy. These fears were exacerbated by the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the 2015 nuclear deal agreed by the permanent five members of the UN Security Council, Germany, and Iran.[10] Under Obama's successor, the vehemently anti-Iranian Donald Trump, relations with the Saudi Kingdom – and the Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman in particular – dramatically improved, in no small part due to the decision to withdraw from the nuclear deal and the belligerent stance taken against Iran.

Efforts to understand the rivalry between the two major Gulf powers traditionally fall into three main camps: first are those who reduce the tensions to national interest[11]; second, those who suggest that the rivalry is a consequence of theological tensions[12]; and third, those who suggest that we must look at a combination of religion and geopolitics to understand the way in which the rivalry plays out[13]. This report falls into the third category, accepting the primacy of states and national interests but also stressing the importance of religion within such calculations. It also seeks to show how the rivalry plays out across time and space, leading to different forms of competition and rivalry across the region.

Whilst sectarian difference can be shaped and cultivated by regional forces and state elites 'from above', it can also emerge 'from below', as actors across the Middle East capitalise upon instability to pursue their own agendas. Commonly referred to as 'sectarian entrepreneurs', these individuals capitalise upon the contingency of specific socio-economic, cultural and historic events which are constructed through the

[7]BBC, Landmark Iran-Saudi Security Deal (BBC, April2001, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/1283010.stm

[8] Full transcript of FM Zarif's speech at 2018 Munich Security Conference - https://realiran.org/read-full-transcript-of-fm-zarifs-speech-at-munich-security-conference-2018/

[9] Ross Colvin, "Cut off head of snake" Saudis told U.S. on Iran, Reuters, November 2010, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-wikileaks-iran-saudis/cut-off-head-of-snake-saudis-told-u-s-on-iran-idUSTRE6AS02B20101129

[10] Simon Mabon, 'Muting Trumpets of Sabotage: Saudi Arabia, the US and the quest to securitize Iran', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 45(5) 2018.

[11] See: Henner Furtig, Iran's Rivalry with Saudi Arabia Between the Gulf Wars, 2006,Reading: Ithaca Press; Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, Iran-Saudi Arabia Relations and Regional Order, 1996, London: OUP for IISS, Banafsheh Keynoush, Saudi Arabia and Iran: Friends or Foes?, 2016, London, Palgrave, and Robert Mason, Foreign Policy in Iran and Saudi Arabia: Economics and Diplomacy in the Middle East, 2014, London: I.B. Tauris.

[12] Vali Nasr, The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam will Shape the Future, 2007, New York: W.W. Norton.

[13] Simon Mabon, Saudi Arabia and Iran: Power and Rivalry in the Middle East, 2015, London: I.B. Tauris.

interaction of regional forces with domestic politics. As Toby Matthiesen articulates, sectarian entrepreneurs are 'people whose political, social, and economic standing depends on the skilful manipulation of sectarian boundaries and who profit if these boundaries become the defining markers of a particular segment of society'[14]. Finding traction when political organisation begins to fragment, the descent into uncertainty and instability creates fertile ground for sectarian divisions to become increasingly entrenched.

As a consequence, to understand the emergence of sectarian divisions and increasingly unstable political contexts we must look at the interaction of regional politics with domestic events. Focussing on events in Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen, this report offers a detailed analysis of the ways in which the rivalry between the two states is shaping regional politics. From the direct military intervention of Saudi Arabia in Yemen and Iran in Syria to the economic investment in Lebanon, the rivalry manifests in a range of different forms with serious implications for political organisation, regional security and everyday life.

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[14] Toby Matthiesen, Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring That Wasn't 2013, Stanford University Press, p127

**The View From Riyadh**
Professor Madawi Al-Rasheed[15]

Most analysis of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry seems to miss the fundamental points that underline the tension.[16] Iran is trying to save itself from either foreign intervention or domestic unrest[17] while Saudi Arabia does not fear foreign intervention, like Iran it is concerned with domestic dissent.

Arguably, the Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) is determined to perpetuate four decades of rivalry and conflict with Iran. The Prince has been struggling with a domestic context that is beneficial to perpetuating this conflict. He has used the rivalry with Tehran to deflect from the complexity of his own domestic uncertainties. The same may be true of Iran.

As Iran became an Islamic Republic, Saudi Arabia was threatened by the high expectations of its own Islamists, who must have been inspired by the Iranian success and intensified their activism to establish their own version of the Islamic state. Riyadh embarked on a project to spread its Wahhabi version of Islam and its clerics increased the frequency of their anti-Shi'a theology.

While not underestimating Saudi regional ambitions that underpin the most recent episode of the troubled and volatile Saudi-Iranian relations, to understand the current roots of antagonism we need not go beyond Saudi domestic uncertainties. These are different from those that in the past had fuelled the conflict.

Today Mohammad bin Salman needs to keep Iran isolated to deflate the current uncertainties he faces, not all of them are related to the prospect of radical Saudi Islamist violence such as the kind that ravaged Syria and Iraq. Previous Kings, Khalid (1975-1982), Fahd (1982-2005), and Abdullah (2005-2015) faced different domestic challenges that the rivalry with Iran helped to deflate but today there are new sets of uncertainties that Mohammad bin Salman is currently unable to resolve to his own advantage.

The most important challenge facing the Crown Prince is consolidating his own rule and centralising major policy decisions under his umbrella, thus excluding a whole range of other aspiring princes. From swift dismissals (eg. sacking Crown Prince and Minister of Interior Muhammad ben Nayif and the Commander of the Saudi National Guard Mitab ben Abdullah), to the detention of wealthy princes (Walid ben Talal in an allegedly anti-corruption campaign), Mohammad bin Salman feels restless. The unprecedented marginalisation and even humiliation of senior princes still haunt not only the young prince but also a large pool of disgruntled brothers and cousins. It is uncertain what the outcome of such drastic and unprecedented measures would be in the long term, particularly after the Khashoggi affair.

The Crown Prince's strong anti-Iranian rhetoric and multiple promises to roll back Iranian influence in Bahrain, Yemen, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, where it had so obviously been proliferating by the time he became Crown Prince in 2016, are meant to create a war like situation in which internal dissent is silenced. Under the threat of Iran, his domestic policies have become sacrosanct.

The regime wants to remind both the marginalised princes and Saudis more broadly that the young Crown Prince is fighting an existential threat, represented by the hawkish Iranians. By amplifying the Iranian threat and magnifying his own Arab mission to save the region from Persianisation and shiification, MBS blames Iran for any dissent in the country. This applies not only to the Shi'a protest movement in the Eastern

province but also Sunni dissidents, especially those who emerged during the 2011 Arab uprisings.[18] He frightens the Sunni majority with the threat of an Iranian backed conspiracy to destabilise the kingdom, create a Shi'a enclave in the oil-rich province, and eventually partition Saudi Arabia along regional and sectarian lines.[19]

By highlighting his determination to curb Iran, the Crown Prince aspires to emerge as the sole saviour of not only Saudi Arabia but also the region as a whole. The unresolved uncertainties surrounding his own kingship and the prospect of internal dissent among both the princes and ordinary Saudis prompt him to amplify the external enemy.

Amplifying the Iranian danger and perpetuating enmity with Tehran is a prerequisite for the domestic ideological shift that MBS, under the auspices of his father King Salman, has instigated since 2015. King Salman adopted the title *malik al-hazm*, king of steadfastness, in contrast with the soft face of King Abdullah, who became known as the King of Humanity before he died in 2015. Although old King Salman adopted a symbolic aggressive title, it was his son Muhammad who was entrusted with the mission to show masculine steadfastness, nowhere but in Yemen where Saudi militarised nationalism was to be tested against the Houthis, dubbed as Iranian clients.[20]

With the Saudi Wahhabi legitimacy narrative subsiding and even gradually being denied and suppressed, the Saudi leadership adopted a populist Saudi militarised nationalism, whose main target is Iran with its alleged aggressive Persian counter nationalism. The Saudi war in Yemen was perceived as a necessary response to an existential threat, and a battle for survival for the Saudi nation. Rivalry with Iran keeps the momentum of the emerging Saudi populist nationalism. It strengthens the abstract sense of Saudi national solidarity. Continuing a proxy war with Iran even without a decisive victory in Yemen remains important for domestic reasons. Saudi Arabia is yet to find a diplomatic solution to a conflict that proved to be difficult to win.

The economic supremacy of Saudi Arabia is inevitably still dependent on the country maintaining its historical share in the global oil market, and its position as an investment destination for global capital in the region. Keeping a large oil producing country under international pressure and a huge market with great potential like Iran excluded remains so important to Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia sees the Iranian economy through the lens of competition rather than regional integration. It seeks the shrinking or even the collapse of the Iranian economy under sanctions and has never engaged into a bid to create regional integration in which Iranian human resources and products become readily integrated in a wider Gulf regional initiative. In retaliation, in 2016, the Iranians have used cyber warfare against Saudi ARAMCO, the oil company, to undermine the Saudi oil economy especially after Saudi Arabia refused to lower its oil production in 2014, a move that resulted in even lower oil prices.[21]

Finally, perpetuating enmity with Iran is extremely important for Saudi Arabia's relationship with the West. Any rapprochement between the West and Iran- such as the one that led to the 2015 Iran Nuclear Agreement - is seen with suspicion and fear.[22] Saudi Arabia needs to be the only US client not only in the Arabian Peninsula but also in the region and beyond. Saudi Arabia currently does not accept a return to the status quo ante during the Cold War when Iran provided the military base and Saudi Arabia provided Islamic ammunition against the Soviet Union.

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[18]Toby Matthiesen, Saudi Arabia: the Middle East's most under-reported conflict, January 2012, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jan/23/saudi-arabia-shia-protesters
[19] Al-Rasheed, Madawi, 2017, Sectarianism as counter-revolution: Saudi responses to the Arab Spring. In: Hashemi, Nader and Postel, Danny, (eds.) Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East. London: C Hurst & Co Ltd, http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/83593/
[20]Al-Rasheed, Madawi (ed.), 2018, Salman's Legacy: The Dilemmas of a New Era in Saudi Arabia , London: C Hurst & Co Ltd, https://www.hurstpublishers.com/book/salmans-legacy/
[21] Sam Jones, Cyber warfare: Iran opens a new front, FT, April 2016, https://www.ft.com/content/15e1acf0-0a47-11e6-b0f1-61f222853ff3
[22]Iran nuclear deal: Key details, BBC News, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-33521655

Conflict with Iran contributes above all to Saudi Arabia maintaining its position as an Arab regional force, loyal to the US and willing to pursue policies and strategies favourable to US national interests. Saudi Arabia's worse nightmare is for the US to contemplate normalisation of relations with Iran, albeit unlikely under President Donald Trump, or even diversify the countries the US can rely on as regional partners in the Persian Gulf.

While Mohammad bin Salman cannot expect US-Israeli relations to worsen more than they did under the Obama administration, he fears most a US rapprochement with Iran. Since 2015 Mohammad bin Salman has stepped up his demonisation of Iran during his several visits to the US. He held it responsible for radicalisation in Saudi Arabia, global terrorism and the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in areas where Iranian influence and Shi'a ascendance had led to marginalising the Sunni population such as in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. On several occasions, he reminded American audiences that Al-Qaida affiliates and relatives of Osama bin Laden took refuge in Iran.[23] More recently, he held Iran responsible for creating violent sectarian militia that terrorise Sunni populations under the guise of fighting terrorism in Iraq and Syria. He referred to Supreme Iranian leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as the new Hitler, thus striking a chord among US and other Western audiences.[24] Saudi Arabia is constantly trying to mitigate against its nightmare scenario, namely the reintegration of Iran in the international community.

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[23] Norah O'Donnell, Saudi Arabia's heir to the throne talks to 60 Minutes, CBS News, March 2018, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/saudi-crown-prine-talks-to-60-minutes/
[24] Ben Hubbard, Khamenei is Hitler: MBS, March 2018, https://www.telegraphindia.com/world/khamenei-is-hitler-mbs-216032

**Religion and Geopolitics in Iranian Foreign Policy**
Dr Edward Wastnidge[25]

Saudi Arabia and Iran, as key power brokers in the Middle East, continue to couch their bilateral relations in antagonistic terms as they chafe against each other in a battle for influence in the region. Characterising this rivalry in the purely sectarian terms of a deep-rooted Sunni-Shi'a enmity is simplistic and fails to understand the complex geopolitical dynamics at play. However, for the Islamic Republic, Iran's religious identity as the pre-eminent 'Shi'a power' gives it a means of influence and co-optation over its co-religionists. A key element of building such relationships is its transnational religious networks which form the basis of much of its cultural and religious diplomacy work.

**Religion, justice and contemporary Iranian foreign policy**
Iran's commitment to the core revolutionary themes of 'justice', 'resistance', and the cultivation of Shi'a networks act as a continual thread in its foreign policy since the revolution. While high-level diplomacy relating to Iran is often cast in terms of its elected President and their own foreign policy outlooks,[26] this only tells part of the story, with the religious networks and cultural outreach work fostered by the Islamic Republic abroad coming under the purview of the Supreme Leader.

Iran's ability to make use of its transnational links to Shi'a communities has been aided by regional developments, most notably the ouster of Saddam Hussein and coming to power of a friendly government in Iraq. Iran's position as the Shi'a metropole gives it the ability to make use of its transnational religious networks as and when they serve its national interests. This has long been the case in its sponsorship of Hizballah, and also in the religious justification seen in taking the fight to Daesh in Syria and Iraq. Iran sees itself and by extension Shi'a communities it has ties with, as a victim of sectarianism in the region. The Islamic Republic has tied this fight to its long-standing resistance narrative, and thus carrying out its own 'war on terror' in the face of the Sunni 'takfiri' threat.[27] Resistance to Israeli and Western aims in the region, support for the Palestinian cause, and protection of the Shi'a draw on ideas of 'justice' and which form part of the Islamic Republic's constitutionally-defined foreign policy objectives,[28] which seek to give support to the oppressed.

**Religious networks**
Having abandoned the active export of the Islamic revolution in the 1980s, Iran went on to invest in building its diplomatic and religious infrastructure, expanding its religious outreach activities across the Shi'a world, drawing on its position as something of a Shi'a metropole in a demonstration of its growing soft power. This, in combination with the repression of Iraqi Shi'a until the removal of Saddam Hussein, meant that Iranian centres of religious learning, most notably Qom, came to rival and in some cases overtake the traditional Shi'a centre of Najaf in Iraq, though the balance has been redressed somewhat in recent years.[29] Iran's transnational religious linkages help to provide legitimacy for Iran's actions in terms of its activities in the region. This can be seen in its application of a religious overlay in its active military engagements in Iraq and

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[26] See, for example: Shahram Akbarzadeh and Dara Conduit (Eds.), Iran in the World:
President Rouhani's Foreign Policy, 2016, (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan:; Maaike Warnaar, Iranian Foreign Policy during Ahmadinejad: Ideology and Actions, 2013 New York: Palgrave MacMillan; Edward Wastnidge, Diplomacy and Reform in Iran: Foreign Policy under Khatami, 2016, London: I.B. Tauris.

[27] Edward Wastnidge,'Iran's own 'War on Terror': Iranian foreign policy towards Syria and Iraq during the Rouhani Era, in Luciano Zaccara (ed) The Foreign Policy of Iran under President Hassan Rouhani (Palgrave MacMillan, forthcoming 2019).

[28] Article 3.16 of Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran (in Persian), available online at:
http://www.moi.ir/Portal/File/ShowFile.aspx?ID=ab40c7a6-af7d-4634-af93-40f2f3a04acf. English version available online at:
https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iran_1989.pdf?lang=en

[29] Ali Mamouri, 'Competition Heats Up Between Qom, Najaf', Al Monitor, May 2013: https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/05/qom-najaf-anxiety-competition-shiite.html

Syria, such as through the channelling of 'shrine defenders' to conflict zones from Shi'a communities in the region.[30] This gives Iran a significant role among Shi'a communities that it can utilise to enhance its standing among its co-religionists.[31]

Iran has historical ties to Iraqi Shi'a which go back to long-standing religious and familial ties with shrine cities in southern Iraq, most notably Najaf and Karbala. The latter, being the site of the martyrdom of the third Shi'a imam, Hussein, carries great significance to Shi'a worldwide and symbolises the fight against oppression and unjust rulers which has proved so foundational to the Islamic Republic's revolutionary message. These ties were also strengthened through political sanctuary provided by the Islamic Republic to Shi'a opposition fleeing Saddam. Similarly, the religious links with Lebanese Shi'a are well-documented and go back centuries, as do religious ties to the Shi'a populations in Bahrain, India, Pakistan and Afghanistan.[32] The centrality of Iran in the Shi'a world can be seen in the cosmopolitan nature of Qom - the centre of Iranian religious learning. Here students and clerics from across the world attend its various seminaries, and then go back to their own countries having earned their religious education in Iran, further cementing ties.

However, this transnational network not only comprises traditional 'religious' activities affiliated to the *hawza* but also involves the educational and diplomatic missions undertaken abroad by the Iranian government. The transnational linkages that Iran has as a result of its position as religious hub are used as vector to enhance diplomatic relations and deepen ties with communities across the Shi'a world, acting as an enhancer of its soft power.[33] This work is carried out through various parastatal organisations, such as the Ahl ul-Bayt World Assembly, Islamic Culture and Relations Organisation (ICRO) and the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation (*Emdad*). The Ahl ul-Bayt grouping brings Shi'a scholars and religious leaders from around the world together every four years for a conference in Tehran.[34] The ICRO direct Iran's cultural diplomacy and employ its cultural attaches abroad – they have a flexible remit in terms of their cultural outreach,[35] though much of its work is done in the religious sphere. *Emdad*,[36] as one of Iran's largest charitable foundations, carries out development work primarily inside Iran, but also has an active international operation providing development assistance to Muslim communities worldwide.

Iran thus has a multiplicity of networks which draw on its position as a centre of Shi'a learning and influence, and which allow it to harness an identity-based narrative that finds a practical utility in both its soft and 'hard' engagements in the region. Its position as a Shi'a metropole gives it a means of influence among Shi'a worldwide, with its cultural and religious outreach work further reinforcing ties to these communities.

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[30] Wastnidge, *Iran's own 'War on Terror'*

[31] For an example of how this translates into positive views of Iran's regional role among Iraqi Shia, see Fotini Christia, Elizabeth Dekeyser, and Dean Knox, 'To Karbala: Surveying Religious Shi'a from Iran and Iraq', *MIT Political Science Department Research Paper,* No. 2016-39. 2016

[32] See, for example, Sabrina Mervin (ed), *The Shi'a Worlds And Iran* 2010, London: Saqi Books: London.

[33] Edward Wastnidge, 'The Modalities of Iranian Soft Power – from Cultural Diplomacy to Soft War', *Politics*, Vol. 35, issue 3-4. 2015.

[34] See website of the Ahl ul-Bayt World Assembly: http://www.ahl-ul-bayt.org/en/introducing-the-assembly

[35] Wastnidge, *The Modalities of Iranian Soft Power*

[36] See website of the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation: https://portal.emdad.ir/

## Sectarianized Geopolitical Contests and the Rise of Armed Sectarian Nonstate Actors
### Bassel F. Salloukh[37]

The rise of armed sectarian nonstate actors (NSAs) is one of the main consequences of the grand Saudi-Iranian contest over regional dominance unleashed in the wake of the 2003 US invasion and occupation of Iraq.[38] Albeit this contest predated the popular uprisings, its sectarianization[39] after the uprisings led to the '*return of the weak Arab state*'[40] and the concomitant rise of sectarian, ethnic, or tribal non-state actors. Whether in Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Syria, or Yemen local and transnational nonstate actors have assumed paramount domestic and geopolitical roles.

Two kinds of NSAs emerged as a consequence of this sectarianization of geopolitical contests: 1) armed, local or transnational, NSAs operating in a proxy capacity to advance the geopolitical interests of their regional patrons; and 2) others that pursue strictly local objectives but are nevertheless supported by regional states in a bid to accumulate more geopolitical capital. Hizballah, the plethora of groups organized in Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), and other NSAs in Syria and Libya are examples of the former type. The relationship between Iran and the Houthis in Yemen exemplifies the latter, however.

This explosion of local and transnational armed nonstate actors as a result of the return of the weak Arab state underscores another trend in regional dynamics: the changing nature of the system's permeability, a process that began in earnest before the popular uprisings of 2011, but which has since intensified. The regime-induced, top-down, state-building permeability of the 1950s and 1960s,[41] driven by Arab nationalist ideology, is replaced by a bottom-up state-destroying permeability driven by sectarian nonstate actors.

This new kind of permeability expressed by transnational nonstate actors is bound to complicate future prospects for state rebuilding in the Arab world in at least two ways.
1) Demands for greater local autonomy by ethnic, tribal, or sectarian groups may have become irreversible and cannot be ignored any longer.
2) The type of post-war state that will emerge in Libya, Yemen, or even Syria, may be captured by different NSAs vying for the political economic and ideological control of ethnic, sectarian, or tribal parts of the population – much like the one that exists in Lebanon, or has been emerging in Iraq since 2003.

Given the destructive local and transnational roles played by armed sectarian nonstate actors, two kinds of bargains, at both the domestic and regional levels, are required to restore a modicum of political stability in post-war reconstituted states. First, there must be democratic power-sharing arrangements that cross-cut sectarian, ethnic, and tribal cleavages with interest-based ones, whether along regional or socioeconomic lines. Only this will launch the difficult process of peacebuilding, and state building and rebuilding, along a democratic path, thus reversing the erosion of the state's ideological and infrastructural capabilities.

Second, there must be a grand regional geopolitical bargain identifying or acknowledging spheres of influence among the main international and regional actors vying for influence in the Middle East as a means of reducing fear and perception of nefarious intent. This is especially true for Saudi Arabia and Iran. Describing the contest

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[37] Bassel F. Salloukh is Associate Professor of Political Science at the Lebanese American University (LAU) in Beirut. His recent publications include the co-authored *The Politics of Sectarianism in Postwar Lebanon* (Pluto Press, 2015), "The Arab Uprisings and the Geopolitics of the Middle East" in *The International Spectator* (June 2012), the co-authored *Beyond the Arab Spring: Authoritarianism and Democratization in the Arab World* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2012), and the co-authored article "Elite Strategies, Civil Society, and Sectarian Identities in Postwar Lebanon" in *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (November 2013). His current research looks at post-conflict power-sharing arrangements, the challenge of re-assembling the political orders and societies of post-uprisings Arab states, and the geopolitics of the Middle East after the popular uprisings.

[38] Bassel F. Salloukh, The Arab Uprisings and the Geopolitics of the Middle East, *The International Spectator* 48, June 2013: 32-46.

[39] Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel, eds. 2017, *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East.* New York: Oxford University Press

[40] Bassel F. Salloukh, 2017, Overlapping Contests and Middle East International Relations: The Return of the Weak Arab State, *PS: Political Science and Politics* 50: 660–63.

[41] Rex Brynen, Permeability Revisited: Reflections on the Regional Repercussions of the al-Aqsa Intifada, in Bassel F. Salloukh and Rex Brynen (ed.), 2004, Persistent Permeability? Regionalism, Localism, and Globalization in the Middle East, London: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 125–48.

between Iran and Saudi Arabia in existential or sectarian terms misses each state's real security concerns. Riyadh views Tehran in offensive realist terms. By contrast, Iran considers itself engaged in a defensive realist confrontation with Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. From this perspective, transnational sectarian armed nonstate actors are instruments in Iran's strategy to escape its regional isolation and deter potential American or Israeli attacks. Refusing to recognize Tehran's newfound role in the Middle East and real geopolitical interests is a recipe for more wars in the region. By the same token, Saudi Arabia exerts substantial political influence in Lebanon, Iraq, and parts of post-war Syria as a balance to Iran's overwhelming position in these crucial states. Moreover, Yemen will always remain Saudi Arabia's security backyard. Consequently, Tehran may have to roll back its military and political engagement in Yemen – to alleviate Riyadh's fears – in exchange for its reintegration into the system of regional states.

Only these dual bargains can help extricate the Middle East from the domestic and regional security dilemmas that have proliferated since the sectarianization of geopolitical contests after the popular uprisings.[42]

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[42] Marc Lynch, The New Arab Order: Power and Violence in Today's Middle East, *Foreign Affairs* 97, 5, September/October 2018, 116-126.

# Iraq and *Muhasasa Ta'ifia*; the external imposition of sectarian politics
Professor Toby Dodge[43]

In the aftermath of invasion and regime change in 2003, Iraq's political field was deliberately and overtly restructured around an informal version of consociationalism, the *Muhasasa Ta'ifia* (sectarian apportionment) system. This exclusive elite pact was designed to empower people and parties who claimed to be acting as representatives of three allegedly distinct communities, Shi'a, Sunni and Kurd.[44] The empowerment of those wielding sectarian rhetoric left Iraq with a post-invasion civil war, endemic corruption, institutional weakness and the widespread alienation of the populous from the governing elite.

The planning for the *Muhasasa Ta'ifia* system was done in the early 1990s, by a disparate group of exiled Iraqi politicians. It was then imported into the country, along with those exiles that went on to form Iraq's new ruling elite, under American force of arms. At various points in its history, the functioning of the *Muhasasa Ta'ifia* has been defended and extended by US, Iranian and Saudi Arabian intervention.

## The System
Plans for the *Muhasasa Ta'ifia* system were agreed upon by the Iraqi opposition at a conference in October 1992. Here a number of councils and committees were established to act as a government-in-waiting. Most importantly, positions on these governing bodies were allocated according to the 'Salah al-Din principles', with a 'virtual census' upon dividing jobs according to the conference's assessment of the percentage of the population that were Shi'a, Kurdish and Sunni.[45] An assertion of religious and ethnic identities was placed at the centre of this agreement. The seven major parties that came to dominate Iraqi politics post - 2003 were the Kurdistan Democratic Party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, the Iraqi National Council, the Iraqi National Accord, the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, the Dawa Islamic Party and the Iraqi Islamic Party. They all agreed to work within the *Muhasasa Ta'ifia* to solidify and expand their grip on Iraq.

In June and July 2003, the Coalition Provisional Authority, the American civilian body running the occupation of Iraq, created the Iraq Governing Council, (IGC) the first political body after regime change designed to represent the Iraqi population during the occupation. The predominance of a sectarian understanding of Iraq was so strong that the process of its formation was an act of ethno-sectarian balancing.

The seven parties that formed the majority of the ICG's membership were then given the job of picking ministers to run Iraq's government. Not only had the *Muhasasa* system been used to pick Iraq's first post-2003 governing body, it had given economic power to those parties promoting ethno-sectarian division. Each party appointed Ministers who controlled the resources and payroll of their ministries, accelerating the sacking of existing civil servants, justified through de-Ba'athification, whilst hiring those linked to their parties and the sectarian communities they claimed to represent.

After the IGC was formed in 2003, during the interim government of 2004, and after each national election in 2005, 2010, 2014 and most recently in 2018, the *Muhasasa* system has dictated that ministries and their resources were awarded to the ethno-sectarian parties in governments of national unity. Each party has used its ministers to exploit government resources. They expand government payrolls to employ their members and followers. As a result, access to government employment, dominant in the Iraqi job market, is

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[44] On exclusive elite pacts see Stefan Lindemann, 'Do inclusive elite bargains matter? A research framework for understanding the causes of civil war in Sub-Saharan Africa', Crisis States Discussion Paper 15, Crisis States Research Centre, LSE, February 2008, http://www.lse.ac.uk/international-development/Assets/Documents/PDFs/csrc-discussion-papers/dp15-Do-Inclusive-Elite-Bargains-Matter.pdf. On its application to Iraq see Toby Dodge, Iraq; from war to a new authoritarianism, 2012, Abingdon: Routledge, 2012.
[45] Ibrahim Nawar, 'Untying the Knot', *Al-Ahram Weekly*, No. 625, February 2003, http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/archive/2003/625/sc5.htm.

only guaranteed by pledging alliance to one of the political parties promoting the *Muhasasa* system. Iraqis seeking government jobs are interpolated as members of exclusive ethno-sectarian communities, Sunni, Shi'a or Kurd. The extent of this practise can be seen in the rapid growth of the state payroll that swelled from 850,000 employees a year after regime change to between seven and nine million in 2016.

**The external players**
Although the US and their formerly exiled allies set up and imposed the *Muhasasa Ta'ifia* system, both Iran and Saudi Arabia have at times intervened to ensure it works in their interests. Major General Qassem Suleimani, the Commander of the Quds Forces of Iran's Revolutionary Guard, is the central coordinator of Iran's presence in Iraq. Dr Mowaffak al-Rubaie, Iraq's former National Security Adviser, has proclaimed that Suleimani is 'the most powerful man in Iraq without question. Nothing gets done without him'.[46] Suleimani has been in Baghdad and actively involved in the process of government formation in 2006, 2010, 2014 and 2018. Of equal importance, he has been central in defending the *Muhasasa* system when it has been in crisis, during the 'Charge of the Knights' in 2008, the strong showing of the anti-*Muhasasa, Iraqiyaa* coalition, in the 2010 elections and in the aftermath of the fall of Mosul to the Islamic State in 2014. Clearly, Iran sees *Muhasasa* as the best vehicle for empowering its client Shi'a Islamist parties and keeping the Iraqi state weak enough to secure its own interests.

Saudi Arabia's role in Iraq has been more informal and covert. Initially, Saudi intervention was constrained by a strong American presence. Support for the post-war insurgency and one side in the civil war came from senior religious figures in the kingdom, with societal actors supplying resources and encouraging a sizeable number of Islamic radical 'Jihadi tourists' to fight and die in Iraq.

However, in the run-up to the second election of 2005, the Saudi government leant its considerable financial support to establishing a specifically Sunni electoral coalition, *Jabha al-Tawafuq al-Iraq* (the Accord Front). This coalition successfully mobilised the Sunni section of Iraqi society, interpolating them specifically as Sunnis and juxtaposing them against the Shi'a and Kurdish sections of society, integrating them into the *Muhasasa Ta'ifia* system as minority players.

**Conclusions**
The dominance of Iraq's political field by the *Muhasasa Ta'ifia* system has greatly weakened the Iraqi state, while the widespread political and personal corruption it encourages has reduced the state's ability to deliver public goods. From at least 2015 onwards, this has produced a large protest movement within Iraqi society, calling for the removal of religion from politics and the creation of a civic state. It is this popular alienation that led to such a low electoral turn out in the May 2018 elections. However, parties that have benefitted from *Muhasasa* have simply ignored popular pressure for change and formed yet another government using the system. In doing so, they were strongly supported by both the United States and Iran.

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[46]Martin Chulov, Qassem Suleimani: the Iranian General "Secretly Running" Iraq, *The Guardian*, July 2011, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jul/28/qassem-suleimani-iran-iraq-influence.

## The different risks of Saudi and Iranian aid to Lebanon
### Dr Hannes Baumann[47]

Lebanon is a battleground of Saudi-Iranian rivalry. Both provide aid. While Iranian aid to Hizballah creates a military fighting force, Saudi aid is notable for its economic impact. Iranian aid is already widely discussed[48] so this article will focus on the risk of Lebanon's over-dependence on Saudi development aid funding.

The goal of Hizballah's network of religious institutions, schools, youth associations, health clinics, women's associations and of course its military wing is to build a 'resistance society'. The all-encompassing range of services offered to Lebanon's majority Shi'a community entrenches sectarianism. Hizballah funding is necessarily opaque.[49] Iran is said to fund Hizballah through cash and charities, training and logistical support. Bashar al Assad's Syria is a crucial geographic conduit for Iranian aid, which goes a long way to explaining the movement's support for the regime's survival. Another source of funding is from wealthy Shi'a donors within Lebanon and the overseas diaspora. Finally, Hizballah allegedly runs various licit and illicit business ventures inside and outside of Lebanon. Recent media reports suggested that the movement is facing financial difficulties due to the cost of fighting in Syria and Iran's economic difficulties in the face of renewed US sanctions.[50]

In the 1980s, Rafiq Hariri emerged as the main conduit of the Kingdom's aid to Lebanon. After Hariri's assassination in 2005 his son and current Prime Minister, Saad Hariri took over. Saad Hariri pursued no holistic goal such as 'resistance society'. Hariri did not overcome political fragmentation within his own Sunni community as Hizballah did among the Shi'a, he simply put himself at the head of the disparate communal scene. The Hariri Foundation's schools and health centres have played a role in parliamentary elections since 2000. Hariri became a typical confessional political boss, furnished with extraordinary resources through his own wealth and Saudi largesse. Saad Hariri's military ambitions appear to have been limited to funding a largely ineffective force run under the guise of a private security company.[51]

Riyadh did not just sponsor Hariri's clientelism but also Lebanon's Central Bank. In the midst of the Israeli war with Lebanon in 2006, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait deposited $1.5 billion to support the Beirut Central Bank's currency chest. In 2008 the Central Bank received another $1 billion from Saudi Arabia. These funds proved vital to the maintenance of the Lebanese pound's peg to the dollar, which has been in place since 1997 but has come under increasing pressure. In 2017 Lebanon's government debt stood at 153 per cent of GDP, the third highest rate in the world. Its current account deficit of 25 per cent of GDP was also among the highest globally. The country needs to constantly attract capital inflows to maintain the peg. But why do investors keep pouring money into this questionable financial proposition? A 2008 IMF working paper found that Lebanese investors perceive an 'implicit -guarantee' by donors – and Saudi Arabia has historically been the most prolific among them.[52] The expectation that Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states would provide funds to stabilise the currency during a crisis has helped the country weather a succession of financial storms.

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[48] For an overview of Iran's role in Hizballah's history, see: Augustus Richard Norton, Hizballah: A Short History, 2007, Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 29-46. For Hizballah's view on the relationship, see: Naim Qassem, Hizbullah: The Story from within, 2007, London: Saqi: London, pp. 387-393.

[49] Matthew Levitt, Hezbollah finances: Funding the party of god, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 2005, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hezbollah-finances-funding-the-party-of-god

[50] Ibrahim Bayram, Hezbollah turns to charity amid economic woes, An Nahar, August 2018, https://en.annahar.com/article/847815-hezbollah-turns-to-charity-amid-economic-woes

[51] Borzou Daragahi and Raed Rafei, Private force no match for Hezbollah, Los Angeles Times, May 2008, http://articles.latimes.com/2008/may/12/world/fg-security12

[52] Axel Schimmelpfennig and Edward H. Gardner, Lebanon - Weathering the perfect storms, IMF Working Paper, 08/17, January 2008, https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/wp/2008/wp0817.pdf

A recent weakening of Saudi support for Lebanon's economy therefore puts the country's financial system in grave danger. Hariri seems to have fallen out of favour with Riyadh. His construction company Saudi Oger began to collapse in 2015 after a new guard of Saudi royals under now Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman slashed state contracts and was wound up in 2017.[53] This eroded Hariri's ability to dole out patronage. Riyadh also created doubt over its commitment to support Lebanon's financial stability when, in February 2016, it withdrew a promised $3 billion aid package to the Lebanese army over perceived Lebanese government unwillingness to distance itself from Iran.[54] The Lebanese Central Bank had to turn to increasingly adventurous financial 'engineering', at one point offering 40 percent interest on a one-year loan to attract the foreign currency it needed to maintain the dollar peg.[55]

In November 2017, Saudi Arabia brought Lebanon to the brink of both military and economic crisis. Just when Hariri was in Riyadh to ask the Kingdom to support donor conference, the Saudi rulers appeared to strong-arm Prime Minister Hariri into a televised resignation, in which he accused Hizballah of plotting to assassinate him.[56] The episode prompted fears of Riyadh forcing a confrontation of its local clients with Hizballah. Rumours swirled that Riyad was going to impose an economic blockade on Lebanon akin to the action taken against Qatar in 2017. This would have strangled Lebanon's fragile economy. France worked to resolve the political crisis and Riyadh stepped back from the brink. At a donor conference in Paris in April 2018, Saudi Arabia restored a previously pledged credit line of $1 billion to Lebanon.[57]

To conclude, Saudi and Iranian aid to Lebanon is similar in some respects: Both countries finance the confessional clientelism of local allies. Yet Saudi Arabia also plays a pivotal economic role, creating a different kind of risk. While Iranian weapons increase the danger of military confrontation, Lebanon's dependence on Saudi economic aid means that Riyadh can destabilise the Lebanese financial system at any time.

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[53] Matthew Dalton and Nicolas Parasie, With Saudi Ties Fraying, Lebanese Premier's Construction Empire Crumbles, *Wall Street Journal*, November 2017, https://www.wsj.com/articles/with-saudi-ties-fraying-lebanese-premiers-construction-empire-crumbles-1511519402

[54] Tom Perry, Laila Bassam, Hezbollah signals no end to Saudi crisis; central bank reassures on currency, *Reuters*, 26 February 2016, https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-saudi-lebanon/hezbollah-signals-no-end-to-saudi-crisis-central-bank-reassures-on-currency-idUKKCN0VZ1KO

[55] The Economist, Lebanon's economy has long been sluggish. Now a crisis looms, August 2018, https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2018/08/30/lebanons-economy-has-long-been-sluggish-now-a-crisis-looms

[56] David Ignatius, Saudi Arabia forcibly detained Lebanon's prime minister, sources say, *Washington Post*, November 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/saudi-arabia-forcibly-detained-lebanons-prime-minister-sources-say/2017/11/10/b93a1fb4-c647-11e7-84bc-5e285c7f4512_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.f855aa7d2a8a

[57] John Irish, Marine Pennetier, Lebanon wins pledges exceeding $11 billion in Paris, *Reuters*, April 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-economy-france/lebanon-wins-pledges-exceeding-11-billion-in-paris-idUSKCN1HD0UU

## Bahrain: The Epicentre of the Saudi-Iranian Rivalry?
### Dr Simon Mabon

For many, the archipelago of Bahrain is at the epicentre of the geopolitical and sect-based struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Situated 16 kilometres from the eastern coast of Saudi Arabia, linked by the King Fahd Causeway, and 768 kilometres from the west coast of Iran, with a Sunni minority ruling over a Shi'a majority, it is easy to see how such conclusions are reached. Bahrain's geographic location and demographic makeup mean that political events on the island often take on additional meaning within the context of the rivalry between the island's two more powerful neighbours.[58]

A brief glance at the country's past reveals a history of social unrest and political upheaval, viewed anxiously by many in Manama and Riyadh. These concerns are furthered when coupled with allegations of perfidious Iranian interference across Shi'a communities in Bahrain, long viewed as 5th columnists by the Sunni ruling family. Long-standing Iranian claims to Bahrain increase fears amongst regime loyalists. In *Kayhan*, an Iranian newspaper with close links to the government, an editorial suggested that Bahrain remained 'an inseparable part of Iran', dating back to the 18th century.[59]

Whilst a history of protest in Bahrain is found far earlier than 1979, there is little doubt that revolutionary fervour in Iran had a dramatic impact on the island. In the years after the revolution, elite military units from Iran provided support to a number of organisations across the region including Hizballah in Lebanon and the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain, who undertook a *coup d'etat* in 1981. Although ultimately unsuccessful, the group's actions and their Iranian sponsor created conditions that helped the narrative of nefarious Iranian behaviour take hold.

With the apparent rising influence of Shi'a groups across the Middle East, captured by the concept of the 'Shi'a Crescent',[60] many in Bahrain were concerned about the repercussions for the island's equilibrium amidst shifting geopolitical currents. An unpublished government report documented the extent of such fears:

> the marginalization of Sunnīs and the lessening of their role in Bahrain is part of a larger regional problem […] Thus there is a dangerous challenge facing Bahraini society in the increased role of the Shī'a [and] the retreat of the role of the Sunna in the Bahraini political system; namely, the problem concerns the country's [Bahrain's] national security, and the likelihood of political regime change in the long term by means of the current relationships between Bahrain's Shī'a and all the Shī'a in Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia's eastern region, and Kuwait.[61]

When protests began in February 2011, the very survival of the Al Khalifa regime appeared at stake. The protesters were initially driven by a widespread demand for greater political representation and they were quick to stress their non-sectarian nature. As the protests escalated, a regime crackdown began which featured the cultivation of a narrative that positioned Iran as the driving force of unrest.[62]

One month after protests began, the Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council forces under the guise of the Peninsular Shield Force, crossed the King Fahd Causeway into Bahrain in support of the government. The force supported the regime's crackdown on opposition movements, in an attempt to prevent increased Iranian involvement on the island, but also to prevent democratic aspirations from spreading into the Eastern Province of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Allegations of Iranian involvement in the uprisings were

[58] Simon Mabon, Saudi Arabia and Iran: Soft Power Rivalry in the Middle East, 2013, London: I.B. Tauris
[59] Simon Mabon, 'The Battle for Bahrain: Iranian-Saudi Rivalry', Middle East Policy
[60] Ian Black, Fear of a Shia full moon, The Guardian, January 2007, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/jan/26/worlddispatch.ianblack
[61] Salah Al-Bandar, 'Al-baḥrayn: al-khiyār al-dīmūqrātī wa āliyāt al-iqṣa', unpublished report prepared by the Gulf Center for Democratic Development, September 2006), in Justin J. Gengler, 'Royal Factionalism, the Khawalid, and the Securitization of 'the Shi'a Problem' in Bahrain', Journal of Arabian Studies, 3:1, 2013
[62] Toby Matthiesen, Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring that Wasn't, 2013, Stanford: Stanford University Press

later rejected by the Bassiouni Independent Commission Inquiry. Upon receiving the report, King Hamad delivered a speech asserting that Iran was responsible for "*supporting anti-government protests*".[63]

The years that followed were characterized by a process that is now commonly referred to as sectarianization, the manipulation of sect-based identities in an attempt to ensure regime survival which involved widespread restriction of civil society, mass arrests of Shi'a protesters and the banning of Al Wefaq. Whilst sectarian identities were seen as a threat to political stability in Bahrain, the sectarianization process circumvented calls for political reform and ensured the loyalty of Sunnis on the island and beyond by locating events within the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, along with a broader meta-narrative of perfidious Iranian manipulation that runs across the Gulf.[64] Amidst a region increasingly shaped by sectarianization, events in Bahrain provide what Toby Matthiesen has called the 'most salient' example of the sectarianization process,[65] leaving opposition groups decimated and the Saudi-backed Al Khalifa regime in a position of supremacy.

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[63] Joost Hilterman, and Kelly McEvers, "Barricaded in Bahrain," *The New York Review of Books* (blog), December 2011, http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2011/dec/27/barricaded-bahrain/.
[64] Simon Mabon, 'The End of the Battle of Bahrain', *Middle East Journal* (Forthcoming) and Sossie Kasbarian and Simon Mabon, 'Contested spaces and sectarian narratives in post-uprising Bahrain', *Global Discourse* 6:4 (2016) 677-696
[65] Toby Matthiesen, 'Sectarianization as Securitization: Identity Politics and Counter-Revolution in Bahrain', in Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel (eds) Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East, 2017, (London: Hurst

## The Yemen War: A Proxy Sectarian War?
Dr May Darwich[66]

The diffusion of protests against authoritarian regimes across the Arab world in 2011 reinvigorated Yemen's marginalized social movements and united different geographical and political factions in Yemen, such as the northern Houthi movement and the southern secessionist movement Hiraak.[67] The Saudi Kingdom, along with other Gulf monarchies, swiftly designed a transitional plan for the country to ensure that President Ali Abdullah Saleh wass replaced with a friendly government led by President Abd Rabo Hadi. Disillusioned by the transition, the Houthis took military control of the capital Sana'a in September 2014, and Yemen descended into a civil war. On 26 March 2015, Saudi Arabia launched airstrikes on Yemen with the aim to restore the Saudi-backed Hadi government and destroy the Houthi movement. What was initially planned as a limited operation degenerated into a war of attrition without a conclusion insight. Scholars and policy analysts moved quickly to examine the Yemen war as a by-product of Saudi-Iranian rivalry and another manifestation of a region-wide war between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims. Yet, the crisis in Yemen is more complex; it is neither an international proxy war nor a sectarian confrontation.

First, the Iranian role in Yemen has been exaggerated and even deliberately distorted by the Saudi Kingdom to legitimize its military intervention. The Houthi movement is a tribal group that is rooted in the Yemeni political context, and the group's decisions and political goals are rooted in its local Yemeni leadership.[68] Some evidence suggests that Iran's links to the Houthis might have increased at the end of 2014.[69] Yet, this evidence remains suggestive at best. The UN Panel of experts on Yemen has stated in January 2017 that there was 'no sufficient evidence to confirm any large-scale direct supply of arms from the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran'.[70] Instead, the Houthis have received military support from their most important ally, the former President Saleh, whose army was equipped with US weapons. In other words, Iran's marginal involvement has no effect on the underlying structure of the conflict.[71]

Second, depicting the political struggle in Yemen as a mere sectarian binary is simplistic. Although the Houthi movement belongs to the Zaydi sect, a branch of Shiism, it is wrong to assume that the Yemen crisis is driven by primordial identities. Zaydism is distinct from the '*Twelver Shiism*' found in Iran both in doctrine and practice, and the theological difference between both Zaydi and Twelver Shiism leaves the Zaydis closer to Sunni Islam. The Zaydis present themselves as a separate sect distinct from both Shiism and Sunnism. It is also worth noting that Saleh's supporters from the Yemeni army fighting with the Houthis are Sunnis.[72]

Instead, the recent crisis in Yemen can be viewed as a civil war between groups in a political struggle, and with international interference. Although sectarianism is alien to Yemeni religious culture, several observers have noticed a growing sectarian polarization in Yemen that relies on borrowing sectarian slurs from the conflicts

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[67] For more details on the movement and its development, see International Crisis Group, Breaking Point? Yemen's Southern Question, October 2011, https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/breaking-point-yemen-s-southern-question

[68] Joost R. Hiltermann and April Longley Alley, The Houthis Are Not Hezbollah, *Foreign Policy*, February 2017, https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/02/27/the-houthis-are-not-hezbollah/

[69] W. Andrew Terrill, Iranian Involvement in Yemen, *Orbis* vol. 58, no. 3 (2014), p.438; Thomas Juneau, Iran's Policy towards the Houthis in Yemen: A Limited Return on a Modest Investment, *International Affairs* vol. 92, no. 3 (2016), p. 657.

[70] UN Security Council, Final Report of the Panel of Expert on Yemen, January 2017, http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2017_81.pdf

[71] Elizabeth Kendall, Iran's Fingerprints in Yemen: Real or Imagined?, Atlantic Council, October 2017, http://pushback.atlanticcouncil.org/papers/irans-fingerprints-in-yemen-real-or-imagined/

[72] Anna Gordon and Sarah Parkinson, 'How the Houthis Became 'Shi'a,' Middle East Report Online, January 2018, http://www.merip.org/mero/mero012718

in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. The Houthi movement is often called as '*Twelver Shiites*', '*the new Hizballah of the Arabian Peninsula*' or an '*Iranian puppet*'. The Houthis have also used sectarian terms to refer to their opponents, such as *takfiris* and *daeshites*.[73]

Iran's ambitions in Yemen are limited and do not wish to escalate the conflict with Saudi Arabia. Yet, local actors involved in the conflict have an interest in borrowing sectarian narratives to mobilize international support and resources by situating their struggle in the regional meta-narrative. President Hadi has adopted an anti-Shiite narrative in his confrontation with the Houthis to maintain the support from Gulf countries, who perceive the Iranian expansion in the region as the most dangerous threat. The Houthis would like more support from Iran by adopting slurs from the '*'Twelver Shiite*'' vocabulary and using famous historical symbols, such as the name of Hussein. The Saudi Kingdom is also interested in providing legitimacy for its military operation, especially at home, and sectarianism provides a wide support for the operation. In short, sectarianism in Yemen remains alien to the local culture but has grown as a strategic war narrative used by local and international actors.

Although Yemen lacks the sharp sectarian divides found in Iraq, Bahrain, and Syria, the sectarianisation of the political transition in Yemen generates distinct junctures, which are likely to have long-lasting implications on Yemen and the region. First, this venom of sectarian hatred that speeded into the Yemen conflict has destroyed centuries of tolerance between the Islamic schools in Yemen, which might take decades to rebuild. Furthermore, the sectarian violence in Yemen made the conflict less localized and increasingly internationalised, which renders the conflict resolution more difficult.

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[73] Al-Muslimi, Farea, How Sunni-Shia Sectarianism Is Poisoning Yemen. Carnegie Middle East Center, December 2015, http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/62375

Dr Christopher Phillips[74]

Saudi Arabia and Iran have both been deeply involved in the Syrian civil war from its beginning in 2011, each sponsoring rival sides. Both have utilised sectarian identity politics to further their goals and both have contributed to the growth of violence along sectarian lines. This has led to a characterisation by many that both are sectarian actors that immediately reach for identity politics as a tool of influence. However, a closer examination of the Syrian case would challenge this. Drawing on research by myself and Morten Valbjorn that examines the relationship between Syrian fighting groups and their external sponsors, this article argues that in Syria identity politics was not the immediate policy pursued by either Saudi Arabia or Iran.[75] Instead, sponsoring sectarian actors was a plan B after backing other, more inclusive actors failed. This suggests a degree of pragmatism from both governments, rather than being driven exclusively by sectarian zeal.

The Syrian conflict is often characterised as sectarian, but this is one strand of several driving the civil war.[76] There has been variation across Syria and over the course of the conflict. In some areas, the war has been driven more by political, economic and international factors than sectarianism. That said, an identity component has often been present, with violence, sexual assault and looting taking place along sectarian lines. Saudi Arabia and Iran have contributed to this. Saudi Arabia has sent arms and money to overtly sectarian Sunni Islamist fighters. Its government turned a blind eye for the first few years of the war to private Saudi donors sending money to radical Sunni groups, and it did little to clamp down on its sectarian preachers appearing on satellite television watched in Syria.

Iran's sectarian activity was even more pronounced. From 2012 it sent Islamist Shi'a militia to Syria to fight for President Bashar al-Assad, with up to 8,000 fighters from its Lebanese ally Hizballah and 12,000 Afghani and Pakistani fighters present by 2017. It sent its own Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force officers, led by Major General Qassem Suleimani, to direct the war effort and retrain Syria's military. Several of these retrained units were based around sectarian identities, as were the non-governmental pro-Assad militia they encouraged. The presence of Shi'a militia in the Syria conflict, many with an explicitly anti-Sunni agenda, helped to radicalise anti-Assad fighters, who were overwhelmingly Sunni, and further sectarianized the conflict.

However, it is important to note that turning to sectarian fighters was neither Iran nor Saudi Arabia's first reaction, and their policies evolved from the failure of earlier options. Riyadh, initially sponsored moderates among those who took up arms against Assad. From early 2012 Saudi Arabia backed the Free Syria Army (FSA), which had a national Syrian rather than a Sunni sectarian focus, even though most were Sunni Muslims. Unlike other sponsors of the opposition like Qatar and Turkey who turned to more Islamist and sectarian fighters earlier, Saudi Arabia feared Islamists like the Muslim Brotherhood and preferred the mostly secular former army officers of the FSA.

It was only after the FSA proved unable to defeat Assad and its fighters started joining more radical Islamist groups that Riyadh looked for alternatives. It eventually backed the Salafist *Jaysh al-Islam* in Damascus in late 2013, led by Zahran Alloush whose father was an imam in Saudi Arabia. This connection also led to it briefly backing the mostly Islamist *Jaysh al-Fatah* coalition in Idlib in 2015. Both included Sunni sectarianists.

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[75] Chris Phillips and Morten Valbjorn, 'What is in a Name?': The Role of (Different) Identities in the Multiple Proxy Wars in Syria', *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 29 (3), 414-433
[76] G. Abdo, *The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shia–Sunni Divide*. Brookings, SD: Saban Center for Middle East Policy Paper. April 10, 2013.

However, it encouraged Alloush and his successors to moderate their slogans.[77] This suggests that Saudi Arabia was pragmatic enough to recognise that ultra-sectarian actors would struggle to win in multi-faith Syria and must compromise. Moreover, Saudi did not abandon the FSA completely and maintained its sponsorship of the Southern Front, a south Syria FSA militia until 2017 at the same time. This shows a degree of expediency from Riyadh. It turned to Alloush in desperation, when plan A of backing the FSA failed. Yet even then it stuck with the southern FSA in the hope it would still triumph.

Iran was also more nuanced, turning to sectarian actors only after others failed. Tehran first sent weapons and advisers to help Assad's army, the nominally inclusive Syrian Arab Army (SAA). Though its elite units were dominated by members of Assad's Shi'a-linked Alawi sect, it was no sectarian institution, boasting Sunnis, Shi'as, Alawis and Christians in its ranks and utilising inclusive national symbols and slogans. However, the SAA performed poorly in the first year of the war, prompting Iran to send Suleimani to Damascus to salvage the situation. Within a few weeks, the Quds force commander reportedly stated, "*The Syrian army is useless! Give me one brigade of Basij [the IRGC's paramilitary force] and I could conquer the whole country*!"[78] Soon Suleimani turned to Hizballah and other Shi'a militia from Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan to come to Syria. Having trained many of them himself, especially in Iraq during the post-2003 campaign against the US, Suleimani saw such sectarian actors as more dependable than the SAA.

Yet, as with the Saudis, this suggests a pragmatic rather than an exclusively sectarian motivation. These militias were utilised for their reliability and fighting ability rather than purely ideological reasons. Moreover, Iran used these groups to supplement rather than replace Assad's national forces and the SAA continued to receive support. Indeed, when the Iranians reorganised Syria's paramilitary forces in 2013 they gave it a national rather than sectarian name: The National Defence Forces (NDF). While the NDF did include sectarian militia, it retained a deliberately national character. Again, expediency may have driven this. Shi'as make up barely 1-2% of Syria's population, and Alawis are barely 12%. Were Iran to encourage a purely sectarian chauvinistic discourse, they would have isolated key Christian, Druze and Sunni constituents that continued to back Assad.[79] Unlike in Iraq, where over 60% of the population is Shi'a, demographics in Syria were not in Suleimani's favour. Even had he wanted to adopt a sectarian approach from the beginning, it would have been counter-productive.

Both Saudi Arabia and Iran, therefore, were not as sectarian as often characterised in their sponsorship of fighting groups in the Syrian civil war. Though both would eventually turn to sectarian militia, each did this only after their first option, more inclusive national-focused fighters, failed. Yet each continued to sponsor national groups alongside these sectarian actors, possibly recognising the impracticality of backing only exclusionary actors in a multi-faith country. In both cases, governments often portrayed as arch-sectarian actors showed a considerable degree of pragmatism and expediency.

[77] Phillips and Valbjorn, 'What is in a Name?'
[78] Dexter Filkins, 'The shadow commander', The New Yorker, September 2013, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/09/30/the-shadow-commander
[79] Chris. Phillips, The Battle for Syria: International rivalry in the New Middle East, 2016, London: Yale University Press, pp. 50-53.

# The Securitisation of the 'Masculinist' other in the Syrian conflict

Dr Rahaf Aldoughli [80]

Amidst the violence that has spread across Syria since 2011, most scholarship concerned with the Syrian conflict has focused on questions related to how the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has shaped the Syrian crisis.[81] The escalated rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia over Syria has stemmed from both regional and geopolitical interests in determining the leader of the region. The existing literature has approached this regional conflict using a sectarian lens, yet such account of the development of the Syrian conflict from a secular movement, calling for social justice to be a regional rivalry that brought sect and identity to the fore, needs to be further analysed in relation to how both states and non-state actors define identity and belonging.

Starting with a simple definition of sectarianism by Makdisi, he elaborates that it is often 'characterized as the violent and illiberal manifestation of competing, age-old antagonistic religious identities in the region'.[82] This sectarian affiliation is rooted in a fixed, one-dimensional conceptualisation of identity that has evolved in the Arab world very much in tandem with the emergence of modern nation-states. It is worth noting that the Syrian uprising was not a clean-cut sectarian conflict at the outset. While many scholars have argued the securitisation of the 'other' as an existential threat that has sectarianised the Syrian conflict, consequently, the pressing question is: What can be done politically to overcome the mobilisation of sectarian narrative in the region and in Syria particularly?[83]

This research aims to highlight the importance of deconstructing the official rhetoric perpetuated by state actors that designates particular models of national identities and belonging. Asking the question: What role does masculinism play in the shaping, defining or legitimising sectarianism in the Syrian conflict? entails proposing a shift from the standard practice of taking identities (whether Sunni or Shi'a) as given, which might then inform regional politics in the Middle East, toward a more sophisticated one that sees cross-cutting influences in both directions. The simple answer to the question is that men's dominance of the political and military dimensions of the Syrian conflict has meant that the story of the conflict has generally been a story about men.

This nationalist and sectarian antagonism reinforced men's roles as protectors and defenders of national and sectarian communities and shaped violent expressions of masculinities. Due to the primacy of using primordiaism and instrumentalism as key frameworks of analysis in research on sectarianism in the Middle East,[84] the relationships between the construction of identity both before and during the conflict as driven by gender has been overlooked.[85] Therefore, the existing debate on understanding sectarianism in the Middle East overlooks identity formation in tandem with the rise of hyper masculinity and competing masculinities.

Since the main objective of this publication and the SEPAD project is how to solve this religious tension and how can we go beyond looking at sectarian identities in the Middle East as tool of explanation and analysis,

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[81] Hurd, E. S. 2015. Politics of Sectarianism: Rethinking Religion and Politics in the Middle East. *Middle East Law and Governance* 7 (1): 61–75

[82] Makdisi, Usama. The Mythology of Sectarian Middle East. *Centre for the Middle East*, February 2017, https://www.bakerinstitute.org/media/files/files/5a20626a/CME-pub-Sectarianism-021317.pdf

[83] May Darwich & Tamirace Fakhoury,2016. Casting the Other as an existential threat: The securitisation of sectarianism in the international relations of the Syria crisis, Global Discourse, 6:4, 712-732

[84] The primordialist approach attributes the break of sectarianism in the region to the ancient hatred and irreconcilable differences between Sunni and Shi'a. However, the instrumentalist approach focuses on how sectarianism is a constructed narrative used and mobilised by political elites to maintain regional power and interest.

[85] See Nasr, V. 2006. *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*. New York: W.W. Norton.

we need to deconstruct and challenge narratives that idealize violence, militarism and masculine prowess. The power of religion in the Middle East, is only one factor among many multilayered and dimensional spectrums in which identity and the sense of belonging become entrenched with characteristics that glorify manliness and masculinist protection as means for survival. The pressing question is: what have instigated, encouraged, provoked and intensified the sectarian divide in the Syrian war?

My starting point for thinking about the relationship between masculinity and sectarianism in the Syrian context is Iris Young's proposition about the logic of masculinist protection. Central to the logic of masculinist protection is the subordinate status of those perceived as in need of protection. This logic is based on dominative masculinity that defines protective masculinity as its other. Such conceptualization of masculine men as protectors therefore entails gratification of fighting and sacrificing for the sake of the nation. Employing Young's model of 'the logic of masculinist protection' as being associated with 'ideas of chivalry' is central to the subordinate status of those perceived as in need of protection.[86] By constructing and perpetuating an image of the man as courageous, dominating and active, this idealisation of heroism is traced back to Hobbes's view of the state of nature as a state of war - a dangerous and wild place where men had to rely on their masculine prowess to survive.[87] The Middle East post-Arab Uprisings was deemed to be anarchic and, as such, like a state of nature. Therefore, while 'othering' in the Syrian conflict is masked with sectarian affiliation, the attempt to deconstruct how the constructions of identity and belonging are premediated with the ethos of chivalric masculinity is essential. I argue that the perpetuation and gratification of the chivalric male model in Syria, Iran and Saudi Arabia, and depending on militarism (whether in Iran, Syria, and a sheikhdom in Saudi Arabia) in the early formation of the state, instigate violence.

Evaluating the official narratives of both Saudi Arabia and Iran, the securitisation of the 'other' has not been fuelled by using an explicit sectarian rhetoric, rather through perpetuating masculinist traits as the main characteristics of national belonging and identity. In this sense, belonging to the nation becomes synonymous with the ability to die and kill the other to preserve nation's dignity. Iran's official rhetoric is full of references to heroism, strength and physical prowess. For example, the slogan used by the Iranian militias configures Zainab and Ali as symbols of both religious and national significance.[88] Arguing that the use of these two slogans 'Labik ya Zainab' and 'Labik ya Hussein' is rather not sectarian stems from the fact that both Sunnis and Shi'as love Zainab and Ali, however, have the Iranian militias used the terms Muʿāwia or Aisha[89], then it would be said that sectarianism gives the ultimate form of the current conflict.

At the same time, the Saudi official narrative has shifted in its approach towards defining belonging to the Kingdom. Before 2011, the rhetoric that had dominated most nationalist songs defined belonging to the nation in romantic and soft terms that idealise religious supremacy[90], belonging being measured by your loyalty to religion and the king. However, after 2011, most nationalist songs have substituted this primordial expression that defined belonging to the nation instead with militarised and masculinist notions such as greater use of the words: bullet, fight and act courageously.[91]

It is a commonplace observation that the sectarian violence in Syria reflects a world of men in that they influence regional affairs through their physical capabilities, through masculinist prowess at both regional

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[86] Young, Iris Marion. 2003. The Logic of Masculinist Protection: Reflections on the Current Security State. *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 29 (1): 1-26.

[87] Hobbes, Thomas. (1668) 1994. *Leviathan*. Indianapolis: Hackett.

[88] Zainab is the daughter of Prophet Mohammad and the wife of Ali. They are both perceived as loved religious figures and no sectarian division on their roles by Sunnis or Shi'ia.

[89] Muʿāwia was the founder and first caliph of the Umayyad Caliphate. He led the Battle of the Camel against Ali which marks the first Islamic civil war. Aisha in turn supported Muʿāwia and further tentions between the two groups led to the emergence of Shi'a and Sunni sects in Islam. Therefore, these two figures are perceived as not true followers of Prophet Mohammad and hated by Shi'a.

[90] For example, the song (Above the Sky) [*Fawq al-sahaab*]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=urs6_wNmTAE

[91] An obvious example to this shift is the song (Lions of Al-Jazeera) [*Usuud Al-Jazeera*] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0jueZMHxepE

levels, and through the symbolic links between sectarianism and masculinity. As soldiering universally disciplines the male body, it determines the national and, at times, sectarian contours of a conflict. Therefore, there is a need to examine the relationship between masculinities and embodiment of national identity in Iran and Saudi Arabia in relation to the Syrian conflict, when conscripting soldiers became intimately bound up with notions of masculinity. This shaping in the Syrian conflict was inflected by sectarianism. Therefore, one approach towards what is needed for a democratic transition in the region is deconstructing and challenging official national narratives that define belonging to the nation in masculinist terms, while seeking to breakdown the gendered hierarchies in these countries.

**Conclusions and Recommendations**
Dr Simon Mabon

Understanding the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran goes some way in understanding the uncertainty and instability that plays out across the contemporary Middle East. There is little doubt that the rivalry has shaped regional politics in a number of ways, contingent upon political and socio-economic contexts and agendas of Riyadh and Tehran. Although the rivalry occupies a central role in the construction of regional security, it is overly simplistic to reduce Middle Eastern politics solely to a bi-polar struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran, with a number of additional actors adding to the complexity of regional politics. Indeed, the role of the UAE, Israel, Turkey, Qatar, and others should not be ignored, as these issues exacerbate an increasingly fraught situation.

As conflict in Syria and Yemen continues with catastrophic humanitarian impact, ending conflict is of the utmost importance to prevent further devastation. Increasing an awareness of the competing pressures and fears of those involved in shaping regional politics and creating space for discussions of such issues is of paramount importance to reducing conflict across the Middle East. If done correctly this can also facilitate trust building between Riyadh and Tehran. Whilst the rivalry occupies a key role in regional politics, particularly amidst the fracturing of regional politics along sect-based lines, we should not view it purely as an attempt to defeat the 'other'. Instead, we must combine our analysis of regional aspirations with consideration of domestic pressures on the regimes in both Riyadh and Tehran, who seek to balance challenges from a range of sources to ensure their survival. Moreover, we must also consider the interaction of the myriad pressures that facilitate the construction of political life in spaces where the rivalry occurs. These forces differ across both time and space and must be acknowledged in a responsible manner.

A key feature of politics in Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen is the politicisation and securitization of sectarian difference within the context of broader geopolitical currents. In each case are examples of the instrumental cultivation of sect-based difference by regimes or 'sectarian entrepreneurs' in an attempt to ensure regime survival or to increase power and influence. Yet the increasingly instrumentalised use of religious language – albeit increasingly mobilized for political and security reasons – risks becoming all encompassing, a self-perpetuating narrative often repeated by academics and policymakers that must be avoided.

The cultivation of political projects that transcend communal divisions is one possible way of circumventing this self-perpetuating narrative. Respect for the rule of law and recognition of individual rights above community rights is a key aspect of this strategy. The international community must also do more to support the development of cross-sectarian initiatives and movements such as the YOU STINK movement in Beirut, a movement of civil disobedience against governance failings concerning waste management, which led to garbage being piled in the streets of the Lebanese capital. International states wishing to improve the political situation must also avoid supporting fringe groups such as MEK (the People's Mojahedin of Iran) who use violence to challenge political order.

With that in mind, we propose the following recommendations:

- Work towards creating a 'grand bargain' that brings both Iran and Saudi Arabia into the system of regional states through creating space for discussion of regional issues;
- Facilitate dialogue and trust building between Riyadh and Tehran;
- Work towards a cease-fire in Yemen and Syria;
- Reject the use of language such as 'Shi'a Crescent' that plays such a damaging role in deepening divisions within and between communities;
- Western states must avoid the mobilisation of sect-based groups who advocate violence as proxies or allies;

- Encourage adherence to the rule of law and recognition of individual rather than community rights;
- Respect the development of political projects which cut across sectarian, ethnic and tribal cleavages such as those seen in Beirut and the YOU STINK movement;
- Advocate and support the development of interest-based political projects that cut across social cleavages.

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