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Saudi Arabia and Iran: Sectarianism, a Quest for Regional Hegemony, and International Alignments

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Abstract

Saudi Arabia and Iran are two of the most influential countries in the Middle East. They have often clashed with each other for a number of reasons. Although Riyadh and Tehran frequently espouse their sectarian differences as an explanation and justification for their regional confrontations, sectarianism is only one variable of the complex relationship between the two countries. Therefore the main question for this research concerns the non-sectarian sources of contention between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and the ways in which Saudi and Iranian leaderships frame this confrontation around sectarianism. As the first step, using constructivist framework, this paper analyzes the social and historical construction of Saudi Arabia and Iran to understand the main reasons for their confrontation in terms of sectarian differences and beyond. Based on a close examination of Saudi and Iranian history and contemporary policies, the paper then uses the examples of proxy wars in Bahrain and Yemen after the Arab Spring to focus on the contemporary geopolitical strategies of Saudi Arabia and Iran. Saudi Arabia and Iran have opposing political discourses; the Saudis tend to use realpolitik while the Iranians often base decisions on ideological considerations. Findings from this research suggest that events like the Arab Spring Revolutions have deeply intimidated Saudi Arabia. As a result, the country has implemented aggressive policies they perceive to be defensive in order to prevent Iranian aggression and subversion. Saudis now routinely disparage Shia movements and parties who are seen as representing Iran. On the other hand Iran, in its efforts to unite all Muslims against imperialist forces, continues to condemn the Saudis as lackeys of American imperialism. Thus the confrontation between the two nations has three dimensions: sectarianism, a quest for regional hegemony, and international alignments.

Executive Summary

This essay examines the power dynamics in the Middle East by looking at the relations between the two hegemonic powers, Saudi Arabia and Iran. Religion matters as a foundation of power for both countries, with Saudi Arabia as the home of Mecca and Medina, and Iran as the home of the modern Islamic revolution. Iran chooses its battles based on geopolitical gains, whereas Saudi Arabia decides based on who defends or challenges its international influence.

The following paper argues that conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran does reflect their divergent religious beliefs, but above all, it is a case of converging power struggles and strategic geopolitical interests. Coupling examinations of sectarian perspectives with examinations of national strategic interests sheds light on the rationale of both of these motivations. While sectarianism is not the sole stimulus of political action and inaction, sectarianism allows for “othering,” and can be used by chauvinistic actors to divert hostilities and build on a collective sentiment. Overall, the goal of this project is to identify the competing religious-political ideologies of Saudi Arabia and Iran, the two dominating powers in the Middle East. This examination of power dynamics illustrates Middle Eastern and international trends and illuminates various foreign and domestic strategies that have been used by Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Although the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran and their battle for Islamic hegemony is more complex than their Sunni-Shia differences, it cannot be properly understood without this sectarian component. This paper begins with a historical examination of the origins of the Islamic sectarian division between Sunnis and Shias, followed by a deconstruction of the frequently referenced “1,400 year war” between the two. This historical analysis creates the

setting in which a thorough understanding of the religious and political relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran can be explored.

This research asks, what are the non-sectarian sources of contention between Saudi Arabia and Iran? And in what ways do Saudi and Iranian leaders frame sectarianism? The dependent variable is the current confrontation and dispute between these two nations. Sectarianism and national strategic interests are two independent variables. Although sectarianism is an important consideration, this research argues that converging power struggles and competing strategic geopolitical interests play a larger role in Saudi-Iranian relations. This research examines Saudi-Iranian relations through adopting a constructivist worldview, with the ultimate goal of gaining a better understanding of the forces that guide action and inaction in the Middle East. It analyzes contemporary political shifts through the study of state, ulema, and media rhetoric that have sometimes amplified and sometimes reduced systemized Sunni and Shia social and economic disadvantages. In addition, this research explores changes in Saudi-Iranian public policy in relation to two distinct pivotal political events, the first being the Iranian Revolution in 1979, and the second being the Arab Spring in 2011. This research includes a comprehensive look at proselytization and impacts of the Iranian Revolution, as well as Saudi Arabia and Iran's proxy wars in Bahrain and Yemen. Although generalizations about Saudi and Iranian actions cannot be made based solely on an examination of these two proxy wars, the examples highlight trends in Saudi and Iranian actions that can be seen in other regional matters.

Today, Saudi Arabia and Iran continue to be in the political spotlight for different reasons. Therefore, it is important to increase public awareness of how differing religious sentiments are always not the root of conflict in the Middle East, but rather how sectarianism has the ability to feed into a preexisting conflict when wrongfully wielded as a political weapon.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Since the withdrawal of direct United States presence in the Middle East and the decline of Syrian and Egyptian hegemony after the Arab Spring, a hegemonic vacuum appeared in the region, waiting to be filled by the next regional power. Events in recent decades show Saudi Arabia and Iran vying for power in that vacancy, where sectarian differences are often referred to as the polarizing culprit behind the geopolitical rivalry. However, religion more often than not serves as a simplistic explanation or guise in government and media rhetoric. The relations of the two countries are far more complex than their Sunni-Shia differences. However, the rivalry cannot be properly understood without the sectarian component. In order to understand the current power dynamics in the Middle East and Saudi-Iranian relations, we must look at and also beyond sectarian labels, without fully dismissing the religious component. It is important to discuss contemporary Middle Eastern politics and history from this perspective, in order to gain insight into sectarian conflicts, while also placing it into a broader perspective of non-sectarian conflicts. This paper argues that conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran does reflect their divergent religious beliefs, but above all, it is a case of converging power struggles and strategic geopolitical interests.

Saudi Arabia and Iran are not only competing for power because of their sectarian differences. Their competition originates in Iran's populist Theocratic-Islamic government direct

challenges to the legitimacy of Saudi Arabia's monarchy. Iran represents the "resistance" against U.S. imperialism, and serves as an appealing model for supporters of Pan-Islamism. Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy with little to no tolerance for popular demonstrations, and a formidable voice in regional organizations. As a huge coercive force and soft-power authority, Saudi Arabia's influence can be particularly alluring among pious Sunni Arabs with little democratic sympathy. Both countries have means for political brokerage from oil reserves, but both countries have very different approaches to exhibiting their influence over the Middle East.

The research question asks what are the non-sectarian sources of contention between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and in what ways do Saudi and Iranian leaders frame this confrontation around sectarianism. This research applies a constructivist framework by analyzing the social and historical construction of Saudi Arabia and Iran. This worldview can help expand understanding of contemporary Middle Eastern relations and reveal the myriad factors that contribute to regional conflicts.

In the first chapter, I will quickly survey the origins of sectarianism and offer a counterargument to the claims of a "1,400 year war" between Sunnis and Shias. In the second chapter, I will examine the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, beginning with state formation, which illuminates the amalgamation of the Saud family, ibn Abd al-Wahhab, and the British. Following this discussion, I will outline Saudi Arabia's contemporary domestic governance and civil society, foreign policy, the Kingdom's stance toward Shias, and the exportation of Wahhabism. For the third chapter, I will discuss the emergence of the Islamic Republic of Iran, beginning in analyzing the decline of the Imperial State of Iran from 1925 up until the Iranian Revolution in 1979. After, I will discuss contemporary Iran's domestic governance and civil society, foreign policy, Iranian leadership's treatment of Sunnis, and the continued exportation of the Iranian

Revolution philosophy, focused on Pan-Islamic ideals. These chapters show how foreign and domestic tendencies are shaped by state formation and history. Finally, in the fourth chapter, I will bring together the discussion on Saudi and Iranian foreign policy to analyze the countries' interventions in Bahrain and Yemen.

Chapter 2

Sectarianism

A discussion of the seventh-century origins of sectarianism is necessary to have in order to better understand the sectarian cleavages that have contributed to Middle Eastern political decision-making and societal relations.

The Prophet Muhammad died a sudden death in 632, an unexpected shock for the people of Medina and his followers. Muhammad had served as an absolute ruler, filling roles such as commander, military general. This made the appointment of a successor difficult because there was no obvious second follower in power below the Prophet, nor did he have any sons. Even if such a person had existed, many Muslims would not consider him or her justifiable, since no one else had a direct connection to God (Armstrong 2002).

Muhammad left no instructions as to who should rule after his death. This led to much dispute over legitimate government after the Prophet's death and it is here that sectarian divides began to emerge. Islam was still a new religion and the Prophet's followers knew that the region had to be ruled by an undivided power, or else the Islamic empire would not survive. Thus his followers agreed that the successor of the Prophet must be one individual in order to maintain an undivided power. One group thought that Muhammad had wanted the elite members of the Muslim community to choose a leader, or caliph, to succeed Muhammad and for the elites to select the caliph when the reigning caliph died. This group became known as the Sunnis.

Another group thought that Muhammad had believed that only God could choose the successor to lead the Muslim world, and that in order to do so, the caliph had to be a member of Muhammad's family. This group would become known as the Shias.

Ali ibn Abi Talib was the Prophet's closest male relative as Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law. Some Muslims believed he should rule the Islamic community, claiming that he held Muhammad's charisma and had unquestionable piety. Ali, however, was still very young and lacked experience. Through a majority vote, Abu Bakr, a close companion of the Prophet and the father of one of Muhammad's wives, was selected to succeed Muhammad and become the first caliph (Armstrong 2002). As newly elected ruler, Abu Bakr stated, "I am elected not because I am the best of you... If I do my job thoroughly, follow me and help me. If I deviate from the right path to corruption, bring me back to the right path" (Saritoprak 2014).

Shias refer to their leaders as Imams, a term that holds significance since Imams traditionally take on a spiritual role that no clerics in Sunni Islam hold. The centrality of the Imam is also a fundamental difference between the two sects of Islam. Shia belief that the Imam will lead Muslims to salvation is problematic for some Sunnis, who believe that Shias are asserting a divine quality of certain human beings. This, Sunnis say, questions the oneness of God, and is therefore a sin. However, the Imam holds significance for all Muslims because it represents the conscious religious approach to politics that is evident throughout Islamic law and philosophy. Another point of contestation about Imams has to do with belief in the twelfth Imam. Twelver Shias believe the twelfth Imam Muhammad al-Mahdi went into occultation, and then was taken into hiding by God to come back at the end of time, while Sunnis do not believe in this occultation of the twelfth Imam (The Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought, 2013). He is known as the Mahdi, or the Messiah. Twelver Shias believe that the Prophet's

message and the Quranic texts will manifest with the return of the twelfth Imam. Although all Shias are not Twelvers, they are the largest branch of Shia Islam, making up about eighty-five percent of the Shia population.

The Sunni-Shia divide in the Muslim world today has been exacerbated by many different events since the original question of Muhammad's succession, but the fundamental disputes between the two sects lie within what happened during the seventh century. Sunni Muslims believe in the first three caliphs prior to Ali and do not believe that God chooses caliphs. Shia Muslims on the other hand reject the first three caliphs and believe in the divinely chosen caliphs, beginning with Ali. Despite their differences in belief of succession, both Sunni and Shia Muslims believe that Muhammad is the final prophet, follow the five pillars of Islam, and read the Quran as the holy book. This mutual agreement on the three fundamental aspects of Islam has allowed Sunni and Shia Muslims to live peacefully amongst each other for long periods of time. However, recent years have unveiled a new period of spreading conflict in the Middle East between Sunnis and Shias. (Brumberg 2001).

Periods of sectarian peace

The differences between Sunni and Shia beliefs cannot be denied, but historically, Sunnis and Shias have often lived peacefully amongst each other. Media and state leadership often makes claims about the "1,400 year war" between Sunnis and Shias, but the reality is far less rigid. The two sects have cohabitated for over a millennium. Similar to any fundamental disagreement, this one is not without conflict, but it has existed in longer periods of pluralism and accommodation than in animosity and vitriol. In the centuries following the founding of Islam, the Islamic empire clashed with European Crusaders and Mongol conquerors, yet the

religion was able to spread widely around the world. This extension of the Islamic religion along with its resiliency could not have occurred if warring sectarian conflict was consistent throughout history (Sachedina 2001). Conflict, between Sunnis and Shias, is a mostly recent occurrence, the reemergence aligning with the Iranian Revolution and the subsequent political shifts in the Middle East, particularly the Arab Spring in 2011.

Some scholars argue that the colonial subjugation of local populations and the creation or reinvigoration of deliberate, artificial ethnic divisions, as seen in Belgian rule over Rwanda and British rule over India, has also aggravated Sunni Shia relations (Nardone 2010). This theory asserts that Western powers have exacerbated these divisions in order to maintain the status quo in the Middle East, where the region is divided and thus groups are incapable of asserting themselves. In this view, the roots of sectarian conflicts are perpetuated through inaccurate continuities that reference a constant strife between Sunnis and Shias that has persisted to present day. Although there seems to be a lot of sectarian conflict in recent decades, this does not mean sectarianism has been a problem throughout history. Non-Muslims and Muslims have used exaggerated sectarian differences to mobilize specific groups and to create disunity within Muslim communities. This strategy of divide and conquer is not a unique tactic; creating disunity within groups perceived to be threats to create infighting and divert efforts away from external actors has long been a political strategy. Such narratives suggest that sectarian fighting is inherent in Islam, and disregards how sectarianism is socially created and amplified by actors seeking to maintain power over a divided Muslim community.

Contemporary cooperation between countries in the Middle East and inclusive governments have existed and continue to exist in the region, despite increased regional conflicts framed around sectarianism. Prior to the Syrian Civil War, Syria was known as “The beating

heart of Arabism,” with its mosaic population of Sunnis, Alawites, Druze, and Christian communities. In addition, Lebanon has created a governmental structure based on inclusive power sharing. These two examples display how in recent history, before the impasse in Syria in 2011 and after Lebanese independence in 1948, respectively, Sunnism and Shiism were not the driving identity forces in the Middle East. Rather, leaders emphasized Arab national identity that facilitated peaceful relations between Arabs of all faiths. Arab unity in defense of Palestine during the Arab-Israeli War in 1948 and the Six Day War in 1967 also shows how Arab countries overcame sectarian differences to work together against Israel.

Historical narratives and media naturally focus on conflicts, which represent realities for some, but not realities for many. Such accounts do not necessarily provide an accurate depiction of everyday life for average Muslims. This skewed exposure suggests that the Sunni-Shia conflict is widespread, inevitable, and permanent. A more inclusive analysis presents a more nuanced historical narrative.

Today’s emerging sectarian relations

Today, Sunni populations outnumber Shias, with Shias making up about ten to fifteen percent of the global Muslim population. Shias, though a global minority, constitute about 80 percent of the native population of the Persian Gulf region, residing in parts of Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia in the oil rich areas (Nakash 2003).

As mentioned earlier, and as will be developed in later chapters, sectarian conflict has reemerged recently in some parts of the Middle East. Inter-state rivalry, as seen between Iran and Saudi Arabia, is high, and social and economic disadvantages for Sunnis in Shia countries and Shias in Sunni countries are systemic. These domestic policies that favor one sect while

disfranchising the other are not due to some sort of inherent hatred between the two sects, but rather represent a geopolitical strategy used to delegitimize opposing regional powers. Similarly, as we will see later in the paper, Saudi Arabia and Iran do not support other Sunni or Shia countries or movements based on their shared religious sect alone; countries will only invest resources into countries that benefit their geopolitical interests. Sectarianism allows for “otherness,” but is also closely tied to power, resource, and territorial interests. This discussion on sectarianism is to give background to better understand the interactions between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the context of their sectarian beliefs.

Chapter 3

Saudi Arabia: The Wahhabi State

A brief overview of Saudi state formation will help support an understanding of contemporary Saudi foreign and domestic policy. This chapter looks at the history of Saudi Arabia's state formation and the main actors involved in the creation of the Kingdom. Because Wahhabism plays a key role in Saudi politics and civil society, it is important to understand how such a controversial interpretation of Islam grew from the birth of the Kingdom, and how it has managed to survive today. This discussion contributes to understanding Riyadh's domestic and foreign policies. Accordingly, this chapter also discusses the importance of Saudi Arabia's petrodollar economy, which funds numerous projects abroad and is used to maintain the welfare state and add legitimacy to the Kingdom's leadership.

Saudi State Formation

The historical formation of Saudi Arabia can be described as “an endogenous political creation,” with roots in the 1744 pact between Najd ruler Muhammad ibn Saud and the Muslim revivalist and fundamentalist Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (Menoret 2014). The Emirate of Jabal Shammar was ruled by the House of Rashid, based in Ha'il, a wealthy northern Najd city because of its position on the route of the Hajj and the accompanying trade market. The House of Rashid often feuded with the House of Saud over control of the Najd region. Eventually, the

House of Rashid fell to the House of Saud. This expansion, leading to the eventual creation of Saudi Kingdom in 1932 from the dual monarchy of Hejaz and Nejd was possible due to the preexisting weakness of the Rashidi rulers and Ibn Saud's establishment of a strong religious fighting force that spread the message of holy war. This rhetoric in turn built the foundation of Ibn Saud's Kingdom.

Although Wahhabism united Ibn Saud's expansionist territorial interests with the Ikhwan's expansionist religious interests and the preexisting tribal structures, Wahhabist ideology was not the main factor of durability for the Saudi Kingdom. International political conditions at the time including the decline of the Rashidi stronghold, the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, and the subsequent British support of the Saud were concurrent factors of the Saud's success (Rasheed 1992). In addition, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire led to new state formation, where most parts of the Middle East fell under British and French spheres of influence.

The United Kingdom's heavy influence in the formation of Saudi Arabia can explain some of the conservative politics of the country today. Although the West is not considered a bastion of Wahhabism, it was the British who appointed al-Wahhab as their leader in Saudi Arabia for their own strategic interests to destroy the Ottoman Empire. Al-Wahhab was not a man of original ideas, but rather he was a textualist. Textualism, similar to literalism emerged during the post-Mongol period, where many people searched for a scapegoat to blame for the destructive Mongol invasion, and landed on the lenient philosophical interpretation of Islam and the acceptance of coexisting religions and ethnicities. Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab believed nothing else was needed for an Islamic state; the Holy Quran was sufficient for scholars and government (Sindi 2014). Wahhabism as an Islamic ideology was able to overcome the lack of

tribal cohesion of the region through administrative effectiveness and institutional organization. It regulated zakat collection, inheritance and marriage, and established an authoritative leadership. The fighting forces, the Ikhwan, were motivated not by payments from the newly established ruler, but by Wahhabi doctrine, which favored territorial expansion, conquest, and military organization that the Ikhwan fervently adopted. Ibn Saud used Wahhabism, or the revivalist movement within the world of Islam, to legitimize his leadership over his newly acquired territory of central Najd up to the border of Jabal Shammar, where he sought to capture the rest of the Arabian Peninsula. As a result, Ibn Saud became King of Hejaz in 1926 and King of Najd in 1927 (Rasheed 1992).

Although it was not the glue that kept the country afloat, a large product of Saudi Arabia's state formation was the creation of Wahhabism. The religion is deeply rooted in Saudi Arabia because of its connection to the House of Saud and the inseparable bond between the two entities. The House promotes Wahhabism and the Wahhabs give the House a sphere of legitimacy; each could not have emerged without the other, and each is dependent on the other (Sindi 2014). The creation of the Saudi Arabian Kingdom in 1932 put the country on track to become a crucial world power, additionally supported by its strategic location, natural resources, and its history of Western political and financial aid.

However, the Saud's debt to the West has contributed to Shari'a law implementation and proselytization, in order to domestically promote a religious narrative. This simultaneously appears to distance the country's politics away from Western interests, which in turn strengthens Saudi nationalism.

The collaboration between ibn Wahhab and ibn Saud continues today in a wider partnership between the Sunni ulema and the House of Saud, in which clerics provide the House

of Saud with the religious legitimacy to rule. However, this relationship has slightly shifted, with the period of modernization under the third Saudi state when King Abdulaziz Al Saud regulated the ulema within the power structure of the Kingdom. The ulema were confined to regulating issues concerning public morality, Sharia interpretation, designing religious education, and so on, but were not allowed to criticize the ruling family, particularly on political matters. Despite these limitations, it is crucial to understand that the rhetoric of the ulema remains a powerful force, and their voices are able to reach mass audiences through outlets such as electronic media, sermons, and prayers (Isamail 2012). Today, the Kingdom still maintains relationships with the United States and the United Kingdom, in which the West usually turns a blind eye to human rights violations in the Kingdom in exchange for intelligence and security information to protect the U.S. and U.K. (Slawson 2015).

Contemporary Civil Society and Domestic Governance

Saudi Arabia has managed to maintain stable global relevance due to its strategic location, control of Mecca and Medina, and its formidable oil reserves. As a geographically vast state with a large population of approximately 29 million, surrounded by smaller and less influential Gulf States, the Kingdom has maintained substantial political leverage in the region (World Bank 2015). Although the country is the only Wahhabi state and thus does not share very many religious similarities with many other Middle Eastern states, the presence of two of the holiest Islamic sites brings an estimated 14.3 million people a year to the country, making it the nineteenth most visited country in the world, according to the World Bank's 2012 estimates (The Economist 2014). It also requires that the country remain involved in the umma, or Muslim

community; severances from the Kingdom mean severances from Muslims duty to embark on the Hajj, or pilgrimage.

Oil plays a huge role in the Kingdom's economy and governance. Aramco, the Saudi Arabia's oil company and the world's largest oil and gas company pays a twenty percent royalty on revenues and eighty-five percent income tax (Blas and Mahdi 2017). Saudi leadership uses oil revenue to silence populations and maintain social order through censorship. In a country where criticism of the government can lead to several years in jail, online platforms have become popular spaces for freedom of expression. However, the state has strictly monitored, censored, and filtered online voices and movements discussing taboo topics issues and a need for political change. Numerous restrictions were imposed on cybercafés in 2009, requiring businesses to install hidden cameras, take customers names and websites used, and prohibit minors. Women make up over half of Saudi's bloggers, where they can discuss topics that are prohibited in public, such as health. Accordingly, the aid of social media and technology to organization of the Arab Spring has also concerned Saudi leadership, where authorities have openly confirmed their blocking of 400,000 sites (Reporters Without Borders 2009)

Shari'a law continues to govern Saudi Arabia, where the sole constitution is an ultra-conservative interpretation of the Holy Quran. Saudi Arabia is not unique in recruiting passages from the Quran while neglecting to acknowledge other crucial passages regarding the same topic at hand. Many other religious and political figures in other countries use this tactic. Quranic reading is very interpretive and has caused a tendentious division amongst Muslims, and has allowed for a puritan view of Islam to emerge and remain in Saudi Arabia. The government seeks to appease its citizens by appearing to be more religious, when arguably Saudi law is

imposed to allow the government to suppress its citizens in order for the House of Saud and the Wahhabis to maintain their power.

As a result of Saudi Arabia's Islamic government, many people in the country have been marginalized and suppressed. Shari'a law in Saudi Arabia bans freedom of religion. Only Wahhabis are permitted to work in the public sector, and any conversion from Wahhabism to any other religion is punishable by death. "Saudization" is a popular notion in the country, where anyone lacking Saudi citizenship is marginalized. However, the government restricts individuals' right to work, and gaining citizenship in the country as a visiting worker, or finding a well-paying job are nearly impossible, unless you are Wahhabi and have connections within the government (Armstrong 2002). An abundance of public and private wealth is juxtaposed with high unemployment, and social inequalities.

Saudi Arabia's government is an absolute monarchy legitimized by ultra-conservative religious beliefs. Ideologically, there are two versions of Wahhabism ultimately contributing to overall instability in the country. These are the official interpretation of the Monarch and the underground oppositional interpretations of Islam. Because of this, it is difficult to identify the exact nature of Islamic revival in Saudi Arabia and whether or not it is a sustainable movement. Saudi domestic durability has been established by a combination of religious and economic factors that have also allowed the Saudis to influence politics in the region. The religious functions of effectiveness, power, and prosperity of a Muslim state, combined with the economic function of oil revenues that granted the government access to military weapons, have allowed Saudi Arabia to maintain prominence in the region and the international sphere (Ochenwald 1981).

Religion matters as a foundation of power, where Saudi Arabia holds power over the two major shrines of Islam, Mecca and Medina, and where tribalism, kingship, and oil resources are the three additional main sources of government power. The rentier state is not dependent on taxes or the people; rather, as the second largest oil-exporting nation, it relies on its oil resources to bring in government revenue. However, experts claim that Saudi oil reserves are not as large as the Kingdom claims, and oil prices have been persistently low. In 2016, companies including Saudi's Binladin Group, the Middle East's largest construction firm, had to let go of tens of thousands of employees (Naylor 2016; Riedel 2016). Continued light flows of petrodollars and resulting periods of austerity will likely affect the belief systems of the population. The changing energy market will sway society toward non-oil based markets that are thought to be western-capitalist industries, or could even "Arab Spring-like turbulence" (Naylor 2016; Alterman and McCants 2014; Ochenwald 1981). This fragmenting social realm could be ameliorated with policies to transform the social and economic sector by expanding the job market to ostracized unemployed populations, but this has not been the case thusfar.

Secular nationalism, socialist materialism, and western consumerism were all rejected on an ideological level by the ulema before the 1970s. The problem the Saudi government faced during the twenty-first century has to do with the practical adaptation and application of these concepts onto society. The Saudi elite perceives any manifestation of attack on the Kingdom as a failure to preserve morality from excessive cultural imitation of the West. Specifically, the 1979 attacks on Mecca triggered a government response to give a greater place to the symbols of Islamic identity in Saudi culture (Ochenwald 1981). Looking to the future, it is difficult to see how the role of Islam in public life can be strengthened more than it has been in the past, and

whether or not the country's strong ultra-conservative religious identity will sustain itself through the next generations of Saudi society.

When King Salman became king in January 2015, he immediately dismissed influential officials who opposed Wahhabi ulema, and in turn appeased the public by making promises for increased financial benefits. However, he continued to neglect calls for political reform. He also appointed Muhammad bin Nayef, an anti-democratic figure as the crown prince and interior minister who controls foreign and domestic intelligence (Choksy and Choksy 2015).

Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy

Political threats, in the eyes of the Saudi government, are treated as security threats. The country is an extremely rational world actor, thus they choose their battles based on who supports or challenges their interests and international influence (Alterman and McCants 2014).

Once the Saudi empire began receiving funding from the British, Riyadh was able to intervene in its neighbors' affairs, as seen in its military intervention in Bahrain during the Arab Spring, its consistent economic influence in Egypt, its international funding of Wahhabi and Salafi schools of thought abroad, and its political brokerage in Yemen and Syria. This financial backing also allows for public expenditure, which on the surface makes the government look like it is improving, but in reality, the increased public sector salaries, monthly minimum wage, and hiring of more civil servants and security personnel only affects people with close connections within the exclusive government, thus neglects a large portion of the population (Menoret 2014). The Saudi's annual budget was an estimated \$130 billion as of 2007. They used much of this funding used to create 60,000 new jobs in the Ministry of Interior, construct 500,000 houses, fund a number of religious organizations, and raise the minimum wage in the public sector,

unemployment assistance, and the budget for public credit agencies (Hertog 2011). The façade that all of Saudi civil society has access to adequate welfare in part allows Western countries, such as the U.S., to continue to financially and militarily support the Kingdom. In turn, this aid allows the Kingdom to pursue its interests both internationally and domestically, without regards to protecting human rights. The interaction between the U.S and Saudi Arabia is thus a mutually beneficial one that legitimizes both governments. This is a dangerous relationship, considering how the Saudis are staunch followers of realpolitik; this partnership provides even more funding, and more importantly, confidence for Riyadh to support regimes that violate human rights.

The loudest voices of the Gulf Cooperation Council, or GCC, have shifted to largely represent Saudi Arabia since the Arab Spring. Established in 1981 after the Iranian Revolution, the coalition of six Arab Sunni oil-exporting monarchies, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman gathered together to promote economic cooperation and defend the member states against threats. Despite its alleged intentions, the GCC was still unable to defend Kuwait from Iraqi occupation in 1990 without the help of American troops. The tacit goal for the establishment of the GCC was to protect the authoritative rulers of the Gulf States against any domestic threats, which were perceived as some of the most threatening forces, after witnessing the fall of the Pahlavi Empire in Iran (Ayoob 2011). Therefore, as an already large and powerful state, Saudi Arabia has managed to gain control of smaller states in the Arabian Peninsula through the GCC, and with checkbook diplomacy to less wealthy states such as Bahrain. Additionally, military assets after years of buying advanced weaponry from the United States has allowed the Saudis to engage in their various proxy wars and assist other GCC members, where they have obtained enough military assets from the U.S. and U.K., where they are capable of carrying out their own endeavors without continued support from the West.

Export of Wahhabism

Saudi Arabia has attempted to establish Wahhabism and Salafism as a major soft power force in the Islamic world through education initiatives and by delegitimizing the Shias. Examples of Wahhabi education can be seen in the students at the Islamic University of Medina, most of whom are foreigners benefitting from scholarships, free accommodation, and plane tickets to study a textualist interpretation of Islam. After they graduate, some are hired by the Saudi monarchy, while others return to their countries to preach Wahhabi Islam. In building an international Wahhabi network, the Saudis are not only proselytizing their interpretation of Islam, but they are creating an international platform to consolidate their political agenda and ideological influences, and to expand their network of international allies (Farquhar 2015).

Building on preexisting tensions in various Middle Eastern societies, the Saudis export their Wahhabi education and outreach programs to challenge preexisting conditions. For example, in the United States, according to the U.S. Congress September 11th report, Saudi Arabia's elite leadership gave millions of dollars to Sunni extremists said to be Islamic charities, both inside and outside the U.S., leading up to the attacks in 2001. In a testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee, and on King Fahd's website, the Kingdom spent four billion per year on madrassas, mosques, preachers, students, and textbooks to spread Wahhabi teachings over the next decades. This funding contributed to thousands of Islamic centers in Pakistan and Afghanistan, some of which do not train scholars, but jihadis (Choksy and Choksy 2015). King Fahd's website claims the funding is used to support charities and trusts, "recruiting students to more than 1,500 mosques, 210 Muslim centers, 202 Islamic colleges, and 2,000 madrassas and on staffing those institutions with nearly 4,000 preachers and missionaries in non-Muslim nations in central, southern, and southeast Asia, as well as in Africa, Europe, and North

America” (Ibid). In addition, Wahhabis control four-fifths of the global Islamic publishing houses, which allows the Saudis to spread their version of Islam to regions with or without an established madrassa. According to a report by Freedom House these publications have been found in the U.S., and spread messages of intolerance toward Jews and Christians, and labels Americans as the “abode of the infidel” (Freedom House 2005: 11).

On the one hand, the Arab Spring removed from power many of Riyadh’s allies throughout the region, but on the other hand, in some cases, with the former dictators of the Middle East being overruled, Wahhabi pockets have been able to further establish themselves without fear of persecution, especially where Wahhabi texts and teachings match those of the Islamic State. This foreign policy plan to export Wahhabism abroad has largely backfired on the Kingdom, since the Islamic State has become a considerable international and national security threat, and other Sunni regimes have recently fell, creating a possible collapse of Riyadh’s regional network.

Shia treatment in Saudi Arabia

Although a minority of the Saudi population, Shias in the Kingdom make up ten to fifteen percent of the population (Pew Research Center 2009). Despite prince Salman, now King Salman’s statements in 2007 to U.S. Ambassador James Oberwetter claiming, “the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia does not have problems with other creeds or sects,” discrimination and persecution of Shias in Saudi Arabia is evident in anti-Shia clerical rhetoric. This hatred toward Shias is rooted in Wahhabism, as well. When ibn Abd al-Wahhab visited Barsa, he found Shia tombs to be too excessive and declared the sect to be corrupt (Ismail 2012). In the early periods of the third Saudi state, the ulema declared the Shia degenerative, but not a political concern. They

rather needed guidance towards the correct theological path (Raihan). However, with the threat of the Iranian Revolution, Saudis have taken greater efforts to marginalize Shia populations domestically and abroad. This oscillation in the Saudi stance toward Shias shows how any abhorrence to Shias does not have to do with differences in Sunni and Shia beliefs, but rather is in concurrence with political events. In a 2014 interview with a Shia activist in Riyadh, the Saudi national claimed that the government deliberately redirects Sunni anger at the royal family towards Shias (Alterman and McCants 2014).

The January 2016 execution of Sheikh Nimr al Nimr, a prominent Shiite cleric, exemplifies Riyadh's reactionary response to political anxieties that diverts attention toward animosity towards Shias. Before Nimr, the Kingdom had not executed such an important Shia figure in many years. Riyadh later cut ties with Iran and expelled all Iranian diplomats from the country. Although the weaknesses in Syria, Egypt, and Iraq create an atmosphere where the Saudis hold much control over regional matters, recent events such as the crisis in Syria and the Iran nuclear deal make the Kingdom feel vulnerable, resulting in erratic foreign policy of the aggressive new leadership. Accordingly drawing attention to anti-Shiism diverts attention away from the Kingdom's failed proxy wars, and further legitimizes the Kingdom's self-proclaimed role as the leader of Sunni regional order (Lynch 2016). The various structural shifts in the region, resulting in continuous anti-Shia rhetoric, have become more difficult to dilute within civil society, especially with young Arabs who have been exposed to much sectarian violence in the wake of the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

In November 1979 in Qatif, Saudis gathered to demonstrate against the Kingdom. Although the protests were inspired in part by the Iranian Revolution, it was not exclusively sectarian; frustrations partly derived from disaffected Shias, and were also deeply rooted in

historical provincial discrimination in Qatif, where citizens called for Riyadh to take responsibility for failing to deliver on promises to modernize the neglected and deteriorating Eastern province (Jones 2006). Although Shias in the Eastern province make up about thirty percent of the population, state neglect has impacted both Sunnis and Shias, where the eastern citizens do not have much input into municipal budgets or administration of the province. This leads to spatial marginalization that has been further exacerbated by sectarian marginalization (Wehrey 2013).

The protests began in al-Qatif with a celebration of Ashura, to celebrate the death of Imam Hussein. The actions spread to neighboring villages and some on the streets also protested against the Saudi Regime, holding signs with anti-Saudi slogans and images of Ayatollah Khomeini. The National Guard, at the advice of the ulema, met the combined celebrations and protests with deadly clashes. Although the first day of the seven days of Qatif protests were initiated and dominated by Shias, the subsequent protests presented in a more complex demographic makeup. As violence erupted at the hands of the National Guard, protests attracted a wider congregation who were both appalled by the brutal state response, and felt a shared communal anger from years of state neglect and poor social conditions (Jones 2006). Following the protests and violence in Qatif, in order to remain in control of the Shia populations and the country, the ulema also began disseminating anti-Shia materials that targeted Saudi Shias, Iran, and various Shia religious doctrines.

Since 1990 Saudi Shia resistance has stagnated for the most part, but the ulema remains suspicious of Shia populations, particularly those in the Eastern province. In 1993, Sheikh Nassar al-'Omar wrote the treatise *Waqi' al-Rafidah fi Balad al-Tawhid*, translating to "The Reality of *Rafidah* in the land of *Tawhid*", arguing that the Shia have exaggerated their population size in

the Kingdom. He went further, claiming that Shias are liars, untrustworthy, and plotting schemes against the Sunnis of the country. Other Saudi ulema often reference this 1993 treatise in attacks on the Saudi Shia. Sheikh al'Omar's treatise claims that Shia education in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province allows Shia girls to receive education. The government funds most of the schools, thus allowing for Shias to infiltrate the labor market and gain economic advantage, particularly with Aramco and governmental departments. Although only a handful of Sunni ulemas are strongly anti-Shia, the visceral opinions on the matter is indistinguishable from the established clerics because the ulemas do not criticize those within their government (Ismail 2012).

Saudi foreign policy has distinctive characteristics that have developed and emerged from regional political shifts that have threatened the preexisting identity of the Kingdom. Prior to the Iranian Revolution, Saudi Arabia portrayed itself as the single legitimate leader of the Islamic world. After 1979, however, the Kingdom had to adopt a staunch Sunni self-identity to remain distinct from Iran, while maintaining political brokerage in the region and appearing as the more authentic leader of the Islamic world. With the rise of the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 2012, which toppled a previous Saudi ally and challenged the Kingdom's claims to be the ruler of Sunnis, the Kingdom faced yet another identity crisis and reformed its international role as the champion of the Salafi-Wahhabi school of thought, thus countering the Muslim Brotherhood's claims of representing the Sunni Islamic world. These two distinct political shifts in the Middle East eroded Saudi distinctiveness, leading to increased conservatism in the Kingdom, as well as further programs to proselytize Wahhabism abroad (Darwich 2016). Sectarianism for Saudi Arabia was enhanced as a tool to establish a distinct narrative for the Kingdom in order to secure the country's dominant presence in the region.

Chapter 4

Iran: The Shia State

Iran has a fascinating contemporary history due to its transformation from a constitutional monarchy to a theocratic republic during the Iranian Revolution in 1979, and its unique Persian ethnicity, surrounded by Arab states. Due to its unique characteristics, Iran is perceived as a threat by many Middle Eastern governments, which has shaped their foreign and domestic policies. Iran today features a leadership that still longs for the country to be the leader of the Pan-Islamic world, and so externally the country tries to diminish sectarian divides and draw a collective-Islamic enmity towards America and other Western powers. This chapter will examine Iran, beginning with an analysis of the reasons for the fall of the Shah and the rise of Khomeini. Next, the chapter will discuss domestic governance and civil society in Iran, followed by the country's foreign policy, which has remained consistent since the Iranian Revolution. This chapter will also study the systematic discrimination against Sunnis in Iran and Iran's attempts to export its revolutionary ideals abroad.

State Formation of Iran

Iran has a unique political culture and identity that is heavily influenced by a pre-Islamic philosophy of Persian nationalism. Due to its Persian heritage and its practice of Shiism, the country is prone to hostilities in the region and has been forced to maintain a skeptical and

selective foreign policy, predominately motivated by ideological, rather than economic or geopolitical reasons (Boroujerdi 2014; Sariolghalam 2014). Iranian foreign policy prioritizes regime security, involving the country consistently attempting to reinforce its legitimacy, sovereignty, and security in the state (Sariolghalam 2013).

In 1921, the military officer Reza Khan, or later Reza Shah claimed kingship. He modernized the economy and secularized politics with the goal of emulating Kemal Ataturk's reforms. He applied alterations to education by creating modern schooling systems and the Iranian Academy of Literature with the goal of purging the Persian language of foreign, particularly Arabic influences (Bashiriyeh 2016, "Social Cleavages"). Additionally, he adopted a French judicial system, which challenged the religious establishment's influence on the legal system through Islamic law. A disbeliever of democratic institutions, Reza Shah admired efficient governments administered by a top down structure, including that of Nazi Germany, with which he sympathized. Prior to the outbreak of World War II, the Shah allowed German specialists and consultants into Iran, which the Allied powers interpreted as a sign of German influence over Iran (Ekran 2010). For this reason, in 1941, the British forced Reza Shah into abdication and his son Mohammad gained control of the throne and ruled up until the revolution, implementing authoritarian modernization, similar to his father, and an extremely pro-Western foreign policy (Long 1980). The consequences of Reza Shah's pro-German sympathies continued to emerge during World War II and after. USSR troops did not withdraw their troops from Iran in 1945, violating their 1942 treaty to evacuate U.S., U.K., and Soviet troops six months after the war ended (Ekran 2010).

Mohammad Shah inherited a fracturing regime that the people considered illegitimate. The regime lacked dedicated popular support because it was seen as a byproduct of American

and British imperialism. To add fuel to fire, Mohammad Shah continued to neglect rural populations and kept a stagnant economy. In 1978, a journalist recalls meeting Mohammad Shah, and the Shah's refusal to acknowledge that there were any slums in Southern Tehran, despite the approximate one to two million inhabitants there (Halliday 1979). Rather than spend public funds on improving Iranian lives, Tehran delineated a huge proportion of the budget to purchasing arms from the U.S. According to the Arms Transfers Database of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, the U.S. was the largest arms exporter to Iran from 1950 to 1970 (SIPRI 2017). The SAVAK, or the Iranian Organization of Intelligence and National Security, was ubiquitous in daily life, and the common use of torture as an interrogation tactic was public knowledge (Halliday 1979). The Shah's denial of this well-known information, his negligence toward rural communities, his partnership with the U.S., and the great deal of internal corruption left Iranians filled with frustration.

During Mohammad Shah's rule, Iran experienced rapid modernization, in which the oil economy increased from \$550 million in 1964 to \$20 billion in 1974 (Boroujerdi 2014). The hurried transformation from an agrarian society to a rentier state applied tremendous pressure on the economic system and state government. Although the Shah tried to create a dynamic and open political system, the government failed to apply this to all social classes. Rapid modernization fostered a sense of political deprivation and dependence on the Western world. The accelerated economic change then eroded state and civil society relations (DeFronzo 2015).

Two key factors largely contributed to domestic unrest and demand for governmental reformation, both of which show the consequences of political dictatorship, international alignments, and sporadic economic development. The first was the economic discontent due to the rise and decline of the economy, combined with the Shah's compromise of Islam in

government, leading to widespread cultural unhappiness. Initially, the country experienced a 10% decline in oil prices in the late 70s, followed by a 20% rise in consumer prices (Bashiriye 2015, "Science of Revolutions"). This later capitalization on Iran's formidable oil reserves produced too much revenue from one sector, thus making the entire economy vulnerable and discouraging other businesses from developing or expanding. Simultaneously the 1970s brought an influx of over 60,000 well-paid foreign technicians into the country, creating a labor shortage and aggravating agricultural problems. The failure of domestic agriculture to keep up with the rise in population and food prices on the world market exacerbated an already frustrated Iranian civil society (Cecolin 2016). The revolutionary crisis occurred when the economy experienced a period of improvement and rising expectations, followed by a sudden decline, thus giving way to widespread public disappointment (Bashiriye 2015, "Science of Revolutions").

Secondly, the Shah's attempts to undermine the public importance of Islam and center Iranian identity on Persian nationality instead of religion was a large contributor to the religious ideology of the revolution. His banishment of organized political opposition received harsh criticism from the U.S., claiming it was in violation of human rights and led the U.S. to pressure the Shah to lift the restraints on political opposition. The Shah's indecisive and shifting policy on political opposition backfired on him when he gave the previously restrained revolutionary force space to organize the opposition movement around the exiled Ayatollah Khomeini (Armstrong 2002). From 1965-1975 there were signs of increasing Islamisation of Iranian society, such as the creation of twenty-six exclusively religious publishing houses, an increase in veil wearing, and an increased number of Islamic societies at universities. Yet despite these increases, there were no drastic shifts toward Islamisation (Ramzani 1986).

The downfall of the Shah shows how the motivating factors behind the Iranian Revolution were derived from a mass of sectarian divisions, but rather from a combination of social factors. Accordingly, Ayatollah Khomeini had great charisma power and the ability to mobilize people to action.

1979: The Iranian Revolution

The Iranian Revolution, or the Islamic Revolution was noteworthy for being the first contemporary revolution that led to a theocracy. All other modern revolutions have fought against merging church and state. It was also the only modern social revolution where guerrillas and peasants played a marginal role; people from all walks of life were drawn to the revolutionary message. However, it is still often referred to as a “cataclysmic event,” because although the revolution was domestically successful, it was seen as an illegitimate claim to power by most elites of the Islamic world.

Ayatollah Khomeini, an Iranian religious and political leader, possessed a unique ability to organize and unite a wide spectrum of political and social forces. For the intelligentsia, Khomeini represented a nationalist opposed to foreign imperialism and domestic fascism. For the Bazaars, or the middle class, Khomeini represented an opposition to the Shah dictatorship and hindrance to ownership of private property and traditional values. To the urban worker, Khomeini was a man of the people and a deliverer of social justice and income redistribution. Finally, to the rural masses, Khomeini brought the promise of infrastructure, development, and access to water and electricity (Abrahamian 1982). The Islamic ideology of the Iranian Revolution was the indispensable mobilizing force behind the massive demonstration of public discontent with the Shah’s regime. It gave a voice to the common miseries of a people who felt

systematically marginalized (Dabashi 2006). His message resonated with such a wide range of Iranians precisely because Shiism meant different things to different people, all of whom disliked conditions under the Shah. Clerics advocating strongly for the revolution argued that Shiism served as a revolutionary ideology that justified the struggle and promised an improved future for all the masses.

The revolutionary coalition consisted of the urban poor who experienced an intense cultural chasm between tradition and modernity, the moderate middle classes who were concerned with political freedoms, the clergy, the leftist opposition including Marxists, and the Bazaars. By the start of demonstrations in 1978 and 1979, the state already lost a significant capacity to repress the resistance. Soon, a reality of dual sovereignty emerged, in which the Shah continued to rule some areas, while the opposition captured other areas (Bashiriyeh 2015, “The Revolution in Iran”).

By January 1979, the Shah fled the country and Khomeini returned, later officially coming to power through elections and declaring Iran an Islamic state. The new constitution promoted political power and legitimacy derived from above, through God, and below, through the people, while purposefully disenfranchising many religious minorities in the country in efforts to keep the Shias in the position of power (Menoret 2014).

During the formative period, the clergy rushed to advance their power and institutionalize the revolution. They transformed the monarchy to an Islamic republic in terms of its constitution, law, parliament, political systems, and revolutionary committees. Secondly, they purged Iran’s schools and universities, the police, military, and government ministries of opposition voices and re-staffed them with supporters of the regime. The legacy of these policies remains today and is evident in the education system, which continues to impress Islamic values and support for an

Islamic state on its students (Menoret 2014). Due to the rapid period of modernization Iran experienced throughout the twentieth century, the transformation of Shia religious law into a modern state constitution required some modifications. The constitution had to extend Shia religious law beyond ethics and customs covering public law, and also necessitated the creation of a legislation that extended beyond the activities of conventional scholar jurists activities (Arjomand 2009). Khomeini was not interested in being a part of the constitutional drafting process, and so he left the job to his inner circle. This disinterest is reflected in his statement in 1970, claiming, “if laws are needed, Islam has established them all. There is no need for you, after establishing government, to sit down and draw up laws, or, like rulers who worship foreigners and are infatuate with the West, run after others to borrow their laws” (Arjomand 2009: 26).

Iran’s history and dramatic changes in regime are instrumental to understanding modern Iran, including why the country feels threatened by the international community, including its regional neighbors, and why it feels it is necessary to export its ideologies abroad.

Contemporary Civil Society and Domestic Governance

Today, Iran is a major regional power with a strong centralized state and a large population of over 70 million people who share a strong national religious identity. The Islamic Republic has a theocratic government, and a political structure comprising of a supreme leader, the executive, legislature, judiciary, and other institutions such as the Assembly of Experts and the Expediency Discernment Council. Despite the regime’s efforts to win the hearts and minds of the civil society, a demographic transformation and a growing distance from the negative experience of the Shah’s previous rule and subsequent revolution has caused Iranian youths to

gradually become more averse to the country's current governmental structure (Menoret 2014). Many of the unemployed masses of Iranian youths aspire to leave the country, to escape the pervasive theocratic government, the slow rate of economic growth, and the poor education (Mokhtari 2005; Sariolghalam 2014).

Similar to Saudi Arabia, the country has experienced social drawbacks due to the "resource curse." This phenomenon explains how Iran has focused on selling its natural resources to countries such as China and India, both countries that are accelerating in the innovative industries, while Iran's oil-export-based economy remains stagnant (Bayat 2010). Iran, however, does recognize that its oil resources are finite, and it would be disingenuous to assume that Iranian leadership is not thinking of ways to transform its economy and energy sector through new technologies, like nuclear energy (Mokhtari 2005).

The Shia state of Iran believes in the occultation of the twelfth Imam, or the last Imam, who would be entitled to political leadership and religious authority. With this belief comes the dilemma of authority; no government is truly legitimate until the Imam returns from hiding. Twelver Shia belief that governmental and religious authority belongs to the Imam alone justified the rebellion against the Shah. Although some say Shiism is more permissive than Sunnism, because it accepts expediency as a source of Sharia law, Shia government structure in Iran is less democratic. Shias believe that the government belongs to the prophet and his descendants, and if his decedents are not in power, then the government is illegitimate. The rise of Ayatollah Khomeini, referred to as Imam Khomeini by his followers, reinvigorated Shiism in the region and thus renewed and enforced the sectarian hegemonic divide between the Wahhabi Saudis and the Shia Iranians.

Iranian Foreign Policy

Iran is willing to fund radical militias in states that have weak central governments and large Shia communities. These groups begin as militias with pro-Iranian elements and later become influential players within national governments. Iran's foreign policy is centralized around ideological concerns. Iranian foreign policy has trend of supporting revolutionary groups, or non-state actors, in order to take advantage of instability and penetrate weak states, thus targeting dissatisfied political parties or militias who oppose domestic or regional status quo. This is reflective of revolutionary ideology, which tends to favor justice for a cause above economic development; politics have always won over economic concerns (Sariolghalam 2014). The country's oil resources have given Iran the ability to postpone economic development, thus saving the country from having to create normalized relations with the United States, the channel that many countries seeking to develop must follow, as seen in Turkey, Brazil, and Malaysia, among others. Iran has a subsistence economy, where interdependence is incompatible with independence and would undermine the identity of the Islamic Republic.

Since the Revolution, Iran's foreign policy and ideology has remained consistent. Iran bases its interests and policies on universalism, "or global order with an Islamic worldview that is found within the geographic boundaries of Muslim societies" (Sariolghalam 2014: 161).

A common misconception is that Iran chooses partners based on a shared adherence to Shia Islam. This, however, is not the case, as evident in its partnership with Hamas and the Taliban. Both these groups were Sunni, but they strongly oppose the regional order's status quo, which was dominated by the U.S. and its regional allies. A main goal of Iran's is to establish a presence in certain geographic areas that can later serve as a platform to project Iranian influence.

Sunnis in Iran

After 1979, Khomeini was not just calling to be accepted as leader of the Shia Islamic world; he wanted to be leader of the entire modern Islamic world. He aspired toward a total Islamic revolution, not just a Shia revolution, with the hopes that Iran would become the vanguard of the Pan-Islamic movement. Despite this, Khomeini still used Shia popular beliefs to rally the Shias around him, while simultaneously downplaying this pro-Shia stance outside the country, instead elevating anti-American rhetoric in attempts to rally Sunnis. International Sunni leadership, however, mostly did not accept his efforts. Since the Iranian Revolution, Sunnis in Iran continue to be underrepresented and marginalized, despite President Rouhani's undelivered promise to grant equal rights to Sunnis and Shias.

Freedom House ranks Iran as “not free” when it comes to the state of religious freedom, the second lowest ranking level, with Saudi Arabia as “worst of the worst” (Freedom House 2017). Compared to non-Muslim religious minorities, such as Zoroastrians and Christians, Sunnis have greater legal protections. Human Rights Watch reports that Iranian authority systematically discriminates against Muslim minorities, including Sunnis, by limiting their political voice, rights to equal employment, and banning religious minorities from building mosques in Tehran or conducting Eid prayers (Human Rights Watch 2016). Sunni identity mostly does not share Iran's Shia national identity, thus reducing Sunni identity to “other” in a Shia state, and leading to even further psychological marginalization (Mohammadi 2014). Although nationalism is discouraged in the religion of Islam, the Iranian government encourages population growth by supporting and promoting families to have more children due to a constant fear that Arab populations will rise against them (Bashiriyeh 2016 “Demography”).

The U.S. State Department also noted in its annual religious-freedom report that religious leaders banned Sunni literature and teachings from public schools, along with the construction of Sunni mosques. The International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran cited activist reports claiming that twenty Iranians were arrested in Ahvaz in February 2016 for converting from Shiism to Sunnism. In addition, Sunnis have been executed for preaching Sunni Islam, on charges of “enmity against God through spreading propaganda against the system” according to Human Rights Activists News Agency. Sectarian tensions have escalated in the region and have manifested in proxy wars, regional disputes, and executions of high-profile Shia clerics like Nimr al-Nimr in Saudi Arabia and Sunni preachers Mohammad Kayvan Karimi, Anjad Salehi, and Omid Payvand in Iran (Graham 2016). Such tensions only seem to suggest a more difficult life for religious Muslim minorities in the Middle East, so long as the ruling elites view minority populations as a political threat.

Export of the Iranian Revolution

Khomeini did not want the Iranian Revolution to remain within the borders of Iran; he aspired for a Pan-Islamic world, with Iran as the leader. In December 1979, Khomeini proclaimed “Islam is not peculiar to a county, to several countries, a group, or even the Muslims. Islam has come for humanity... Islam wishes to bring all of humanity under the umbrella of justice” (Ramanzi 2004: 556). Iranian leadership continues to use this rhetoric, though regional Sunni leadership sees it as illegitimate. The Iranian leadership downplays the country’s Shiism to countries abroad, while vilifying the U.S., often deterring blame for a regional country’s actions on American imperialism. After the execution of Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr in January 2016, at a protest in Tehran, in a speech Ahmad Panahian, an Iranian cleric claimed,

“the gruesome crime was only the enforcement of an order coming from America and Israeli intelligence services dictated to their collared dogs in Saudi Arabia” (Hubbard 2016). This vitriol towards Western influences contrasts with the words of a protester, who said “today, the message of this gathering and other rallies throughout the country to the Shiites of Saudi Arabia is that we are with you and we support you” (Ibid). The sentiments during the protest show how Iranian leadership expresses disapproval of other Muslim nations, though they reserve the harshest criticisms for the West in order to keep the door open to alliances with other Muslim nations in the future. Ultimately, the creation of a Pan-Islamic movement was a failed project of Khomeini’s, and the Iranian Revolution did not create unity amongst Muslim states, but it did play a role in transforming Shia political stances from quietist to an ideological and socio-political movement against foreign influence.

The Iranian Revolution was not only transformative for Iranians; the movement’s message was felt amongst Saudis as well, particularly in the Eastern Saudi Province, as discussed in the previous chapter. Dissident Shia clerics such as Shaykh Hasan al-Saffar hoped that the revolution would be an impetus for the Saudi Shia to finally defy the House of Saud (Darwich 2016). The Revolution served as the beginning of the emerging and continued power struggle between the Saudi Monarchy and an Islamic Republic of Iran. Saudi Arabia remains a deeply anti-revolutionary state, while Iran continues to work toward achieving a Pan-Islamism. In addition, the Kingdom is not based on a nationalist sentiment, but rather its Textualism and implementation of Sharia law, as interpreted by Wahhabis. Because of this, Saudi Arabia feels threatened when its distinct identity is challenged. Previously, the Saudi royal family established its consolidation of Islam and based its identity on its position as the vanguard of the Islamic world. It cited the ownership of Mecca and Medina and the financial funding of a conservative

Islamic approach. The Iranian Revolution challenged this, resulting in a contesting duality of power.

Chapter 5

Converged Regional Interests: Proxy wars in Bahrain and Yemen

The Middle Eastern hegemonic powers, Iran and Saudi Arabia, are currently invested in several regional interventions and proxy wars. Although some undertakings are more significant to the interceding countries than others, no pawn in Riyadh and Tehran's game of geopolitical supremacy is more salient than another, in terms of analysis; different case studies reveal or substantiate different trends. This chapter continues to explore what the non-sectarian sources of contention between Saudi Arabia and Iran are, and how the Saudi and Iranian leaderships frame the confrontation around sectarianism.

The cases of Bahrain and Yemen serves the purpose of this particular paper because they are instances of which both Riyadh and Tehran are potential benefactors, but also in which the two countries have invested differently. In addition, these proxy wars feature Iran and Saudi Arabia as the main actors, without as much other international influence, particularly from the U.S., as is the case in Syria and Iraq. A comparison of the two proxy wars, and the hegemons' roles in the conflicts, provides an interesting insight into the geopolitical strategies of Saudi Arabia and Iran and illuminates how Saudi Arabia follows *realpolitik* and Iran follows ideological considerations. The case of Bahrain shows the quick reactions from Saudi Arabia and Iran in the chaos of the Arab Spring in 2011, when both countries had long-term strategic interests in the region, with Saudi Arabia's partnership with Bahraini leadership, and Iran's

historical ties to the country. Yemen, on the other hand, provides a case study in which Saudi Arabia has historical ties and investments in the country, but Iran's level of involvement is debated, though Saudi Arabia continues to justify its involvement in Yemen as a defense against Iranian expansion. Saudi Arabia and Iran's proxy wars in Bahrain and Yemen are indeed a case of divergent religious branches, but above all, it is a battle for power and strategic interests.

Bahrain

Political tensions in Bahrain do follow sectarian lines, though this is not the only explanatory factor for the politics of the country. Roughly sixty-five to seventy-five percent of the population is Shia, and almost one-third the population is Shia of Persian decent, a group that the Sunni monarchy especially distrusts (Pew Research Center 2009). Despite this demographic composition, Sunnis dominate Bahrain's 40-seat parliament, due to an electoral process that bars Shias. Bahrainis believe that Sunni invaders from Qatar in the eighteenth century captured and maintained power over the original Bahraini Shias. The country has experienced periods of violence, and repression against the politically marginalized Shia populations (Nasr 2006). The Bahraini monarchy has recruited and granted citizenship to thousands of guest workers, typically of Arab or Pakistani descent, in an effort to alter the sectarian balance in the nation towards a higher Sunni population (Kuwait Times 2011). Currently, the country's proportion of non-nationals is at 51.1 percent, according to the Gulf Labor Markets and Migration Research Center (Gulf Research Center). This atmosphere is coupled with the systematic disenfranchisement of Shias through exclusion from state-jobs, governmental decision-making, and housing.

Prior to the Arab Spring, violent confrontations between Shias and the Sunni monarchy occurred with help for the leadership coming from the Saudi government who remains vigilant

about increased Iranian influence in Bahrain. Accusations in 1981 by the Bahraini government claimed to have discovered Iranian terrorist cells in the country. Bahrain followed with harsh campaigns to counter domestic Shia resistance, arresting seventy-three Bahrainis and later charging them as members of the Tehran-based Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (BBC 2016). Uprisings in the 1990s brought civil unrest and a subsequent violent crackdown that left forty people dead, and arbitrarily arrested Shia religious leaders, oppositional political figures, and human rights activists. These pieces of history are precisely why Sunni rulers suspect Iran to be the feeding hand behind anti-regime, Shia activity in their states. However, the main opposition parties in Bahrain do not want an Iranian *vilayet-e faqih*, or guardian of the jurist government, nor do they necessarily want Shia rule; they wish for an end to the institutionalized discrimination against Shias by elite Sunnis, and an end to sectarian gerrymandering that recruits and gives citizenship to Sunni guest workers who often serve in Bahraini security forces and have a greater access to the job market (Nasr 2006). Iran is arguably a marginal Shia force in Bahrain, where Bahrainis gravitate towards the Iraqi Shia clergy, which advocates for quietism. This philosophy calls for religious leaders to restrict their statements to moral and religious issues, and abstain from political commentary. This strategy is espoused by Iraq's Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who is an Iranian-born cleric, and who supports an Islamic state, but not a theocratic state like Iran (Otterman 2004). It is against this background of systemic disenfranchisement and schemes by Bahraini government that the Bahraini citizens were inclined to organize and protest during the Arab Spring.

The Arab Spring uprisings in Bahrain and the subsequent violent crackdown reintroduced vitriolic clashes between Iran and Saudi Arabia, similar to Saudi Arabia's reaction to domestic demonstrations during and after the Iranian Revolution. Although this is one case of conflict

between the two countries, it exemplifies both defensive and offensive strategies made by Saudi Arabia and Iran, respectively. Saudi Arabia attempts to quell the revolution and maintain the status quo, while Iran attempts to capitalize on the political upheaval in Bahrain in order to shift alliances towards the Republic. Iran merging with Bahrain would create a pathway to build more coalitions in the region, which could later serve as a gateway to harness more power in the region. The case of Bahrain exemplifies how Riyadh supports governments and Iran supports civilian-led uprisings. The case does follow sectarian lines, but, the problem is not inherently due to sectarianism, but rather derives from systematized discriminatory policies against a group of people who are seen as a political threat, in order for another group to maintain power.

With a history of economic stability along with its connection to global super powers, Saudi Arabia is able not only to neglect human rights in its own country, but also to support similar neglect in other countries in the Middle East. The increased amount of control over Gulf States, or Saudi satellite regimes after the Arab Spring has given the Kingdom notable political leverage, especially in Bahrain. Unlike other small Gulf States, the Bahraini monarchy has welcomed Saudi financial aid and has not displayed much independence as seen in other small but wealthy Gulf States such as Qatar.

Saudi elite backed King Hamad, stating that they stood “with all its power behind the state and people of Bahrain” (Kuwait Times 2011). This ironic statement and the Kingdom’s subsequent military intervention were due to a fear that successful revolutionary campaigns in Bahrain would entice similar domestic revolutions. In addition, the Saudis claimed that the Gulf Cooperation Council’s military forces were deployed to protect Bahrain from Iranian threats, not as an execution of occupational power over Bahrain (Ibid). In reaction to GCC claims of Iranian subversion in Bahrain, Ayatollah Ali Khomeini in 2012 during a Friday Prayer in Tehran stated,

“The rulers of Bahrain claimed that Iran is involved in the events of Bahrain. This is a lie. No, we do not interfere... if we had interfered, the conditions would have been different in Bahrain” (Matthiesen 2013).

Iran has a long history of attempts to extend Iranian sovereignty over Bahrain, arguing it was a part of the Shah Abbas reign in 1588-1629, and was taken by the al-Khalifa family with support from the United Kingdom in 1783. Iran's Shah, beginning in 1970, revived Iran's call for ownership over Bahrain, which later fizzled out after the UN referendum for Bahrain's independence. After 1979, however, the mullah regime again revived claims for ownership over Bahrain, with one advisor referring to the country as the fourteenth district of Iran. (Melamed 2016; Lawson 1989; Cordesman 1997). This historical claim, however, is never manifested in actions, only rhetoric and shared sentiments. Iran's claims to Bahrain exhibit a foundational difference between the Saudi and Iranian leadership, where the former is action motivated, and the latter is ideologically motivated.

Bahrain's geographic proximity to the Kingdom along with its historical roots in the Persian Empire makes the small island nation a center for substantial Saudi-Iranian political conflict. The case of the Arab Spring in Bahrain can be viewed as a case of climactic sectarian tensions, but it can more fittingly be analyzed as a geopolitical conflict between two countries and their support for allied governmental monarchies, versus support for revolutionary masses.

The Arab Spring in 2011 toppled Saudi-allied governments across the region. The Muslim Brotherhood's rise to power posed a threat to the Kingdom's self-identified role as the Sunni leader of the Islamic world. Worried that Iranians would fill the empty vacuums and capitalize on civil unrest throughout the region, the Saudis quickly backed the governments of their regional allies with financial and military funding. The Kingdom promised billions in aid to

Jordan, Yemen, Egypt, and other countries for crackdowns on protesters, even going so far as to offer Morocco and Jordan memberships to the Gulf Cooperation Council (Lynch 2011; Fisher 2016). As a revolutionary movement, which challenges the status quo, the Arab Spring was seen as an opportune moment for Iranians to gain more partners and extend their influence in the region.

Out of all the Arab Spring uprisings in the Middle East, Bahrain had the largest turnout relative to the size of the country. During the height of Arab Spring unrest, oil-rich countries distributed wealth to Oman and Bahrain to quell cries of social reform in the two smaller countries. The Gulf Cooperation Council believed that the 2011 uprisings grew from the ghost of the Iranian Revolution. They thought that Iran attempted to capitalize on the popular unrest in Bahrain to ultimately overrule the Sunni al-Khalifa family power in Bahrain (Friedman 2012). At the height of Arab Spring protests on March 14th, one day before a three-month state of emergency was called, at King Hamad's request, Saudi military transport vehicles and roughly two thousand troops from the GCC's Peninsula Shield task force were deployed to support the al-Khalifa security forces (Bronner and Slackman, 2011). Although the protests were largely nonviolent, the aftermath of the protests and subsequent crackdown led to over forty people killed, 1,600 arrested, and many detainees tortured, with several dying while in custody. Protesters were not the only ones targeted; journalists and doctors were also detained for reporting on the case and treating the wounded. 4,000 individuals have lost their jobs for supporting the movement, and forty mosques that have been destroyed (Zunes 2013). Even though Bahrain requested the deployment of military backing by Saudi forces, the Kingdom's presence highlights Saudi concern over Iran's expanding regional influence, and goes to show

that Saudi's actions are not to help Bahraini people, but rather to help the regional interests of the Kingdom (Bronner and Slackman 2011).

Media rhetoric also played an active role in rallying Iranians and Saudis around the situation in Bahrain. The Saudi Daily newspaper *Al Jazirah*, days before March 14th, released a weeklong series of articles titled "Safavid Iran's plans for the destruction of the Gulf States," calling back to the Safavid Empire in the sixteenth to eighteenth century, the Shia empire had control over Bahrain. The articles described Iran's elaborate plan to exploit chaos in Bahrain in order to advance its regional ambitions to annex Bahrain as a part of Iran. In addition, Iran's own daily newspaper *Kayhan* published a statement that was endorsed by over two hundred and fifty members of Parliament, stating "the efforts of America and the sending of forces by the rulers of Saudi Arabia to Bahrain, the staining of the hands of these rulers with the blood of innocents of Bahrain not only will not suppress the will of the people of Bahrain, the bloody intervention in Bahrain by Saudi Arabia will have dangerous consequences for the illegitimate rulers of the Saudi regime" (Friedman 2012). These two media publications are samples in a broader collection of reporting that follow the foreign policy stances of Saudi Arabia and Iran. The Kingdom remains skeptical of its biggest regional counterpart, Iran, and attempts to instill fear of Iranian proselytization in the smaller Gulf States. Iran, on the other hand, continues to attack Saudi Arabia, citing the expense of human lives and the illegitimate Saudi elite, while simultaneously blaming the United States in order to continue its Pan-Islamic and anti-American foreign policy stance. Saudi Arabia uses sectarianism to redirect any internal or external disapproval of Saudi military deployment, citing Iran as the inherent regional enemy who is obsessed with reviving the Safavid Empire. The Iranians, on the other hand, do not refer to sectarianism as reasoning for delegitimizing foreign governments and calling out against

intervention in Bahrain. They rather employ a humanitarian stance, which is meant to resound with Shias because of their shared identity with Bahraini protesters, and should resonate with non-Shias as well.

Editor-in-chief at the Pan-Arab daily newspaper *al-Hayat*, reported that the aggressive stance of the Gulf Cooperation Council was uncharacteristic of the coalition's previous approaches to foreign policy, which was usually focused on avoiding condemnation and attacks and keeping crisis mitigation behind closed doors. Particularly, this silence was seen in the GCC's reaction to Iraq, where the council refused to confront Iran on its political entrenchment (Friedman 2012). However, since the Arab Spring, a distinct shift in the GCC has occurred, specifically with the reassertion of Saudi dominance, and diminished opposition by Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. The many and fast uprisings of the Arab Spring produced a new sense of urgency and required quick, deliberate action to back the otherwise at-risk governments (Kamrava 2012). The shift in GCC's foreign policy shows the deep fear member countries feel at the possibility of an Iranian backed revolution in Bahrain. The continued Saudi leadership in the GCC further displays how a consistent fear of a more powerful Iran remains today, and has forced the GCC to reform its foreign policy approach to be more outspoken against Iran's actions, with a staunch opposition to possible future Iranian nuclear capabilities, and to act more proactive and outspoken in their regional endeavors.

Since the end of the Arab Spring, stifling opposition remains a priority on the Bahraini elite's agenda. After the lifting of martial law in June 2011, King Hamad created a National Dialogue and an independent investigation into the unrest. He called this an attempt to reconcile with the opposition, but the results only led to more divisions between the opposition and Bahraini leadership in part through mixed messages from regime leadership. Bahrain's National

Safety Court tried and sentenced thirteen prominent opposition figures to varying terms of imprisonment, most of who were committed non-violent protesters (Ulrichsen 2012).

Credibility of King Hamad's oppositional reconciliation tactics suffered from the beginning of the post-revolution period. The Bahraini leadership ignored core oppositional demands, rewriting electoral boundaries and limiting the extent of the al-Khalifa family's power. King Hamad also called for the creation of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, or the BICI, to investigate the Arab Spring. The chair, Egyptian Professor Cherif Bassiouni, had led the UN Security Council investigation into war crimes in the former Yugoslavia. His report released in November made shocking discoveries. In the report, and during a televised speech in front of the King, he concluded that state authorities used torture and excessive force during protest crackdowns, and discovered a pattern of unaccountability and violations of human rights protection laws in the state emergency security services. Most surprisingly to the Bahrain leadership and the international community, the BICI argued that the protests were in the boundaries of citizens' participatory rights, and that there was no evidence found to link the protests to Iranian involvement. The statements by the BICI directly contradicted regime narratives and the GCC's justification for military intervention, thus creating deeper divisions between the leadership and the opposition (Bassiouni 2011).

In 2017, Bahrain's Shura Council, or the Consultative Council approved a constitutional amendment allowing military courts to try citizens who attack security forces, which Amnesty International said would undermine defendants' rights and silence state opposition, and "is part of a broader pattern where the government uses the courts to crack down on all forms of opposition at the expense of human rights" (Yaakoubi 2017). Human rights organizations have been critical of Bahrain's recent domestic policies that silence Shia oppositions, including arrests

of several prominent activists and the removal of a Shia spiritual leaders' citizenship on the basis of corruption charges (Aboudi and Williams 2017).

Bahrain's monarchy, however, has promoted the idea of pluralism and religious toleration, which is used as a counter-narrative campaign to delegitimize widespread majority Shia sentiments. The King nominated a female member of the Jewish community as Bahraini ambassador in Washington, who served from 2008-2013, although the Jewish community in Bahrain is about 35-50 individuals at most. She was promoted the same year the regime released a document that promoted "harmony and tolerance among religions in Bahrain, the land where all faiths and sects are respected" (Bahrain News Agency 2008). Representatives from Bohras, Christian, and Muslim communities signed the document and celebrated "freedom of worship" (Ibid). These gestures, though they received much media attention, were made to benefit non-citizens, foreign residents, and politically non-oppositional minorities. While promoting inclusion of religious minorities in Bahrain, in January 2014, the court dissolved the Shia Islamic Council of Scholars, created in 2004 by Sheikh Issa Qassim, and liquidated its assets, claiming that the group was breaching laws on permitted political activities (Global Coalition to Protect Education 2014).

Until the government stops seeing Shias as a political threat, the Bahraini leadership will continue to marginalize and monitor them. In addition, escalating tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, could lead to deteriorating relations between Bahrain's leadership and opposition, where shared regional grievances has the power to mobilize Iranians to proselytize Bahrainis in the future.

The case of Saudi Arabia and Iran in Bahrain shows how the Saudis and Iranians have framed the Arab Spring in Bahrain, and the results of their interventions in the region. Although

the direct intervention of Iran in Bahrain is debated, the Saudis would not have reacted to the uprising with such forceful military assistance if there were no fear of Iran gaining influence in the region. However, without GCC military intervention in the uprisings, the outcome of the Arab Spring in Bahrain could have been drastically different.

Yemen

Yemen is geographically divided with the minority Shias in the northeast and the majority Sunni populations in the southeast. The oppositional insurgent group known as the Houthis is Zaidiyyah. It is a small branch of Shias located almost exclusively in Yemen that is distinct from Twelver Shiism, but is not entirely associated with the Houthi insurgency. The Houthis fought president Ali Abdullah Saleh from 2004 until 2011, when he stepped down during the Arab Spring protests and President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi succeeded him. Saudi Arabia supports president Hadi, and believes that military intervention is the solution to restoring Yemen's failed government. However, this approach has spiraled them from a proxy war in Yemen into a wider, more complicated conflict involving many international actors, such as Egypt's president Sisi, supporting Hadi's navy and air forces, and Al Qaeda's Sunni militants (NYT 2015).

The Saudis have ties to the Yemen Arab Republic, or North Yemen, which emerged in 1962. However, this unity between the Saudis and North Yemen dissolved in 1990 with the unification of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, or South Yemen, to form the Republic of Yemen in 1990. The Saudis financially and politically supported North Yemen to protect it from the Marxist-influenced People's Democratic Republic of Yemen. The Saudis campaigned to coerce North Yemen into ignoring any prospects of unification with South

Yemen, in part because of a fear that, if united, Yemen would become the more populous and dynamic Arab Peninsula country. Following the brief but bloody civil war in South Yemen in 1986, and the decline of communism in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, South Yemen began a liberalization process simultaneously with North Yemen and the two countries quickly moved toward unification in 1990 (Phillips 2014).

After failing to prevent the unification between North Yemen and South Yemen, Riyadh began to place pressure on the newly merged Yemen regime. Especially after Sana'a seemed to support Iraq in Kuwait in August 1990, Saudi Arabia began a counter-narrative campaign towards Yemen and expelled Yemeni workers from the Kingdom. This influx of an estimated one million workers weakened Yemen's already fragile economy. Relations between Sana'a and Riyadh further deteriorated with the rise of competition over oil reserves on the established boarder region between the two countries. Riyadh formed alliances with tribal groups to periodically kidnap and detain oil-field workers and require Sana'a to meet tribal demands. As a new government, Sana'a failed to establish control over the Riyadh's allied tribal groups, undermining Yemen's central government. Serving as an even greater challenge to Riyadh, Sana'a experimented with civic participation and democratic governance systems that Saudi officials viewed as dubious. Eventually, in 1998, the Yemeni President Ali Abdallah Salih declared a border agreement to peacefully settle disputes with the Saudis, with the hope that cooperation could lead to economic benefits. In addition, the Saudis began building Wahhabi institutes, particularly in the Sa'ada province, in an attempt to create an allied force in the country (Juneau 2016). Despite these factors, in the long run, Saudis viewed Yemen as a threat to their supremacy in the peninsula, and many Yemenis viewed Sana'a's alliance with Riyadh to be irresponsible and subservient.

In November 2011, after high levels of defections and protests, an agreement titled the GCC Initiative called for numerous quick reforms in Yemen, including elections for a new president, a government comprised equally of ruling and oppositional party members, amendments to the electoral system and constitution, and changes to the security apparatus. In this agreement, President Salih was not required to abandon all positions in politics; instead he gained immunity from prosecution for anything he committed while in power and was allowed to remain as the head of his political party. Many Yemenis saw this process as illegitimate because it was largely influenced by the United States and Saudi Arabia. The Houthis vehemently rejected the proposal to form a federation of six regions, which was an obvious tactic to divide the territories under Houthi control (Juneau 2016). Such political unrest concurring with food insecurity, an increase in Al-Qaida affiliates in the country and U.S. military action against them, other security issues, and a decline in oil revenues led to the failed state we see today (Phillips 2014).

Arguably even worse than the United States' failure to acknowledge Saudi war crimes in the region, the U.S. has previously provided the Saudis with unchecked military sales for fighting in Yemen. Approvals of these sales have significantly increased the civilian death toll. Saudi Arabia's naval blockade in Aden and al-Hudaydah has cut off essential supplies to Yemenis and has largely contributed to fatal instability in the country. In April, Riyadh agreed to provide Yemen with \$274 million for humanitarian relief, but has since failed to transfer the funds. London and Washington have tried to "quietly" persuade the Saudis to moderate its tactics in Yemen, but so far, Saudi Arabia's policy has remained the same (Carasik 2015). At the same time, the United States has provided intelligence and some logistical support to the Saudi-led coalition of nine African and Middle Eastern countries that launched Operation Decisive Storm

in March 2015. This action has been responsible for bombing hospitals and weddings, causing hundreds of civilian casualties, and blockading which cuts off Yemen's food and medicine supplies (Knights and Mello 2015). Experts claim, however, that the March 2015 Saudi-led coalition airstrikes against the Houthis have been carried out despite few new arms support from the U.S., who have supported the Kingdom with intelligence instead of weaponry. This suggests that the Kingdom has become capable of carrying out sophisticated military campaigns, independent of continued aid from the U.S. (Friedman 2015).

Saudi Arabia has used military intervention in Yemen throughout the last five years, though its level of involvement fluctuates, with the claim that it is protecting the Arab nations from "Persian subversion" (Milani 2015). This being said, experts have claimed that Saudi Arabia exaggerates Iran's influence in Yemen, using this rhetoric as an excuse to justify the Kingdom's desire for regional expansion (Juneau 2016; Malsin 2016; Lynch 2016; Terril 2014). Iran has little economic investment in Yemen. Though Iran has supported the Houthis in the last few years with soft power and small investments, Mohsen Milani argues that the Houthis are seeking Iran's support, whereas Iran is not seeking to reap large benefits from supporting the Houthis. Evidence suggesting Iran's modest investment into Yemen can be seen in examinations of Tehran's outlook on the conflict in Yemen; Iran states that there is no military solution, and therefore, unlike the Saudis, Tehran will not directly invest military strength into the broken country with an unforeseeable future. This, however, does not mean Iran has fully expunged its Yemen interests; Tehran has realized that it can still make geopolitical gains in the warring country, with little economic or ideological investments (Milani 2015).

Thomas Juneau claims the Iranians have four reasons for supporting the Houthis over the past few years in a limited way. First, the high levels of instability in Yemen means that in order

to substantially benefit in a resolution, Iran would have to heavily commit to the country. Second, Iran has limited geopolitical gains to make in Yemen, where the country is not as much of a foreign policy priority as is Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. Third, deeper investment into Yemen would represent international “overstretching” for Iran, thus deflecting resources away from other regional projects of greater value. Finally, Iran recognizes that Yemen is a large priority for Saudi Arabia; therefore deeper investment into Yemen would mean further unnecessary contesting tensions with Saudi Arabia. Ultimately, the costs of more involvement outweigh the benefits (Juneau 2016).

Still, Iranian support of the Houthis has resulted in the marginalization of pro-Saudi actors in Yemen, such as Ali Mosen the Al-Islah. Accordingly, any losses for the Saudis represent gains for the Iranians, and Iran benefits from the distraction of Saudi’s investment in the expensive conflict, thus giving way for insecurity to disperse elsewhere in the region, such as in Syria and Iraq (Milani 2015).

A presence in Yemen, however marginal, nonetheless creates a launch pad for Iran to use against any future opponents. Tehran has established the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps officers to train and equip the Houthis, and there have been reports of increased shipping between Iran and Yemen in 2015 (Jones and Kerr 2015). However, with Yemen’s one-of-a-kind gun culture and its vast preexisting weapons market, any contribution to the plethora of already available weapons in the country does not necessarily have a lasting impact on the balance of forces in Yemen, nor does it reap many benefits to the donor. This being said, Iran’s contributions do not necessarily result in any significant influence over Houthi’s decisions. In a statement in April 2015, Jen Psaki, spokesperson for the State Department stated, “The U.S. is concerned about Iran’s relations with the Houthis and that the U.S. has evidence of all kinds of

support to the Houthis, but, we have no evidence that Iran controls the actions of the Houthis” (Milani 2015). Additionally, there is no evidence to suggest that the Houthis are dependent on Iranian support, or that they are an instrumental actor in the Yemen war.

The Saudis have more to gain from involvement in the Yemen war because of their previous investments in the country since the mid-twentieth century. From 2012 to 2014, the Kingdom spent over four billion dollars to support Yemen, and many of its actions in the country have resulted in increased casualties. (IRIN 2014). Once again, this economic support and various other interventions in Yemen exemplify the realpolitik of Riyadh. On their southern border, the Saudis need to continue to dilute tensions in Yemen, which poses an all-too-real threat to Saudi national security, in the possible influx of refugees, weapons, and Al Qaeda’s Arabian Peninsula branch.

Today, to simplify, conflict in Yemen divides Houthis, Iran, and former president Saleh on one side, versus the pro-status quo forces of the remaining Hadi government, its domestic backing, and Saudi Arabia. Looking at the conflict holistically, though, the situation in Yemen involves far more actors, and has turned from a civil war into an international crisis. Although the Houthis are one of the many problematic groups in Yemen, the Saudis have targeted the group as if it is the sole actor responsible for the state of anarchy in Yemen. Even though this is not the case, the stance is in line with Saudi policy in regional conflicts. Riyadh believes that its influence in Yemen is necessary as an extension of its efforts to counter Iranian influence in the region. Saudi Arabia considers the Houthis to be an Iranian proxy, although, as stated before, Tehran’s influence in Yemen is marginal, both economically and politically. Without Saudi influence in Yemen, however, the country has a high chance of completely imploding on itself

(Knickmeyer 2011). The Saudis are not trying to solve the conflict in Yemen or find a long-term solution; they are only trying to manage the existing problem.

Since the unification of North and South Yemen, the Saudis have tried to undermine the new country, but since the war, Riyadh is trying a different approach to ensure a pro-Saudi force emerges from the war. The Saudis instituted economic measures to manipulate Yemen's oil market and prevented Yemenis from working in the Kingdom. In addition, they created a division between the tribal groups on the Saudi-Yemen boarder and the state. Retracting from the crisis in Yemen would mean over fifty years of wasted national interest efforts. Continued involvement in Yemen, on the other hand, means continued protection of Saudi national interests. If Yemen implodes after Saudi withdrawal, the legitimacy of the Kingdom would come into question, both domestically internationally. However, currently, the Saudi narrative for involvement in Yemen is framed around a defensive campaign against the Iranians.

The complexity of the humanitarian crisis in Yemen does not have a high chance of resolution in the foreseeable future. Farea al-Muslimi, a Yemeni analyst at the Carnegie Middle East Center claims, "for peace to possibly exist in Yemen, it will have to get at least the consensus of at least Saudi Arabia and Iran." (Malsin 2016). Saudi involvement in Yemen is seen as a foreign policy failure, and has received resistance from Saudi society and the international community. For this reason, Riyadh may choose to fizzle out its presence in the country and divert its attention toward other regional concerns, such as advocacy against the Iranian nuclear deal. This, however, could leave a vacuum for other non-state actors, such as Al Qaeda, to capture the region, or for Iran to gain more leverage. In addition, Al Qaeda entering Saudi Arabia would significantly delegitimize the Kingdom in the eyes of the international community because Saudi Wahhabi proselytization in Yemen has influenced the establishment

of Islamist groups. Saudi Arabia's failed foreign intervention in Yemen, which has only exacerbated the conflict, can hopefully serve as a reminder for the country to carefully weigh Iranian involvement in future regional crises before establishing an active role.

Future Prospects for Bahrain and Yemen

The futures of Bahrain and Yemen have been dramatically altered by Saudi and Iranian intervention. If Bahrain's leadership continues to uphold and implement laws in the country that marginalize Shias, its actions could lead to a widespread feeling of disillusionment amongst majority of the population, leading to a dispirited society that could turn to Iran for help. Likewise, Bahrain cannot rely on the Saudi's checkbook diplomacy and protection in the case of future civil uprisings because it then runs the risk of becoming an absolute Saudi satellite. Bahrain has carefully investigated its Arab Spring protests and should use the analysis to create a more inclusive public atmosphere, instead of further instigating civil society, which could only lead to more civil unrest. In Yemen, the Saudis continue to be actively involved, although the country has reached an impasse. Because the Kingdom has not made any tangible gains in Yemen, the legitimacy and coercive power of the state will be undermined if it fully retracts itself from Yemen. However, as oil becomes a less lucrative market, the Saudis and Iranians will need to become more selective in the conflicts in which they choose to intervene. This possible future financial crisis serves as an incentive for the Saudis, particularly, to gracefully and creatively back out of its international conflicts from which they have yet to reap benefits, rather than continuing to divert their revenue away from domestic projects.

Conclusion

The Middle East is currently experiencing a leadership duality. This paper has argued that the actions of Saudi and Iranian leadership are largely due neither to sectarian differences nor to caprice, but rather that both countries adhere to realpolitik and ideological strategies in regional policymaking. Although both countries have policies discriminating against the other religious sect, Riyadh mainly frames regional conflicts around Iranian aggression, which has become ubiquitous with Shia aggression, whereas Tehran places blame on American perversion rather than overtly Sunni or Saudi influence.

Circumstances in Bahrain and Yemen suggest that the Saudis not only have greater investments in these two proxy wars than the Iranians do, but they also inflate the level of Iranian involvement in order to delegitimize Tehran and unite Saudi nationals around Riyadh's proxy wars. It is uncertain whether this narrative is a result of genuine paranoia of Iranian subversion, or if it is a disguise to move attention away from Saudi actions. The case of Bahrain seems to suggest the Saudi vigilance towards Iran is rather genuine. Involvement in Yemen, however, was justified similarly as a national security measure against Iranian proselytization, which actually concealed the real goal of preventing Islamist threats from entering the Kingdom, in order to protect Saudi legitimacy.

Saudi Arabia and Iran's desire for geopolitical supremacy has become a national security objective for the two countries. When it comes to the national security of Saudi Arabia and Iran,

the regimes have largely invested resources abroad, while resorting to an internal security quick fix involving systemic alienation of minority Muslim populations, who they see as a political threat. This suppression of perceived domestic threats only delays any possible future opposition against the regime, adding pressure to the autoclave. As an alternative, the countries could diffuse this pressure by taking steps to build dialogues and institute social and economic reforms to include the entire populations.

When it comes to civil unrest, these countries, along with others, historically have mitigated political unrest and disapproval with increased public spending packages. This strategy, though not capable of providing for prolonged peace, can help, so long as there are remittances and funding within the government. Proxy wars deplete state funds, particularly for the Saudis, who have no foreseeable future solutions in Yemen. Investing in more egalitarian policies, rather than investing in suppressive projects, will better create functioning and diverse societies and economies. This is a wiser national security strategy that will, in the long run, benefit the home countries.

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