The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry and its tutelary models in Lebanon

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Acknowledgements

"Don't let idiots ruin your day"

Lancaster-UK, September 2022.

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"...It does a job…"

Simon Mabon, September 2022

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Abstract

The geopolitical rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has exerted a profound influence on the internal dynamics of Middle Eastern nations since the mid-2000s, with Lebanon standing out as a significant case study. This doctoral thesis seeks to explore in depth the specific characteristics that have rendered Lebanon uniquely susceptible to external interference from these regional powers, particularly through their respective tutelary models. While existing international relations literature extensively covers the Saudi-Iranian rivalry in the broader Middle East, this thesis aims to fill a crucial gap by providing a detailed analysis of how these powers' distinct tutelary approaches manifest within Lebanon and shape its political landscape. Lebanon's strategic position and complex sectarian makeup have made it a battleground for regional influence, where Saudi Arabia and Iran compete not only for geopolitical supremacy but also for ideological and strategic footholds. This thesis posits that Lebanon's historical and contemporary vulnerabilities to external manipulation are rooted in a combination of socio-political fragmentation, historical ties to external powers, and the legacy of sectarianism exacerbated by regional proxy conflicts. The study is structured into five comprehensive chapters, each addressing a key aspect of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and its impact on Lebanon:

Chapter 01: Regional Rivalries, Socialization, and Tutelary Power Drawing on insights from international relations literature, this chapter explores the concept of regional rivalries, socialization, and the mechanisms through which external powers seek to exert influence over smaller states like Lebanon. It discusses the theoretical frameworks of socialization and tutelage, highlighting how Saudi Arabia and Iran employ these strategies to shape political outcomes in Lebanon.

Chapter 02: Origins and Evolution of the Saudi-Iranian Rivalry Focused on the origins and evolution of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, this chapter elucidates the geostrategic objectives of each actor within the Middle Eastern regional order and their implications for Lebanon. It analyzes how these rivalries have impacted Lebanon's political system, contributing to periods of instability and polarization.

Chapter 03: Struggle for Islamic Supremacy and Regional Security Architecture This chapter examines the aftermath of the 2006 Lebanese-Israeli War and its role in reshaping the regional

security architecture. It explores how the competition between armed Islamist groups aligned with Saudi Arabia and Iran has influenced Lebanon's security dynamics and broader regional stability.

Chapter 04: This chapter provides a historical backdrop to Lebanon's unique political landscape, tracing the interactions between domestic factions and external powers, particularly Saudi Arabia and Iran. It examines how these interactions have evolved over time, influencing Lebanon's state formation, political institutions, and societal divisions.

Chapter 05: Theoretical Analysis of Tutelary Models in Lebanon The final chapter offers a theoretical analysis of the tutelary models employed by Saudi Arabia and Iran within Lebanon. It investigates how these models operate to maintain influence over Lebanon's political and social structures, often at the expense of national sovereignty and democratic governance. This chapter also considers the implications of external tutelage for Lebanon's future as an independent state and the challenges it poses to conventional understandings of sovereignty in international relations.

In conclusion, this thesis argues that Lebanon's enduring susceptibility to external interference from Saudi Arabia and Iran reflects a broader trend in the Middle East, where regional powers utilize sectarian divisions and geopolitical rivalries to extend their influence. By unpacking the complexities of Saudi-Iranian competition within Lebanon, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how external powers manipulate domestic politics and shape regional dynamics. It calls for continued scholarly attention to the intricate interplay between regional rivalries, domestic politics, and sovereignty in the context of Lebanon and similar states in the Middle East. Overall, this thesis aims to not only contribute to academic literature on Middle Eastern geopolitics but also to provide insights that can inform policy decisions aimed at promoting stability and sovereignty in Lebanon and beyond. By unraveling the mechanisms of tutelary power and its implications, it seeks to shed light on the challenges and opportunities facing Lebanon as it navigates its complex geopolitical environment in the 21st century.

Chapters

Introduction

Setting the scene

The clash between two regional powers – Saudi Arabia and Iran – has produced multidimensional impacts on the internal dynamics of other nations in the Middle East, particularly since 2006. However, these effects are particularly pronounced in Lebanon, where they have shaped the very nature of the country's internal political processes. In this manuscript, I identify what specific characteristics have left the political systems in the Middle East, in general, and in Lebanon, in particular, permeable to Saudi and Iranian external interference. I explore the conditions and the operating mechanisms of the respective tutelary models exercised by Saudi Arabia and Iran over the various sectarian groups and political forces of Lebanon.

To understand how the Saudi-Iranian rivalry has shaped Lebanese politics, it is necessary to shed light on how this influence is exerted within the state in both the contours of its political system and the fabric of its social organization. Some evidence reveals that the weakness of institutional structures, the profusion of sectarian cleavages and systemic corruption serve as conditioning factors that shape the behavior of political actors in the country. This research offers to the field of International Relations, drawn from the Lebanese case, an explanation in the various dimensions that make up the multifaceted geopolitical rivalry between two prominent regional powers – the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran – in the Middle East and their tutelary models.

The concepts of tutelage and the tutelary model are important to understand in any discussion of Lebanon's political environment. Tutelage, in this case, refers to an arrangement in which a particular actor, institution, or external force exerts controlling influence over the action of another political agent in return for protection, resources, and legitimacy. A tutelary model describes the application of this concept to praxis in a state's political environment. For Lebanon, the presence and power of tutelary models contribute to an interesting conceptual situation in which Lebanon is independent nation but not truly sovereign in any meaningful sense of the term.

The regime of external tutelage exercised by regional forces occurs at the macro political (strategic) level and not at the micro political (tactical) level. That is, there are two different layers of political decision-making in a given country. The tutelated actors can make decisions independent of the

tutelary forces on topics such as health, education, public transport or the legislative approval of issues on family law. However, when the issues concern topics such as defense, foreign policy, energy exploitation – themes that interface with the geopolitical or regional security architecture and link to the interests of the tutelary powers – they are oriented and defined from the outside to the inside. The specific layer of tactical themes, meanwhile, is defined among the players themselves in that political ecosystem. In the academic literature, tutelary regimes are generally thought of as those where "the power of the elected governments is constrained by non-elected, tutelary powers" (Bünte 2022). From an analytical perspective, "Tutelary intervention is not defined here as a binary of direct power relationships between political actors (controlling versus not controlling). Instead, it is constructed as a spectrum of possible and not mutually exclusive roles which tutelary powers perform – depending on their position in the political system." (*Idem*)

In fact, Lebanon's political environment is currently characterized by the presence of not one, but two distinct tutelary models corresponding to two rival external powers: Saudi Arabia and Iran. As the geopolitical rivalry between these two regional powers plays out across the Middle Eastern region, Lebanon has become an increasingly irreplaceable piece on their strategic chessboard. Both nations view Lebanon as critical to their national security, a stance that has led to deep external involvement in the country's politics in the form of tutelary relationships between a range of internal actors and their respective benefactors in Riyadh and Tehran. These models differ from each other in important ways. The Iranian model is based primarily on ideological alignment, religious affinity, and/or deep historical and cultural ties. It therefore has proved fairly successful at advancing Iranian interests, maintaining alignment, and continuing a tutelary relationship even without continuous provision of resources – although Tehran has certainly provided resources, such as weaponry, to aligned groups like Hezbollah. The Saudi model, on the other hand, centers primarily on economic incentives and resource inflows provided by Riyadh to its allies in Lebanon. Often termed "petro-dollar diplomacy," this latter model has proved less successful in fostering lasting alignments that continue to exist without a constant *quid pro quo* provision of resources.

These complex tutelary relationships go beyond the traditional view of proxy relationships and complicate a view of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry in Lebanon as simply a proxy war, a complication that Mabon (2023) highlights:

> *Conflict across the Middle East has routinely been framed as a consequence of proxy wars, such as conflict in Iraq, Libya, Syria, Yemen, albeit playing out in different ways. These proxy wars are often found as features of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, yet the ways in which Saudi Arabia and Iran develop relationships with local actors points to a more complex set of relationships than the model typically understood within a 'proxy relationship'* (Mabon 2023, 7–8)

In this context, Lebanon became an irreplaceable piece for Saudi Arabia and Iran's geostrategic ambitions in the Middle East. The clash to dominate the Lebanese arena has emerged as a matter of national security for both Tehran and Riyadh. Thus, a refined foreign policy has been meticulously tailored by both sides after the Israeli-Lebanese war in 2006. On one hand, the Saudi Kingdom was determined to constrain Hezbollah's domestic power and obliterate its military capabilities in order to dominate the Lebanese political decision- making process. On the other hand, the 'Party of God' has become a precious asset and an invaluable deterrent power in the eyes of the Islamic Republic to counter the Israeli influence in the Levant and to politically amalgamate the Shia corridor from Tehran to Beirut.

In the last decade, the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran that plays out in a number of states across the Middle East has started to be seen as part of a sectarian clash among Sunni and Shi'as (Nasr 2007). However, this geopolitical rivalry is essentially more connected to power ambitions and political disputes in the region, and more specifically in the Gulf region and the Levant (Chubin e Tripp 1996). Furthermore, it involves such a considerable amount of political, religious, economic, military, and social capital that it will probe absolutely crucial to any major security questions that exist for Lebanon and the other key players of the region (Mabon 2023, 56). In this manuscript, I explore these intertwined power-based and political disputes aspects of the rivalry in Lebanon.

Gaps in literature

The effects and origins of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry in the machination of politics in Lebanon have only been partially explored by the literature. Most of the studies are related to Saudi Arabia's mediation of the Ta'if Accord, which ended fifteen years of Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), Iran's influence in Hezbollah ideology and identity, Iran and Saudi Arabia's foreign policies and the relevance of Lebanon in the Middle Eastern regional security architecture, Saudi and Iranian economic influence over Lebanon or the Saudi-Iranian associations with different sectarian-based groups and the Lebanese consociational power sharing landscape. The literature on Saudi Arabia and Iran and their operating mechanisms of the respective tutelary models exercised by both regional powers is incipient. Furthermore, there is little detailed analysis and scientific publication that shows how the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran shapes the nature of political life in Lebanon or how this rivalry plays out and in what form. Moreover, solid studies vis-à-vis the permeability of the Lebanese political system to external influences remain unexplored in the literature of international relations.

Although international relations literature has extensively covered the morphology of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the Middle East, the multidimensional impacts of this rivalry, especially after the Lebanese-Israeli war in 2006, require more profound exploration. In the Lebanese political arena as well as in the country's social fabric, this rivalry has pronounced either in the macro political trends such us the cabinet formation to the micro political aspects like institutional appointments in the diplomatic, security, legal and financial apparatuses. In a divided society and fragmented political state, Saudi-Iranian competition over Lebanon has shaped the very nature of the country's internal political dynamic.

However, the objective of this research is focused on identifying what specific characteristics have left such political systems penetrable to this type of external interference and influence. The tutelary models exercised by Saudi Arabia and Iran over the various sectarian groups and political Lebanese associations pulled the country into insoluble political stalemates. In the International Relations literature, there is a significant gap on how the Saudi-Iranian tutelary model plays out in Lebanon. Furthermore, this work seeks to analyze from a theoretical and conceptual perspective the challenges posed to concepts such as sovereignty and the rule of law by the two separate approaches that define this rivalry in the Lebanese domestic context.

Bassel Saloukh's (Salloukh et al. 2015) work explores widely the limitation of Lebanese institutional structures, the sectarian cleavages and the country's endemic corruption. Yet, there is still a gap to be filled on how this rivalry serves as a conditioning factor to jeopardize the national security interest and foreign policy priorities in the region. Imad Salamey's (2013) works point to the collapse of governance due to the proliferation of several sectarian-based political factions within the country. Nevertheless, there are some aspects that must be deepened, such as how Riyadh and Tehran's influences are exerted within the state either in its political system or in its social organization.

Accordantly to Amal Saad (2019), the enlargement of political and religious antagonism eroded tenuous sectarian balance in the country Two main political blocs have emerged in opposition to one another. The March 14th coalition believes that aligning with Saudi Arabia, Europe, and the United States is necessary to extricate the country from the orbit of Iran and Syria. The March 8th coalition, on the other hand, believes that an alliance with Iran's Axis of Resistance is vital to countering Israeli-western dominance in the region. Yet, in recent years and especially after the parliamentarian election of 2018 and 2022, the literature remains unexplored and unwilling to examine how the mutual political vetoes have collapsed the country and wrinkled the institutional separation of powers within it.

Hence, the contribution of this research seeks to propose to the field of international relations a restored understanding of how the competition between regional powers, such as that of Saudi Arabia and Iran, plays out in the Lebanese sociopolitical arena.

Methods

The methodology employed is primarily qualitative. I collected primary data in Lebanon through personal interviews and archival research. I interviewed high-ranking diplomats, clerics, military officers, policymakers, academics, and other local analysts. I also conducted archival research mainly in the National Archive in Lebanon. Materials include such sources as diplomatic and military reports, strategic documents, meeting minutes, governmental official statements and speeches, national plans and projects, international treaties, analyses from the mass media, and bibliographic databases, as well as available or published qualitative analyses performed by other scholars and analysts, among many others.

This research project will draw on concepts found in the literature on international relations, the historical development of global power dynamics, and Middle Eastern politics. Academic books, journals, and specialized reviews will be used as valuable sources. Furthermore, interviews will be conducted with academics, political authorities, and high- level diplomats who have been intimately involved in shaping the geopolitics of the Middle East, noticeably, the Levant region.

Unfortunately, however, the literature on this subject is limited and few books, papers, or essays related to these peculiar issues have been published. The reason for this lack of exploratory study is that such a research requires: 1) deep understanding of the nature of the socio-religious cleavages existent in societies such as Lebanon, apart from the Sunni- Shi'a schism, and intrinsically connected to local values and cultural foundations; 2) a practical experience in the Middle East, particularly, in the countries mentioned previously, in order to select primary resources; 3) a command over Arabic and the capability to distill/extract the relevant information from the available resources

This doctoral research aims to contribute to a better understanding of the contemporary international relations of the Middle East and specifically for the understanding of the Saudi- Iranian tutelary models in Lebanon. Although the clash between Tehran and Riyadh is not purely religious, its implications have generated sectarian divisions of unprecedented nature with political violence as a major component, culminating in national fragmentation. The rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran has begun to become increasingly visible in the Lebanese arena in both its domestic and external politics. Pivotal inferences can be drawn from the Saudi-Iranian confrontation in order to understand the depth of its implications for the Sunni and Shi'a sects, and how that could affect the political configuration in not only the country, but the region as well.

Supplementing these interviews is an analysis of key speeches by Lebanese politicians including Hassan Nasrallah, Samir Geagea, Gibran Bassil, Saad Hariri, and Walid Jumblatt, and data from reports published by Al-Mayadeen; Al-Jadeed; Al-Manar; Media Focal Center; Malcom H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center; Center for Lebanese Studies; Institute of Financial Economics (American University of Beirut); Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (American University of Beirut); and the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies.

In this manuscript, I interview prominent officials across Lebanese politics. Whilst tradition dictates that interviewees should remain anonymous to ensure security, safety and intellectual rigor, public

officials across Lebanon requested that they be named. In view of these requests, I have attributed quotes to them. I also interviewed clerics, journalists, scholars and analysts across a three-year period of engaging with Lebanese politics. These figures are referred to anonymously to preserve their safety and security. Although unconventional, this flexible approach to interview data reflects the wishes of interviewees (many of whom would have withdrawn had they not had quotes attributed to them). I have sought to ensure that no quotes can identify others who may be affected by material that is covered in these interviews.

Research questions

With regard to the research questions, I explore the conditions and the operating mechanisms of the respective tutelary models exercised by Saudi Arabia and Iran over the various sectarian groups and political forces of Lebanon. The goal is to understand how these factors can contribute to a better understanding of the political, ideological, religious and strategic alignments established within the country and the Middle East.

To understand how the Saudi-Iranian rivalry has shaped Lebanese politics, it is necessary to shed light on how this influence is exerted within the state in both the contours of its political system and the fabric of its social organization. Evidence reveals that the weakness of institutional structures, sectarian cleavages and systemic corruption serve as conditioning factors for regional powers external influences. Thus, such paradigms in Lebanon have impacted the behavior of political actors in the country vis-à-vis the Iranian-Saudi power race in the Levant. Finally, this research offers to the field of International Relations, drawn from the Lebanese case, an explanation in the various dimensions that make up the multifaceted geopolitical rivalry between two prominent regional powers in the Middle East.

This doctoral investigation is committed to contribute to a better understanding of the Saudi- Iranian tutelary models in Lebanon by addressing the following questions:

1. **Firstly**, to what extent does the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran shape the nature of political life in Lebanon?
2. **Secondly**, how does this rivalry play out in Lebanon and in what form?
3. **Thirdly**, what factors – domestic and regional – condition the nature of the rivalry in Lebanon?

4. **Fourthly**, to what extent does the system of power sharing and tutelage built into the Lebanese political system leave the state vulnerable to foreign interference?

In this sense, this scientific investigation intends to offer improved understanding of how regional politics affects the machinations of domestic politics in Lebanon and how Saudi- Iranian influence shaped the domestic politics in the last two decades, especially between 2006 and 2022.

Claims to originality

Furthermore, this manuscript makes the following claims to originality:

1. It is a rigorous exploration of the impact of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran on Lebanese politics.

2. A critical reflection on the mechanisms through which the rivalry plays out across Lebanon.

3. A critical reflection on socialization and tutelary models in world politics.

4. Contributing to a burgeoning literature looking at the impact of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran across the Middle East.

5. To propose the idea of a tutelary model to understand the nature of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran in Lebanon.

In recent decades, scholars from the western and eastern worlds have investigated the Saudi-Iran rivalry extensively. So far, no doctoral research has studied the effects of the Saudi Arabia and Iran rivalry and its tutelary model in Lebanon. This research will try to offer a unique perspective on how regional interplay could impact the domestic political dynamic and the functioning of institutions in Lebanon. Moreover, this research will try to indicate how this rivalry also plays out and shapes the decision-making process in Lebanese foreign policy. The Saudi-Iranian rivalry has been extensively investigated by scholars. Nevertheless, in the case of Lebanon, it is necessary to point out that the interplay between regional and local politics has been poorly explored in academia.

Positionality

Due to positionality, I would argue that being a Brazilian citizen from a Lebanese background who has visited and lived in the region for several years gives me the skills to analyze the profundity of this topic. Besides that, my abilities in the local language (Arabic) will contribute to exploration of primary resources. All materials were systemized and analyzed in a scientific way free from preconceived views or political standpoints related to the topic which ultimately contributed to an impartial and transparent work. My commitment is to offer an independent view of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and how this clash shaped the domestic politics in Lebanon based on solid conceptual analysis and qualitative material.

The research was conducted over five years. Fieldwork was carried out on three occasions during trips to Lebanon in 2015, 2016, and 2018 where I have met the current President of the Lebanese Parliament Nabi Berri, the former Prime Minister of Lebanon Saad Hariri, the former Defense Minister Yacoub Sarraf, the former Foreign Ministers Gebran Bassil and Fawzi Salloukh, the Minister of the Interior Nouhad Al-Machnouk, the General Commander of the Lebanese Army Joseph Aoun, the former President of the Higher Judicial Council Ghaleb Ghanem, the general director of the General Directorate of General Security Abbas Ibrahim, and the former General Prosecutor Saeed Mirza. As complementary work, I also interviewed several high-ranking officials and ambassadors from Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Syria, and Iran in order to have multiple angles, and dimensions of coverage on the topic.

Finally, this doctoral thesis is the result of a scientific work structured in three articles of published research, in Global Discourse/Routledge (2017), University of São Paulo Book Press (2018) and Manchester University Book Press (2022). The research was conducted over five years. Fieldwork was carried out on three occasions during trips to Lebanon in 2015, 2016, and 2018 where I have met the current President of the Lebanese Parliament Nabi Berri, the former Prime Minister of Lebanon Saad Hariri, the former Defense Minister Yacoub Sarraf, the former Foreign Ministers Gebran Bassil and Fawzi Salloukh, the Minister of the Interior Nouhad Al-Machnouk, the General Commander of the Lebanese Army Joseph Aoun, the former President of the Higher Judicial Council Ghaleb Ghanem, the general director of the General Directorate of General Security Abbas Ibrahim, and the former General Prosecutor Saeed Mirza. As complementary work, I also interviewed several high- ranking

officials and ambassadors from Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Syria, and Iran in order to have multiple angles, and dimensions of coverage on the topic. Lastly, I divide this manuscript' chapters as follows:

Chapter 01 – Regional Rivalries, Socialization, and Tutelary Power: This chapter discusses the literature on regional powers and regional rivalries. My goal is to review the IR literature on regional powers to understand how rival regional powers seek supremacy through socializations schemes. Regional powers use socializations processes that combine material, ideological and ideational aspects to socialize small powers or domestic factions within small powers according to their regional interests. I argue that one byproduct of socialization schemes is tutelary power models. In the case of Saudi-Iranian rivalry, Lebanon has become a prolific scenario of different socialization schemes emanating from regional powers seeking to control domestic factions, and eventually, the entire country. These regional socialization schemes have turned into the competing tutelary models discussed later on.

Chapter 02 – The Origins of Saudi Arabia and Iran Rivalry: This chapter analyzes the history of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran. It sheds lights on the geostrategic objectives of each actor vis-à-vis the Middle Eastern regional order, and, more specifically, the various effects this struggle has had on the Lebanese political system. It also reviews the literature on the rivalry and its most recent contributions.

Chapter 03 – The Struggle for Islamic Supremacy: This chapter examines the direct implications of this rivalry and competition upon the evolution of the regional security architecture in the Middle East and the establishment of a new geopolitical order after 2006 Lebanese-Israeli War. Lebanon's gravitational weight has changed in the region, as the country has become an irreplaceable piece in the geostrategic perspective of both Tehran and Riyadh. In this chapter, I show how this rivalry the clash for hegemony within Pan-Islamism after the 2006 war and later the Iranian nuclear program negotiations alongside the world's great powers (P5+1) has changed drastically the Saudi and Iranian involvement in Lebanon with both sides becoming more aggressively interventionist in the level of domestic

politics. It is possible to argue that the clash over Lebanon in the Middle Eastern geopolitical chessboard is crucially linked to both the Saudi and Iranian defense and security policies in their pursuit of the strategic goal of regional dominance. The race for supporting armed movements and religious organizations across the Arab and Islamic worlds by both actors has been a preponderant component in the foreign policy of each nation. This chapter places a particular emphasis on the multidimensional effects of this strategy, exploring how both sides have jeopardized national consensus and paved the way to political violence and national fragmentation in Lebanon and beyond.

Chapter 04 – The interplay of regional and domestic politics in Lebanon: This chapter examines the interplay of regional and domestic politics in the Lebanese political arena. My goal is to elucidate why Iran and Saudi Arabia matter in the region in general and in Lebanon in particular. To explore this topic, the chapter delves into the history of Saudi and Iranian foreign policy involvement in Lebanon. It also covers the other side of the equation, tracing the Lebanese history of penetrability and permeability to regional and foreign powers. Finally, it looks at the importance of Lebanon in the region and across the Arab world from geopolitical and other angles.

Chapter 05 – The Tutelary Model in Lebanon: This chapter explores the tutelary model that has been implemented by each state vis-à-vis the Lebanese institutions in general and the political factions in specific. While the Saudi model is verticalized and relies on financial sources to achieve the country's objectives in something resembling a mercantilist formula, the Iranian approach is horizontal and based on transnational cooperation without requiring trade-offs and instead incorporating a strong component of ideological linkage. The concept of "tutelage" and its effects on national sovereignty will also be discussed in accordance with two main premises: 1) the meaning of order and stability in Lebanese politics, and 2) the effects of foreign interference on the rule of law. Finally, two historical episodes – the 2006 Lebanese-Israeli War and the outbreak of the Civil War in Syria in 2011 – will serve as key components to explain the interplay between the regional order and Lebanon's political and social structure.

Chapter 01

Regional Rivalries, Socialization and Tutelary Power

This chapter undertakes a comprehensive exploration of the literature concerning regional powers and their rivalries, with a particular focus on the dynamics of supremacy through socialization schemes within the framework of International Relations (IR). The objective is to dissect how regional powers employ a combination of material, ideological, and ideational tools to influence smaller powers or factions within these smaller entities, aligning them with their regional ambitions. *A central argument presented here is that these socialization schemes frequently give rise to tutelary power models*. In the specific context of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, Lebanon emerges as a fertile ground where diverse socialization strategies by regional powers compete to dominate domestic factions and, ultimately, the entire nation. These strategies crystallize into the tutelary models that will be scrutinized in subsequent sections.

Barry Buzan (1998, 70–73) categorizes regional interactions into four dimensions. First, the nature of interactions (military, economic, cultural); second, the attitudes accompanying these interactions (cooperative, neutral, competitive, hostile, conflictual); third, the relative intensity of interactions, indicated by the degree of institutionalization; and finally, the boundaries that delineate these interactions, including the extent of engagement with the global level and external powers. This framework suggests that geographical proximity is less significant than the patterns of attitudes, interactions, and shared ideational constructs in defining regional dynamics.

In the late 1990s, Mansfield and Milner (1999, 391) presciently observed that regions should be conceptualized beyond mere geographical confines. The notion that geographic proximity or shared cultural, linguistic, political, or economic bonds alone could define regionness was becoming increasingly insufficient. Hettne and Söderbaum (2000, 53) further expounded on this by arguing that, while the territorial foundations of regions are often presumed, the nature of interactions within these spaces is politically contingent and interwoven with dynamic identity-sharing formations. They contended that regional powers aspiring to impose their values and norms

represent merely one category of actors contributing to the political and sociological construction of regions.

The discourse surrounding regionalism and the influence of regional powers constitutes one of the most prolific areas of study within International Relations. The renaissance of regionalism in the 1990s catalyzed an expansion of conceptual frameworks and methodological approaches that have continued to evolve. Nevertheless, despite the extensive body of research, Prys (2010, 432) maintains that the ideational construction of regionness remains significantly tethered to the predominant material position of regional powers.

The majority of studies addressing the strategies and behaviors of regional powers implicitly assume that the responsibility associated with a dominant position within a region naturally entails a hegemonic role, typically assumed by one or more regional powers. Nolte and Schenoni (2021, 03) delineate two universally acknowledged elements that define regional powers: their regional belonging and their possession of a substantial share of the region's capabilities relative to smaller neighbors. They assert that "*in such situations, regional power status is usually recognized, more or less explicitly, by other states in the region and beyond. States with a greater share of a region's capabilities will always be taken into special account because of the differential impact they might have on that region*."

According to Nolte (2010, 887–93), regional powers shape the structural dynamics (polarity) of any regional security complex, irrespective of interference from external powers. While their power capabilities may be significant, they are confined to the regional arena, with higher-level powers from outside the region excluding them from global power calculations. Both global and regional power hierarchies are in constant flux, with no power hierarchy being stable.

The concept of regional power, however, merits closer examination. Flemes (2007, 11) delineates regional powers through four crucial criteria: (1) a claim to regional leadership; (2) possession of power resources to substantiate this claim; (3) utilization of foreign policy tools to secure regional dominance; and (4) recognition of regional leadership or power status by neighboring states. The fourth criterion, acceptance by peers, is particularly pivotal to the notion of regional power.

Building on Nolte's framework, this manuscript defines regional power in terms of the distribution of power resources within a socially constructed region. While traditional material-based

instruments of power provide the foundation for regional dominance, it is ultimately the socially constructed aspect of power that determines the political and ideational contours of a region. For instance, regional power status extends beyond mere possession of material assets (such as military forces and economic strength) to include recognition by other states within the region, whether they are smaller or secondary powers. This "circle of recognition" (Wohlforth and Zubok 2017) acknowledges the superior power capabilities of the regional power. As discussed later, the struggle for power recognition is integral to tutelary models.

Nolte (2010, 820) further contends that the classification of regional power status is influenced not only by material power resources but also by perceptions regarding the configuration of regional and global hierarchies, as well as role definitions formulated by domestic elites concerning a country's position within the regional power hierarchy. In this context, regional powers endeavor to control the narratives surrounding regionness, determining its meaning, inclusion criteria, and, crucially, the power hierarchy of the region.

An essential concept encapsulating the influence regional powers exert over regionalization schemes is *socialization*. This process represents a hierarchical relationship wherein the more dominant power employs a mix of normative and material tools to integrate the weaker state into its regional community of values and interests. Socialization encompasses three fundamental components: a socializing actor, the content being socialized (norms, values, preferences, roles, etc.), and a pre-existing community. In conventional socialization models, the smaller power, or the socialized actor, undergoes more significant transformation, while the community itself experiences only minor changes with the inclusion of a new member.

Alderson (2001) defines state socialization as the "*process by which states internalize norms originating elsewhere in the international system*" (Alderson 2001, 417). This means that socialization involves states adopting norms that originate outside their own immediate milieu. Checkel (2005) describes socialization as the "*process of inducting actors into the norms and rules of a given community, resulting in sustained compliance based on the internalization of these new norms*" (Checkel 2005, 80).

Most theories of socialization share a fundamental structure: an actor being socialized by another actor or structure, the content being socialized, and a pre-existing community (Guimarães and

Maitino 2019, 6). Johnston (2008, 20-22) highlights two critical aspects of socialization. First, it typically targets "novices"—actors not yet regarded as full members of a social group. Second, socialization pertains to the "*internalization of the values, roles, and understandings upheld by the group that forms the society to which the actor becomes a member*." In the field of International Relations, this ideational, attitudinal, normative, and behavioral content of socialization is often distilled to what Checkel (2005) terms "norm internalization." Through the use of force and values, regional powers socialize smaller powers to align with their vision of the region. Consequently, smaller powers internalize norms emanating from the socialization strategies of regional powers.

Thies (2003, 544) emphasizes that the process of socialization fundamentally involves internalization. Alderson (2001, 417–20) expands on this by defining internalization as encompassing *'individual belief change, political pressure and persuasion, and institutionalization*.' For Thies (2003), this conceptualization allows researchers to explain state behavior across multiple levels of analysis, linking the international or regional system with domestic politics and the actions of individuals within domestic society. Domestic actors, such as social groups or political parties, become crucial in determining the success or failure of socialization, as they are the ones who ultimately 'internalize' regional norms and alter political behaviors. Hence, a critical aspect of socialization analysis is empirically identifying how domestic social and political actors internalize the socialization models propagated by regional powers.

Thies (2001, 28) points out that socialization schemes generate tensions among members of the regional community, leading to three significant implications that generally favor regional powers. First, disparities in power, status, and prestige between regional powers and smaller members elevate the prominence of regional powers. Second, smaller members often fall within the sphere of influence of the more powerful members. Third, there is a varying degree of asymmetry between the perspectives of regional powers and novice members. Regional powers typically view the region as a domain for exerting influence, whereas smaller states may perceive the region as either a threat or an opportunity, depending on the stance of the regional power toward them.

However, smaller states are not merely passive recipients of socialization schemes. Despite the power asymmetry inherent in socialization, it also involves negotiation and mutual accommodation, allowing weaker states to exert some influence on more powerful actors (Thies

2001, 702-703). Indeed, Thies (2001) argues that according to Waltz (1979), socialization induces a "sameness" effect, where small powers conform to the dictates of the international system to survive. Nevertheless, Thies (2001) also notes that socialization is an ongoing process, with rivalries and friendships forming dynamic, non-static relationships within a competitive environment.

Most studies on socialization emphasize the need for empirical evidence to demonstrate how socialization occurs, representing it as both a process and an outcome. Despite recent literature exploring socialization processes and mechanisms, it remains challenging to identify how socialization specifically unfolds and to distinguish between regional powers' pressures and genuine transformations initiated by local elites. For example, it is difficult to ascertain whether Lebanon's Sunni elite was genuinely socialized by Saudi Arabia or whether they joined Riyadh's coalition independently. Socialization can proceed through overt mechanisms such as teaching, shaming, or conditioning membership to norm compliance, as well as through subtler pathways like social cues, role bargaining, or mimicking (Checkel 2005; Thies 2012).

Adding to the complexity, the literature on socialization attempts to differentiate between behavior resulting from strategic adaptation—instrumentally rational behavior triggered by environmental changes—and actual internalization, which implies a shift in preferences and interests that drive behavior even without environmental incentives (Checkel 2007, 809). Checkel (2005, 804) distinguishes between Type I and Type II socialization schemes that regional powers may promote towards novice or smaller states. Type I socialization is relatively shallow, describing a situation where an actor learns to navigate the rules of a new social context or institution, resulting in behavioral changes but not necessarily altering the actor's interests. In contrast, Type II socialization is much deeper, involving actors adopting a new social identity and experiencing a demonstrable change in their interests over time (Bearce and Bondanella 2007, 706). For instance, did Hezbollah's leadership merely adapt to Iran's socialization attempts, or did it genuinely internalize Iranian regional norms? It is important not to exaggerate the distinctions between instrumentally rational action and empirical socialization.

Thies (2003, 549) argues that the most intriguing socialization episodes are likely the exceptional cases where state agents do not conform to the state's societal demands. Additionally, studying

situations where different socialization models compete for supremacy can be valuable, as they reveal how competing regional powers seek to attract domestic actors into their spheres of influence. In other words, some socialization efforts result in conflictual socializing actions from competing regional powers, illustrating the impact of regional rivalries on socialization schemes.

Regional rivalries frequently influence socialization schemes. Regions are often contested grounds where two or more predominant powers attempt to exert socialization mechanisms over minor actors. Establishing regional powerhood is inherently conflictual, contested, and competitive. The literature on enduring rivalries indicates that some rivalries are so deeply ingrained in the regional makeup that constant conflict between the poles is expected by all local elites. These rivalries assume a backdrop of conflict and a significant likelihood of war or military confrontation between the poles. Enduring rivalries provide cases to test hypotheses in conflict literature, as most world conflicts stem from enduring rivalries (Goertz and Diehl 1993; Schulze and Blechinger-Talcott 2019).

The literature on regional powerhood shows that these rivalries often involve secondary powers contesting regional powers' initiatives. Secondary powers tend to reject the hegemonic actions of regional powers and attempt to undermine their capacity to project leadership and pursue socialization endeavors. Consequently, the implementation of regional powerhood is constrained by secondary powers that do not fully recognize the regional power's claims, creating obstacles to the full establishment of regional supremacy. Flemes and Wojczewski (2010, 6) argue that secondary powers play a crucial role in regional acceptance of leadership claims, either accepting the regional supremacy exerted by a rival or employing various foreign policy tools to prevent their peer rival from succeeding.

Malamud (2011, 3) underscores that regional contestation highlights the duality of leadership: it also requires followership. Potential followers can respond in three ways: bandwagoning, balancing, or resistance (foot-dragging). Only bandwagoning truly supports leadership. However, enduring rivalries are far more complex than mere normative rejection or passive resistance; they involve active foreign policy competition for supremacy or survival. Socialization schemes, whether material or ideational, are not just tools for constructing regional power but are actual strategies of survival, integral to a state's core priorities.

Flemes (2010, 105) argues that regional contestations to socialization schemes typically originate from secondary powers. These secondary powers, defined by their relative material and social dimensions, perceive themselves (and are recognized by others) as part of a group distinct from regional and minor powers. According to Flemes and Wojczewski (2010, 10-11), secondary powers have limited foreign policy options due to the superior power of regional powers. In international relations theory, the most common strategies for states are balancing and bandwagoning. In scenarios of contested leadership characterized by cooperative regional relations, bandwagoning is more likely. Here, smaller or secondary powers tend to view the regional power positively and align with it to gain political or economic benefits.

Conversely, in contested leadership marked by conflict, secondary powers are likely to pursue counterbalancing strategies. Weaker secondary powers will ally with other secondary or smaller powers to check the dominance of a rising regional leader. In the Middle East, for example, Saudi Arabia's opposition to Iran's preponderance leads it to counterbalance Tehran, even collaborating with unlikely partners like Israel. Over time, enduring rivalries can shift, altering threat perceptions.

Goertz and Diehl (1993), in their classic work on enduring rivalries, argue that these rivalries address the problem of repeated conflict, particularly how the outcomes of crises and wars influence the likelihood of future conflicts between the same states. They posit that enduring rivalries are based on the assumption that conflicts between the same two protagonists are interconnected. To understand and explain international conflict and competition, one must consider the context of past confrontations within the rivalry. In non-enduring rivalries (e.g., the US vs. Iraq), past conflicts do not significantly influence present dynamics as these powers have not previously engaged in warfare. In enduring rivalries, however, past wars and their outcomes heavily influence policy makers' decisions.

On the other hand, Goertz and Diehl (1994) also discovered that the 'volcano effect'—an increase in the conflict level of successive disputes leading to war—is not an inevitable consequence of enduring rivalries. Enduring rivalries can produce various patterns, including stability, proxy wars, or gradual decline in hostilities. Only about one-third of enduring rivalries lead to increased conflict over time. The question then arises: how do enduring rivalries generate competing socialization schemes? When two powers are bitter rivals, they likely develop socialization strategies to attract

new allies or secure existing ones. However, the interplay between socialization schemes and enduring rivalries remains underexplored in specialized literature.

In this context, I argue in this manuscript that the *interplay between enduring rivalries and socialization schemes can engender tutelary models of regional competition*. Regional powers, embroiled in intense competition for supremacy, may prefer to destabilize and divide small powers' domestic politics rather than allow their immediate rivals to gain control. Failed socialization attempts can lead to the establishment of foreign-imposed tutelary regimes. In such scenarios, regional powers act as guardians of specific domestic factions, providing them with normative and material benefits, thereby preventing their rivals from fully controlling the small power's domestic and foreign policies. This approach goes beyond merely socializing a small power; it aims to paralyze domestic political functioning to serve regional aspirations. Tutelary models in regional politics thus function as protective strategies within socialization schemes, securing power allegiances and laying the groundwork for comprehensive socialization efforts to be implemented later.

Adam Przeworski (1988) defines tutelary democracy as "*a regime which has competitive, formally democratic institutions, but in which the power apparatus, typically reduced by this time to the armed forces, retains the capacity to intervene to correct undesirable states of affa*irs" (Przeworski 1988, 6). Additionally, the concepts of tutelary democracy or tutelary authoritarianism generally encompass a criterion of tutelary interference, which elucidates the influence of the tutelary power within the political system (Bünte 2022). For instance, in Iran, the clergy exerts control over elections, while in Pakistan, it is the military that holds ultimate authority. In essence, there are specific domestic actors who possess the power to direct the political system according to their interests, thereby preventing any genuine political change.

According to Closa and Palestini (2018, pp. 10-11), the concept of tutelage in a structural context is rooted in the perception dynamics among governments. Specifically, certain governments see themselves as the enforcers of rules and norms, while others view themselves—and are viewed by others—as needing protection. This perception is particularly evident among the larger and more stable member states, who consider themselves as guardians or protectors. They assume a role of oversight and guidance over smaller, less stable member states, or over specific domestic factions

within third-party states. This dynamic fosters a tutelage relationship, where the perceived enforcers act as mentors or overseers, aiming to stabilize and support those seen as requiring protection. This relationship underscores the imbalance of power and stability within the international or regional context, highlighting the role of stronger states in safeguarding and guiding their less stable counterparts.

In this context, *I propose that foreign tutelary models happens when formal democratic institutions operate alongside a dominant foreign authority that retains overarching control and intervenes as necessary. This authority can operate through proxy actors or formal political processes.* In the specific case of Lebanon, these dominant authorities are external countries exerting influence. Such models of tutelary democracy or tutelary authoritarianism are marked by dual authority structures. Here, an external or internal entity wields significant influence over the political process to protect its interests. This results in a political environment where democratic mechanisms are present but are overshadowed by a higher authority that ensures its strategic objectives are met. These dual authority structures reveal a complex interplay between sovereignty and external intervention, where the latter often dictates key political outcomes to maintain stability or control within the tutelary framework.

Key characteristics of tutelage include mechanisms for interference in governance, such as military interventions or economic incentives, which ensure that decisions align with the tutelary power's agenda. Despite the facade of democratic elections and institutions, the actual exercise of power often lies outside these formal frameworks. Stability and control are paramount in tutelary models, aiming to prevent disruptions that might challenge the status quo set by the controlling authority.

In the context of Lebanon, the dynamics of tutelary influence extend beyond domestic factions vying for control to encompass foreign powers assuming roles akin to guardianship. These external actors aim to exert authority over specific Lebanese factions whose military capabilities enable them to influence or even paralyze domestic decision-making processes. This mirrors the broader strategy of regional powers seeking to establish tutelary regimes within smaller states' political landscapes.

Saudi Arabia and Iran exemplify this approach by endeavoring to carve out spheres of influence within Lebanon's political framework. They act as veto players, wielding significant influence over

key decisions and policies. This foreign imposition of tutelary regimes reflects a scenario where external political forces loom large over Lebanon's political system. Understanding these interventions requires examining not only the actions but also the motivations behind them. The involvement of regional powers in Lebanon's politics underscores their strategic interests and regional rivalries. These interventions complicate Lebanon's efforts to consolidate and stabilize its political system, perpetuating a state of flux and uncertainty.

Thus, the dual influence of domestic and foreign tutelary powers in Lebanon underscores a complex interplay where external actors leverage local factions to advance their geopolitical agendas. This dynamic not only shapes Lebanon's political landscape but also underscores the broader implications of tutelary governance in international relations.

When it comes to the purpose of this research, Mabon (2023) theorizes on the origin of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, accentuating that:

> *Efforts to understand the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran typically fall into three camps: The first argues that the rivalry emerges out of struggle for regional supremacy, geopolitical competition that is shaped by concerns about the organization of regional security. The second argues that the rivalry is a consequence of centuries old enmity within Islam, stemming from "ancient hatreds" that pit Sunni against Shi'a. Adherents of such a primordialist view hold that the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran stems from a contemporary manifestation of these religious tension. The third argues that religion has been used as a mechanism of control alongside and within geopolitical concerns, resulting in a rivalry that plays out across time* (Mabon 2023, 9).

In the current Middle Eastern context, the rivalry between regional powers like Saudi Arabia and Iran is not likely to culminate in one achieving hegemonic dominance over the other, as Gregory Gause argues. The region's multipolar order and the intricate interplay between domestic and

regional politics create conditions where achieving true hegemony becomes highly impractical (Ibidem).

This mutual interpenetration is evident as tutelated forces within states such as Lebanon recognize their ability to leverage external backing to strengthen their political standing, thereby reducing the inclination to compromise with domestic rivals. In Lebanon's consociational power-sharing system, this manifests through distinct blocs and parties competing electorally, each aligned with external sponsors like Saudi Arabia, Iran, and historically, Syria. This dynamic contrasts with states such as Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, where regional powers engage in proxy warfare by supporting armed groups outside formal state structures (Ibidem).

Moreover, Gause's framework draws parallels between the current regional dynamics and historical periods, such as the Arab Cold War described by Malcolm Kerr, but extends its scope to include Iran, Turkey, and Israel. This multifaceted competition spans different levels of analysis, integrating local and regional forces vying for geopolitical influence and legitimacy within the broader regional order (Mabon 2023, 34).

Thus, the ongoing struggle among Middle Eastern powers underscores a complex interplay where external interventions intersect with domestic politics, shaping regional dynamics without leading to clear-cut hegemonic outcomes. This intricate relationship underscores the enduring complexities and challenges within the Middle East's geopolitical landscape.

These different levels of analysis link to the multifaceted areas of this competition, and also to the limitations of examining these frameworks of tutelage and mutual interpenetration within a theoretical view centered solely on Westphalian models of state sovereignty. As Mabon (2023) explains:

> *Consideration of the characteristics of a rivalry typically requires reflecting on a number of areas including the way in which power operates between actors involved; the history behind tensions; the political, social and economic factors that drive tensions; understandings of security; and the role of other actors in exacerbating or mitigating tensions. This is particularly evident in discussion about rivalries across the Middle East, yet little attention has been paid to the spaces in which rivalries play out. In*

> *part, this perhaps reflects the dominance of the sovereign model of political organization which privileges states, but when spaces of rivalry are discussed, they are typically referred to as zones of 'proxy conflict', removing local agency and locating events within the context of broader regional currents.* (Mabon 2023, 36)

In fact, the traditional state-centric view of security limits our analysis of security issues connected to the Saudi-Iranian rivalry in the region. Moving beyond this view enables us to better examine the complex interactions of security, politics, and religion. Incorporating these interactions into our analytical framework is also highly important because of the nature of the regional powers themselves – both Iran and Saudi Arabia are states in which religion and politics are deeply interwoven, and attempting to fully disentangle these two concepts from both each other and the nations' security interests is counterproductive in practice (Mabon 2023, 37).

Because religion and politics are so inextricably interlinked in the Saudi-Iranian competition, the expression of this phenomenon in the region is described as a prime example of the so-called "sectarianization of geopolitics", a concept that Mabon describes as follows:

> *…the sectarianization of geopolitics where geopolitical agendas were undertaken under the veneer of sectarian difference, capitalizing on and manipulating schisms across the Middle East for political ends. In the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings, schisms between regimes and societies emerged that created opportunities for external actors to exert influence across the region, capitalising on local instability in an effort to increase their influence. Conversely, precarious domestic conditions often prompted local groups to turn to external sponsors in pursuit of material resources deemed essential to meet their needs. In such conditions local and regional politics began to interact in a parabolic cycle, facilitated by material and ideational*

> *capabilities, and exacerbated by local and regional context.* (Mabon 2023, 38)

In sum, in this chapter I argued that different regional powers seeking to create socialization schemes to attract or convince a small power have the potential to create tutelary models when socialization attempts failed to materialized. In other words, regional powers in intense competition for supremacy prefer to paralyze small powers domestic politics over handing that same small power to its regional rival.

Chapter 02

The origins of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and its literature

This chapter analyzes the history of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran. It sheds lights on the geostrategic objectives of each actor vis-à-vis the Middle Eastern regional order, and, more specifically, the various effects this struggle has had on the Lebanese political system. It also reviews some of the literature on the rivalry itself and its implications for this study.

These issues relate directly to key questions in the literature regarding the broader Saudi-Iranian rivalry, its impacts on states across the Middle East, its variations across time and space, and the factors that contour the interplay between domestic and foreign policy for each political entity that finds itself involved (Mabon 2023, 23). The relationship between the two powers is certainly a complex one – it has not remained stationary over the decades, and this chapter will seek to provide additional explanation for the phenomenon Mabon (2023, 36) identifies as a strategic oscillation between the two: "*the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran plays out in different ways across time and space, oscillating between periods of outright hostility and apparent rapprochement*."

We can begin our exploration of the rivalry at a crucial historical juncture. The impact of the 1979 Iranian Revolution in shaping contemporary Middle Eastern geopolitics is an aspect not yet fully explored by Western politology. The lack of knowledge about the effects of this Revolution and the magnitude of its impact on several Arab countries began to become more sharply nuanced only after the outbreak of civil conflict in Syria in 2011.

The collapse of one of the most legendary Middle Eastern monarchies and the establishment of a theocratic model of government transformed the region's social dynamics and geopolitical trajectory. Because of this important historical gap, we have the genesis of the contemporary rivalry between Iran and the Arab Gulf monarchies. The fall of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlevi[1] not only caused unrest in the main capitals of the Arab world, but also accelerated the race to occupy the power vacuum left by

[1] The title of Shah or " Shah " has the meaning of king or emperor.

the fall of his regime and the removal of the main ally of Western powers in the region.

From his exile in France, the leading religious' leader and political activist, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, influenced the masses and prepared the rites of the Revolution. The Iranians' discontent with Pahlevi was unmistakable. Social unrest was underway, and the Iranian monarch ignored the demands of the most disadvantaged classes. The alliance made with the West, especially the United States, gave the Shah of Persia the confidence to believe in his "immovability of the throne" as the undisputed ruler of the Persian nation.

The uncontrollable inflation rates increased popular dissatisfaction and launched the country into a crisis marked by stubborn protests and strikes against the monarchical regime. In the face of socioeconomic difficulties and authoritarianism, the friction points in the political context were gradually accentuated. Both secular nationalists and religious movements viewed the Shah's liberalizing measures with skepticism and dislike. The lack of control over the repressive apparatus and summary executions conducted by General Nematollah Nassiri, commander of the Imperial Guard and head of the Intelligence and National Security Agency (1965-1978), known infamously as Savak[2], boosted organized movements against the Iranian monarch (Hiro 1985). The mysterious death of prominent Iranian intellectual Ali Shariati in London in 1977 aroused the fury of the Iranian population. Shariati was considered one of the most important anti-government voices and the ideological mentor of the Revolution. Savak was blamed for his death. The persecution of opposition political forces such as the National Front, composed of a coalition of associations, among which were secular nationalists, religious and even parties on the left, such as the pro Soviet Tudeh[3] movement, served as fuel to light the wick of the Revolution.

Even with the June 1978 replacement of General Nematollah Nassiri, executioner of the anti-monarchist movements and articulator of "Operation Ajax", which led to the coup d'état in 1953 against the then Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh, tempers against Shah Reza Pahlevi were still fierce. The new Savak commander, General Nasser Moghadam, failed in his task to placate the protests and his downfall occurred in February 1979 with the outbreak of the Revolution.

[2] Savak is how Iran's Intelligence Service was known during Shah Reza Pahlevi's monarchical regime
[3] Translating from the Persian, "Tudeh" means "masses".

Between illegal arrests, censorship, torture, executions and protests, the police state and martial law imposed by the Shah ended up strengthening the cohesion of the revolutionaries, despite their differing interests and ideological inclinations. Shariati's death ultimately ended, after all, with the consolidation Ayatollah Khomeini's role as the leader of the Iranian Revolution. His charismatic leadership was able to unite the eclectic Iranian mass, including the workers and the Armed Forces base from the popular strata (Nasr 2006).

The secular party forces of the ousted prime minister, Mohammad Mosaddegh, were unable to fill the vacuum in the face of his relative political weakness. Without the participation of clerical leaders and influential religious sectors to unite the excluded population, it would be impossible to face the Shah and his repressive apparatus. Even in exile, Khomeini was a respected and active voice in the Iranian context, which led the leader of the secular nationalist front, Karim Sanjabi, to seal an agreement with the Ayatollah in Paris, before his return to Tehran, with the aim of nurturing the revolutionary momentum and providing legitimacy to the Revolution itself. Therefore, the secularists, in fact, depended in large part on the engagement of religious forces to get rid of Pahlevi and his coercive machine. The condition imposed by Khomeini to seal the agreement with Sanjabi was based on the premise that post-Shah Iran should be an "Islamic and democratic" republic. (*Idem)*

Khomeini's popular ascendancy with members of marginalized social strata, the religious elite, part of the economic aristocracy and sectors of the Armed Forces propelled the axes of the Iranian Revolution and established a new social, political and religious architecture in the country. Khomeini was also able to neutralize the military's counterrevolutionary momentum, fragmenting its command structure, which allowed him to impose a new political order with the support of the majority of the Iranian population.

Khomeini's political success made him an icon of the Revolution. His image as a Muslim clerical leader capable of facing the oppression and despotism of the Shah's monarchy has since transcended the borders of the Persian nation. Khomeini became, in fact, the first religious leader to cause a mixture of uproar and rejoicing in the ranks of *Al- Umma Al- Islamiya,* since the patron of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hassan Al- Banna was murdered in Egypt in 1949.

After three decades, a new religious activist was born capable of moving the dictates and pride of the adherents to the ideas of the great “Islamic Nation”. Khomeini's goal in the period immediately

following the establishment of the theocratic regime in Iran was to safeguard the cardinal points of the Revolution. The Revolution was built on the premises of the preservation of the new political order, the protection of the self-determination of the new Islamic Republic, and the legitimation of the clerical pact, providing the nucleus of power with a consistent ballast and strong influence over the country's political and social decision-making process.

From a historical perspective, Iran was the first Muslim country to openly adopt a reference to the religious denomination in the country's official nomenclature: "Islamic Republic". As much as this, at first glance, has an apparently symbolic connotation, its political effect on the monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula was resounding, especially for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which claims to be the *Alma Mater* of the "lands of Islam" and the endless protectorate of all Muslims[4].

The political, social and religious impact of the Iranian Revolution on various countries in the Muslim world sparked an uncontrollable rivalry in the Middle East between Saudis and Iranians. As the crown prince of the Saudi throne and the most influential political figure in the kingdom, Fahd bin Abdulaziz Al- Saud feared the impact that the Iranian Revolution could have on the Saudi Kingdom and, particularly, on religious currents dissatisfied with the country's course. His greatest fear was that the idea of an "Islamic Republic" could foster groups opposing the royal family, inducing the population to a political insurrection against the Monarchy.

Basically, Prince Fahd was more afraid for the safety of the crown than King Khaled bin Abdulaziz Al- Saud himself, who was seen as a weak monarch, accordantly to Madawi Al-Rasheed view. Al- Saud's family, under Fahd's leadership, feared a similar fate to that of Shah Reza Pahlevi, sustains Al-Rasheed (2010). Despite distant relations with the Shah, the Saudis preferred, first, a monarchy in Iran and, second, a secular political regime. The idea of a "Republic" and "Shi'a Islamic state" was seen as a double threat to the Saudi environment and the entire regional political ecosystem, declare Parsi (2007).

Under the rule of King Khaled and the strategic guidance of Crown Prince Fahd, the Saudi kingdom supported Iraq in the war against Iran from the beginning, which lasted from 1980 to 1988. In the

[4] The pre-Islamic Arabian Peninsula was divided into three regions: Arabia Pétrea; Arabia Phoenix; Desert Arabia or "Rub Al- Khali ". The territorial space of the Arabian Peninsula of the Islamic "era", even before the proclamation of the Saudi Monarchy in 1932, was composed of the regions of Al- Hijaz and Najd.

political conception of Riyadh, the newly triumphant Iranian Revolution could not be allowed to stabilize, so they endeavored to launch the country into a serious crisis that, inevitably, would culminate in the failure of the newly established "Islamic Republic" (*Idem*).

Upon taking the throne in 1982, Fahd bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud[5] focused his attention on reaffirming the importance and leadership of Saudi Arabia in the context of the Muslim world. With that, King Fahd launched a series of measures focused on containing the expansion of the Iranian Revolution. The first actions of his reign were guided by the reorientation of Saudi foreign policy towards Washington, the rapprochement with the main Wahabite clerics in the kingdom, and the re-equipment of the Armed Forces.

One of the most emblematic decisions of the Saudi monarch was to change the reference to the royal title from "His Majesty the King of Saudi Arabia" to "Guardian of the two holy mosques", in reference to the most important religious temples of Islam: Al- Masjid al- Haram in Mecca and Al- Masjid al- Nabawi in Medina (Rashid e Shaheen 1987). This initiative had a double positive effect, serving internally as a gesture of rapprochement with the most ultra-orthodox sectors of Islam and deepening Riyadh's dialogue with Asian Muslim countries outside the Arab world, such as Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Monarch Fahd bin- Abdulaziz ruled with a high degree of conservatism, which allowed Wahabism to gain even more influence against other religious denominations inside and outside Saudi Arabia (Stern 2011). Throughout Fahd's 23-year reign, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy compass had been anchored to an unconditional alignment with the United States on virtually all international boards.

The conflagration of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, and the unbreakable sealed alliance between King Fahd and US President Ronald Reagan during the 1980s altered the balance of power in the region and converted Iran into a unique and key country for the solution of several regional and global problems. However, Saudi foreign policy aimed at eroding the Iranian Revolution has had a reverse effect.

Saddam Hussein's war against Iran generated serious political fractures of long-lasting impact in several countries in the Arab-Muslim world. These fractures and fissures are multidimensional,

[5] The fifth sovereign to take over the Saudi vise (1982-2005). Fahd was the longest-serving monarch in front of the throne of Al- Saud, overcoming his brothers and his own father King Abdulaziz Al- Saud.

evident in social, political, and military effects that persist even today in the nations of Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon.

The massive funding poured out by the Arab Gulf monarchies to subsidize the Iraqi Armed Forces, coupled with the wide war and diplomatic coverage guaranteed by Western powers to insulate Iran and stifle the Revolution, placed Ayatollah Khomeini in the face of the challenge of seeking political alternatives to escape the isolation imposed by neighboring countries. These efforts by the Saudis and others were so forceful, in fact, that they run counter to the expectations that one would have for their course of action based on realist international relations theory – as Mabon (2023) explains:

> *…the Saudi decision to support a militarily superior Iraq against a weakened Iran – brought about by the disbandment of the Iranian army after the revolution – appears at odds with conventional understandings of alliance building in IR theory. Underpinning this decision, Darwich argues, was a broader concern about ontological security and a challenge from the Islamic Republic to the Kingdom's legitimacy.* (Mabon 2023, 86)

Due to the intricate challenges imposed on the Iranians on the regional and global boards, the idea that the expansion of the country's foreign policy should take place with the aim of building solid, safe and inspired alliances with its ideological model gained traction among the new establishment. The substratum of the Iranian plan was fundamentally based on supporting anti-Western revolutionary fronts, on supporting avant-garde socialist Arabism such as Syrian "Baathism,*"* and, finally, forging alliances with Shi'a Islamist political groups in different Arab countries.

The intense political upheavals in the Middle East that occurred simultaneously with the early years of the Iranian Revolution, such as the revival of religious nationalism, the Israeli- Egyptian Peace Treaty , the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Al-Sadat, the transition in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the uncontrollable civil war in Lebanon, allowed Iran, despite the bloody conflict with Iraq, acting outside the geographic lines established by Washington and Riyadh, influencing important episodes in the regional context.

Iranian foreign policy has found a tangible mainstay in Lebanon, especially with the Shi'ite Muslim population in the south of the country, who were experiencing a double catastrophe with the destructive military invasion of Israel in 1982 led by Ariel Sharon and, additionally, the helplessness imposed on southerners by Lebanese central government controlled by the Falangist movement. Among other factors, these two elements ended up facilitating the engagement of the Iranians with the newly formed nationalist resistance forces. The religious factor served, in the end, as a bridge between Iranians and the Shiite social fabric of many Lebanese.

For all intents and purposes, the Galilean Peace Operation, the code name given to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, ended up providing a unique opportunity for Tehran to export its political-religious model when it found in the newly created Lebanese resistance movement, Hezbollah, the ideal host for the founding of an influential ideological and strategic alliance. This embryonic association began to impact not only the dynamics of Lebanon's domestic policy, but, above all, the framework of the mutual deterrent power that permeates the Lebanese-Israeli conflict and, in addition, the architecture of regional security.

According to the expectation of the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Israel, insular countries like Syria and Iran would have difficulties surviving the process of dissolution of the USSR that began in 1991. However, the collapse of Soviet power after the fall of the Berlin Wall did not dry up the influence of Damascus and Tehran on the geopolitical topography of the region. On the contrary, Iran managed to preserve its alliances, avoided isolationism, and, furthermore, became the main economic and military sponsor of the armed resistance movements that were enemies of the State of Israel. Syria has since been a powerful participant in all events in the eastern Mediterranean.

The failure of the Saudi-American alliance to cauterize the expanding influence of the Iranian regime not only made Saudi Arabia Iran's main regional rival, but also incentivized Tehran's incisive advance in consolidating the Shiite political corridor called the *"*Axis of Resistance*"* - which extends to the eastern border of the Mediterranean, bringing together Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon.

It is crucial to stress, however, that the achievement of the Iranian strategy only materialized thanks to the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq, as part of the plan to combat "terrorism" designed by the George W. Bush administration after the attacks of September 11, 2001. To some extent, the 2003 American invasion of Iraq, as well as the reconfiguration of Iraqi domestic politics into a kind of

ethnic-sectarian confederation, ended up strengthening the conglomerate of Shiite parties, a major religious current in Iraq sympathetic to Tehran.

The United States' leadership was unclear about the implications of the dissolution of Iraqi government institutions or the strategic impact of the dismantling of Saddam Hussein's Baath party measured. The subsequent migration of political and decision-making power into the hands of the Dawa Islamic Party was crucial to building the Shiite alliance, which extends today from Tehran to Beirut, through Baghdad and Damascus.

The American invasion of Iraq, the July 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel, the immovable Syrian regime and the nuclear negotiations between Iran and the six preeminent world powers (P5 + 1), made Tehran the key player in myriads of Middle Eastern strategic chessboards.

Anointed to the level of regional power, Iran's importance cannot be ignored or dealt with without a high coefficient of responsibility. The Lebanese-Israeli conflict, the Israeli- Palestinian conflict, the resolution of the Syrian dispute, the economic and military support for the armed groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah, the stabilization of Iraq, the socio- political unrest in Bahrain and the solution of the War in Yemen all tie directly to Tehran. In sum, one can no longer ignore Iranian influence and power in the complex collective security architecture of the Middle East.

The evolution and reorientation of Saudi foreign policy before and after the Iranian revolution

Mabon (2023, 16) astutely points out that for both Saudi Arabia and Iran, it is important to understand not only their actions in the realm of foreign policy, but also their visions of order that drove those actions. These visions of order emerge not only from the regional geopolitical architecture, but also from internal developments within each state that mold their goals and interests. We can turn first to the evolution of Saudi foreign policy in the historical perspective to understand this in context.

In a historical context, it possible to identify two different phases of Saudi foreign policy. The first one could be framed before the Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979 and was mostly oriented towards the Arab World. The second phase begins in the 1980s with the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war. Since the 1960s, the Saudis have been able to politically undermine the strength of their opponents in the Arab and Muslim world, but they have not been successful in trying to fill the power vacuum created from

their own political-strategic actions.

Nevertheless, with inexorable persistence, the Saudi monarchy managed to weaken the political viability of "*Nasserism"* in the 1970s and 1980s. The refractory "anti-Arabist" policy completely undermined the bastions of secular Arabism, disrupting the role of Egypt, Iraq and Syria in the regional context. In addition, the Saudis managed to neutralize the evolution and impact of Syrian-Iraqi "*Baathism"*, as well as of popular party models in different Arab states. But despite the relative efficiency in the method of political deconstruction of the Arab union strategy itself, the Saudis were unable to promote a political platform that could give them legitimacy in the regional decision-making process.

The war between Iran and Iraq, which lasted from 1980 to 1988, did not bring any political advantage to the Saudi monarchy, states Parsi (2012). The Saudis, alongside the United States, were the main strategic architects, economic supporters and political supporters of the continuation of the dispute which pitted two key rivals against each other. From the Saudi perspective, the overthrow of Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi's monarchy by Iran's Islamic revolution viewed with trepidation, as it could trigger unwelcome developments on the Arabian Peninsula.

However, the heart of the matter was associated with the risk posed by the transformation of Iran into a republican platform of Islamic governance with '*quasi-democratic'* features, which could become the axiom of popular participatory representativeness, assure Nasr (2013). This raised concerns on the part of the monarchy of Al Saud that saw its position grounded in the model of theocratic-state governance threatened in the midst of the Muslim world.

Therefore, in the Saudis' view, it was and still is necessary to eliminate any political-religious platform that could rival their perennial aspiration to occupy supremacy among other Islamic nations. The emergence of the power of organized political fronts that use Islam as a driving force – the so-called "political Islam" – causes a deep degree of skepticism and fear in Saudi Arabia.

The strategy of undermining the power of the Islamic revolution under the aegis of Ayatollah Khomeini and acting to prevent Tehran to expands its projection in the Arab States and in the Muslim world, had the opposite effect in the end. The failure of the Saudi to defeat the Iranian theocracy not only made Saudi Arabia Iran's main regional rival, but also led Tehran to more decisively promote the consolidation of ideological coalition and inactivating the formation of new popular forces across the region.

After the 1980s, Saudi foreign policy has largely failed to achieve its intended goals on the geostrategic chessboard of the Middle East and the Islamic World in general. To a large extent, Saudi Arabia's political power has been steadily weakening in the regional political diagram as the kingdom's room for maneuver narrows, limiting Saudi options for against other powerful actors in the Middle East. Traditionally, Saudi diplomacy has opted for high- risk, low-effectiveness strategic positions on the regional map – either in Lebanon, Syria or in Yemen.

In somehow, strategist and scholars emphasize that balance of failures on the outer front must be attributed, first of all, to the former foreign minister, Prince Saud Al-Faisal[6]. The former Saudi head of diplomacy failed in the Syrian context and failed in the intricate Lebanese scenario by spreading acute discord across all socio-religious backgrounds in the country, leading Beirut to widespread governmental paralysis from 2006 to 2015. The forty years of the dollar coercive diplomacy that he inaugurated under the auspicious of King Fahd did not result in concrete victory to the Saudi kingdom, alludes Nasrallah in his speech in 2015. In a historical context, it possible to identify two different phases of the Saudi foreign policy. The first one could be framed before the Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979 and was mostly oriented towards the Arab World. The second phase begins in 1980's with the outbreak of the Iran-Iraqi war.

The origins of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry in Lebanon

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[6] Prince Saud Al-Faisal was the Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia from 1975 to 2015. He was the son of the third monarch Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al Saud and patron of the " *Sudairites"* branch in the royal house.

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Literature on the Saudi-Iranian rivalry in Lebanon

Scholars have investigated the Saudi-Iran rivalry extensively. Nevertheless, in the case of Lebanon, it is commendable to emphasize that the academic literature has not sufficiently explored the interplay between regional and local politics. With regard to the literature on the Saudi-Iran rivalry across the Middle East or the Saudi-Iran rivalry in Lebanon, one of the most prominent research developments has been Simon Mabon's (2023) theorization on Saudi-Iranian rivalry in the region and in the Islamic world. Mabon argues that the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran and its impact on the region has been reshaped through a multi-level, multi-dimensional and multi-causal set of interactions between a range of different actors operating across the region.

Supplementing Mabon's argument on regional politics of the Middle East, Paul Noble's (1991) work on the weakness of Arab states in their early years of independence details how, in his view, that weakness led to chronic instability in politics across the region, exacerbated by commonalities across state borders (Noble 2019). In the decades that followed, Nobel argues that this pattern continued, with Arabism and Islamism offering ideational causes that could compete with states, leaving the residue for future transnational engagement. For Noble, the interaction of domestic and regional politics has had serious repercussions for regional politics. In Lebanon's tutelary case, regional interplay has had a substantive effect over the Lebanese political arena due to the unique permeability and vulnerability of its political system.

In the International Relations literature on the Middle East, few conceptualizations of Saudi Arabia and Iran's rivalry in Lebanon have been developed. Simon Mabon (2023) argues that "both Riyadh and Tehran pursued to deploy a mixture of material and ideational resources to cultivate relationships with actors across the region either in Iraq or Lebanon. While this often took place between groups who shared sectarian allegiances, this also involved the development of relationships between groups who shared visions of order" as in the Syrian case after the Civil War upheaval in 2011.

To Mabon (2023, 06), the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran plays out regionally, conditioned by the interplay of local and global forces, but he argues that this rivalry also plays out *within* states – such as in the case of Lebanon. The presence of shared normative environments, conditioned by religion, sectarian affinity, ethnicity, or ideology, helps Riyadh and Tehran to engage with groups found within state borders". On this set of arguments, Mabon (2023, 06) underline, "This

engagement results in the cultivation of relationships of a range of different forms, between states and non-state actors. Such relationships have typically been referred to as 'proxy wars' and are deemed to play a central role in international politics and the perpetuation of conflict, particularly in the context of the rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran".

Mabon (2023, 07) argues that "conflict across the Middle East has routinely been framed as a consequence of proxy wars, such as conflict in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, albeit playing out in different ways. These proxy wars are often found as features of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, yet the ways in which Saudi Arabia and Iran develop relationships with local actors' points to a more complex set of relationships than the model typically understood within a 'proxy relationship'". To Saad (2019), the model of proxy wars is deeply problematic, emerging from a reductive and conceptual inadequacy, particularly when seeking to examine multidimensional relationships.

Wastnidge and Mabon (2019) discuss the intricacy of trans-state relationships between states – in this case Saudi Arabia and Iran – and non-state actors as products of time and space, meaning that a range of factors influence the relationships, producing a few different outcomes. This includes some local actors possessing far more agency than is often typically assumed, as observed by Amal Saad in the case of Hezbollah (Saad 2019).

Moreover, as the cultivation of cross-border relationships developed by Saudi Arabia and Iran reveal, these relationships are not uni-directional, but rather can also be driven by local actors seeking to find regional powers able to provide support. To Mabon (2023), the Iranian-Saudi rivalry plays out differently across time and space, shaped by the complexities and contingencies of each local context. This argument appears in Hassan Nasrallah's, Hezbollah's Secretary-General, speeches while he is addressing the narrative of deterrence vis-à-vis Israel or vis-à-vis the Gulf monarchies.

Mabon (2013) ensure that work on the clash between Saudi Arabia and Iran typically falls in different camps of analysis with a wide range of interpretations depending on the variables and angles to be explored. Nevertheless, the author describes with precision three groups of interpretations that modulate visions and perceptions on Saudi Arabia and Iran's rivalry. For the author, the first group argues that the rivalry emerges out of struggle for regional supremacy, geopolitical competition that is shaped by concerns about the organization of regional security. The second argues that the rivalry is a consequence of centuries old enmity within Islam, stemming from "ancient hatreds" that pit Sunni

against Shi'a. Adherents of such a primordialist view hold that the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran stems from a contemporary manifestation of these religious tension. The third argues that religion has been used as a mechanism of control alongside and within geopolitical concerns, resulting in a rivalry that plays out across time and space, shaping – and being shaped by – local contexts.

Alexander Wendt argues that as the Muslim world's most influential nations, Saudi Arabia and Iran handle sectarian issues from very different angles. To Wendt (1992), the nature of identities has a decisive impact on the nature of political relations between states. From this concept it is possible to draw some conclusions about how Saudis and Iranians perceive one another. Additionally, Wendt's conceptualization of the behavior of states as a matter intrinsically bonded to an inter-subjective relationship will be pivotal to analyzing how both contenders (Saudis and Iranians) measure their perceptions on Trans-Levantine States.

When it comes to the question of trans-state identities, Raymond Hinnebusch (2002) argues that artificial states or the imposition of boundaries does not necessarily create loyalties to states, but rather to the sub-states, as he defines. This premise is applicable to the case of Iraq, in which the religious identity overlaps the national feeling. And this paradigm is precisely what makes the Saudis oppose the central government in Baghdad and what also makes the Iranians intervene in Bahrain.

In the case of Lebanon and even in Syria, it is reasonable to conclude that Saudis and Iranians have moved past persuading others and shaping the preferences by utilizing the sectarian card and ethnic cleavages as instruments of "*soft power*". In the recent past, Tehran's and Riyadh's decision-making process in foreign policy is moved primarily through coercion tactics, used as an instrument to preserve interests and to conserve power, which exemplifies what Joseph Nye defines as "*hard power*" (Nye Jr 2004).

Riyadh and Tehran also utilize Islam as a strong component in their diplomacy in order to preserve their political authorities and to expand their influences. As Mabon (2013) correctly asserts, given the importance of Islam for both Saudis and Iranians, religion is used as an instrument of legitimization in order to reduce the threat posed by different identity groups, and this is reflected in the conduct of the states. This integration of religion in diplomacy will be a key ingredient in unpacking the impact of sectarianism on the genesis of political violence and armed conflicts in the Trans-Levantine region (Iraq, Syria and Lebanon).

Therefore, Fred Halliday characterized the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran into two spheres of competition: the geopolitical and the ideological. Halliday argues that the clash is mainly emanated from ethno-national and religious identity struggles. Questions such as identity, ideology and nationalism will be explored conspicuously in the light of Fred Halliday's theories to define the nature of the clash between Riyadh and Tehran, and its impacts on sectarianism, national fragmentation and political violence within societies composed of multiple identities, like Syria, Iraq and Lebanon (Halliday 2005).

In applying the concept of Halliday to Lebanon's political model framework, Mabon (2013) argues that the rivalry is grounded within blocs within the power sharing system, albeit with broader repercussions. Amidst state fragmentation, however, the rivalry plays out in different forms, such as in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, where Riyadh and Tehran provided support for militias and armed groups operating largely – although not exclusively – beyond the coercive capacity of the state.

Gregory Gause's (2020) studies on hegemony and supremacy challenge generic concepts to define the morphology of Saudi-Iran rivalry. He emphasizes that the battle for hegemony or supremacy between both regional players is doomed to fail either in the Middle Eastern landscape or in the Muslim World at large. His argument is anchored in myriad of variables related to the multipolar nature of the Middle Eastern political order encompassed by other regional powers such as Turkey, Israel and Egypt. A second variable that should be considered is the direct influence of great powers – such as France, Russia, and the United Kingdom – and superpowers – like the United States and China – over central issues such as energy, military and security prospects. Gause (2020), therefore, argues that the multipolar nature of order, underpinned by both material and ideational capabilities, coupled with the penetration of regional politics by external actors, leaves hegemonic aspirations doomed to fail.

Adham Saouli (2020) in his research indicates that the Middle East is a region dominated by "middle powers" in a variety of diverse arrangements, who seek to exert influence on regional and global politics, but this ability is conditioned by structural factors and relations with global powers. Nevertheless, Guimaraes, & Almeida (2018) argues that there are differences between what are categorized as regional powers and what is the stature of middle powers.

To Guimarães & Almeida (2018), middle power states are capable of exerting their influence in their own regional compass and they are also capable of influencing on a large scale more than one global

matter on the world stage – that is, beyond their geographical region. On the other hand, regional power influence is primarily concentrated in their own regional compass, and they are not capable of exerting decisive influence in more than one large scale global matter – which restrict their strength and maneuverability in the international system. Brazil and India, for example, could be considered as middle powers. They can modulate geopolitically their own sphere of influence and play a wider role in more than one topic on the world stage. While Canada, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Israel, and Turkey are mostly regional actors rather than true middle power states. In the case of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, Mabon (2023) emphasizes that what is at play particularly in the case of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is competition for order, between different visions of how (regional) politics *should* be organized.

In the contemporary Middle East, one can assert that the rivalry between the two regional powers builds on several existing divisions – particularly ethnicity, sect, vision of regional order, and relationship with external powers, as Mabon (2023) indicates in his theoretical analysis of the topography of Saudi-Iranian competition. From these divisions, relationships have been cultivated amongst actors who share similar outlooks to either Riyadh or Tehran, Mabon continues. Often viewed as a sectarian struggle, such an approach hints at the formation of a "Sunni bloc" to counter the "Shi'a bloc", bringing together amongst others, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey (McDowall e Bakr 2015). Similarly, if viewed purely through the lens of power politics, a Saudi-Turkey-Israel alliance would have been forged to counter the threat posed by Iran. Yet fears about ideological acceptability among possible partners have prevented either from occurring, reflecting broader concerns about regional order which appear to trump tendencies towards alliance-building.

In Mabon's (2023, 31) view "*the permeability of local politics coupled with the regional ambitions of both states allows tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran to interact and play with domestic and sub-regional rivalries*". As we shall see, this level of permeability and the interplay between local and regional politics is of paramount importance to the case of Lebanon.

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In addition to the literature we have already referenced, one can identify many more relevant publications on the international relations and geopolitics of the Middle East, such as: Simon Mabon's

books on ‘Saudi Arabia and Iran: Soft Power Rivalry in the Middle East’ (2013), ‘Houses built on sand: violence, sectarianism and revolution in the Middle East’ (2020), and ‘The Struggle for Supremacy: Saudi Arabia and Iran’ (2023); Raymond Hinnebusch’s book on ‘The international politics of the Middle East’ (2015), and publications such as ‘Proxy Wars and Spheres of Influence in Post-ISIS Syria’ (2020), 'Identity and state formation in multi-sectarian societies: between nationalism and sectarianism in Syria' (2020), ‘The rise and decline of the populist social contract in the Arab world’ (2020), and joint publication with Ola Riai and Raymond Hinnebusch on ‘Understanding Syria's sectarian wave’ (2021), Jasmine K. Gani and Raymond Hinnebusch on ‘Actors and dynamics in the Syrian conflict's middle phase: between contentious politics, militarization and regime resilience’ (2022), Jasmine K. Gani and Raymond Hinnebusch on ‘The Syrian uprising: between peaceful protest and state failure’ (2022); Christopher Phillips’ book on ‘The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East’ (2016); Bassel Salloukh’s publications on ‘The Politics of Sectarianism in Postwar Lebanon’ (2015); ‘Taif and the Lebanese State: The Political Economy of a Very Sectarian Public Sector’ (2019), ‘Transforming Power Sharing: From Corporate to Hybrid Consociation in Postwar Lebanon (2017); Imad Salamey’s book on ‘The Government and Politics of Lebanon. Routledge’ (2014); Amal Saad’s article on ‘Challenging the sponsor-proxy model: the Iran-Hizbullah relationship’ (2019); Edward Wastnidge’s book on ‘Diplomacy and reform in Iran: foreign policy under Khatami’ (2016) and his article on ‘Iran and Syria: An Enduring Axis’ (2017); Frederic Wehrey’s book on ‘Beyond Sunni and Shia : the roots of sectarianism in a changing Middle East’ (2017); Joseph Bahout’s article on ‘Sectarianism in Lebanon and Syria: The dynamics of mutual spill-over’ (2013); Daniel Sobelman’s articles on ‘Learning to deter: Deterrence failure and success in the Israel-Hezbollah conflict (2017), ‘New rules of the game : Israel and Hizbollah after the withdrawal from Lebanon’ (2004) and ‘Hizbollah from Terror to Resistance: Towards a National Defense Strategy’ (2010); Ussama Makdisi’s books on ‘Age of coexistence: the ecumenical frame and the making of the modern Arab world’ (2019) and ‘The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History and Violence in Nineteenth- Century Ottoman Lebanon’ (2000); Gilbert Achcar’s book on ‘The 33-Day War: Israel’s War on Hezbollah in Lebanon and Its Aftermath’ (2007); Ward Vloeberghs’ book on ‘Architecture, power and religion in Lebanon: Rafiq Hariri and the politics of sacred space in Beirut. (2016) and his article on ‘Worshipping the martyr president: the darîh of Rafiq al- Hariri in Beirut’ (2008); Vali Nasr’s book on ‘The Shi’a Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future’

(2007); Thomas Hegghammer's book on 'Jihad in Saudi Arabia: violence and pan-Islamism since 1979 (2010); Rola El-Husseini's articles on 'Hezbollah and the Axis of Refusal: Hamas, Iran and Syria' (2010) and the 'Pax Syriana: elite politics in postwar Lebanon' (2012); F. Gregory Gause III's publication on 'Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War' (2014) and 'The International Relations of the Persian Gulf' (2009); Bassam Tibi's book on 'Arab Nationalism: Between Islam and the Nation State'(1997); Adham Saouli's publications on 'Unfulfilled aspirations: middle power politics in the Middle East' (2020) and Hezbollah: socialisation and its tragic ironies (2019); Rima Majed's article on 'Sectarianization: mapping the new politics of the Middle East' (2019); Joseph Daher's book on 'Hezbollah : the political economy of the Party of God' (2016); Majed Halawi's book on 'A Lebanon defied: Musa al-Sadr and the Shi'a community' (1992); Hannes Bauman's book on 'Citizen Hariri: Lebanon's neoliberal reconstruction (2016); Reinoud Leenders' book on 'Spoils of truce: corruption and state-building in postwar Lebanon' (2012); Steven Heydemann and Reinoud Leenders' book on 'Middle East authoritarianisms: governance, contestation, and regime resilience in Syria and Iran' (2013); Jeffrey Karam's book on 'The Middle East in 1958: reimagining a revolutionary year' (2020); Marius Deeb's publication on 'Syria, Iran, and Hezbollah: the unholy alliance and its war on Lebanon' (2013); Mona Harb and Reinoud Leenders' publication on 'Know thy enemy: Hizbullah, 'terrorism' and the politics of perception' (2005); Mona Harb's article on 'New Forms of Youth Activism in Contested Cities: The Case of Beirut' (2018); Rex Brynen's publication on 'Beyond the Arab Spring: Authoritarianism and Democratization in the Arab World' (2012); Hassan Ahmadian's article 'From detente to containment: the emergence of Iran's new Saudi strategy' (2021); and Mustafa Menshawi's articles on 'Discoursing sectarianism" approach: What and how to analyze in sectarian discourses (2022) and 'The irony of sectarianism: Sectarianizing by desectarianizing in Syria' (2022).

Chapter 03

The struggle for Islamic supremacy

> *"What makes the Iran-Saudi cold war particularly fraught is that the Saudis do not recognize that the Iranians are actually in a better position to pursue serious brinkmanship. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is better suited to exploit the vulnerabilities of Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf states, with its ideological appeal and propensity to effectively collaborate with sympathetic local groups as partners and not just as proxies. Iran has more experience and operational capability in these efforts and, unlike Saudi Arabia, is more pressure-resistant due to decades of weathering strenuous foreign, economic and domestic political crises since the Islamic Revolution in 1979." (Mohseni 2016, 02)*

This chapter examines the direct implications of this rivalry and competition upon the evolution of the regional security architecture in the Middle East and the establishment of a new geopolitical order after 2006 Lebanese-Israeli War. Lebanon's gravitational weight has changed in the region, as the country has become an irreplaceable piece in the geostrategic perspective of both Tehran and Riyadh. In this chapter, I show how this rivalry the clash for hegemony within Pan-Islamism after the 2006 war and later the Iranian nuclear program negotiations alongside the world's great powers (P5+1) has changed drastically the Saudi and Iranian involvement in Lebanon with both sides becoming more aggressively interventionist in the level of domestic politics. It is possible to argue that the clash over Lebanon in the Middle Eastern geopolitical chessboard is crucially linked to both the Saudi and Iranian

defense and security policies in their pursuit of the strategic goal of regional dominance. The race for supporting armed movements and religious organizations across the Arab and Islamic worlds by both actors has been a preponderant component in the foreign policy of each nation. This chapter places a particular emphasis on the multidimensional effects of this strategy, exploring how both sides have jeopardized national consensus and paved the way to political violence and national fragmentation in Lebanon and beyond.

I argue that five historical events indelibly shaped the rivalry between the two most important Islamic nations in the Middle East: 1) The 1979 Iranian revolution; 2) The American invasion of Iraq in 2003; 3) The war between Hezbollah and Israel in 2006; 4) the erosion of the Arab state system with poor governance and authoritarianism; and 5) the power vacuum caused by the US withdrawal in 2020-2021.

All these events were the pillars of the reconfiguration of the contemporary regional political architecture. Given these historical facts and the conflagrated clash between Riyadh and Tehran over supremacy in the Middle East, the new regional security order and balance of power could potentially reshape the new geopolitical contours in the region and affect the landscape of sectarianism, political violence and national fragmentation.

Therefore, it is conceivable to argue that the unfurling of the Saudi-Iranian struggle for expansion of their respective sphere of influence could culminate in a wider armed conflict in the region. While there exists a perennial absence of a calibrated mutual deterrence mechanism to govern this clash, instruments of *"hard power"* are becoming repeatedly utilized as means of deterrence – and are being increasingly used in favor of the *"soft power"* tools that have previously ruled most of this rivalry. This shift towards hard power has important ramifications for the way this rivalry will play out both inside and outside of state borders with its tendency to create a wide range of "proxy wars," a concept Mabon (2023) provides valuable context for:

> *While the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran plays out regionally, conditioned by the interplay of local and global forces, it also plays out within states. The presence of shared normative environments, conditioned by religion, sectarian affinity, ethnicity, or ideology, helps Riyadh and Tehran to engage with groups found*

> *(predominantly, although not exclusively) within state borders. This engagement results in the cultivation of relationships of a range of different forms, between states and non-state actors. Such relationships have regularly been referred to as "proxy wars" and are deemed to play a central role in contemporary conflict, particularly in the context of the rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran… This point is developed further by Vladimir Rauta, who argues that proxy wars should be conceptualised as "strategic bargains" in pursuit of coercion. In lieu of the concept of "proxy wars", the concept of "proxy networks" has also been used in an effort to examine the nature of trans-national relationships between actors across the region.* (Mabon 2023, 6)

On one hand, some scholars such as Vali Nasr (2013) and Trita Parsi (2012) would argue that five major historical events outlined at the beginning of this chapter set Iran apart as the pivotal nation that today holds the key to solving the diverse issues facing the region and the world. Today Iran is an indispensable actor in the stabilization of the Middle East, politically and socio-religiously. On the other, scholars like Frederic Wehrey (2014) claim that from the Gulf States' and Israel's standpoints, Iran is perceived as a real threat to the balance of power of the region and rises as the pinnacle of instability in whole Middle East.

Despite the fall of the Soviet Union in the early nineties, some Cold War-influenced alliances in the Middle East, such as the one between Syria and Iran, managed to survive, preserving a geopolitical topography different from the one that Washington and Riyadh had expected or desired. The Islamic Republic of Iran thus managed to preserve key relationships, avoid isolation, and ultimately become the principal economic and military supporter of armed groups fighting Israel.

The failure of the Saudi monarchy's efforts to undermine the Iranian theocracy not only converted Saudi Arabia into the main regional rival of Iran, but also pushed Tehran to invest more deliberately in the consolidation of the Shi'a political corridor, which now extends to the eastern border of the Levant. It is important to note that Iran was able to successfully pursue this strategy largely due to the fall of Saddam

Hussein in Iraq. To a certain degree, the American invasion of Iraq and the transition of political power from the Sunni Baath party to the majority Shi'a population were essential to the construction of the Shi'a alliance that extends today from Tehran to Beirut, passing through Baghdad and Damascus – the so- called "Axis of the Resistance".

On the other hand, the terrorism that plagues the Middle East emanates from a contrasting palette of Islamic hues. The Wahhabi-Salafist ideology has been converted into one of the main inspirational vectors for violent organizations subsidized by its economic power. Albeit the main source of Islamic extremism in a certain measure, this ideology is not only linked to marginalization, ignorance and unemployment, but is also linked to the maximalist policies of the religious-industrial complex under the power of some Gulf countries. Some groups, such as Jabhat Al-Nusra, act not as a proxy contender, but instead act as effectively a wing of the foreign policy apparatus of certain countries in the Gulf, alludes Dean Alexander and Yonah Alexander (Alexander e Alexander 2015).

These groups seek not only to increase their power and benefit the parties involved in their tutelary relationships, but also to restructure the region as a whole in a way that aligns with their particular conception of order. These efforts mirror those of regional and global powers as well, as Mabon (2023) explains:

> *The increased involvement of the US post 2003 supports such hypotheses, revealing a complex set of struggles between actors seeking to exert influence and shape the region in their image, albeit often struggling to do so due to other competing visions of order. For example, both Saudi Arabia and Iran seek to shape regional politics in accordance with particular political visions, yet so too do Turkey, Qatar, Israel, Hizbullah, Da'ish, the US and China, amongst others. In this complex mélange of interactions, each actor seeks to impose its own vision of order on the region through cultivating relationships with actors across the region in the form of political parties, militias, clerics, or broader popular support through media outlets.* (Mabon 2023, 154)

Payam Mohseni (2016, 01), nevertheless, argues that the “Iranians have filled the vacuums of power resulting from the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and [from] the structural decline and dissolution of the Arab state system ushered in by the Arab Spring. Fragmentation in the Arab world, exacerbated by Saudi Arabia’s conservative and counterrevolutionary regional policies in response to the Arab Spring, naturally provides greater opportunities for Iranian influence”.

Since the 1960s, Saudi foreign policy in particular has sought to undermine politically and ideologically the power of their adversaries in the Arab world. Nonetheless, they failed to occupy the vacuum of power resulting from their strategic actions. Undeniably the persistency of the Saudi monarchy to erode the Egyptian influence and leadership over the Arab states was successful by weakening the political vitality of the “Nasserism” and isolating Cairo after the Camp David peace treaty with Israel.

Moreover, the Saudis were able also to neutralize the impact of Popular Arab Movements, such as *"Ba'athism",* in several states by supporting antagonistic regimes. And, today Riyadh employs precisely the same tactic to annihilate the consolidation of Political Islam – such as that represented by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt – as a viable platform of governance, dreading a loss of power and influence.

The future of the political, military, and economic decisions in the region will thus have to involve the emerging Iranian-aligned corridor, a loose confederation of strategic actors encompassing more than 100 million people, from Tehran all the way to Beirut.

This loose confederation consists of a complex patchwork of state and non-state actors operating inside and outside of legally defined international borders. It would clearly be reductive to advance this analysis within a purely Westphalian framework emphasizing only state action and official, *de jure* sovereignty within a state’s territory. In many parts of the Middle East in particular, the Weberian definition of statehood – the political entity that holds a monopoly on the legitimate use of force within a given territory – does not align with reality. It is therefore necessary for us to delve into the foundations of some of the most influential non-state Islamist groups, organizations that undermine this Weberian definition in the region perhaps more than any other categories of political entities (Ahmadian e Mohseni 2021). Mabon (2023) delves into the unique position of these groups as illuminating the complex interplay between formal and informal power through their occupation

of a hybrid role in the system:

> *Moreover, as a nascent body of literature observes, the fragmentation of the (neo)Weberian model has allowed actors to occupy hybrid positions between states and non-state actors. Here, groups such as Hizbullah, Hamas, al -Hashd al-Sha'bi - Iraqi Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMFs) – are positioned between the formal institutional structures of the state and of non-state actors, occupying a hybrid role. Accepting this allows us to better understand relationships between different actors, both endogenous and exogenous. Thus, while states seek to regulate their territory, other efforts to impose logics and order over space stemming from ideational or material positions of power creates conditions of permeability and contestation, conditioned by the relational interplay of actors involved.* (Mabon 2023, 43)

The political foundations behind the origins of the armed groups and religious movements in the Islamic world has had profound consequences upon the sociopolitical structure that shaped the emergence of several religious groups in the Middle East. The objective here is to shed light and to explore, in a comparative perspective, the struggle that has marked the nature of the clash between the religious nationalism and the secular nationalism within the Arab world, which remain largely of the same denomination within Islam. Furthermore, this chapter has one of its goals to delineate the paradoxes that marked the several groups within the Islamic society. In this case, I will establish a comparative parallel by stratifying in different categories the diversity and complexity of some religious organizations, displaying their dissimilarities, political pillars and ideological doctrines.

It is imperative to understand Islam as a source of religious inspiration(s), under a plural and multifaceted prism, distinguishing it according to the various dynamics that mark the functioning of the Islamic world. Within the context of rising sectarianism, understood as the manifestation of different interpretations of these sources of inspiration, it results in a range of different types of political activities. The cause and effect of Islamic fundamentalism cannot be associated to only cultural habitat but,

predominantly, also to political conditioning and social factors such as marginalization, manipulation, ignorance and unemployment, and this part of the research seeks to stress the importance of these factors.

In fact, understanding Islam and the factionalized struggles for power that occur within it provides another angle from which we can better examine the Saudi-Iranian rivalry as well. Each state seeks to position itself as a leader of the Islamic world in various ways, but neither has yet succeeded – neither is likely to succeed in any meaningful sense given the complexity of the religion and its various sects. As Mabon (2023) puts it, "*The position of Islam within the political, social and theological fabric of both Saudi Arabia and Iran is easily seen, yet as Nazih Ayubi suggests, it is difficult to monopolize Islam as a consequence of its shared belief and the myriad (often competing) visions and interpretations*." (Mabon 2023, 14). Though relatively rare in the wider context of the religious world, at its most extreme, these myriad visions and interpretations of Islam have resulted in intense bouts of internecine violence and even acts of terror.

However, it is important to emphasize that the use of violence or the practice of terrorism as a method cannot be circumscribed, a priori, to simplistic motives of religious expression but has to be revised as a matter of ideological and political connotations. One of the common mistakes when it comes to study the genesis of armed movements, especially in the Middle East, is to bring them together within the same categorization, ignoring their social roots and strategic objectives. It is crucial to keep in mind that organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Hezbollah, Hamas, Al- Qaeda, Boko Haram and even the 'Islamic sSate' – known as Da'ish – have emerged under different sets of conditions. Their identity is based on a dissimilar and antagonistic ideological and political orientation, although they integrate the universe of so-called religious organizations. A theoretical and conceptual approach will assess characteristics of each group, centered on unraveling the mechanisms of the sociocultural habitat of Muslim societies. The focus will be on exploring not only the historical foundations that led to the emergence of religious-based nationalist resistance groups but also the political trends among these non-state actors and on differentiating the ideological matrix that led to the formation of new terrorist networks within the Arab and Islamic worlds. Ultimately, it seeks to argue that while the notion of a sect is a useful and important analytical tool, we must also locate this within broader socioeconomic conditions that shape the behavior of the particular group.

This argument is supported by Mabon's (2023) observations on the conflicts between sects and the analytical missteps that would result from an oversimplification of intra-Islamic rivalries as following a simple pattern of Sunni against Shia:

> *The deployment of sectarian identity politics has facilitated transnational mobilization by state and non-state actors alike, providing ample opportunities for intervention and manipulation. While this constellation has predominantly resulted in geopolitically charged sectarian tensions, both domestically and regionally, the shifting dynamics of polarity have also resulted in intrasectarian tensions, most notably seen in tensions between Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey which have played into ideas of 'underbalancing', a point reinforced by Gause in 2017. Here, the failure to create a grand Sunni alliance to tackle the perceived threat from Iran serves as a strong rebuttal to those seeking to reduce the struggle over regional order to sectarian difference* (Mabon 2023, 34).

In this section, I focus on efforts to explain the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and its subsidiaries in terms of religion, geopolitics, or a constructivist approach that centers on an interplay between the two identities, contextualized in time and space (Mabon 2023).

The genesis of religious nationalism and armed resistance

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the political order of the Middle East was marked by abrupt changes and by the resurgence of religious-based nationalism, which served as a standard of protection for the self-determination of the so-called *"Al-Umma Al-Islamiya"* or Islamic Nation. Between 1920 and 1930, frictions between the Egyptian intellectual elite and the British colonial force led to the emergence of political–religious organizations determined to safeguard the independence of the so-called 'Muslim territories' from the subjugation of European colonialism.

In Egypt, Hassan Al-Banna emerged as an energetic social activist, intellectual, religious and political leader. Al-Banna's ideology crossed the Egyptian borders, and gradually his thinking gained adherents in the major academic circles between Cairo, Damascus and Jerusalem. Despite having a strong popular appeal, Al-Banna's discourse preached a revision of the political organization of the state and of social relations between individuals based on religious moral foundations embodying the principles of Islam. Defending the sovereignty of Muslim territories and safeguarding the self-determination of Islam's culture and values, as central pillars in regulating relations between the state and individuals, Al- Banna's ideas have become the common denominator of religious currents in the main capitals of the Muslim world.

The subservience of the Egyptian economic elite to the metropolis gradually strengthened the embryonic Pan-Islamic ideological current. Imbued in the articulation of a matrix of foundations capable of propelling the ideology of religious nationalism as a source of inspiration and resistance to foreign occupation, Al-Banna and his immediate circle began, in 1928, the founding of one of the most influential social networks in political Islam: the so-called Muslim Brotherhood. The points of inflection between the intellectual elite of religious character and the Egyptian aristocracy were, in fact, in the process of deterioration. The insurgencies were no longer only against the cadets of the colonial metropolis. Hassan Al-Banna advocated building a new order in which the state and laws should be guided by the principles of Islamic doctrines.

The religious nationalism that Al-Banna addressed gained traction and transcended the borders of Egypt. Between the 1930s and 1940s, his ideas had reverberating in the main religious centres of Algeria, Tunisia, Syria, Jordan and Palestine. In Jerusalem, his popularity spread among theologians and intellectuals, particularly at a historic moment of deep social and political upheaval. In addition to its importance to the three mono- theistic religions and one of Islam's most sacred temples, the city of Jerusalem was seen as one of the resistance bastion to the European colonial occupation in the Middle East and in the Muslim world.

Sheikh Izzedin Al-Qassam, considered as one of the 'revivalists'[7] of Islam, was one of the main figures

[7]A chain of religious thinkers and Muslim theologians who excel at the orthodox interpreta- tion of Islam and combat so-called 'innovations' in the interpretation of the Hadith. The prominent names among the 'revivalists' who are also known by the name 'Mujadedin Al- Sahwa Al-Islamiya' – renovators of Islamic consciousness – in the history of Islam include such names as Ibn Taymiyyah, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and Hassan Al -Banna (enthusiasts and sowers of Salafism).

at this time, operating as a mentor of the Palestinian insurrection against the British occupation. According to Hroub (2010), Al-Qassam galvanized the discontent of indigenous population in opposition to the policies of the colonial power over Muslim sanctuaries, and about the modus operandi of the British control over the immigration system. Three catalysts essentially conditioned the political–religious movement led by Sheikh Al-Qassam:

1. Defence of the religious values of Islam;
2. Preservation of Muslim identity and self-determination
3. Protection of sanctuaries

Such demands, in fact, were already part of a broad consensus among several Muslim leaderships based between Egypt and the Levant region. A pan-Islamic ideology was soon profusely served as a mainstay during the first transnational Islamic meeting in Jerusalem in 1938 – better known as the Beit Al-Maqdes[8] Conference. In addition to diverse Arab groups, the event was attended by delegations from the present territories of Pakistan and Indonesia (Hroub 2010). The Beit Al-Maqdes meeting came to be regarded as the first high-caliber meeting of Muslim intellectuals effectively focused on fighting what they defined as 'de-characterization of Islamic identity, shrines and customs' under the yoke of foreign colonialism.

According to Khaled Hroub (2010), one of the results of this conference was the approval of a memorandum that established as a political duty, to be instilled in the most varied social nuclei: resistance to colonialism, defense of the native population of Palestine and preservation of Islamic identity in all borders of the Muslim world. Al-Qassam's activism had become the 'Islamist Icon' for independence and a trench of resistance. For Hroub (2010), Al-Qassam's insurrection was marked as one of the first revolts anchored by the preconception of emerging religious nationalism. In his book One Palestine, Complete: Jews and Arabs under the British Mandate, the Israeli historian Segev (2000) emphasized the crucial role that Al-Qassam had played in the awakening of the Arab revolt in Palestine against the British mandate. In this context, the work of Izzedin Al-Qassam is explored under

[8] Beit Al-Maqdis in Arabic translation would be 'Holy House' or the 'sanctified house'.

various prisms. In part of Israeli historiography, Qassam's name is also associated with incitement against Zionism. From the perspective of Islamic sectors, his role was considered of such relevance in defense of self-determination and sovereignty of the Palestinian cause that the Hamas Movement honored him by baptizing their extent driven by Al-Qassam's ideas. However, it is important to state that it was the Muslim Brotherhood and, in fact, the thinking of Hassan Al-Banna that shaped the philosophy and ideology of the founders and intellectual mentors of the Palestinian group, such as Sheik Ahmad Yassin, Salah Shehadeh and Abdel-Aziz Al-Rantisi. Many of them were inspired by the 'revivalists,' a group that had as its founders Ibn Taymiyyah, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and Hassan Al-Banna himself – luminaries of ultra- orthodox wing of Islam such as Salafism and Wahhabism. This plight over the following decades was marked by strong discussions between secular and fundamentalist intellectuals about the matrix of the nationalist identity within the Arab– Muslim world.

European colonialism and origins of the Islamic movements

One of the epistemological debates established within the Muslim world at this time is the idea about the existence of the Al-Umma Al-Islamiya – the 'Great Islamic Nation.' Several scholars have argued that the introjection of the Islamic preconception to nationalist struggles against the European colonialism in the Arab world was the vector responsible for creating a thought intended to safeguard the cultural identity, religious values and customs of local populations. On the other hand, pan-Arabist scholars have always challenged the thesis concerning the existence of a 'Great Islamic Nation' – homogeneous, palatable and strategically coordinated. Proponents of Pan-Islamism have always been used as strong points of counter arguments that the political, economic and cultural expansion of the various Islamic caliphates under the Umayyad, Abbasid, Fatmíadas, Ayubíadas and Mamluk dynasties. Another aspect is the hegemonic expansionism of the Ottoman Empire, which lasted about seven uninterrupted centuries, as evidence of the existence of a Great Islamic Nation.

Others, such as the Egyptian Haykal (2012), have argued that Arab identity precedes Islamic identity. In this perspective, religious nationalism, in addition to representing disturbing paradigms for the very identity of the Arab peoples, would not have taken into account the nationalist aspirations of non-Muslim Arab populations, such as the Christian communities: Copts, Orthodox and Maronites. Haykal (2012)

argues that the prism of religious nationalism, propagated throughout the twentieth century and most recently vocalized in Egypt with the victory of the Muslim Brotherhood in the short post-Mubarak period, has proved to be an instinctively refractory movement, neglecting and sidelining the Christian Coptic minority and other ethnic groups. However, it is important to emphasize that religious nationalism has many features and, in some cases, is governed by peculiar characteristics based on a logic of its own, as was the case with Libya's independence from Italian colonial rule.

Between 1912 and 1931, Omar Al-Mukhtar, a professor, theologian and religious leader, led the first armed resistance against Italian colonialism in Libyan territory, organizing one of the most important nationalist movements that sprang up under the umbrella of religion in the Arab world. Al-Mukhtar was the first leader to use religion-armed wing with his name. According to Hroub (2010), the historical roots of the founders of Hamas[9] were to some as a political instrument, uniting the various indigenous tribes of Libya to forge a national identity capable of resisting the colonial rule of Benito Mussolini's Fascist Italy. The awakening of a nationalist sentiment, originated from the premises of Islamism was, in his view, the only vector appropriate to the convergence of the interests of tribal organizations existing in Libyan territory (Santarelli, E., 'A.-R. S. ' Ajīlī, and A. M. Barbar, 1988).

The creation of the Al-Mujahiddun brigade, a group of multi-tribal combatants who would be the first Libyan nationalist army, is celebrated in Libya's history as one of the most remarkable feats of Al-Mukhtar. In a multifaceted tribal caste society, Al- Mujahiddun was, in essence, the largest military force organized on Arab–Muslim territory throughout the European colonial period, with an estimated 3000 combatants. Its base was consolidated in the region of Cyrenaica, and the brigade fought for two decades for the independence of Libya (Santarelli, E., 'A.-R. S. ' Ajīlī, and A. M. Barbar, 1988).

Omar Al-Mukhtar's legacy has, to a large extent, inspired a number of independence movements in Africa, and particularly in the Arab countries of the Maghreb. The influence of his legacy reached not only Egypt but also the eastern fringe of the Mediterranean – lands of the 'Levant' – Syria, Lebanon and Palestine. As one of the greatest revolutionary leaders of the Arab and Muslim worlds and symbol of heroism in Libya, Al-Mukhtar left a striking mark in nationalist or religious resistance movements.

[9] The Islamic Resistance Movement – Hamas – was officially founded, on 14 December 1987, during the first Palestinian Intifada as a nationalist liberation movement against the Israeli military occupation of the occupied Palestinian territories. The word 'Hamas' in Arabic means 'fervor.' Some countries typify Hamas as a terrorist organization. Many other countries – all the Latin American states, for example – does not recognize the group as such terrorist organization.

His famous sentence before the Italian military court that sentenced him to death, after 22 years of resistance for his country's independence – 'we will not surrender; we will win or die' – has fostered the ideals of various nationalist groups in the Middle East and North Africa.

The clash of nationalisms

After a vibrant political rise between the 1920s and 1940s, the decline of religious nationalism and Islamist political movements can be attributed to a range of factors, including the impact of the geopolitical transformations in the Middle East after the World War II. The end of European colonialism, the rise of the State of Israel and the political polarization between East and West, characteristic of the cold war between the two world superpowers of the time, the United States and the Soviet Union, served as a leaven for the emergence of secular political movements in Arab countries. These movements are the Neo- Destour Party in Tunisia and the Ba'ath Party in Syria and Iraq.

In addition, the effects of the Cold War and the rise of pan-Arab nationalism had two important impacts. First, they favored the strengthening of military corporations in Arab countries. Second, they led to the overthrow of various monarchical regimes by the armed forces, as seen in Egypt, Libya and Yemen. The ideological character gained a more robust space for political movements, whether left wing or right wing, weakening the aspirations of religious nationalism that was already waning. One of the immediate effects was felt in the early 1950s with the uprising of the Egyptian military who in 1952 decided to overthrow the monarch Farouk I. The growing influence of the United States and the USSR on much of the political system of the Arab countries and the establishment of the State of Israel influenced the course of political transformation in several Middle Eastern countries.

In the period between the 1950s and 1970s, religious nationalism lost traction within Arab society, and the military in several Arab countries was moving to take power – with the exception of the Gulf, Jordan and Morocco monarchies. For Hroub (2010), despite the proliferation of Islamic associations, such groups did not belong to a hierarchical organizational structure or to a single transnational Islamic organization. It was a varied network of political fronts of religious hue and functioning horizontally and decentralized.

In the explanation of several Arab intellectuals, such as Muhammad Hasanayn Haykal and Sadiq Al-

Azm[10], it is possible to obtain two explanatory variables. The first suggests that the emergence of Pan-Arab nationalism was dependent on the need for containment of Franco- Anglo-American imperialism. The second alludes to the belief that only the ranks of the armed forces, and not political Islam, would be able to restore Arab sovereignty over the occupied Palestinian territories, as posited in an interview with Sadiq Al-Azm. However, Gamal Abdel Nasser's rise to power in Egypt and the effects of the Suez War in 1956 spurred the Egyptian leader's ambition to move forward with his project to create a confederation of Arab states with the alliance between Egypt and Syria – which generated the United Arab Republic in 1958.

Nasser's ideas, in the end, gave a real outline to the new secular Pan-Arab nationalism. The Egyptian leader, as well as the military governments that succeeded him, with Presidents Anwar Al-Sadat and Hosni Mubarak, repressed the Islamic movement, especially the Muslim Brotherhood. Not surprisingly, even today, the Egyptian military establishment and President Abdel-al-Fatah El-Sissi consider political Islam and the Wahhabi–Salafism religious movement as a threat to the Egyptian national security, particularly, after the removed president, Mohamed Morsi, of the Muslim Brotherhood, attempted to revive religious nationalism. The 'Nasserism' has become the dominant ideological and the flag of left-wing Arab nationalism. The predominance of pan-Arab sentiment served as a prelude to the awakening of Al-Umma Al-Arabiya (Arab Nation) in juxtaposition with a vision of an identity enshrined in the religious sectors of *Al-Umma Al-Islamiya* (Islamic Nation), influencing various political regimes in the Middle East.

It is essential, however, to elucidate that important Syrian Christian intellectual such as Michel Aflaq, Michel Quzman, Shakir al-As and Elias Qandalaft were the main articulators of the Pan-Arab ideology between the 1930s and 1940s, which were known as the 'Arab Renaissance'. Michel Aflaq's thought of 'A nation, an identity' traced back primarily to the thinking of left-wing Christian intellectuals. The consolidation of Arab political identity was instrumentalized in three axioms: socialism, nationalism and pan- Arabism. Such axes were responsible for forging the birth of the Ba'ath Party or of 'Ba'athism'. Although the origin was launched in the late 1930s, the Ba'ath Arab Party only consolidated in the 1960s, largely occupying the vacuum left by 'Nasserism' after the Egyptian leader's

[10] Professor Sadiq Al-Azm is one of the most prominent Arab scholars. He is a Syrian and is professor emeritus at the University of Damascus and has taught at Princeton University. Lately he was a senior scholar at Harvard University.

death in 1970.

In addition, it cannot be ignored that, in fact, secular nationalism was the factor responsible for the agglutination of all Palestinian armed movements within the same organizational identity. The foundation in 1964 of the Palestine Liberation Organization, under the leadership of Yasser Arafat, united various groups of different ideological inspirations among Marxist, socialist and even Christian liberal movements. All of them were influenced, to some extent, by the ideology of secular pan-Arabism.

As a breakpoint, the symbolism of the Palestinian struggle under the aegis of a secular nationalism culminated in the fragmentation of the Islamic political movements. Between 1950 and 1970, religious nationalism withered and lost legitimacy, especially within the Palestinian cause. The proliferation of a multiplicity of religious political movements within the Arab countries between 1920 and 1940, such as the Youssefist Movement in Tunisia and the branches of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan, Syria, Algeria and Morocco, collapsed with the Pan-Arab awakening in the early 1950s.

Icons of religious nationalism such as Al-Mukhtar and Al-Qassam would have no room in the Middle East in the convulsion of the cold war period. In the psyche of the Arab societies of that time, only the military establishment and autocratic regimes were able to deal with the dynamics of the Arab–Israeli conflict or to safeguard self-determination and defend the sovereignty of these societies from Western interference. Even Omar Al- Mukhtar's successful strategy in Libya, with the utilization of religious narrative as an important link to unite the country's tribal diversity within the same nationalist alliance, could not prevail in the context of an Arab society deeply impacted by the nature of the bipolar conflict and by the Nasserist Pan-Arabism.

In general, Arab historiography attributes to the military establishment the glory for colonial emancipation against Franco-British imperialism, and to some extent neglects the role of religious social movements in the national independence process. Between 1950 and 1990, few authors emphasized the role of the religious nationalist movements. Their works were interpreted, in some sense, as if they sought to rewrite history in order to reduce the glory of the armed forces in favor of Islamist movements – and were understood by some sectors as an apology to Islamic fundamentalism.

Categories and groups of Islamic tint

It is fundamental to understand the complexity and diversity of the Islamic world under the prism of its plurality. Individuals who profess the Muslim faith are estimated at approximately 1.5 billion people, equivalent to a quarter of the world's population, and are spread over some 80 countries on all continents (Lipka e Hackett 2017). The cause and effect of Islamic extremism are not exclusively linked to the individual's cultural and social habitat, but it is also associated with marginalization, ignorance, and exclusion. The radicalization of young people reaches, before any other social habitat, their own Muslim socio-organizational base.

Polk (2007), in his study about what he calls of 'pressure groups', emphasizes the existence of different categories within the Muslim world such as guerrillas, terrorist groups and socio- religious organizations, which cannot therefore all be agglutinated in the same classification. In this sense, one of the proposed ways would be to stratify the various Islamic organizations in three different groups:

1. Religious fraternities;
2. Nationalist resistance movements;
3. Terrorist organizations

According to Polk (2007), religious fraternities first emerged as social movements in the early twentieth century and, in the course of history, became organized political forces. In this group can be listed the Muslim Brotherhood (Egypt), Ennahda (Tunisia) and Hizmet (Turkey).

Within the conglomerate denominated Nationalist Resistance Movements, it is possible to include, for example, Hamas (Palestine) and Hezbollah (Lebanon). These are the two movements that emerged in the 1980s as indigenous armed groups vis-à-vis military occupations or foreign invasions. The third group is made up of associations such as Al- Qaeda, Daesh[11], Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (formerly Jabhat Al-Nusra),[12] Ansar Al- Shariah and Boko Haram. The main objective of these organizations is based on the exclusive use of terrorist methods as an instrument of coercion to achieve their

[11] Arabic acronym of the terrorist group so-called 'Islamic State'.
[12] The terrorist organization Jabhat Al-Nusra changed its name to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (Front for the Conquest of the Levant) in July 2016, following its breakup with its 'Alma Mater', the terrorist organization Al-Qaeda.

political objectives. In addition to the use of systematic violence to spread terror, all the activities of these organizations are anchored in the practice of transnational organized crime.

It is important to emphasize, however, that this classification is not monolithic one and there may be an overlap of characteristics between the three groups. Some practices may also have been shared or applied by a particular group, perhaps in another category. The modus operandi and the political objectives of these categories generally go in different directions. However, this does not mean that some groups have not at any time resorted to the use of terrorist methods as tactics.

The modus operandi of the organizations that constitute the first group is based on the dissemination of their ideology and the protection of their social base, with the objective to keep active their clerical network and to maintain operative the social projects. The second group seeks to safeguard the defense of its national identity, its self-determination and its existence as a sociopolitical force, sometimes organizing itself in political parties. One of the main characteristics of its modus operandi is the social assistance through schools and hospitals, for example. The third group is devoid of the connotations of the previous categories and operates mostly as a mercenary force and also acts as merchant gear for drug trafficking, human trafficking, organ trafficking, arms trafficking, illegal sale of oil and as a boomerang actor which operates as 'proxy guerrilla'. Part of these structures is created to spread disorder, anarchy, and terror. It is important to point out that some groups in this category had their financial resources, political orientation and theological inspiration coming mainly from Middle Eastern states.

One of the important factors that distinguish the first two groups from the third is, fundamentally, their legitimacy. The first two categories are based on significant popular bases, with some demands qualified as legitimate from the perspective of international law[13], as posited in an interview with Mohammad Hilal in 2015. Usually, they are sociopolitical structures based on large support of the masses and empowered by legal and institutional doctrine.[14] [27]

[13] It has more recently been recognized as a legitimate right to resist against illegal occupation in several international instruments including UN General Assembly Resolution 3246 (XXIX) of 29 November 1974, which is considered reflective of customary international law. During the 1990s, the Bosnian Uprising against the Serbs was considered a legitimated claim of 'Levée en Masse' in the resistance in Srebrenica in July 1995 and the Bosnian right to resist was supported and recognized under the Fourth Geneva Convention by the Western powers and by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.

[14] Since the inauguration of the new president of Egypt, Abdel Fattah Al-Sissi, the Muslim Brotherhood has been typified by Sissi's government as a terrorist organization. This typification is controversial from the perspective of several external

In contrast to the groups classified as religious fraternities or Nationalist Resistance Movements, terrorist groups are only able to rise in places where the state is lethargic, state institutions are vulnerable, and where the level of social or religious cleavage is latent. The consolidation of the third group activities is a result of the vacuum of power left by a weakened State. However, it is important to underline that the practice of terrorism emanates, in Degaut's (2014) view, from a political and ideological conviction, in which the author has clarity about the consequences of his actions.

Moreover, one of the problems related in the classification of what is terrorism is the discretion of how each state in the international system decides to do so. The perception of the practice of some methods can still be interpreted asymmetrically between one international actor and another. Discretion also depends on the strategic interest in this characterization and on how objective or subjective criteria are defined. The inclusion or exclusion of groups on lists of terrorist organizations or even the application of sanctions does not necessarily follow an internationally recognized legal logic and is, therefore, a volatile precept that may differ from one State to another according to the political interests of each international actor.

The absence of a clear international convention defining what constitutes 'terrorism' therefore ultimately opens the door for the term to be handled politically in accordance with the strategic interests of states, governments, and non- governmental organizations. The methodology of framing some groups in this category, as well as states that act openly or veiled in fomenting international terrorism, ends up being weakened by this legal-political vacuum and the absence of an international treaty about this subject.

Sunism, Shi'ism and their geopolitical dimensions

It is essential to clarify that the political and armed disputes that plague countries like Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain or Yemen are not clashes resulting solely from a sectarian cleavage.

Such conflicts are primarily characterized by a strong geopolitical component inherent in the classic struggle for power and supremacy between the two contenders aspiring to attain a geopolitical monopoly

actors. In turn, the Hizmet Movement in Turkey is accused by the government authorities of the Erdogan government as a terror group. Several countries, including the Western Axis like the United States, did not relate either of the two groups to their list of terrorist organizations.

in the Middle East: Saudi Arabia and Iran. Viewing the competition between Saudis and Iranians solely through the prism of a religious clash between Sunnis versus Shiites is, to say the least, a reductionist and simplistic approach to the facts.

As the most influential nations in the Muslim world, Saudi Arabia and Iran deal with sectarian issues from very different angles. Comparatively, Iranian foreign policy towards the Muslim world, in general, is unfavorable to an overly sectarian type of approach because it understands that the sectarian narrative would weaken its political and socio-religious position – primarily because Shiism represents only between 10% and 15% of the global Muslim population (or approximately 200 million people) (Oxford 2021).

Iranian support for political movements and groups in the Muslim world and, especially, in the Arab context, is not mainly based on a religious spectrum, but on a geostrategic bias – as in the case of the Palestinian movements Hamas and Islamic Jihad, both of Sunni orientation. The alliance with the Syrian regime, on the other hand, is determined by historical considerations and is linked to an ideological-political component that dates back to the early 1980s and to the origins of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party, therefore not based around any religious framework (Betts 2013).

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia, which has been gradually losing ground and political influence in the regional context, uses religious rhetoric as an axiomatic resource to flex its muscles and unite predominantly Sunni nations around its narrative. This type of speech would theoretically position the Saudi monarchy as the vanguard nation of the Sunni Islamic world, today estimated at between 85% and 90% of the Muslim population in the world (or about 1.8 billion people) (Matthiesen 2013).

However, this approach that seeks to give the Saudi kingdom primacy in the Sunni Muslim world runs up against several challenges and opposes the strategic interests of other Muslim nations with a Sunni majority, such as, for example, Turkey, Egypt and Pakistan. Even if there are occasional demonstrations of verbal support for the Saudi narrative, in practice, such acts usually do not translate into concrete actions. From a political point of view, the macro-strategic aspirations of the Turkish-Egyptian-Pakistani triad do not allow for firm support for Riyadh, mainly for two reasons: 1) this type of discourse limits the importance of these countries in the Middle East, which could compromise the projection of their political interests in the context of the Muslim world more broadly; 2) the canons that guide the diplomatic actions of Ankara-Cairo-Islamabad collide with the reality that the Saudi

narrative is empty, dangerous and must therefore be opposed.

In the schools of jurisprudence that underpin Muslim religious norms and clerical training (such as those of Al-Azhar and Najaf, for example), the discussion around the pillars of Islam and its religious doctrines is a pacified matter. Although there may be idiosyncratic divergences (just as there are differences in the context of Christianity between Catholics and Orthodox), in general, the guiding principles of each aspect are respected. In this sense, the Iranian-Saudi clash, within the scope of the Muslim world, is not exclusively limited to its religious substratum. The dichotomy surrounding this divergence stems from pragmatic paradigms in which religion serves as an instrument for manipulating politics (Nasr 2003).

In an illustrative and comparative analogy between the hierarchical levels of Shiism and Catholicism, for example, it is clear that there is a centrality in the process of indoctrination, religious governance and the hierarchical organization of both religious sects. This political dynamic curbed the formation of parallel forces in Shiism, thus providing more effective control over the clerical college and over those who claim full legitimacy in issuing religious decrees, the so-called "*fatwas*" (Kalout 2017).

However, the absence of such hierarchical centrality in Sunnism, largely due to its four distinct schools of jurisprudence, leads to an organizational structure more analogous to that of Protestant Christianity (e.g., Evangelicals and Lutherans). Its organization is that of a more horizontal clerical structure. Precisely because of this bias in the distribution of religious power, Sunni jurisprudence has been easily usurped by various authorities that produce *"fatwas"* without central control (Kalout 2017).

Altogether there are five Islamic schools of jurisprudence, four of which are Sunni (Hanafi, Malki, Shaf'i and Hanbali) and one is Shia (Ja'fari or Jafarita). In the structure of the Sunni strand, there are variations in relation to the weight that should be given to the interpretation of some normative sources of Islamic jurisprudence (*Al Sharia*). Each School of Islamic Law (*Madrassa)* adopts different criteria that guide religious interpretation. Some schools have components that are more restricted to '*Fiqh'* (normative legal orders of Islamic jurisprudence) to the detriment of '*Kalam'* (rationalist/narrative theology). From these vectors come scales of interpretative orders built on: the '*Hadith'* (normative source); '*Qiyas'* (analogical deduction); '*Ijmaa'* (consensus); ' *Ijtihad'* (reflection); '*urf*' (customs); *'Raay'* (personal opinion); '*Istin'baat'* (deductive reasoning); *'Al-Aql'* (reason); *'Al-Tafsir '* (interpretation); *'Al-*

Falsafa' (philosophy). Each of the schools emphasizes certain variables over others, namely (Izzi Dien 2004):

i. **Sunni Hanafi** : the first of the four Sunni schools, having been founded by the jurist Nu'man Ibn Thabit Abu Hanifah (699-767), of Persian origin, but born in Kufa, Iraq.

    1. Adherents of Hanafism or Al-Hanaffiya are found scattered across Egypt, Turkey, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, China, India, Albania, the Balkan region and parts of Central Asia. It is considered a conservative branch of Sunni Islam and its doctrine prevails through Qur'anic interpretations derived from '*Fiqh'* and instrumented through the '*Qiyas', 'Raay'* and '*Hadith'* (Hallaq 2007, Izzi Dien 2004).

ii. **Sunita Maliki:** the second religious school to be established. It was founded by the jurist Malik Ibn Anas (713-795) of Yemeni origin, but born in Medina, Saudi Arabia. Its adherents are predominantly concentrated in the African continent (Northern, West and East Africa and the northern part of central Africa). There are small concentrations east of the Arabian Peninsula. It is considered a heterodox strand of Sunni Islam and its doctrine is based on Quranic interpretations derived from ' *Fiqh '* and instrumented through the '*Qiyas',* '*Hadith'* and '*Ijmaa'* (Hallaq 2007, Izzi Dien 2004).

iii. **Sunita Shafi'i:** the third religious school. It was founded by the jurist Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi (767-819), who was born in Palestine and lived in Medina and Baghdad and died in Egypt. Its adherents are distributed throughout the eastern Mediterranean (Lebanon, Syria, Palestine and Jordan), Yemen, Egypt, parts of East Africa, Central Asia and Southeast Asia. It is a strand that positions itself doctrinally between orthodox Hanafism and heterodox Malikism. Its doctrine prevails by Quranic interpretations derived less from '*Qiyas'* and '*Raay*' and more from interpretation from *'Istin'baat'* (deductive reasoning). Al- Shafi was a disciple of al-Malki . His teachings also incorporate nuances of Shiite Islam. This school has an affinity for *ahlul-al-beit* (the Shia lineage of the prophet Muhammad) (Hallaq 2007, Izzi Dien 2004).

iv. **Sunita Hanbali:** the fourth religious school to be established. It was founded by the

jurist Ahmad Ibn Hanbal (780-855) who was born in Baghdad and lived in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Hijaz (Saudi Arabia). Its supporters are concentrated in the countries

1. of the Gulf, essentially Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, Yemen, Iraq, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates. There is also a small group of adherents in Pakistan and Afghanistan. It is considered a puritanism form of the orthodoxy of Sunni Islam and its doctrine, unlike other Sunni denominations, does not use '*Qiyas'* or *'Raay'* as essential parameters, with prevailing Quranic interpretations predominantly derived from *'Fiqh'* and instrumentalized in an almost literal version of the '*Hadith'*. Wahhabism is an ultra-Orthodox current within Hanbalism. Followers of Wahhabism are often referred to as *"Al-Salafi'ien"* or "Salafists" for their religious dogmatism. In a way, Salafists challenge the interpretive model of other branches of Islam. The Wahhabi current was created by Mohammed bin Abd al-Wahhab (1703- 1792), a member of a movement of traditionalist Islamic scholars who categorically rejected the Islamic theology of '*Kalam'* in favor of a strict textual interpretation of the Qur'an. This current is the ideological source of several of the more radicalized Islamic groups, such as Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda (Hallaq 2007, Izzi Dien 2004).

On the other hand, Shi'a Muslims (or Shiites) have a more simplified structure. There is a large doctrinal school called Jafarita. The adherents of this school represent about 90% of Shiite Muslims and these follow the descent of the "Twelver*" Imanate* from Imam Ali Ibn Abi- Talib. Shias constitute the largest religious group in countries such as Iran, Iraq, Bahrain, Lebanon and Azerbaijan. Moreover, the Shiites are a relatively significant part of the socio-religious framework of countries such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Oman, Yemen, Turkey, India, Pakistan and Afghanistan (Betts 2013).

The Jafarite school was the forerunner of all schools of jurisprudence in Islam, inspiring some Sunni schools. It was founded by Imam Jafar Al-Saadiq (702-765), a direct descendant of the lineage of the prophet Muhammad and sixth Caliph of Shiism. It is considered a reformist aspect of Islam. Its doctrine prevails through Qur'anic interpretations derived from '*Fiqh'* and instrumented through *Hadith*

(normative source)*, 'Al- Aql'* (reason), '*Ijmaa'* (consensus), *'Al- Tafsir '* (interpretation), *'Al- Falsafa '* (philosophy) and '*Kalam'* (rationalist theology) (Hallaq 2009, Izzi Dien 2004).

There are two main Shi'ite minority groups: a) the Zaydis, who follow the Shi'ite line up to the fifth Imam and are based in Yemen; and b) the Shiites Ismailis , who follow the line of the Shiite Caliphate until the seventh Imam and are primarily based in central Asia. There are also undercurrents (small esoteric sects) that are not associated with doctrinal schools, such as the Fatimids, Alawites, Druses and Akbaris.

Accordantly to Mabon (2013), given the complexity of the Muslim world, it is not correct to depict the geopolitical confrontation between Saudis and Iranians through the simplistic prism of a sectarian clash between Sunnis and Shiites. Historically, the Saudis have sought to protect all Sunni currents under their Wahhabi aegis in an attempt to reinforce their political goals. The political cleavage between Riyadh and Tehran could more specifically be seen under the scope of an animosity between the Wahhabi current (the Saudi King proclaims himself as the guardian of the two holy mosques and ascribes to this school) and the Persian-Shiism of *"Wilayat al Faqih"* (the title bestowed upon Ayatollah Khamenei as the supreme guardian of the jurists of Islam), rather than a sectarian clash of the broader Sunni-Shia spectrum (Harrison1995, Menoret 2005)

Finally, it is important to emphasize that, in the contemporary era, Shiites in the Muslim world have created a notably more solid unity, regardless of their nationality, which can be attributed to the following elements: 1) Shiites, constituting a minority in Muslim world, often excluded and persecuted in their own counties, understood the need to support each other; 2) the policy of suppression practiced in the government of Saddam Hussein, in Iraq, reinforced the perception of a need for cohesion among Shiites; 3) the closure of the Shiite doctrinal school in Najaf and the expulsion and imprisonment of clerical graduates during the Saddam Hussein era converted the Iranian city of Qom into the main center of clerical training for Shiism; 4) the persecution and marginalization of the Shiite population in Saudi Arabia, as well as in Bahrain.

A comparative parallel between Daesh and Boko Haram

Although they are recognized internationally as terrorist groups, Boko Haram and Daesh have

different political character and ideological foundation. During the administration of Christian President Olusegun Obasanjo, between 1999 and 2007, Nigeria was undergoing a period marked by growing social and political tensions between the central power constituted from a Christian majority and Muslim political groups dis- satisfied with the government's architecture, leading to the gradual erosion of social and security balance in the country (Guibbaud 2014).

Boko Haram emerged in 2002 in a divided religious society and permeated by severe institutional dysfunctions. It is an endogenous phenomenon that emerged initially as a separatist religious sect in the city of Maiduguri in northeastern Nigeria, fulfilling the vacuum of power due the disunity caused by historical sociopolitical fractures after decades of religious conflict between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria (Koungou 2016). It is important to highlight that the embryonic characteristic of Boko Haram has features of religious sect rather than a terrorist organization. Its founder, Mohammed Yusuf, launched in Maiduguri a platform of theological indoctrination similar to the molds adopted by religious fraternities. It was after the death of Yusuf that the group became fragmented and adopted terrorism as a method of confrontation against the central government in Nigeria. Furthermore, local political leaders in the state of Borno have turned the Boko Haram into a bargaining tool to pressure the government for more political concession as a 'sine qua non' condition for maintaining the country's political stability. Such circumstances not only marginalized the group but also altered its original topology from a fraternity to a terrorist group (Smith 2015).

Daesh, in the other hand, was forged by a conglomerate of exogenous forces as a supranational entity of terrorists. Considerable part of Daesh and Jabhat Al-Nusra combatants were originally linked to the Al-Qaeda terrorist network and to the Al-Qaeda arm in Iraq. Therefore, a substantial part of Daesh fighters is not Arab ethnic, but mercenaries from countless countries and practically from all continents. In 2011, extremists and mercenaries landed in Syria coming from Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan and, particularly, Turkey. Initially, such combatants organized themselves in fragmented and small terrorist cells adopting multiple nomenclatures such as Jundi Al-Sham, Ahrar Al-Sham, Ansar Al-Shariah or Ansar Al-Islam, among many other labels. In the second year of the Syrian conflict, in 2012, a large part of these units merged into an organized conglomerate under the name of 'Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant', and afterward adopting the nomenclature 'Islamic State.' According to the statistics published by Al- Mayadeen news agency, in April 2015, 65% of the non-government fighters in Syria belonged to Daesh, 20% were part of Jabhat Al-Nusra and 15%

belonged to rebel groups such as the Free Syrian Army. The data also indicate that, 55% were Arabs or Middle Eastern, 25% were non-Arab and non-European[15] and 20% were European or Western nationals[16].

On the military level, Daesh and Al-Nusra have a sophisticated structure of combatants and a varied and substantive arsenal of short- and medium- range weaponry. The military nucleus is congregated by multiple nationalities and ethnicities. Arabs, Pakistanis, Afghans, Europeans, Slavs and even Chechen guerrillas, who participated in the Balkan war, are part of the military structure of these organizations. Despite operating on the most varied fronts of trafficking and transnational crimes, the economic structure of the Daesh and Al-Nusra was well organized and connected to countries such as Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, according to repeated accusations by the Syrian regime, Russia and Iran.

In contrast, Boko Haram has a low-level military structure. The strategic and tactic expertise of Boko Haram is very limited. The African group is not equal to the level of sophistication in terms of training and armaments to Daesh or Al-Nusra. In addition, its main economic vector is structured in the contraband, drug trafficking, arms trafficking, human trafficking and in pillaging. Boko Haram is more closely involved in the dynamics of Nigeria's domestic politics than with macro-regional aspirations. Boko Haram's operational capability is restricted to the northeastern boundary between Chad, Niger and Cameroon. Therefore, it does not pose a real risk to international collective security compared to Daesh.

Regarding to a comparison between the religious doctrinal premises, Daesh is oriented by Salafi–Wahhabi ideology, a puritanical and ultraconservative religious doctrine within Sunni Islamic schools of Hanbali jurisprudence. The members of the Boko Haram belong mainly to the ethnic-tribal groups, Hausa and Fulani, which traditionally follow the Islamic jurisprudence of the Sunni Maliki school of jurisprudence, common in the Maghreb region and in the West of Africa. Unlike other currents within Islam, the Sunni strand does not have a hierarchical centrality between its four schools of jurisprudence – Hanafi, Shaf'i, Malki and Hanbali. In comparative perspective, Sunnis have a more horizontal clerical structure, roughly similar to organizational hierarchy of the Evangelicals or the

[15] This category includes, for example, Pakistanis, Afghans, Central Asians from Uzbekistan and Chechens (Infographic published in April 2015, see www.almayadeen.net).
[16] Westerners are Americans, Canadians and Australians. This group makes up less than 2% of the total group called European and Western.

Lutherans.

Boko Haram and the Daesh have created, unconnected to the schools of jurisprudence in Sunni Islam, legal practitioners' sinecures in Islamic law without proper legal training. Daesh's objectives were focused on manipulating the dogmas and principles of Islam in order to legitimize the group's actions by moving illegitimately a factory of religious decrees – 'fatwas' – with the purpose to implement its political interests such as its pretentious and false caliphate. Several of the barbaric acts executed by the Daesh were sponsored by illegal 'fatwas' and ultimately ran against the premises of Islamism as a religion. In Degaut's (2014) view, 'terrorism promotes the idealization and exaltation of violence as a desirable form of political participation, anchored by a supposed ideology that justifies action. Violence thus becomes something "positive" and transformative, not only a justifiable means for ends, but an end in itself.'

In an illustrative analogy, the Shia branch of Islam obeys a minimal standard of centrality. As in Shi'ism there is only a single recognized school of jurisprudence, the Jafari, the control over the processing of religious decrees is more rigid. In a comparative perspective, it is possible to underline that there is a similarity between the hierarchical structure of Shi'ism and Catholicism. This similitude also can be compared in the centrality of the religious governance, indoctrination and hierarchical organization of both. This political dynamic does not necessarily restrict the constitution of parallel frameworks, but rather restricts such possibility and imposes more effective control over the clerical seminary and those who claim full legitimacy in the issuance of religious decrees, the fatwas.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that – apart from some theocratic states controlled by fundamentalist ideology – on all the frontiers of the Muslim world, the religious doctrines of Islam serve more as spiritual, ethical and moral parameters of conduct than as effectively regulatory axes that determine the functioning of society.

Comparative outline between Hezbollah and Hamas

Another important comparison that can be delineated is within the groups classified as Nationalist Resistance Movements such as Hamas and Hezbollah. Hezbollah and Hamas have different ideological and organizational characteristics. Both organizations also evolved asymmetrically

whether in the political, social or military spheres. Moreover, the Islamic feature of both groups is also different. From a political perspective, Hamas ideologically leans more to a right-wing view in its political sense, whereas Hezbollah was constituted with bases linked to a more left-wing vision with a tangential Marxist connotation (Gleis e Berti 2012). The conceptual differences between Hezbollah and Hamas can be traced in various spheres in the internal context. Preliminarily, this parallel can be approached by the composition of the socio-religious architecture of each group.

As a Shi'a political organization and a nationalist armed movement, Hezbollah has a political matrix based on a diversified socio-religious foundation. A significant part of Hezbollah's political coalition is composed by Christian Maronites as well as by Muslim Sunnis and Druse. Although its military structure was mostly composed of Shi'ia Muslims, in the Second Israeli–Lebanese War in 2006, many individuals belonging to other religious sects adhered to Hezbollah's armed wing. In fact, Hezbollah is one the few national parties in Lebanon that is able to draw a considerable number of its supporters and allied groups from outside of its sectarian bent, providing it with remarkable tactical flexibility and optionality (Mabon 2023). Hamas, on the other hand, has a more 'puritan' outline and is composed exclusively of a broad base of Sunni Muslims of Salafi hue. Hamas' conservative views on politics made basically all Palestinian Christians identify themselves politically and ideologically with the secular party Fatah – founded by Yasser Arafat.

Scholars such as Khaled Hroub (2010) attribute the historical origins of Hamas, prior to its official foundation in 1987, to its ideological and religious connections, strongly linked to the doctrines conceived by its founders, disciples of Hassan Al-Banna, founder of the Muslim Brotherhood. In addition, the monolithic religious character of Gaza society demonstrates that Hezbollah's social topology is more diversified in comparison to Hamas' social atmosphere. This characteristic also compelled the Lebanese group to adapt its idiosyncrasies and ideological profile in order to be accepted by a consistent majority of the Lebanese population. Finally, it is vital to emphasize that both Hamas and Hezbollah have gone through different phases and have evolved politically under different strategic frameworks. Both groups were impacted by internal and external circumstances connected to the regional political order and the geopolitical trends involving not only the regional powers but also the superpower states.

In sum, the fractures in the Middle Eastern geopolitical order and the existential challenges that plague

the Islamic world will remain main points of inflections in the years ahead. In fact, the regional and the religious nationalism will be exposed to a deeper debate that requires construction of new paradigms to comprehend the trade-off of this socio- political evolutionary process. Today, we can add to this struggle within the Muslim world an evident clash that cannot anymore be seen as an imperceptible one such as the Saudi–Iranian rivalry and the sectarian cleavages that challenge the unity of Islam. In the decade ahead, the Middle East has to deal with a powerful pan-Islamic narrative that can undermine the regional stability and would likely conflagrate a sectarian animosity within Islam among Sunnis and Shias (Mabon 2020).

Another challenge that the Arab states and Middle East as a whole have to face in the near future is the consolidation of a variety of religious segments in Tunisia, Morocco, or Israel – with the expansion of the religious right-wing parties. It is important to not ignore the fact that there are many sectors in the Middle East interested and working for the dismantlement of the secular nationalism and its replacement by an invigorated religious nationalism.

Nevertheless, it is essential to keep in mind that organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Hezbollah and Hamas emerged out of asymmetrical perspectives and political dissention. These groups arose based on diversified ideological and political orientations distant from the Wahhabi doctrine. Nowadays, radical Islam is spreading vastly within the Arab and Muslim societies sponsored by the Gulf States and oriented by the Salafi–Wahhabi ideology. In contrast, it is possible to infer from the methods adopted by Saudi-sponsored armed organizations, such as Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, Islamic Front, Jaysh Al-Islam, Syrian Islamic Liberation Front, Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham (former Jabhat Al-Nusra) and Ansar Al-Sharia, that none of them has either a nationalist revolutionary cause or a secular political cause, but supposedly religious motivations. Recipients of the Gulf Petrodollars, all these groups operate as part of some gulf monarchies proxies in Iraq and Syria and, in turn, serve as agents in extending the Saudi foreign policy goals (Phillips 2016).

Notwithstanding, it is important to note that there exist other Muslim Sunni organizations such as Hamas Movement and Islamic Jihad Brigade, in the occupied Palestinian territories, which are characteristically driven by a nationalist cause and which do use unconventional methods and political violence to achieve their political and national objectives but are not operating as proxies of a foreign state or inspired by a circumstantial ideological cause. Finally, the impact of historical events such as

the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, the war between Hezbollah and Israel in 2006 and the results of the Syrian Civil War will impact the pillars of the reconfiguration of the regional political architecture and social cohesion in the Arab and Muslim worlds. Given these historical facts and the conflagrated clash between Riyadh and Tehran over the supremacy in the Middle East, the new regional security order and balance of power could potentially reshape the new geopolitical contours in the region and impact the landscape of sectarianism, political violence and national fragmentation.

The Era of Declining Transformation

The political and social instability that has plagued the Middle East appears to be the most complex challenge of the contemporary politics in the region, for mixing components such as structural cleavages of local societies, e.g., nationalist identity fragmentation, ethnic conflicts, and divisions composed by sectarian character. Besides the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which has its own particular dynamics, most of the other conflicts are a result, to a certain degree, of the Iranian-Saudi rivalry.

The last decade could be called as the "Era of Declining Transformation" in the structure of the regional order and also in the balance of power of Middle Eastern states. This transformation began with the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, and then progressed to the second Lebanon war between Hezbollah and Israel in 2006, and today the deterioration of the political and social order can be seen in the implosion of civil conflict of Syria. Nonetheless, the clash between important pieces on the Middle Eastern chessboard has produced two distinct geopolitical alignments determined to influence the restructuring of the new regional political and security architecture, with Saudi-Sunni conglomerates supported by the Western powers, on one hand, and the Iranian-Shi'a alliance handled by Russia, on the other.

In the last decade, at least, the clash over the supremacy in the Middle East between Saudi Arabia and Iran has started to be seen as part of a sectarian clash among Sunnis and Shi'as. However, this geopolitical rivalry is essentially more connected to hegemonic ambitions and political disputes in the Arab World, and more specifically in the Gulf region and the Levant. Furthermore, immediately after the nuclear deal between the six world powers (P5+1) and Iran, the Saudi monarchy repeatedly put out several official statements saying that Iran is the main threat to Middle Eastern regional security.

This tactic emphasizes the need for the establishment of clear lines of contention against Iranian power, and displaces the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from the epicentre of the political picture of Arab countries to a peripheral role due to the assertion that the collective national security of Arab States is under its utmost historical threat due to Iranian hegemonic ambitions in the point of view, especially, of the Gulf States.

However, studies about Sunni and Shi'a sectarianism have failed to identify and define the hybrid types of sectarianism existent as result of the political clash between these two contenders or to establish the boundaries of what a sectarian cleavage is and what a geopolitical rivalry is. Furthermore, not all clashes between Tehran and Riyadh, in certain corners of the Middle East, could be characterized by sectarian disputes.

Thus, the clash between Saudi Arabia and Iran over the supremacy of the Middle East involves asymmetric components and does not necessarily follow the same dynamic in all its extensions. However, it is possible to identify two dimensions of the Saudi-Iranian clash today. The first one is structured in a wider sectarian cleavage, such as the dispute in Iraq or in Lebanon, while the other clash has predominantly geopolitical contours, like the wars in Syria and Yemen.

Categories of Sectarianism

Within this clash it is possible to identify three types of sectarianism – the *"religious"*, the *"ideological"*, and the *"political"*. Studies in the Western world tend to discuss the sectarian division within Islam merely as a classical clash among Sunnis and Shi'as, represented by Saudi Arabia and Iran. In Lebanon, however, the cleavages between Sunni and Shi'a political groups have historically different geneses as compared with the Iraqi social structure and political dynamics. Furthermore, neither do all pieces in the dispute between Tehran and Riyadh have equal values, nor are they marked by identical elements in politics and sectarianism. In Lebanon, for example, Saudi Kingdom is compelled to make more concessions, while Iran is urged to recede from Yemen.

Thus, besides clashes determined by geopolitical interests between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the fragmentation of Iraq, the war in Syria and the collapse of Lebanese politics are today driven by a certain degree of sectarian elements. Vali Nasr (2007) and Robert Betts (2013) argue that there are different

topographies of sectarianism among Sunnis and Shi'as. Accordingly, it is possible to categorize the sectarianism between Sunnis and Shi'as in the following categories.

The *"Religious"* sectarianism could be perceived in Iraq where the religious identity is stronger than the national feeling. Additionally, this type of sectarianism is characterized by endogenous factors and is guided by high degree of interference by religious doctrines. The main consequence of this type of sectarianism is leading to a national fragmentation or a veiled pseudo-apartheid system.

The *"Ideological"* sectarianism could be seen commonly in Lebanon. In this kind of sectarianism, it is possible to identify a mix of the national and the religious identities. Moreover, this type of sectarianism has a strong political component and is typically linked to regional and geopolitical rivalry – a mix of endogenous and exogenous factors. Notwithstanding, it is possible also to identify in the Lebanese political mainstream an association between Sunnis and Shi'as within a political conglomerate, based on ideological perceptions and affinities. For example, the Arab Liberation Party of Faisal Omar Karami, a prominent Sunni leader from Tripoli, a crucial city in northern Lebanon and the second most important Sunni stronghold after Beirut, or Osama Saad, the leader of the Popular Nasserist Party in the southern city of Sidon and the third largest Sunni powerhouse – both these are classical Sunni parties aligned with Hezbollah and Iran in an unbreakable political alliance in the region. The Lebanese model could be typified to some degree as a hybrid ideological sectarianism taking into consideration the consociational arrangement in the Lebanese political order.

The third type is the *"Political"* sectarianism, which is detected in the Syrian conflict where the religious identity is a peripheral component and the national character is the main driver of politics and social relations. This kind of sectarianism is inserted by exogenous factors imposed by regional actors focusing on disrupting the internal order. The consequences of this kind of clash expose social cleavages but will not materialize into religious schism within the core of the society. An interesting example to explore, however, is the reason why the regime remains intact (the cohesion/unity of the Syrian Arab Army) and the political structure remains functional.

This chapter investigated the impact of the Saudi-Iranian clash within the Arab and Islamic worlds and its implications on the regional order as well as its effect on the transformation of the sectarian and political character of the Middle East. Furthermore, by evaluating the types of sectarianism that are derivatives of the Iranian-Saudi dispute explains the "*rationale"* behind the decision-making process

in the formulation of foreign policy as well as the categories of diplomatic behavior and action in a comparative perspective over the nature of this rivalry either in Iraq, Syria, or Lebanon. This chapter endeavored to establish differences and similarities between two "*religious-industrial complexes"* – one led by the Saudis and the other led by the Iranians – with the objective of evaluating the power of their spheres of influence in the Middle East and particularly in Lebanon.

Chapter 04

The interplay of regional and domestic politics in Lebanon

This chapter examines the interplay of regional and domestic politics in the Lebanese political arena. My goal is to elucidate why Iran and Saudi Arabia matter in the region in general and in Lebanon in particular. To explore this topic, the chapter delves into the history of Saudi and Iranian foreign policy involvement in Lebanon. It also covers the other side of the equation, tracing the Lebanese history of penetrability and permeability to regional and foreign powers. Ultimately, it looks at the importance of Lebanon in the region and across the Arab world from geopolitical and other angles.

In his book on the *Struggle for Supremacy: Saudi Arabia and Iran*, Simon Mabon (2023) argues that the clash between Saudi Arabia and Iran has produced deep religious cleavages, relentless civil war, and disrupted political order in countries such as Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Lebanon. The vacuum of power, as well as the political violence, in Iraq culminated in a process that could render the country's path towards national fragmentation irreversible. In Syria, the emergence of several armed groups, specifically, the terrorist organization denominated "*Islamic State"* or *"Daesh"* (its acronym in Arabic) destroyed Syrian social cohesion and endangered the country's future. The eruption of the war in Yemen in 2014 remains unsolved despite the devastating humanitarian crisis at present. In Lebanon, similarly, the country is facing its most profound political, economical a social crisis since the end of fifteen years of Civil War (1975-1990). Beirut's center is on the brink of an institutional collapse, and the rivalry between Tehran and Riyadh is leading their domestic political allies to an irreparable schism by throwing the country into a perennial political immobilization and socioreligious "*cantonization"*.

The recent negotiations of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) between the P5+1 and Iran revealed that the regional security and stability of the Middle East is far from a final resolution. On the contrary, tensions and confrontations between Saudis and Iranians are ushering the region into an unprecedented period of turmoil and instability. According to Amal Saad's (2019) view, after the

second war in Lebanon in 2006, the kingdom of Al- Saud lost its political compass on the regional chessboard by aggravating its relations with neighbors. While it was inclined towards non-diplomatic actions like coercion and escalation, the Iranians were approaching the West to inaugurate a new era of external relations. Tehran seems determined to expand their dominance in Bahrain, Yemen, and the Levant and Riyadh is convinced that it must deter the Iranian aspirations to consolidate their power as a major player within the Arab countries.

From a historical perspective, it's important to underline the relevance of the 1979 Iranian revolution, the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the war between Hezbollah and Israel in 2006 as important political events in the modulation of the features of the contemporary security architecture of the Middle East. Hassan Ahmadian points to these three political episodes as key variables in the configuration of the contemporary regional political order (Ahmadian e Mohseni 2021). Given these historical facts and particularly the 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel, a new regional security order and balance of power is playing out in the making of the new geopolitical contours in the region. Raymond Hinnebusch argues – in convergence with Mabon – that the rivalry is deepening the landscape of sectarianism, political violence and national fragmentation in Syria, Lebanon, Bahrain, Yemen, and Iraq (Hinnebusch 2020).

Christopher Phillips (2016) suggests that the non-containment of the Saudi-Iranian struggle for geopolitical dominance of their respective sphere of influence could culminate in a wider armed conflict in the region. While there exists a perennial absence of a calibrated mutual deterrence mechanism to govern this clash, instruments of *"hard power"* will be recurrently utilized as means of deterrence – in substitution for the *"soft power"* tools that have long been ruling this rivalry. A valid question that rises in this context is: Can the employment of sectarianism as a key element in the Saudi Arabian and Iranian foreign policy decision-making process towards Lebanon, Syria and Iraq lead to a direct military confrontation between those two regional powers? Mabon (2023) elucidates this matter by offering for the literature an important angle, where he emphasizes that the rationale behind this clash is mostly related to geopolitical and power ambition rather than by religious distensions.

Accordantly to Mabon (2023), Saudi Arabia was able to capitalize on economic largesse in pursuit of influence, while Iranian influence across the Middle East is exerted through a number of different mechanisms – these include but are not restricted to: cultural capital, religious linkages and financial

support. Since the 1979 Revolution, Iranian officials have developed the narrative of resistance which has helped to transcend sectarian divisions. The so-called 'Axis of Resistance' is one example of such an alignment, drawing upon Iran's non-aligned status and long-standing resistance to Israel. Support for groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas have only served to increase this popularity. In contrast, Saudi influence is predominantly achieved through financial methods, although it is supported by the proliferation of Wahhabi clerics and capital to support infrastructural development.

Political and historical antecedents

The 1979 Iranian Revolution could have taken a very different path were it not for three crucial events that altered the course of history in the Middle East. The conflagration of the Iran-Iraq War, the emergence of Hezbollah spurred by the Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon, and the alliance between the House of Saud and the Reagan administration during the 1980s – all of these were fundamental elements in the attempts to isolate the Iranian revolution that forged the geopolitical structure of the contemporary Middle East and particularly the clash vis-à-vis Iran and Saudi Arabia in its present form.

On one hand some scholars such as Vali Nasr (2013) and Trita Parsi (2012) would argue that these events set Iran apart as the pivotal nation that today holds the key to solving the diverse issues facing the region and the world. Today, by all means, Iran is an indispensable actor in the stabilization of the Middle East, politically and socio-religiously. On the other hand, scholars like Frederic Wehrey (2014) and Nawaf Obaid (2014) claim that from the Gulf States and Israel's standpoint, Iran is perceived as a real threat to the balance of power in the region and is the pinnacle of the instability in the whole Middle East. To Saudi Arabia, Israel and Egypt, Tehran has an expansionist objectives and hegemonic aspirations, suggests Obaid.

The war initiated by Iraq under Saddam Hussein against the Persian nation in 1980 forced the leader of the Iranian Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, to come up with alternative policies and seek loyal allies in order to escape the isolation imposed by the Western powers and the monarchs of the Gulf. Edward Wastnidge (2016) suggests that the objective of this political maneuvering was to protect the pillars of the Islamic revolution that included ultimate authority of the religious clerics, protection of the nationalist spirit, and the preservation of internal security.

It was during the early stages of this period of isolation that the Iranians adopted a foreign policy approach that exported Shi'a religious values and Shi'ism as a political ideology. To Vali Nasr (2007), such a model ensured the creation of enduring alliances inspired by the nation's religious-ideological fervor. Mabon (2023) argues that Shi'a ideas were a central part of revolutionary – and post-revolutionary – Iran as well as its alliances. These ideas found traction following the Shah's fierce military responses to unrest in the preceding years which facilitated parallels with the narratives of martyrdom in Shi'a history (El Husseini 2010). Ideas of sacrifice and resistance were a prominent feature of domestic and regional politics at this time, once again found in Shi'a thought. Although ethnically heterogeneous, Iran relies upon a Shi'a narrative as a mechanism through which to keep its population unified (Mabon 2013). Some parallels exist with Shi'ism-based alignments within the broader axis of resistance.

The Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the rise of Hezbollah in the south of the country created a singular opportunity for Tehran to export its own political-religious model. This nascent Lebanese movement represented an ideal opportunity for the foundation of an influential enduring alliance whose impact would spread beyond the bounds of Lebanese politics. This relationship has had a major effect on the ongoing Israeli-Lebanese conflict and, more recently, the current civil war in Syria.

Despite the fall of the Soviet Union in the early nineties, some Cold War-influenced alliances in the Middle East, such as the one between Syria and Iran, managed to survive, preserving a geopolitical topography different from the one that Washington and Riyadh had expected or desired. The Islamic Republic of Iran thus managed to preserve key relationships, avoid isolation, and ultimately become the principal economic and military supporter of armed groups fighting Israel (Deeb 2013).

Within this context, Mabon (2013) argues that the Saudi-Iranian rivalry gained more pronounced shape shortly after the turn of the century. The September 11th terrorist attacks damaged the Saudi monarchy's reputation with the Bush administration. Meanwhile, the Islamic Republic of Iran was able to consolidate its regional influence and substantially increase its military, political, and economic reach. In the shadow of international pressure on Iran as the next possible target, Saudi Arabia was the state most interested in a possible intervention when it perceived its hegemony was being challenged in the Persian Gulf.

Furthermore, the rivalry between the House of Al-Saud and the Persian nation created tension and

sharp divisions within the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) (Gause III 2009). The Iranians came to be seen by segments of the Islamic world, in contrast to the Saudis, as a symbol of the struggle for Muslim identity against Western interference in the Middle East (Nasrallah 2016). Iran was also viewed by a portion of Muslims as the true defender of the Palestinian plight, in part owing to its substantial economic support to armed groups in the occupied territories.

Since the 1960s, Saudi foreign policy sought to undermine politically and ideologically the power of their adversaries in the Arab world. Nonetheless, they failed to occupy the vacuum of power resulting from their strategic actions. Undeniably, the persistence of the Saudi monarchy in its efforts to erode the Egyptian influence and leadership over the Arab states was successful by weakening the political vitality of the "Nasserism" and isolating Cairo after the Camp David peace treaty with Israel, according to Hamzawy. These efforts involved multiple powers in the region, but Saudi Arabia certainly took a leading role in their execution as Mabon (2013) describes:

> *Religion was used by a number of regional powers as a means of contesting the power of the Pan Arab movement, with Pan Islam 'heir apparent' following the demise of Nasser and Pan Arabism. At the vanguard of efforts to curtail Nasser's influence across the region, Saudi Arabia sought to proselytize its Wahhabist vision, facilitated by its vast petro dollars. In support of this, training and funding was provided to Imams from across the world at the Islamic University of Medina. Yet much like its precursor, Pan Islamism also became an arena for (geo)political competition amidst fracturing visions of order and questions of leadership.* (Mabon 2023, 52)

Moreover, the Saudis were able also to neutralize the impact of Popular Arab Movements, such as the "*Ba'athism*", in several states by supporting antagonistic regimes. And, today Riyadh employs precisely the same tactic to annihilate the consolidation of Political Islam – such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt – as a viable platform of governance (particularly in the Arab World) dreading a loss of power and influence.

The failure of the Saudi monarchy's efforts to undermine the Iranian theocracy not only converted Saudi Arabia into the main regional rival of Iran, but also pushed Tehran to invest more deliberately in the consolidation of the Shi'a political corridor (or Shi'a Crescent), which now extends to the eastern border of the Mediterranean. It is important to note that Iran was able to successfully pursue this strategy largely due to the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. To a certain degree, the American invasion of Iraq and the transition of political power from the Sunni Baath party to the Shi'a population were essential to the construction of the Shi'a alliance that extends today from Tehran to Beirut, passing through Baghdad and Damascus – the so-called "Axis of the Resistance".

Saad (2019) argues that Iran can be the key to solving diverse problems of the Middle East. It is an influential regional power that cannot be ignored (Saad 2019). Tehran can act as a moderating influence to contain Hamas in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In addition, Tehran can help rein in Hezbollah as part of the Israeli-Lebanese conflict. Lastly, Tehran can also be a key player in resolving the Syrian conflict, stabilizing Iraq, and ensuring peaceful dialogue in Bahrain. The punctual question to ask in this context is to what extent Saudi Arabia will be flexible and pragmatic to deal with this diplomatic architecture. Another question to be asked is: does Iran want to play this kind of role in the Middle East? Trita Parsi (2017) emphasizes that during the reformist government of Mohamad Khatami and during the eight years in office of Hassan Rouhani, Iranian foreign policy was inclined towards such diplomatic frameworks of action. In fact, Iran's foreign policy can be understood as following an identifiable theme throughout the history of the Islamic Republic, as Mabon (2023) argues:

> *Although the foreign policy making process has been a site of contestation between different groups, a broadly identifiable foreign policy strategy can be identified. This strategy fuses religious identity and geopolitical aspirations, bringing together an ideological commitment to supporting the mostaz'afin (downtrodden) of the Muslim world and a broader aspiration to secure Iranian influence in the region.* (Mabon 2023, 17)

On the other hand, the terrorism that plagues the Middle East and the Western world emanates

predominantly from a contrasting Islamic hue. The Wahhabi-Salafist ideology has been converted in one of the main inspirational vectors for violent organizations subsidized by its economic power. Albeit the main source of Islamic extremism, in a certain measure, it is not only the social constraints linked to marginalization, ignorance and unemployment, but it is also linked to the maximalist policies of the religious-industrial complex under the power of some Gulf countries – particularly Saudi Arabia as Ahmadian & Mohseni (2021) alleges.

The integrality of Islam to the Saudi state also directly impacted its stance towards Iranian power. To Mabon (2023, 13):

> *The importance of Islam within Saudi Arabia meant that Iran's behavior on the international stage was a cause of great consternation in Riyadh and required a range of different strategies in response. From this, it is easy to see how religion has played an important role in shaping the nature of the rivalry, with the need to speak to domestic audiences having an impact upon external relations and external relations impacting upon domestic stability.*

Why do Iran and Saudi Arabia matter in the region?

The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is of paramount importance to understanding the contemporary Middle East and undeniably the Lebanese political arena. Despite this importance, scholarly analysis of the rivalry is scarce, typically focused on simplistic and orientalist assumptions. As this manuscript will show, the rivalry is central in understanding regional dynamics and the Saudi-Iranian tutelary model in Lebanon

Since the 1970, Iran and Saudi Arabia have become two regional powers and influential actors in the Muslim, Arab and Middle Eastern worlds. Both have influenced the political, social, and religious fabrics of several states and societies due to their connections within Islamic organizations, political parties, media apparatus and local religious leaders. Furthermore, from a military standpoint, both states have contributed to the creation and organization of armed movements across the region and beyond as is described in the further chapters.

Beside the religious component of this rivalry and its impact on the geopolitics of the Middle Eastern

sociopolitical architecture, the interplay between regional politics and domestic politics is crucial to examine in order to have a better understanding of MENA politics and International Relations theory. Saudi Arabia and Iran can be considered as powerful regional actors through their economic, energetic, military, political and religious influences in the Muslim world at large and the Middle East in particular.

The particular overlapping of regional and domestic politics in the Middle East is something that has impacted its states in the historical view as well. Simon Mabon (2023) lays out some of the groundwork for this phenomenon in his work:

> *(…) this interaction of domestic and regional politics has had serious repercussions for regional politics. Indeed, the weakness of Arab states in their early years of independence - coupled with dramatic changes in societal organization – led to chronic instability in politics across the region, exacerbated by commonalities across state borders. In the decades that followed, this pattern continued, with Arabism and Islamism offering ideational causes that could compete with states, leaving the residue for future transnational engagement.* (Mabon 2023, 31)

Why do Saudi Arabia and Iran matter in Lebanon?

The small Mediterranean country of Lebanon has often been viewed as a staging ground for regional disputes and power struggles in the Middle East. Its heterogeneous religious makeup and geostrategic position, sharing a border with Israel, make it a particularly salient arena for these kinds of competitions. The ongoing rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is no exception.

This rivalry has resonated across the Middle East in recent years, with devastating repercussions for the people of the region. After the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the rivalry became more influential in shaping dynamics. Post 2011, it also played out in Syria, Bahrain, and Yemen. Yet the case of Lebanon points to a different type of engagement. A different type of engagement – not always as a zero-sum game. The May 7th events in 2008, an open clash on the street of Beirut between pro-Iran

supporters and pro-Saudi allies, forced both Tehran and Riyadh to cooperate closely in order to avoid reigniting the Lebanese Civil War (Mabon 2013).

Payam Mohseni (2016, 01), nevertheless, asserts that the "Iranians have filled the vacuums of power resulting from the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and [from] the structural decline and dissolution of the Arab state system ushered in by the Arab Spring. Fragmentation in the Arab world, exacerbated by Saudi Arabia's conservative and counterrevolutionary regional policies in response to the Arab Spring, naturally provides greater opportunities for Iranian influence".

In fact, Saudi Arabia and Iran have been present in the Lebanese political arena since the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War in the 1970's. As external forces interested in shaping the domestic politics in the country, the Islamic Republic of Iran since the beginning of the so-called "Islamic revolution" in 1979, stared to endorses the creation of a transnational Shia movement based on the idea of Islamic military resistance against the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia hosted the peace conference in the Saudi city of Tai'f in 1989, after fifteen years of Civil War, in order to reconcile the Lebanese social fabric, and also to settle the domestic dispute among the different Lebanese political and armed factions. This mediation or social contract is known as the Tai'f Accords (Salloukh et al. 2015).

To Mabon (2023, 153), Saudi Arabia's economic relations link Sunnis in the Kingdom with those in Lebanon, whilst the vibrancy of Lebanese politics provided Al Saud with opportunities to counter and outmaneuver regional allies. This occurred in historical periods such as the 1950s and 1960s with the Saudi support for the Christian Maronite's leaders such as Pierre Gemayyel and Kamil Sham'un, outspoken critics of Nasser's Pan-Arab vision. More recently, support for the Hariri family and their Future Movement has served to balance against Iranian backed groups. For Iran, clerical links and the establishment of Hezbollah, the Party of God, have given Tehran a great deal of influence across Lebanese politics, particularly amongst Shi'a communities, whilst its support for Hezbollah positions it on the front-line of resistance against Israel

The return of Ayatollah Khomeini from exile in France to Iran triggered the 1979 Revolution and reshaped the country's vision towards the region, which demanded a new foreign policy framework either in its security dimension or in its political engagement. Mabon argues that the revolution has changed the nature of regional politics. In one of many Khomeini speeches, he stressed his view

about the objective of the Iranian Islamic Revolution led by him, underlining that: *"We shall export our revolution to the whole world. Until the cry 'There is no god but Allah' resounds over the whole world, there will be struggle."* In other speeches, Khomeini underlined that "All those against the revolution must disappear and quickly be executed."

Such statements resonated negatively in the Arab world and especially in Saudi Arabia. Khomeini's idea of exporting the ideal, values and ideology of the so-called "Islamic Revolution" generated skepticism and a deep dilemma among the Arab States, especially, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, due to its undeniable role as the most influential Muslim country across the globe. As a consequence, the Saudi government became more concerned with the transformational character of Iranian influence in the geopolitical architecture of the region. Khomeini's quotes on the role on religion and politics such as "*Islam is politics or it is nothing*" triggered an open confrontation between Riyadh and Tehran in the begging of the 1980, by making the Saudi Kingdom endorse for eight years the Iraq-Iran war (1980-1988). Essentially, this converted Lebanon into an important strategic piece in the 1980's for both countries. And, more precisely, the involvement of Iran in the formation of a transnational Shi'a movement in the Levant compelled Saudi Arabia to act as a tutelary power in the mediation of Ta'if Accords. This historical episode could be described as the first reflex of this nascent rivalry in the modern Islamic world and in the Middle East (Mabon 2013).

In the beginnings of the 1980, both states became more active and more interventionist in Lebanese domestic politics, shaping their own interests according to their foreign policy and security objectives. Facilitated by the onset of the civil war, the two states engaged with different actors in pursuit of their interests. Both States were claiming, either directly or indirectly thru their political local allies, legitimacy over the Lebanese political scene in the form of political, social and religious tutelage. Both States claimed that they were helping their allies within the Lebanese domestic politics to defend their own interests. Saudi Arabia contributed to the Lebanese national conciliation with the Ta'if Accords and Iran, in turn, backed the foundation of Hezbollah.

Iran's support to rising armed movements and religious groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon was perceived as a direct threat to Arab Nationalism on one hand and to Christian minority on the other (Harb e Leenders 2005). Saudi Arabia, alongside other Arab States such as Libya, Egypt, and Iraq, initiated a security operation by weaponizing other Armed Movements identified with Pan-Arab

ideology or secular Arab nationalist group such us the Mourabiton, Al-Sa'eqa, and the Nasserist Front within the Lebanese landscape (Ghosn e Khoury 2011). Both scholars Halliday (2005) and Mabon (2023) argue that the Civil War in Lebanon (1975-1990) was not only a pure reflection of the Cold War, or a consequence of the Arab-Israeli conflict, but was also a competition among the rising regional power of Saudi Arabia and Iran.

The Ta'if Accords created a new political landscape in Lebanon, but this was a political arrangement where Lebanese politics could also be penetrated by regional powers with military, economic, and religious influence. The influence of Saudi Arabia began to rise through the Hariri bloc and Solidere's reconstruction of Lebanon, much to the chagrin of Iran, Hezbollah, Amal and others (Baumann 2016). The alliance between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Hariri clan in Lebanon endured for almost three decades. The reconstruction of Beirut and the Lebanese civil infrastructure after the civil war relied on a strong economic and financial partnership between the Saudi crown and Hariri family (Idem). For almost two decades, the Hariri family controlled Lebanese politics and the financial system incontestably with Riyadh's endorsement.

Thus, between 1990 and 2000, with Iran under the reformist Mohamad Khatami's government, Tehran's main priorities were centered on the promotion of gradual domestic opening and exploring gateways to reconnect its relations with the western world. Lebanon at that time was basically under a Syrian tutelary system with the approval of Saudis and Iranians (Salloukh 2019).

Analyzing the permeability of the Lebanese political system vis-à-vis the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, Mabon (2023) astutely argues that:

> *The permeability of local politics coupled with the regional ambitions of both states allows tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran to interact and play with domestic and sub-regional rivalries. Through this process, relationships are formed between state and non-state actors which take on a range of different forms, from the transient to the formal, yet what is of note here – which pushes our inquiry beyond discussions of alliances – are the factors that condition the establishment of such relationships and their repercussions for local and regional politics. In this way,*

> *the character of these transnational – and sometimes transactional - relationships is contingent upon the context in which they take place, with state capacity, regional context, power relations, and content (ideological, economic, material) all shaping relationships.* (Mabon 2023, 31)

From 1990 until the assassination of the former Lebanese prime-minister, Rafic Hariri, in February 2005, the so-called triangular diplomacy among Damascus-Riyadh-Tehran served to stabilize Lebanon and to prevent major sectarian clashes. Imad Salamey (2021) argues that Hariri's assassination broke the triangular diplomacy and, consequently, in March 2005, the Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad announced the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon, after strong pressure of the political pro-Saudi bloc in Lebanon. This movement united three important domestic forces encompassing Saad Hariri, the new leader of the Sunni Future Party, Samir Geagea, head of the Lebanese Forces Party, Samy Gemayel, leader of the Falangist Party, and Walid Jumblatt, the Druse leader and co-founder of the Socialist Progressist Party. The rupture with Syria also included a separation from Iran. Since then, Lebanon became divided between two domestic coalitions: the pro-Saudi (denominated March 14th) and the pro-Iranian-Syrian (called March 8th) (Salamey 2021).

The consolidation of these two adversaries' blocs is a direct reflection of Saudi-Iranian rivalry within the political arena of the country. Both camps started to present two different and antagonistic views of Lebanon's economic, social, political and security domestic structure as well as its engagement in the region. The March 14th coalition believes that aligning with Saudi Arabia, Europe, and the United States is necessary to extricate the country from the orbit of Iran and Syria. The March 8th coalition, on the other hand, believes that an alliance with Iran's Axis of Resistance is vital to countering Israeli-western dominance in the region (Kalout & Sage 2014). Salloukh (2019) argues that on the regional stage, the Saudis and Iranians continued their maneuvering for dominance and influence

in Lebanese politics – a struggle reflected in the positioning of the March 8th and March 14th blocs. [17] [18]

Results Parliamentary General Elections 2018 and 2009 (by party and block)

Source: Calfat, 2022 based on the Congressional Research Service (2018); Lebanese elections (2018); National Democratic Institute (2018)

Party/Block	Votes 2018	Votes 2009
Hezbollah/Amal and Allies		
Amal (Shia)	16	13
Hezbollah (Shia) Bloc Loyalist Resistance	13	13
Syrian Social Nationalist Party (Secular/Syrian Nationalist)	3	2
El Marada (Maronite Christian)	3	3
Popular Nasserist Organization (Sunni Muslim)	1	0
Ba'ath Arab Socialist Party (Secular/Arab Nationalist)	1	2
Islamic Charity Projects Association (Al Ahbash) (Sunni)	1	0
Tadamon, Solidarity (Maronite Christian)	0	1
Free Patriotic Movement and Allies - Change and Reform		
Free Patriotic Movement (Maronite)	23	19
Dashnag (Armenian Orthodox)	3	2
Lebanese Democratic Party (Secular/druso)	1	2
Sunnis pro March 8	2	0
Christians pro-March 8	2	0
Shi'ites pro 8 March	1	0
8 March Alliance and independents	**70**	**57**
	54,69%	**44,53%**

[17] The total amount of votes obtained by the coalitions may vary slightly, as the affiliation of some MPs to one or other bloc has changed since the last elections in 2009.
[18] The results of the 2018 general parliamentary elections, including results broken down by region, can be found here: http://www.interior.gov.lb/AdsDetails.aspx?ida=281 e https://tinyurl.com/y7yezg36. The full list of MPs elected by district is available at: http://www.legallaw.ul.edu.lb/parliament/explore/DEPUTE/021.HTM.

Future Movement and Allies		
Future Movement (Sunni Muslim)	20	33
Lebanese Forces (Maronite Christian)	15	8
Lebanese Phalanxes, Kataeb (Maronite Christian)	3	5
Dashag (Armenian Orthodox)	0	2
Ramgavar (Armenian Orthodox)	0	1
Democratic Left Movement (secular)	0	1
Jama'a Islamiya (Sunni Muslim)	0	1
National Liberation Party (Christian)	1	1
	2	0
Christians for March 14		
Shiites for March 14	1	0
Alliance 14 March	**42**	**52**
	32,81%	**40,63%**
Other Parties		
Progressive Socialist Party (14 March until 2009) (Druze)	9	11
Sabaa/Kilna Watani (civil society coalition)	1	0
Al Azm Movement (Sunni Muslim)	2	1
National Dialogue Party	1	0
Glory Movement (Sunni Muslim)	0	2
Independent Christians (Christian)	3	0
Vacant	0	3
Affiliation unknown	0	2
Other Parties	**16**	**19**
	12,50%	**14,84%**
Legislative Seats	**128**	**128**

Lebanon has become a central strategic piece in the Saudi-Iranian chessboard. The Cedar Revolution, a chain of demonstrations triggered by the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister, Rafik Hariri, furthered this. This popular and peaceful uprising had as objective the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon, the replacement of the government by non-Syrian-Iranian allies, the establishment of an international Tribunal to investigate the assassination of Hariri, and the organization of free parliamentary elections (Knudsen e Kerr 2013).

The impact of the death of Hariri on Lebanon culminated in a fissure that led to myriad of external penetrations. France, the United States, Iran, and Saudi Arabia have turned into major players in the domestic scene. Nevertheless, the War of July 2006 between Hezbollah and Israel has become a milestone for the unhidden clash over Lebanon among Riyadh and Tehran. Hezbollah's partial triumph changed the whole scale of political calculation among all sides. To Iran, Hezbollah became an invaluable political and military piece. To Saudi Arabia, Hezbollah became a threat to their political regional aspirations. Subsequent to the 2006 war between Lebanon and Israel, Hezbollah's ascendency as a deterrent power and dominant actor in Lebanese politics became more evident by imposing its objectives over the Pro-Saudi Bloc alliance. The triumph of the pro-Iranian Bloc in the 2006 war against Israel aroused Saudi distrust in Hezbollah as well as in other Shia political parties such as the Amal Party. In Mabon own words:

> *The events of 2006 posed a strategic dilemma for Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Arab states: Should the Kingdom provide support to the Party of God in an effort to cultivate capital by opposing Israel, or should do nothing, weaking a key Iranian ally in the process but looking impotent in the broader struggle against Israel? A central part of Saudi concerns was the Wahhabi 'ulama's condemnation of Shi'a groups, yet broader questions about legitimacy continued to play a prominent role in political decisions. In a move against the "Arab game of politics", Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt all publicly condemned Hizbullah's decision to go to war with Israel, fearing the Party of God's rising popularity across the region* (Mabon 2023, 70)

According to Mabon (2023), Saudi diplomatic alternatives were limited. Riyadh faced a deep security dilemma at that time related to its own interest as a regional power in one hand and the conservation of the Arab and Islamic unity against a declared enemy and a military regional power in the Middle East such as Israel. The Saudi strategy was bouncing between two main pillars. The first pillar consists of the dimension of the implication for the Saudi foreign policy of endorsing openly Hezbollah and the "Resistance" in its war against Israel. The outcome in the eyes of the Saudi security establishment of this decision was perceived as a strengthening of the Iranian position in Lebanon as well as across the region. The second pillar was based in opposing Hezbollah in its war against Israel and weakening its domestic, institutional, and military position to obliterate the Iranian influence over Lebanon, concludes Salem Zahran[19].

Nevertheless, this position was perceived in the foreign policy establishment in Riyadh as a dangerous maneuver with a double effect trigger, which in one hand could resonate negatively domestically, especially within the Shia population in the Saudi oriental province, with the risk of culminating in the eruption of social upheaves and in the Arab and in the Islamic worlds at large, subtracting the Saudi political leverage and religious influence in several countries, asserts Ahmadian (2021). The Saudi decision- making process was anchored in gain and losses where the ideal strategic equation relied on preserving influence, weakening Hezbollah and Iran, and reinforcing its position in the Lebanese chessboard.

In fact, Lebanon has become the main battle stage of the political rivalry and competition among Saudi Arabia and Iran, as seen in chapter five of this manuscript. The consolidation of the Iranian geopolitical project with the formation of the Axis of Resistance, converted Lebanon into a crucial piece in the foreign policy chessboard of Saudi (contention) and Iran (expansion). Elie Ferzli[20] argues that the outbreak of Civil War in Syria and the direct involvement of Saudi Arabia and Iran and the participation of several Lebanese factions, including Hezbollah, was an undeniable consequence of the results of the last political episodes of the Lebanese arena to safeguard their regional geopolitical interest vis-à-vis the

[19] Salem Zahran is a Lebanese journalist, political analyst, and director of the Media Focus Center

[20] Elie Ferzli is a Lebanese and Eastern Orthodox Christian politician, lawyer, and political analyst. He served as Information Minister and Deputy Speaker of the Parliament of Lebanon in the decade of 2000.

regional security order.

In the case of Hezbollah involvement in Syria, Mabon emphasizes that:

> *Hizbullah embarked on a "necessary war of choice in Syria", primarily designed to prevent the collapse of a key ally. Yet the decision to become involved came with a heavy price, not only in terms of human and economic losses, but also in damage to Hizbullah's legitimacy. Previously positioned at the vanguard of resistance against Israel, the Party of God was now complicit in the widespread repression of Syrian protesters. In response, Hizbullah figures claimed that their involvement in the conflict was essential in preserving the Assad regime, but also protecting both Syria and Lebanon from the threat posed by Salafi-jihadi takfiri groups who had been attacking Shi'a towns across Lebanon's border with Syria (Mabon 2023, 181)*

Mabon (2023, 36) supplement Ferzli's vision by underlining that the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran plays out in different ways across time and space, Oscillating between periods of outright hostility and apparent rapprochement. To comprehend the permeability of the Lebanese political model and how Saudi-Iran rivalry plays out in the country, it's imperative to shed light on Lebanon's demography.

Lebanon's religious, political, economic, and social demography

According to Traboulsi (2012) the debate over how to govern a society made up of eighteen officially recognized faith communities in a way that protects minority rights and religious pluralism has taken the form of a faith-based consociational government in Lebanon. It ensures representation of groups in government along religious lines with equitable participation between Christians and Muslims. The Lebanese faith system is characterized by the proportional distribution of political and institutional power among the different religious communities according to their disposition and

demographic weight. This is achieved by pre-allocating and reserving to the respective representatives of the different sectors a proportionate amount of high-level government positions, executive ministerial offices, seats in the legislature and senior public jobs.

In the country, there are 18 officially recognized confessional communities: Sunnis, Shias, Maronites, Armenians (Catholic and Orthodox), Druzes, Copts, Syriacs (Catholic and Orthodox), Alawites, Greeks (Melkite Catholics and Antioch Orthodox), Jews, Assyrians, Protestants, Chaldean Catholics, Ismailis and Roman Catholics.

Of them, only 11 are formally represented, as shown in table below:

Officially recognized religious denominations
Source: CALFAT, 2022

Religion	Religious confession or sect	Political representation
Islamism		
	Sunnite	**Yes**
	Shiite	**Yes**
	Druze	**Yes**
	Alawite	**Yes**
	Isma'ili	**No**
Christianism		
	Maronite	**Yes**
	Latin Catholic	**No**
	Chaldean Catholic	**No**
	Protestant	**Yes**
	Assyrian	**No**
	Armenian Orthodox	**Yes**
	Armenian Catholic	**Yes**
	Copts	**No**
	Syrian Catholic	**No**
	Syrian Orthodox	**No**
	Melkite Geek Catholic	**Yes**
	Antiochian Orthodox Greek Christian	**Yes**

Judaism		
	Jew	**Yes**

The political engineering of the country also implies the division of executive powers between the Maronite Christian presidency, the post of premier held by a Sunni Muslim and the post of speaker of the parliament held by a Shia Muslim, in addition to balanced parliamentary representation between Christians and Muslims. Religious legal autonomy is fully guaranteed through the religious courts and tribunals that govern all civil and personal status laws (Collelo e Rolland 2003; Harb 2006).

However, government resource allocations are also distributed based on religion, in such a way that religious affiliation is the main form of access to public services, political power and different rights and privileges. This arrangement is called *muhasasah ta'ifiyah* (sectarian sharing interests), according to Salloukh et al. (2015).

Saliba (2010) emphasizes that articles 24 and 95 of the Constitution now stipulate that, until the abolition of sectarianism as a 'transitional measure', faiths are equally represented in Parliament, in the cabinet (including ministerial ranks of secretary-general and directors- general of ministries) and in high-level public service positions, ensuring proportional representation between Muslims and Christians (Saliba 2010).

It is worth clarifying that Article 24 of the Constitution has provisions on three levels: firstly, it establishes the equitable distribution of intersecting seats, that is, equally divided between Christians and Muslims. Secondly, intra-sectarian proportionality, that is, between respective sects or sub-confessions, and finally, it establishes proportional legislative representation between electoral districts. This distribution of political power operates at the national and local levels of government – since the seats in Parliament are distributed proportionally among the regions of the country – and in all three branches, since in addition to the equitable executive sectarian sharing in the portfolios of the Council of Ministers, headed by the Sunni Muslim premier and chaired by the Maronite Christian president, the National Assembly is presided over by a Shia Muslim and the judiciary is guaranteed religious autonomy through the different religious courts for the respective faiths.

In addition to these executive and legislative provisions, appointments to senior public positions –

but also at different levels of the state bureaucracy – respect parity between Christians and Muslims. At the same time, this institutional distribution of power is crossed by a network of patronage, the domain of notable local leaders, the co-called "*al-zu'ama"*. No one is appointed to a position of leadership or governance without the approval of sectarian leaders – the leader (*"al-za'im")* of each sect.

In Lebanon, the most relevant or politically salient identity is that of religion. In this context, communalism refers to the sectarian bond or partisanship to the religious community. Confessionalism is the institutional regime that guarantees political representation to the sect or religious faith and its different rites, that is, when the communal element is transposed to the political-religious sphere. However, despite this and other conflicts in the Middle East being called religious, often other socio-groupings, political and economic cleavages overlap with sectarianism, increasing the complexity of the scenario. Sectarianism (*al Ta'fiyya*) – defined as the institutional political framing and perpetuation of these communal affiliations, that is, the politicization or institutionalization of sectarian identities – despite being fundamental to understanding the Lebanese reality, narrative and political practice, has little connection with fundamental post-colonial, authoritarian and regional geopolitical equations – in addition to reinforcing approaches that essentialize, exoticize and exceptionalize the region (Salloukh, 2017).

As stipulated by the Ta'if Agreement, the equitable ratio of seats between Christians and Muslims in the National Assembly (128 seats) equates to 64 seats reserved for Muslims and 64 seats reserved for Christians. Thus, in addition to guaranteeing an equitable distribution of seats, the religious composition of the unicameral legislature is fixed at 34 Maronites (26.56% of the total seats), 27 Sunnis (21.09% of the seats), 27 Shias (21.09 %), 14 Greek Orthodox (10.94%), 8 Greek Melkite Catholics (6.25%), 8 Druze (6.25%), 5 Armenian Orthodox (3.91%), 2 Alawites (1.56%), 1 Catholic Armenian (0.78%), 1 Protestant and Evangelical (0.78%), and 1 other Christian minority and Jews (0.78%) (Donohue 2009).

While Christian representation is fundamentally dominated by Maronites and to a lesser extent by Greek Orthodox, the greater share of Muslim representation is divided equally between Sunnis and Shias, with a smaller share of power reserved for Druze. Among the 64 seats reserved exclusively for Christians, 53% are necessarily Maronites, 22% Greek Orthodox, 12% Greek Catholics and 8%

Armenian Orthodox. As for the 64 seats reserved for Muslims, 42% of them are exclusively Sunni, 42% Shia, 13% Druze.

Religious denominations represented and their power shares
Source: (CALFAT, 2022)

Religious confession (11)	Parliamentary seats cf. Ta'ef Agreement	Intra-confessional power share	Overall Power Share
Maronite	34	53%	26,56%
Orthodox Greek	14	22%	10,94%
Catholic Greek	8	12%	6,25%
Armenian Orthodox	5	8%	3,91%
Armenian Catholic	1	1%	0,78%
Protestant	1	2%	0,78%
Others/minorities	1	2%	0,78
Overall Christians	**64**		**50%**
Sunnite	27	42%	21,09%
Shiite	27	42%	21,09%
Alawite	2	3%	1,56%
Druze	8	13%	6,25%
Overall Islamism	**64**		**50%**
Overall Parliamentary seats	**128**		**100%**

The Lebanese Constitution of 1926, ratified as a jurisprudential framework after the country's independence in 1943 and consensually endorsed in the Ta'if Accords, determines that basic national issues require the approval of two-thirds of the members of the Council of Ministers. These issues relate to: war and peace, amendment of the Constitution, international treaties, annual government budget, broad and long-term development projects, appointment of high government offices and their equivalents, dissolution of the Chamber of Deputies, electoral laws, nationality laws, personal status laws and dismissal of ministers (Khairullin 2018; Donohue 2009; "The Lebanese Constitution" 1997).

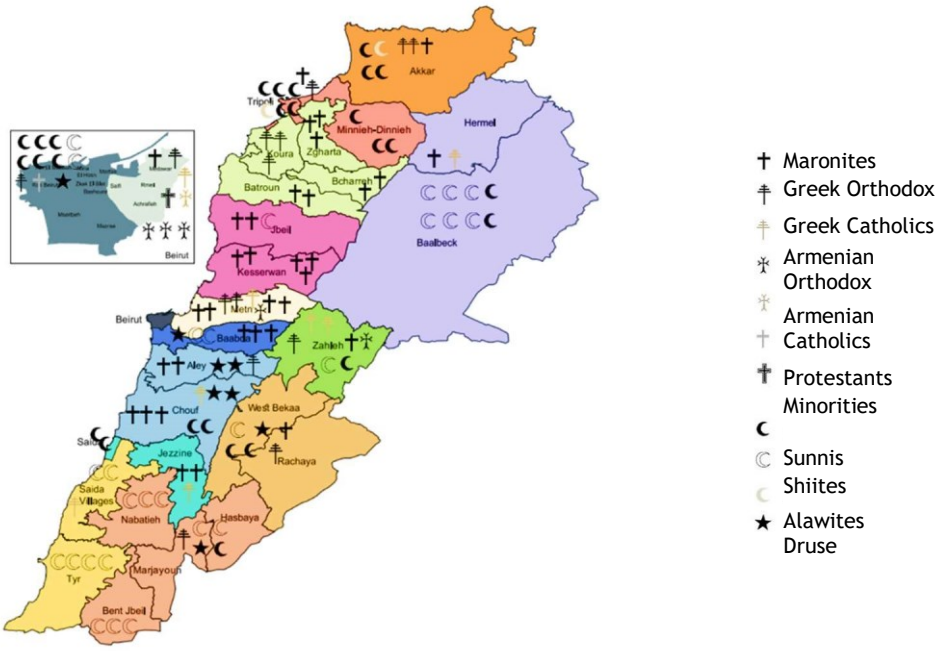
The Constitutional Law of September 1990 abolished sectarian representation for the civil service, for

the judiciary, and for military and security establishments in public and mixed organizations (Khairullin 2018). Still, by unregulated tradition, Majed (2010, 02) stresses that key posts in the administration also still respect the 5:5 ratios between Christians and Muslims. In practice, therefore, parity between Christians and Muslims is respected in allocations across positions throughout the public sector and, contrary to the stipulations in Ta'if, all state bureaucracy, even at the lowest echelons, was largely sectarianized in the post-war period, including as a form of co-optation and reproduction of the system by sectarian elites and their protégés, according to Salloukh (2019, 44).

According to the Arab Barometer (AB Wave V 2018) 24.3% of Lebanese consider themselves religious and 61% "somewhat religious". Still, according to data from the World Values Survey (Inglehart et al., 2014 – Wave 6), despite religion being considered very important by 52.9% of respondents, only 10.1% of them are active members of a community such as a church or religious organization, and another 12.2% are fairly inactive members. The vast majority, 77.8% of respondents, are non-members. The same proportions are maintained if one considers membership of humanitarian or charitable organizations: 79.2% are non-members and another 12.2% are inactive members. For complete results, breakdown by region, degree of interreligious trust and communal belonging.

Lebanon has not conducted an official census since 1932, still under the French Mandate for Syria and Lebanon, fearing that the result would distort its political formula. But demographics can be estimated from electoral statistics. In 2015, of the 3.538 million registered voters (over 21 years old), 36.14% were Christian and 63.86% Muslim, with Shias constituting 28.40% of the population, Sunnis 28.37% and Maronites 20.52% (IFES, 2017, p. 45). In 2020, according to the Ministry of the Interior and Municipalities (2020), the number of registered voters in the country and in the diaspora increased to 3,860,939. In 2021, also according to the Ministry of the Interior and Municipalities, the total population of Lebanese was 5,749,004, made up of 30.07% Sunnis, 26.98% Shiites and 20.57% Maronites. Complete data on the denominational distribution estimated across registered voters, in addition to the gender and age distribution of registered voters, can be seen in the following figure:

Map of sectarian distribution of parliamentarians by constituency



Source: CALFAT, 2022 based on Parliamentary Elections Law No. 44, Adwan law (2017).

Due to the growing birth rate among the segment, unofficial statistics on the current percentage of the Shia population are quite varied. Yusri Hazran (2009), for example, writes that Shias make up approximately 40% or more of the country's population. The independent consultancy Information International, through an unofficial census (Information International, 2018), estimates 5.508 million Lebanese, with 1.3 million of them living abroad. Altogether, 69.28% of them are Muslims (31.65% Shia, 31.25% Sunni, 5.37% Druze and 1.01% Alawite); while 30.62% are Christians (16.97% Maronites, 5.99% Eastern Orthodox, 3.87% Roman Catholics, 1.72% Armenian Orthodox, 0.60% Christian minorities, 0.4% Armenian Catholics and 0 .38% Protestants).

Since 1932, when Christians were 58.73% of the population and Muslims 40.89%, the number of Lebanese citizens has increased by 426%, with almost 4.4 million people born since then. The increase is about 174.5% for Christians and 785.1% for Muslims. Even the debate about lowering the minimum voting age (from the current 21 to 18) collides with the sectarian issue. While the reduction is

seen as a way to encourage the participation of young people in decision-making, estimates show that of the 280,000 new voters, 180,000 would be Muslims and 100,000 Christians, increasing the participation of Muslim voters to the detriment of Christians and contributing to a greater imbalance (Information International, 2021).

Lebanon's political landscape

Lebanon is a confessionalism-based consociational democracy, a unicameral parliamentary republic where legislative seats are pre-defined for 11 different politically represented religious communities according to their disposition and demographic weight – the country altogether has 18 officially recognized religious denominations. Lebanon is categorized as a country with democratic contours – even if imperfect – and is the only one in the Middle East that is composed of a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society.

After the country's civil war (1975-1990), the 1989 Ta'if Agreement equalized representation between Muslims and Christians, and, in 2008, the Doha Agreement consolidated the formation of a consensual government of national unity shared between the main forces in the country: Maronite Christians, Sunni Muslims and Shia Muslims, granting veto power "officially" to the opposing minority – without constitutional provision. If one of the three great religious denominations to leave the government, the ministerial cabinet would lose its representative legitimacy. This arrangement of political representation of the different religious sects, through a faith-based consociational arrangement of power-sharing, guaranteed to Lebanon a political stability that lasted with some success between 1990 and 2005. It is important to underline, however, that in that period the interferences of Saudi Arabia and Iran tended to come in a softer, rather than frontal or confrontational, form.

The sectarian power-sharing is currently divided between the executive power divided between Sunnis, Shias and Maronites; the legislative power with 128 parliamentary seats distributed 50% for Christians and 50% for Muslims; and a judiciary that guarantees segmental and legal autonomy to sects with overlapping cleavages – in addition to a broad sectarian coalition in the form of cabinets of national unity.

Additionally, since the 2008 Doha Agreement, the three communities have what might be called

“mutual guaranteed vetoes as basic national issues such as security, defense and foreign policy must be settled by consensus among the three major sectarian groups. The political-social structure of modern Lebanon is rooted in centuries-old sectarian institutions. Both the division of state power and resources between the different sects and the judiciary of the religious authorities still date back to the French pre-colonial period.

According to Lijphart (1969), in Lebanon, Muslim, Christian and Jewish communities of different faiths enjoyed freedom of worship and administrative autonomy, with their leaders locally administering community affairs and self-governing the provision of goods and services. During the French mandate for Syria and Lebanon (1923-1943), the government of religious representation was reinforced, and this exclusive modality of political identification continued to be politicized and incorporated into the structure of the state. It is important to underline that the literature on power sharing relies on a variety of institutional arrangements and mechanisms for post-conflict democratic transition and promotion of civil peace in plural societies, granting protection to different rival groups by dividing and balancing state power and capacity in a non-monopolized manner. In Lijphart's view, unequally granted privileges and sectarian welfare institutions were inherited by the structure of the independent Lebanese state, and later institutionalized through the unwritten National Pact of 1943, constituting the very foundations of confessionalism.

This political arrangement offered political stability to the country for fifteen years (1990- 2005). But when internal socio-political divergences are accentuated or when one of the majority sects becomes more vulnerable or asymmetrically stronger, the political balance collapses. This opens space for external interference – demanded or imposed – through an arrangement of political tutelage. Political immobilization can be imposed from the outside to the inside and can occur due to internal divisions with external endorsements by the tutelary forces, which ends up making the system unconditionally permeable to the influences of regional and global powers. This vulnerability, in short, has become a structural and systemic problem in Lebanese politics.

Although Lebanese confessionalism has undergone representative adjustments over time, the process of sectarianization and politicization of communal identities has gradually been institutionalized and crystallized in the last four decades – and, in particular, from 2006 to the present day. The balance reached, however, has been tenuous from the beginning, and from time to time its terms are revisited and

the pact renewed with marginal increments.

This power-sharing system, although partially conceived as a compromise solution between different religious affiliations, generated tensions and disputes, reinforcing communal loyalties and patronage networks of protection and services (many of them managed by prominent families and institutionalized oligarchic-sectarian forces) that permeate Lebanese politics to this day. Moreover, the importance of these networks allows for immense external influence in the country's political arena.

According to Salloukh (2019), the institutional stimulus modalities of communal solidarity through patronage chains undermine the legitimacy of the national state and its capacity to provide public goods. In this sense, each communal grouping becomes dependent on the patronage regime of sectarian leaders. On the other hand, it can be said that the networks of goods and services acting continuously and parallel to the State are the broadest way of accessing representation and the public good. This is what makes Hezbollah and other internal groups irreplaceable actors in local politics – while from the perspective of political elites, they are the way to guarantee the maintenance of the balance of power and the protection of their vital interests through the capture of state resources.

Some experts claim that explanations for the instability in the country cannot be reduced to the regional scenario, arguing that domestic disputes often intersect with geopolitical ones and cannot be easily separated out.

However, to Mabon (2023), the Lebanese political structure and governance model has succumbed to the polarization of regional powers through direct or indirect interference. Although there are specifically local disputes – such as the dispute over garbage collection in the country, which was immobilized for about two years – in major national political decisions these smaller disputes end up interfacing with the external context as part of the equation of negotiation. It is true, however, that local leaders construct their own polarizing narratives and manipulate international economic or regional security issues with their own agendas in mind. Yet, since 2005, evidence has shown that the country's main forces do not exclude from their political equation the time and space vectors that guide the regional balance of power between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Mabon (2023) deploys his argument by stating that:

> *The rivalry plays out across a range of different spaces, shaped by the complexities of local context. Understanding the ways in which*

> *life is organized in particular spaces is necessary in order to critically reflect on the impact of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran on those spaces.* (Mabon 2023, 9)

It is worth remembering that the negotiation between the P5+1 and the US-Iran deal ended up acting as a conducive environment for the presidential election of Michel Aoun in 2016, accordantly to the Lebanese former Defense Minister, Yacoub Sarraf. The reflection of the success of the Iranian nuclear agreement (JCPOA) exerted traction, which ended up, in practice, impacting the alliance regime in favor of the election of Aoun and, also, the course of the 2018 electoral process – giving the March 8 coalition, led by Hezbollah, the parliamentary majority.

The dialogue at a global level, between the US and Iran, was interpreted in the Lebanese political arena as a weakening of Saudi Arabia, which ended up reflecting in a concrete way in the final result of the elections, emphasize one important cleric. The most concrete evidence can be seen from the composition of the Christian-Maronite alliance between two antagonistic forces such as the Lebanese Forces Party and its visceral rival Free Patriotic Movement[21] – whether for the 2016 presidential election or the 2018 parliamentary elections. The direction of the Lebanese Forces towards an alliance with the Free Patriotic Movement, was a strategic maneuver to ensure equal parliamentary representation on the Maronite spectrum and to maintain the party's influence on the Lebanese political scene. However, this move would not have been possible without the support of Saudi Arabia and the US – which subsequently sponsored the breakup of the Maronite dialogue and massively subsidized support for the Lebanese Forces in the 2022 elections, where the party obtained numerical superiority within the Christian-Maronite sect vis-à-vis their former ally (or circumstantial ally), the Free Patriotic Movement. The Free Patriotic Movement, unsurprisingly, serves as a vital ally of Hezbollah.

In this sense, this research seeks to explore the tutelary regime exercised by both Saudi Arabia and Iran over multiple domestic actors and how this tutelary regime has evolved in time and space. The second objective of this research is to understand the effects of power projection by regional powers, namely Saudi Arabia and Iran, on domestic (in)governability and political interoperability between the

[21] The alliance between the Lebanese Forces and the Free Patriotic Movement was known as the Accord of Me'erab and lasted from 2016 to 2019

various political, social, economic and religious actors in Lebanon.

Mabon (2023) points out that the influence of Iran and Saudi Arabia ended up shaping the political behavior of domestic actors. In this sense, it would be essential to examine what characterizes the conduct of both the March 14 Alliance and the March 8 Alliance post- 2005, seeking to explain the behaviors, interests and rationales of different actors that make up such political coalitions. It is worth emphasizing that one of the factors that made the presidential election of Aoun, in 2016, possible, was the elasticity and plurality of his alliance and the arrangements supported by external forces. In addition, at that time, Aoun led the largest Maronite bloc, and he had the support of the most representative forces of Shi'a and Sunni segments. Any antagonistic candidate to the March 8 political bloc, in that temporal and conjunctural circumstance, would only have real chances of competitiveness or viability if he could count on the three main political forces of each sect. The division of the political forces of the Sunni denomination into multiple currents, the division of the political forces of the Maronite denomination into several currents and the unification of the Shi'as into a single political current, gives a vital comparative advantage to the latter group – any candidate can become viable only with the support of the Shi'a segment, argue the Lebanese Scholar Habib Fayad.

In this sense, it is essential to understand that within the scope of this faith-based consociational power arrangement, Tehran has obtained a relative advantage if one analyzes the three tests of strength to which the Lebanese political process has been submitted in recent years – the 2016 presidential election and the parliamentary elections of 2018 and 2022 – held since the breakdown of the Saudi-Syrian-Iranian understanding following the Syrian withdrawal from the Lebanese political theater and after the 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel. In the 2022 election, despite an even split in parliament, the Saudi strategy was successful in breaking through the superiority of the March 8 Movement alliance, rebalancing the presence in parliament of domestic anti-Iranian political forces. By making Lebanese Forces' Samir Geagea's party the largest Christian party in Lebanon in the 2022 elections and by dispelling Sunni centralism focused on Saad Hariri, the Saudi strategy was effective in denying a dynamic victory to the March 8th coalition. To eliminate the sectarian focus between Sunnis and Shiites, Riyadh chose to invest massively in a Maronite-Druze alliance (Geagea-Jumblatt), to dissipate the sectarian character and attack the strongest point of the March 8 Movement composed of the Shiite duet (Amal-Hezbollah) as well as the largest political party up to that time and the largest Christian-Maronite association, the Free Patriotic Movement.

It is clear to see that the changes in the Lebanese institutional arrangement since 2006 are linked to the impacts of the Syrian war and the regional redistribution of power between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Saudi Arabia has failed to carry out an effective and divisible penetration into the political currents of the Shia parties. However, it was effective in betting on Samir Geagea, of the Lebanese Forces party, as a contender for *"Aunism"* to weaken the Hezbollah alliance. The erosion of the Free Patriotic Movement in the exercise of government since 2016, in its six-year presidential term, and the collapse of the country's economic situation and the explosion of the port of Beirut in August 2021, offered good conditions for the strategic success of the Saudi intervention. Moreover, as Mabon (2023) argues:

> *Beyond support for Sunni groups, Saudi Arabia also sought to cultivate relations with other members of the March 14 bloc, notably Samir Geagea, the leader of the Lebanese Forces and longtime [sic] rival of Michel Aoun. Lebanese Christians such as Boutros Harb, a former Presidential candidate, also began to reach out to Saudi Arabia for support, albeit independent of Saad Hariri. Harb also requested money from Saudi Arabia to establish a political party. Geagea sent a representative to Saudi Arabia asking for financial assistance in the midst of a deteriorating financial situation, before saying 'I'm broke. I'm ready to do what the kingdom demands'. To strengthen this request, Geagea declared that he was central in efforts to deter Hizbullah.* (Mabon 2023, 183)

One of the main effects of the 2006 war on the architecture Lebanese politics was the rupture with the previous status quo established in the post Ta'if process in 1989 that had been supported by the Saudi-Syrian-Iranian triad (SSI) in the early 1990s. Essentially, the political arrangement established by the SSI triad reserved for Hezbollah (and the Shias by extension) primacy over security and strategic issues and safeguarded the Sunnis' dominance over issues related to the economic and financial reconstruction of Lebanon. In turn, the Maronites remained at the forefront of control of the armed

forces and the judiciary. This understanding was basically the genesis of the social contract of post-war Lebanon until the assassination of Rafik Hariri and the outbreak of the war between Hezbollah and Israel. It was precisely this pact that led the armed groups in Lebanon to lay down their weapons – with the exception of Hezbollah, which continued as a militarized force and as a resistance movement. The legitimation of this process is still supported and exposed in the makeup of the ministerial cabinets and embodied under the triad of *"the army, the people, and the resistance" (Al-Jai'sh, Al-Sha'ab, wa Al-Mukawuama)*.

Regionally, as seen before, this rebalancing of power is related to the rise of the so-called "Shiite Crescent' or "Axis of Resistance", agreed to during meetings in Damascus in 2005 and in 2011 (Scanlan 2010) that included Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and Hezbollah's Leader Hassan Nassrallah (Oweis 2007). In the view of the Gulf countries and, in particular, Saudi Arabia, this tripartite arrangement corresponded to the revival of a transnational Shia alliance and reflected important changes in the balance of power and in the regional security architecture, especially after 2006 when Hezbollah acquired a deterrent power capable of altering the security rules of the game with Israel. The immediate effect of the increase in Hezbollah's deterrent power against Israel, in the last case, could not be ignored either by the Saudis or by the other Arab nations, and provided a disproportionate power to Hezbollah in domestic political dynamics which could interdict the strength of Riyadh's allies in Lebanon (Sobelman 2015).

It is important, however, to recuperate Mabon's analysis of the consociational system:

> *Yet to reduce Lebanese politics purely to geopolitical factors or sectarian politics misses a great deal of the nuance that has shaped political organisation across the state. This nuance is seen when considering the different spatial contexts across the state, but perhaps are most obviously seen within Beirut. Although the confessional system gives prominence to sectarian identities - reinforcing this difference - space across Lebanon is (re)shaped through the interaction of myriad factors, creating a fluid state of possibility, albeit underpinned by the legacy of colonial rule and prominence of sect- based identity, re-enforced by external patrons. The establishment of a consociational power sharing system provided a range of opportunities for outside powers to*

> *exert influence through seeking to manipulate identity groups operating within the country's confessional system* (Mabon 2023, 152).

The 2008 Doha Conference and its consequences

As mentioned earlier, the new configuration of Lebanese consociationalism compelled the country's political forces to find consensus in the formation of government between majority and minority. The prevailing idea was that there could be no winners and losers, but rather the inclusion of both the March 8 and March 14 Movement in government. However, the distribution of forces in the cabinet would have to take into account two aspects: 1) equal division of ministerial portfolios between the three main sects of the country (Maronite Christians, Sunni Muslims and Shia Muslims); 2) the portfolios would be distributed according to the size of representation of each party force in parliament. However, this arrangement allowed for the possibility of exchanging positions between the three sects if there was agreement between them. The first objective of this equation was to prevent the supremacy of one group over the other. The second objective, on the other hand, consisted of stabilizing the political system between the parties via a third-party arbitration protection – a kind of buffer zone between the pro Saudis and pro Iranians blocs chosen by the president as neutral actors in the cabinet.

After Syria's departure from Lebanon in 2005 and the consequent incorporation of new political elites into the decision-making process, this adhesion began to be reflected in an increase in institutional instability and persistent political crises. After Doha, the Lebanese governments have been composed of a grand national coalition that includes the aligned and opposition parties of the March 14 and March 8 Coalitions. Although the system favors the Christian-Muslim duality, currently each of the main politically relevant communities that make up the triumvirate (Maronites, Sunnis and Shiites) has executive power of mutual veto, since the main decisions must be established by consensus. In this sense, the three political-religious pillars have considerable bargaining power.

However, the Doha pact lost its effectiveness and its political meaning after the withdrawal of several political parties – such as the Falangists and the Lebanese Forces, members of the March 14 coalition of the government of national unity – in 2020, accordantly to Gebran Bassil, political leader of the Free

Patriotic Movement. The Agreement, in practice, was dismantled and the government of Hassan Diab (which held power from January 2020 – September 2021) became a government basically composed mostly of political forces coordinated by the March 8 Movement. The central objective of this maneuver was to split the Shia dyad (known as the "Shia twins" or the "Shia brotherhood alliance") and weaken the government of Michel Aoun, an ally of the Amal-Hezbollah duo.

It is important to differentiate between the Ta'if Agreement and the Doha Understanding. The first was ratified by parliament and gained legal status with constitutional binding. The second, on the other hand, was a momentary understanding elaborated to solve a political impasse – it therefore did not have constitutional binding – states the former Lebanese Minister and preeminent Druse political figure Wi'am Wahab. The abandonment of the Doha Understanding by some parties of the March 14 coalition does not represent a socio- sectarian rupture or breach of the "social contract", argue a Christian Maronite cleric. Basically, the abandonment entailed a political coup and a strategic maneuver with a view to the parliamentary election of 2022. This maneuver had as its central objective the attempt to recreate a new balance of forces between the divergent poles – after the substantial loss of seats by the March 14 Movement in the 2018 parliamentary elections,[22] claims Salah El- Machnouk. Saudi Arabia backed parties that abandoned the agreement on allegations such as: corruption and Hezbollah's refusal to disarm. With this, Qatar was eliminated from the Lebanese political equation – bringing it back to the pre-Doha status quo, asserts a Lebanese senior diplomat.

However, Salloukh (2015) argues that the Lebanese constitution, while enabling the inclusion of all denominational political forces, can also foster structural impasses. The constitution stipulates that one-third is required as a minimum for government meeting or resignation; President, Prime Minister and Minister of Finance must sign bills together; the government falls through the resignation of the Prime Minister; the President of Parliament must convene meetings and elect the president; and the president must approve key government appointments and sanction the Premier's cabinet. Furthermore, usually, ordinary laws are proposed and organized around the Prime Minister, who then addresses the Speaker of Parliament, who holds agenda power in the Legislature, and finally the

[22] As Mabon explains on p. 186 of *The Struggle for Supremacy*: "By 2018, elections returned Hariri as Prime Minister albeit with a dramatically reduced influence of March 14 in the political system. March 8 won more than 56% of parliamentary seats, with March 14 taking slightly over 33%. Yet the two blocs worked together to maintain the government, continuing a tacit acknowledgment of the need to collaborate to ensure the survival of the elite."

signature of the President is necessary for sanctioning the laws passed next door. This system of checks and balances between the Sunni-Maronite-Shia triad reflects shared responsibility and the continuous effort for approvals through broad consensus, but also frequent procedural delays and decision-making paralysis, Salloukh et al posits (2015).

According to Salamey (2013), the Lebanese socio-religious arrangement establishes a strict sectarian distribution of the judiciary, legislative and executive powers. Between 1943, the year of independence, and the 1970s, Lebanon was seen as a model of post-colonial success, enjoying wealth and economic growth, in addition to being a society often referred to as free and open. So pronounced was Lebanon's success that many still see in the consociational model the best option to guarantee the political representation of the different Lebanese sects with peaceful interreligious coexistence given the high degree of internal heterogeneity. The Lebanese model was exported by the US to equalize the denominational balance of power in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, and was used to consolidate the political system in the Balkans after the disintegration of Yugoslavia, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Machnouk 2021). It was also, finally, the model considered to solve the civil war in Syria before the triumph of the regime of Bashar Al-Assad.

The sectarian distribution of key top government posts[7]

Source: CALFAT, 2022 based on Bassel F. Salloukh (2019) and Information International (2017)

Commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces	Director General of the Internal Security Forces	Director and Deputy Director of General Security	Director General of State Security	Governor of Beirut	Chief of Staff Lebanese Armed Forces
Director of the Intelligence Board of the Lebanese Armed Forces	Second Deputy Director Intelligence Board of the Lebanese Armed Forces	First Deputy Director Intelligence Board of the Lebanese Armed Forces	Member of the Banking Supervision Committee	Director-General of the Ministry of Labour	Director of Judicial Policy
Governor of the Banque du Liban	Third Deputy Governor of Banque du Liban	Head of the Embassy Security Unit	President of the Beirut Stock Exchange Committee	Head of the Central Fund for the Displaced	Second Deputy Governor Banque du Liban
Director of the Casino du Liban	President of the Banking Control Commission	First Vice-Governor of Banque du Liban	President and General Manager Beqaa' Water Establishment Governor of the North	Member of the Banking Control Commission	Government Commissioner Council for Development and Reconstruction
Director General of the Ministry of Finance	President of the Council for Development and Reconstruction	President of the Finance Bank	Governor of the North	Government Commissioner Banque du Liban	Director General of the Ministry of Public Health
Director General High Council for	Director General Ministry of Foreign	Member of the Banking Control	President of the Economic and	Director General of the Council for	Director General of the Ministry for Displaced

Privatization	Affairs and Expatriates	Commission	Social Council	Development and Reconstruction	Persons
Vice-President of the Council for Development and Reconstruction	President of the Supreme Aid Council	Director General of the Ministry of Economy	Director General Ministry of Agriculture	Secretary General of the Council for Development and Reconstruction	Governor of the South
Vice-President of the Southern Council	President of the Civil Service Board	Vice-President of the Council for Development and Reconstruction	General Manager Industry	Head of the Educational Center for Research and Development	Director General of Railways and Public Transport Authority
Director General Ministry of Water and Energy	Governor of Mount Lebanon	President of the Southern Council	Director General Lebanon TV	President of the Authority for Management of Traffic, Trucks and Vehicles	Director General/President General Organisation for Consumer Markets
Director General Électricité du Liban	Director General Organisme de Gestion et d'Exploitation de l'ex Radio Orient	Director General of Southern Council	Chief Director General of the Technical Branch of the Presidency		
Head of the Supreme Judicial Council	President of the Board of Directors of Middle East Airways	Director General of the National Social Security Fund			
Head of the State Consultative Council	Director General of the Office of the Prime Minister	Comptroller General			
President of the Constitutional Council	Director General Urban Planning	Governor of Nabatiyeh			
Director General Ministry of Education and Higher Education	Director General of the Ministry of Justice	Director General of the Ministry of Interior			
Director General of Customs	Attorney General	President of the Lebanese University			
Director General of the Presidency					
Director General of Civil Defence					
Director General of the Cooperatives					

[7] Most, if not all, top public posts are selected by community leaders. The appointment is also cross-referenced to the leaders of the major sectarian parties: 10 of the 155 posts are directly affiliated to Walid Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Druse party; 11 of the 155 posts are directly affiliated to Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement; 18 of the 155 posts are directly affiliated to Saad Hariri's Future Movement; and 27 of the 155 posts are directly affiliated from Nabih Berri's Amal Party (INFORMATION INTERNATIONAL, 2017).

The Lebanese consociational model is seen, both by policymakers[23] and jurists,[24] as the most effective institutional tool to regulate political and sectarian interoperability and as an alternative for conflict management – however, only when there is no clientelist or tutelary relationship between internal and external forces.

Although Barclay (2007) emphasize that the Lebanese model of power distribution as it is conceived is what most effectively generates balance and stability in fragmented societies, their argument fails to examine the penetrability of the model by external powers and the possibility for capture of the political system. For the author, the high internal heterogeneity and the competition established between regional powers, second, this form of power sharing is understood as the most effective way for the empowerment of governance by consensus and guarantee of political representation. Polarization and the interests of regional powers have immobilized the country's political system since 2005.

The harmony of the system only works well at a time of low competitiveness among regional powers interested in influencing the country's political system. The greater the degree of rivalry and competition between the Saudis and the Iranians, the greater the possibility of an intensification of the internal dispute in the country – unless specific and circumstantial understandings exist between the two contenders when the damage is mutually proportional Based on the literature surveyed and the examination of empirical data, it is possible to conclude that the penetration of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry in Lebanon's domestic politics ended up substantially exposing the limits of this consociational model and the capture of political forces in the country. In the Lebanese case, the structural vulnerabilities of the model were exposed to two variables: 1) the rise of political and sectarian polarizations after 2006 exposed the permeability of the political system; 2) rupture of the somewhat "hands- off" separation between Saudis and Iranians that more or less existed between 1990 and 2005.

It should be noted that the détente between Riyadh and Tehran (1990-2005) and the diplomatic cooperation between the two brought stability to the Lebanese political system and regulated the game between players within each segment. The idea that the consociational model is the best option to guarantee the political representation of the different Lebanese sects, given their high degree of heterogeneity, is valid, however, as long as there is no violation of any of the variables presented

[23] Wahab, Zahra, and Ferzeli.
[24] Adoum, Salloukh and Faiad.

above. In other words: sharp frictions in the Saudi-Iranian bilateral relationship, producing an imbalance in the regional balance of power – whether due to ideological, security or political differences – have immediate repercussions on the Lebanese political system. Such impacts can occur via incentives arising as an inducing action resulting from disputes between regional powers in time and space or by internal domestic divergences of a natural order which are influenced by external political actions and the instructions of the tutelary forces.

The reflection of the regional tension and the pressure on the Lebanese judiciary to continue the investigations into the explosion of the port of Beirut, which took place in August 2020, increased the polarization in the internal context of Lebanon. In October 2021, six months before a decisive parliamentary election, Hezbollah's leader accused the Lebanese Forces party of shooting at their supporters and killing seven people near a protest against the judges investigating the Beirut Port explosion. Hassan Nasrallah said in a televised address on the 18th of October 2021, that the Christian party and its leader Samir Geagea were trying to start conflict in the country. According to Nassrallah: "*The real program of the Lebanese Forces party is civil war (...) They don't have a problem with causing events that lead to bloodshed ... even if it will lead to a large-scale military confrontation and civil war." Nasrallah underlined that Hezbollah's armed wing has 100,000 "armed, trained, and experienced*" fighters.[25]

Salloukh (2017) emphasizes that the consociational trade-off can generate a qualitative democratic deficit. However, it also offers the guarantee of minimum stability and order. But in the context of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, if the two powers do not find a limit to their goals in the competition for control over Lebanese politics, that minimum stability and order could be threatened and subject to disruptive civil ruptures, claims Elie Ferzli the former vice-president of the Lebanese Parliament.

In the last two decades, the entire country of Lebanon has faced constant institutional breakdowns. Parliament's last term, elected in May 2018, postponed its elections, which were due to take place in 2009, citing security concerns linked to political instability and the Syrian war. The previous legislature extended its term three times: on 31 May 2013 (for 17 months), on 5 November 2014 (for 31 months)

[25] Hundreds of Hezbollah and Amal supporters in the 14th of October 2021 were attacked by armed group at a protest by the Beirut Justice Palace, leading to hours-long clashes that killed at least seven militants and civilians and wounded more than 30 others. Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea, longtime adversaries of the Iran-backed party, repeatedly denied the accusations of organizing an attack. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/18/hezbollah-accuses-lebanese-forces-of-killing-supporters

and on 14 June 2017 (until 6 May 2018, when new elections took place).

Other examples that elucidate the immobility of Lebanese politics not only as a reflection of internal disputes but also as a consequence of the regional political clash between Riyadh and Tehran include: the governance crises that devastated the country in 2005, 2008 and 2011; the presidential vacuum from May 2014 to October 2016; the budget, electricity, water and garbage crises of 2015 and the delay in the formation of the cabinet by the Prime Minister after the elections of May 2018. October Revolution of 2019 and the 13 months following the explosion at the port of Beirut in August 2020, obliterated the capacity of the domestic dialogue compelling the tutelary power to intervene in order to avoid an armed escalation. Of course, not only in Lebanon, but in many power-sharing regimes, the delay in forming governments of national unity is frequent, and, routinely, the balance between the political forces in dispute takes time to establish. However, it is important to shed light on the post- 2005 scenario, which seems to indicate a worsening in times of instability. Mahmalat and Curran (2020, 204) and data from Information International (2018), reveal that the average time for formation of Lebanese governments between 1989 and 2005 was 6.27 days, while from 2005 to 2016 the average period passed to 116 days. It took eight months of deadlocks and negotiations following the May 2018 parliamentary elections to form the Cabinet of Saad Hariri on 31 January 2019. In 2009, Hariri took five months to form a government administration, while his successor Tammam Salam took a full ten months after being nominated in 2013.

Lebanese government formation timeframe: 1987-2021
Source: CALFAT, 2022 based on The Monthly Magazine, Information International (2018, 2021)

Time Period	Prime Minister	Premier's designation period until cabinet formation (days)
02 june 1987 - 24 december 1990	Salim Hoss	13
24 december 1990 - 16 may 1992	Omar Karami	5
16 may 1992 - 31 october 1992	Rachid Solh	4
31 october 1992 - 4 december 1998	Rafik Hariri	8
31 october 1992 - 4 december 1998	Rafik Hariri	4
31 october 1992 - 4 december 1998	Rafik Hariri	14
december 6, 1998 - october 26, 2000	Salim Hoss	2
october 26, 2000 - october 26, 2004	Rafik Hariri	4

26 october 2000 - 26 october 2004	Rafik Hariri	2
october 25, 2004 - april 19, 2005	Omar Karami	8
april 19, 2005 - july 19, 2005	Najib Mikati	5
july 19, 2005 - may 25, 2008	Fouad Siniora	20
may 25, 2008 - november 9, 2009	Fouad Siniora	45
november 9, 2009 - june 13, 2011	Saad Hariri	135
13 june 2011 - 15 february 2014	Najib Mikati	140
15 february 2014 - 18 december 2016	Tammam Salam	315
18 december 2016 - 21 january 2020	Saad Hariri	46
24 may 2018 - 29 october 2019	Saad Hariri	253
21 january 2020 - 10 september 2021	Hassan Diab	34 (366 days interim)
31 august 2020 - 26 september 2020	Mustapha Adib	no cabinet formation
22 october 2020 - 15 july 2021	Saad Hariri	no cabinet formation
10 september 2021 - current	Najib Mikati	47

In addition to the regional asymmetries between Saudi Arabia and Iran, segments of the Lebanese political-economic elite know that they are, to a certain extent, indispensable actors and valuable pieces in the competitive chessboard that exists between the two regional powers. Despite the popular demonstrations in October 2019 against the government system and the ruling political elite, part of the independent grassroots anti- sectarian movements that emerged in the demonstrations defending the banner of a secular state ended up – directly or indirectly – uniting segments of the political and religious establishment.

The population's discontent with the leaders' inability to manage the country effectively ended up not translating into major political changes during the last parliamentary election held in May 2022. About 85% of the same political forces were re-elected to parliament – with the exceptions of some local forces as in the case of the traditional Sunni political leader Faisal Karami in Tripoli, and of Lebanon's oldest Druze political dynasties of the Chouf-Monte Lebanon region, Talal Arslan, causing a retraction in the political bloc of the March 8 Movement integrated by Hezbollah and its allies.

The growing popular discontent against the political caste in general and against the Aoun government in particular served as an instrument of pressure to hold the March 8 Bloc accountable for the mismanagement of public resources, unemployment, inflation, systemic corruption and clientelism. The

popular demands focused on the following aspects: abandonment of sectarianism, appointment of technocratic ministers, and qualified provision of basic services such as public health, education and infrastructure. The demilitarization of Hezbollah, although echoed as a demand by some segments, was not a demand among all those protesting against the political establishment. The protests led to the resignation of Saad Hariri on 29 October 2019. However, weak organizational capacity and absence of a unified program undermined the potential of the October Revolution.

It should be noted that the popular protests were accompanied by the deepest economic crisis the country has experienced since the end of the civil war, where public debt/GDP ratio in 2019 exceeded 170% (US$91.64 billion, almost double the US$ 52.5 billion in 2010, according to the International Monetary Fund).[26] In March 2020, for the first time, the country failed to pay a Eurobond (debt instrument in foreign currency) of more than US$ 1 billion. The fiscal and financial crisis, with banks imposing capital controls and restricting foreign currency withdrawals, has been severely exacerbated by the public health crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic. What the World Bank calls a 'severe and prolonged economic depression' has reflected in real GDP growth contracting by 20.3% in 2020 and triple-digit inflation.[27]

The period of inertia

After Saad Hariri and Mustapha Diab failed to form a cabinet, Hassan Diab was chosen as the new Prime Minister in January 2020. His government was short-lived, resigning on August 10, 2020, after the explosions in the port of Beirut. This hiatus lasted until the appointment of Najib Mikati on September 10, 2021. In summary, since 2009, the Lebanese have watched their government collapse three times: in January 2011, in 2013 (with the resulting presidency vacant for 29 months from May 2014 to October 2016); and in October 2019 and August 2020 with lingering consequences.

[26] According to data from the Credit Libanais Group, from 2018 to 2019 alone, Lebanon's gross public debt grew by US$ 6.51 billion (from US$ 85.13 billion to US$ 91.64 billion, with the public debt/GDP ratio jumping from 150.92% in 2018 to 175.6% in 2019 (CREDIT LIBANAIS BANKING GROUP, 2019, p. 32-33).

[27] According to World Bank data (2019) of these, US$ 18.52 billion were in service costs Interest on external debt was US$ 12.93 billion in 2011. The public debt/GDP ratio is estimated to have exceeded 500% as per the World Population Review, International Monetary Fund, United Nations 2021.

Timeline: key political events 2005-2021
Source: Calfat, 2022

26 October 2000	➢ Decree forming Rafiq Hariri's 4th government
17 April 2003	➢ Decree Formation 5th government of Rafiq Hariri
26 October 2004	➢ Decree Formation 2nd government of Omar Karami
14 February 2005	➢ Assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, attack on his convoy killing 21 others in downtown Beirut
18 February, 2005	➢ 'Cedar Revolution', series of popular demonstrations calling for Syrian withdrawal and overthrow of the Omar Karami government
13 April 2005	Omar Karami announces resignation and dissolves government
19 April 2005	➢ Reappointed Premier by President Émile Lahoud, Omar
26th April 2005	➢ Karami resigns from government without being able to form new cabinet
7 May 2005	➢ Najib Miqati appointed to interim government with 110 votes, after 50 days of Omar Karami's resignation / Decree Forming 1st government of Najib Miqati
29 May, 5, 12 and 20 June 2005	➢ Complete withdrawal of Syrian military troops from Lebanon after 29 years
30 June 2005	➢ Michel Aoun returns to Lebanon after 14-year exile in France
19 July 2005	➢ Parliamentary general elections, overseen by Miqati interim government formed by 14 independents
December 1st, 2006	➢ Fuad Siniora instructed to form cabinet
12 July-14 August 2006	➢ Premier Fuad Siniora forms government / Decree Forming 1st government of Fuad Siniora
11 November 2007	➢ Start 17 months of anti-government demonstrations organised by the opposition
24 November 2007	➢ 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, or July War
7-14 May 2008	➢ 6 members of Siniora's government resign in opposition to the establishment of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon
21 May 2008	➢ End of President Emile Lahoud's mandate. Fuad Siniora steps in as interim President.
25 May 2008	➢ Tensions between pro-government and opposition forces result in dozens of deaths
25 May 2008	➢ Signing of the Doha Agreement in Doha, Qatar, ending 18 months of political crisis

27 May 2008	➢ Fuad Siniora steps down as interim president since 24 November 2007
11 July 2008	➢ Election of Michel Sleiman as President (25/05/2008 -25/05/2014)
1 March 2009	➢ President Michel Sleiman appoints incumbent Prime Minister Fuad Siniora to form national unity government
7 June 2009	➢ Formation of national unity government by Prime Minister Fuad Siniora, with opposition securing 11 of 30 seats / Decree Formation 2nd government of Fuad Siniora
25 June 2009	➢ Inauguration of the Special International Tribunal for Lebanon to investigate and try those responsible for Hariri's assassination
27 June 2009	➢ Parliamentary general elections under the new 2008 electoral law. March 14 Bloc and its allies obtained majority of 71 seats, opposition March 8 secured 57 seats
9 November 2009	➢ Nabih Berri re-elected for fifth consecutive term as Speaker of Parliament
12 January 2011	➢ Saad Hariri appointed Prime Minister with 86 votes, tasked with forming national unity government
25 January 2011	➢ Saad Hariri forms national unity government after 5 months of talks / Decree Forming 1st government of Saad Hariri
15 March 2011	➢ 11 opposition ministers resign, resulting in the fall of the government of national unity
13 June 2011	➢ Najib Miqati appointed Prime Minister for a second term
22 March 2013	➢ Syrian war breaks out, following repression of popular protests since January
6 April 2013	➢ Premier Najib Miqati forms cabinet / Decree Forming 2nd government of Najib Miqati
25 May 2013	➢ Prime Minister Najib Mikati resigns
31 May 2013	➢ Tammam Salam appointed Premier and instructed to form cabinet
15 February 2014	➢ In speech, Hassan Nasrallah publicly confirms military presence of Hezbollah fighters in Syria
5 November 2014	➢ National assembly extends mandate for first time (17 months), citing security reasons and Syrian war
17 July 2015	➢ Premier Tammam Salam forms cabinet after 10 months of talks / Decree Forming Tamam Salam government
31 October 2016	➢ National Assembly extends term for second time (31 months)
18 December 2016	➢ Waste Crisis triggered by closure of Naameh solid waste landfill
14 June 2017	➢ Michel Aoun appointed president, ending 29-month vacancy in the presidency
16 June 2017	➢ Decree Forming 2nd government of Saad Hariri
4 November 2017	➢ National assembly extends mandate for a second time (9 months) until general elections in 2018

22 November 2017	➢ Approval of new electoral law
5 December 2017	➢ During his visit to Saudi Arabia, Saad Hariri unexpectedly resigns via televised speech. Aoun did not accept the resignation request.
6 May 2018	➢ Prime Minister Saad Hariri suspends resignation temporarily after his return to Lebanon
24 May 2018	➢ Saad Hariri formally rescinds resignation.
31 January 2019	➢ PM Saad Hariri forms national unity government with 30 ministers after 9 months of talks
17 October 2019	➢ October Revolution' begins series of popular protests (thawra) against tax increases and improved service delivery
29 October 2019	➢ PM Saad Hariri resigns and the government is dissolved
19 December 2019	➢ Hassan Diab appointed premier with 69 votes
21 January 2020	➢ Hassan Diab forms coalition government and announces technocratic government
9 March 2020	➢ Country defaults on $1,200m Eurobonds, public debt reaches 170% of GDP
15 March 2020	➢ Lebanon announces nationwide lockdown over SARS-COV-2 pandemic
30 April 2020	➢ Lebanon adopts plan for economic rescue and promises reforms
15 May 2020	➢ Discussions begin with the IMF for a $10bn rescue package
04 August 2020	➢ Explosions at Beirut port caused by storage of 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate
10 August 2020	➢ Hassan Diab announces resignation of entire government, which remains as interim
18 August 2020	➢ Special Tribunal for Lebanon issues sentence for the assassination of Rafiq Hariri (Ayyash et. al.)
1 September 2020	➢ Mustapha Adib assumed as Prime Minister with 90 votes
8 September 2020	➢ US Expands Sanctions on Lebanon
26 September 2020	➢ Mustapha Adib resigns as Prime Minister, without forming cabinet
22 October 2020	➢ Saad Hariri appointed to form government for fourth time, with 65 votes
15 July 2021	➢ Hariri resigns as Premier, without forming government
26 July 2021	➢ Najib Miqati appointed Prime Minister with 72 votes
4 August 2021	➢ International Conference in Support of the Lebanese People, promoted for France and UN, raises $370 million
10 September 2021	➢ Najib Mikati announces formation of technocrat cabinet with 24 ministers after consultations with parties and the President
15 May 2022	➢ General elections scheduled

After the May 2022 election and after Mikati was designated to remain at the head of the formation of the new government, the country remained immobilized until September 2022 (Salloukh and Verheij 2017; Makdisi and Marktanner 2009; Assaf 2004). The weakening of the state, sectarianism and the entrenchment of sectarian identities, associated with the profound permeability of the political system,

put the country in a state of political inertia with the possibility of prolonged immobility beyond September 2022, since the decision to form government was postponed until after the presidential election scheduled for November 2022 – after Michel Aoun's six-year term expired.

However, in the absence of a minimum consensus, the deep fragmentation and the regional clash between Riyadh and Tehran tend to hinder the formation of a new government. In other words: the future of Lebanon and the negotiation around any political agreement from now on will depend on the developments in the regional environment (for instance, the advancement of the Iranian nuclear agreement and the indirect negotiation between Lebanon and Israel for the exploration of gas in the Mediterranean) and the interests of the world powers in the country's fate – such as the repercussions of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its energy impacts on Europe.

Saudi hiatus and the tactical retreat

After Michel Aoun's election to office in 2016 as a vital Hezbollah ally, the Saudi hiatus in the Lebanese domestic politics endured from 2016 until 2020. The Saudi hiatus was mostly tactical and not a strategic level retreat, argue a Lebanese senior official. This retraction was focused on portraying a new approach for the Lebanese domestic scene and particularly for the Lebanese parliamentarian election of 2022. This marked the adoption of a double discourse by Riyadh – while externally the official statement underlined a disengagement from the domestic politics and the abandonment of Saad Hariri, the former Lebanese Sunni prime minister and long-lasting ally, the diplomatic action in the field indicated an opposite strategy, ensured the former Lebanese Ambassador Joseph Sayah. Saudi Arabia was successful in breaking the electoral superiority of the major Christian Maronite political party, the Free Patriotic Movement and long-lasting Hezbollah's allies, subtracting the wider Christian legitimacy that Hezbollah had been relying on since the Mar Mikhael Agreement (a Memorandum of Understanding) between the Free Patriotic Movement and Hezbollah.

Lebanon is still today being torn apart by political disputes due internal stalemate among the two blocs, namely the pro-Saudi alignment and the pro-Iranian alliance. Furthermore, the October 17th protests against the political establishment eroded the fragile sectarian balance by triggering violence and armed clashes between different political factions in the country. The domestic competition among those oriented towards Iran and those oriented towards Saudi Arabia, between those who support the Syrian

regime and those who do not, between Salafist groups and Hezbollah, and so on, remain as a key factor for the immobilization of the Lebanese political system and institutions.

Since the post-war period (1990), Hezbollah has been the most influential political force in Lebanon and will remain so until there is a new diplomatic rearrangement between Riyadh and Tehran and a definitive solution to the Lebanon-Israeli conflict. Despite the party's ideological vision of regional and global relations, Hezbollah acts with an immense degree of pragmatism, optimizing its accumulation of power and ultimately forcing the country's decision-making mechanism to rely on its consent, particularly in the geostrategic realm. Hezbollah's tactical flexibility has been exercised intensely and measurably over the past few years. The reception of Prime Minister Saad Hariri after his unjustified detention in Riyadh by the Saudi Crown Prince Mohamad Bin-Salman and the demand for his release and his immediate return to Beirut by the Secretary General of Hezbollah, Hassan Nassrallah, is one of the examples of how the Lebanese party was able to adapt its rhetorical strategy and its political conduct to remain influential on the local political board. Hezbollah not only demanded the restoration of Hariri's legitimacy, but also supported his continuity as the head of the Lebanese government. As Mabon (2023) explains:

> *Hariri was placed under house arrest before being forced him to resign as Prime Minister on 4th November. In a television address, Hariri expressed fears for his life in Lebanon, drawing parallels with the climate prior to his father's assassination, accusing Iran of creating an atmosphere of "disorder and destruction" through support for its ally Hizbullah, the Party of God. The interview was quickly a subject of extensive debate, with many suggesting that Hariri was speaking underduress. A week later, Michel Auon, the Lebanese President, told ambassadors that the country's Prime Minister had been 'kidnapped'*(Mabon 2023, 151).

The nature of the rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran has different ramification over the Middle East and specially in Lebanon. The foreign policies of Saudi Arabia and Iran and the way how both

strategies play out in the Lebanese chessboard will be meticulously explored. As Mabon (2023) asserts, when it comes to analyze the Saudi-Iranian competition, it is necessary to look at both the construction of foreign policy and also the broader visions that condition action and behavior. To Mabon (2023), visions of regional order have a key role to play in understanding Riyadh and Tehran's actions across the Middle East, and peculiarly in Lebanon.

Before turning to a detailed analysis of Saudi-Iranian engagement in Lebanon, I must first consider the ways in which regional powers and domestic actors interact and the intellectual approaches that help understand such engagement. This manuscript demands a reflection on socialization, tutelary power, and regional security.

Chapter 05

The Tutelary Model in Lebanon

This chapter explores the tutelary model that has been implemented by each state vis-à-vis the Lebanese institutions in general and the political factions in specific. While the Saudi model is verticalized and relies on financial sources to achieve the country's objectives in something resembling a mercantilist formula, the Iranian approach is horizontal and based on transnational cooperation without requiring trade-offs and instead incorporating a strong component of ideological linkage. The concept of "tutelage" and its effects on national sovereignty will also be discussed in accordance with two main premises: 1) the meaning of order and stability in Lebanese politics, and 2) the effects of foreign interference on the rule of law. Finally, two historical episodes – the 2006 Lebanese-Israeli War and the outbreak of the Civil War in Syria in 2011 – will serve as key components to explain the interplay between the regional order and Lebanon's political and social structure.

Despite the destructive competition between the two regional powers in other geostrategic arenas such as Syria, Yemen, Bahrain and Iraq, it is in Lebanon where the Saudi-Iranian antagonism is the most multilayered and multifaceted with regard to the interface between internal and external forces. The nature of this rivalry has evolved differently across time and space in Lebanon, particularly before the Ta'if Accord in 1989 and after the Israeli- Lebanese War in 2006. Thus, the characteristics of the Lebanese political system and the way it is structured make it vulnerable and permeable to external influences.

Such vulnerability and permeability has weakened the country's institutions and contributed to their fragmentation, often along sectarian lines, disrupting the preexisting sectarian balance. In this chapter, I will also shed light upon the impact of this rivalry on the trajectory of the domestic electoral process, the formation of political coalitions and the domestic interfaith dialogue. From an 'intermittent détente' to an 'aggressive diplomacy', the result of this clash among the key power brokers in the Middle East has unleashed a succession of consequences such as the prevention of Lebanese governmental formation, economic sanctions, and the expulsion of Lebanese entrepreneurs from the Gulf. The

implementation of a 'maximum pressure' diplomacy by Saudi Arabia and its allies has not changed the strategic balance of power within the domestic political scene. With very few exceptions (such as the Armed Forces), the impacts of the Tehran-Riyadh rivalry have already expanded to exert significant influence on Media Corporations and Judicial Power (specifically, Lebanon's Criminal Legal System). Discussion of these effects will appear in this chapter as well as the fifth chapter of the manuscript.

Lebanon – historically at the center of how to balance and work with the Axis of Resistance

Besides the deep divergences and rivalry between the "Axis of Resistance" alignment and the pro-Saudi Bloc, Lebanon is the political arena where both sides can moderate the geopolitical contentious and reach a viable balance standard.

The peculiarity of Lebanese social structure and political division implies that all the major sects must be represented in government. Any attempts to sideline any of the major political forces either in the Sunni, Shia or the Maronite coalitions will inexorably lead to the disintegration of the social cohesion and will likely push the country towards a national fragmentation collapsing the political system and Tai'f agreement.

This suggests, at least, that Lebanese politics is a zero-sum game on the Saudi-Iranian Cold War chessboard. Political fractures will demand Tehran and Riyadh diplomacies to invest considerable efforts to restore the sociopolitical cohesion with only peripheral strategic gains. Basically, the socio-religious architecture of the Lebanese political system plays as a natural obstacle to any drastic political imposition by Saudis or Iranians. Furthermore, any exogenous attempts at reshaping the nature of this sociopolitical architecture will naturally inflect severe damage to the sectarian balance by jeopardizing the internal equilibrium.

The endorsement by Sunni leader and Saudi affiliate in Lebanon, Saad Hariri, of the candidacy of the major Maronite political leader and member of Hezbollah political coalition, Michel Aoun, for the Lebanese presidency, reflects the new reality of the Middle East. The succession of facts in favor of the Axis of Resistance – from the achievement of the nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1 to the current evolvement of the military situation on the ground in Iraq and, particularly, in Syria – meant that Hariri

was compelled to lean for a more pragmatic approach by meeting the Hezbollah bloc halfway. On the other hand, Michel Aoun has announced that Saad Hariri will be acclaimed as a Prime Minister of the government free from Hezbollah's veto, as the Secretary-General of Shia group, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, has confirmed in his public speech on October 23th 2016.

It is important to analyze how Hariri's position changed since the vacancy of the Presidential chair almost three years ago, after former president Michel Suleiman finished his term in the office. Firstly, he endorsed Samir Geagea, leader of the Lebanese Forces Party and member of his political alignment. Afterwards, he decided to endorse Suleiman Frangieh, a pro- Syrian ally and member of Hezbollah political coalition, for the presidency. And in 2016 he endorsed Michel Aoun for the presidency – Hezbollah's candidate for the office since forever and the Maronite strategic partner of Hezbollah.

Since the beginning of the Lebanese crisis in early 2014, Hariri's un-pragmatism, validated by Saudi inflexibility, was much anchored on the hope that evolvement of the Syrian Crisis will lead to the downfall of Assad's regime.

The Russian military involvement in Syria, in November 2015, was undeniably a strong game changer, helping the regime to recapture strategic zones from ISIS, Al Nusra and some small rebel groups. Since then, Hariri started to adjust his rhetoric when he realized that his coalition could not claim both positions – the Presidency and the Prime Minister office.

According to the known Lebanese tradition and consensus the President has to be a Christian Maronite, the Prime Minister Muslim Sunni and the Speaker of the parliament a Muslim Shia. If Hariri becomes the Prime Minister, then inevitably the presidential candidate has to be someone from Hezbollah's coalition. In case he succeeds to elect the president from his coalition, Hariri has to accept that the Prime Minister has to be chosen from Hezbollah's coalition. Since the beginning of the immobilization of Lebanese dialogue, the Axis of Resistance alignment never denied Hariri's coalition to head the government as the prime minister since he also agreed to accept Aoun becoming the president.

Furthermore, Hariri's demands on Hezbollah's disarmament and full withdrawal of its combatants from Syria were a set of requests excluded from the scope of the negotiation. Even though both sides denied any external interference in the internal arrangement, it's clear that the discussions between the two Lebanese adversaries were dictated by the new status quo in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. The mutual

endorsement, therefore, displays not only an important level of pragmatism, necessary for both the Lebanese sides, but also an indirect agreement between Saudis and Iranians to not veto each other side.

Moreover, one more fact that can explain why Hariri ceded to the pressures was the emergence of other Sunni leaders undermining his legitimacy as the most important political leader of his religious sect in the country like the northern Sunni leader Ashraf Rifi. However, in the perspective of some leaders within the Axis of Resistance, the mutual endorsement between Aoun and Hariri reflects the consolidation of the influence and the strength of this strategic alignment in the region.

In a broader picture, aside from Lebanese domestic politics, it is important to watch the emergence of political and intelligence coordination among the self-proclaimed P5+1, composed of Russia, Iran, Iraq, Syria and Hezbollah, focused on shaping new patterns in regional security. From the perspective of the P5+1, the alliance between the United States and Saudi Arabia has lost its ability to stabilize the Middle East and for certain extent to preserve the old political order. In the perspective of Moscow-Tehran-Damascus, Washington has to deal with a new geopolitical reality with a more endowed and powerful political alignment that is apparently antagonistic to American interests.

With these new developments and the increased tensions, they bring to the region, it is more important than ever to understand Lebanon as a crucial junction in the geopolitical chessboard – both for its external positioning vis-à-vis other actors and its complex internal dynamics. In the broader history of the Middle East, Lebanon may appear as a neutral landscape where regional and international rivalries have played out—between the US and USSR during the Cold War, or between Iran and Saudi Arabia today. As a small state with a multifaceted social fabric, Lebanon has been treated as a passive player that becomes entangled in larger international machinations and geopolitical struggles. Lebanon itself does not matter in these narratives.

However, it is important to understand the development and consequences of social and political actors within Lebanon that have become regional actors and have reshaped the regional balance of power beyond the country's borders. Rather than being a passive landscape with internal divisions, this approach looks at how domestic politics and domestic actors in in Lebanon have strengthened over time and moved to impact the regional picture and shape the regional dynamics vis-à-vis the Lebanese state. Hezbollah, for example, has grown and morphed from an organization concerned only with the Lebanese landscape and the Israeli-Lebanese conflict into perhaps one of the strongest

actors in the region. But as Hezbollah and, by extension, Iran's power grows, so too do Saudi fears that they will lose their hegemony in the Gulf region. Tehran, on the other hand, values Hezbollah's increasing power as a deterrent to Israel that allows Iran to project force in the Levant.

In this context, Lebanon became an irreplaceable piece for Saudi Arabia and Iran's competing geostrategic ambitions in the Middle East. The clash to dominate the Lebanese arena has emerged as a national security matter for both Tehran and Riyadh. Thus, a refined foreign policy has been meticulously tailored by both sides after the Second Lebanon War in 2006. On one hand, the Saudi Kingdom was determined to constrain Hezbollah's domestic power as well as to obliterate its military capabilities while dominating the Lebanese political decision-making process enough to prevent Hezbollah from attaining political predominance. On the other hand, the 'Party of God', as Hezbollah literally means in Arabic, has become a precious asset and an invaluable deterrent power in the eyes of the Islamic Republic to counter Israeli influence in the Levant and to politically amalgamate the connection of the "Axis of Resistance" from Tehran to Beirut. Over the last two decades, internal political divisions within Lebanon have become even more inextricably tied to two distinct political poles: one that revolves around a Saudi-Western alliance and another which promotes ties with Iran and Russia.

Since the 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and the subsequent 2006 war between Lebanon and Israel, the country has seen increased political and religious antagonism erode its tenuous sectarian balance. Two main political blocs have emerged in opposition to one another. The March 14th coalition believes that aligning with Saudi Arabia, Europe, and the United States is necessary to extricate the country from the orbit of Iran and Syria. The March 8th coalition, on the other hand, believes that an alliance with Iran's Axis of Resistance is vital to countering Israeli-western dominance in the region.

List of ministerial resignations in the cabinet and main instabilities (2004-2021)
Source: Calfat, 2022

Date	Event	Description
28 february 2005	Omar Karami, Prime Minister after Hariri's death, forced out and dissolution of the cabinet. Karami reappointed by President Lahoud in pro-Syrian government; without forming government resigns again	Dissolution of government as a result of popular pressure from the 'Cedar Revolution', led by the anti-Syrian/Hezbollah movement, which followed

	in April 2005.	the assassination of Rafiq Hariri.
11 november 2006	5 Shiites and 1 pro-Syrian Christian resign in opposition to Special Tribunal for Lebanon for the assassination of Rafiq Hariri, calling for greater decision-making power.	Failing to reach 1/3 of the then 24 seats to boycott the cabinet (The cabinet is resigned in the absence of a third of its ministers, almost reached with the assassination of Pierre Gemayel).
01 december 2006	Siniora approves Statute on 13 November 2006 for TSL despite absence of 4 Shiite ministers. Hezbollah, Amal and Free Patriotic Movement leave portfolios.	Start of 18-month crisis (sit-in) culminating in the Doha Agreement
12 january 2011	Eleven opposition ministers resign after months of warnings and demands for negotiations regarding the appointment of the accused (TSL)	Breaking the threshold of 1/3 +1 of the total 30 seats: first use of the propositional veto post-Doha.
06 june 2015	Total paralysis of the Cabinet after MPL threatened to obstruct the work of the government and vote on any other issues, even though it was not in the majority, until a new Army commander was appointed, persisting with the appointment of Aoun's son-in-law Chamel Roukoz. The MPL warned that it would resort to "street demonstrations under the slogan of preserving the rights of Christians." MPL and Hezbollah accused of wanting to form a unilateral government and paralyse all constitutional institutions.	Michel Aoun attacks Prime Minister for the way he handles cabinet and security appointments. Politicization of military institution. No waiver, but corroborates frequent paralysis due to inability of parties to reach agreement (narrative of protecting vital interests). (1/2 of cabinet would allow sessions and 2/3 the approval of important decisions).
25 august 2015	Six ministers, including Foreign Minister Gibran Bassil (MPL) walked out after four hours of the emergency meeting called by Tammam Salam to discuss the worsening rubbish crisis followed by protests against corruption and deficit public services. The ministers unanimously rejected the winning bidders to manage Beirut's rubbish collection, citing high costs and bidding procedures said to be questionable. Bassil said he quit because of the political "theatre" surrounding the rubbish issue.	Political instability and lack of consensus, combined with long presidential vacuum and threat of terrorism, but no formal resignation or veto. Population accuses ministers and parties of incessant bickering and paralysis around defining profits and benefits on waste management contracts.
25 august 2016	Kataeb Party Labor Minister Sejaan Qazzi and Economy Minister Alain Hakim have resigned from Premier	Kataeb ministers walked out of cabinet session in protest against government's

	Tammam Salam's government.	handling of waste management file and approval of Jannah dam project, "stifling Kataeb opinion."
30 june 2019	Two ministerial aides of Saleh al-Gharib shot dead in Chouf mountains. Allies of Druze Talal Arslan, who blames Walid Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party. Debate over referring the Qabrshmoun case to the Judicial Council Court or the Military Court.	No resignation, but Hariri unable to unite cabinet despite economic crisis and urgency to pass budget. Dispute over the influence of the Druze Lebanese community.
29 october 2019	Prime Minister Saad Hariri resigns, result of protests and anti-government pressure. Protesters sparked the thawra (revolution), ongoing since October 17.	Hassan Diab formed a short-lived government (7 months) that resigned after the port explosion in August 2020. The next Prime Minister, Mustafa Adib, failed to form a lasting government due to disputes around the main ministerial portfolios, Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Water and Energy. Najib Miqati was appointed Prime Minister in July 2021, forming a new government in September 2021 after 13 months of political deadlock.

The contrast between these two visions has hurled the country into consecutive constitutional impasses since 2006. The Parliament's 2014 decision to extend its mandate by an additional two years and seven months was, ultimately, a tactical maneuver to maintain the *status quo,* using the argument that new elections would constitute a major security risk given the fragile situation of the country. However, the social consequences of this decision have been considerable – it has undermined of the legitimacy of the constitution and weakened Lebanese institutions and the democratic process.

Although the domestic conflict in Lebanon seems to primarily involve a clash of influence between Iran and Saudi Arabia, it is important to remember that the situation is inextricably connected to the framework of competition between the Euro-American-Saudi and Russian- Syrian-Iranian axes. Thus, political turmoil in Lebanon will have consequences that reach far past its borders. Remnants of ISIS and *Takfiri* inspired ideology still exist in the interior of the country, and sectarian polarization remains

intense. Even though Lebanon has been able to successfully avoid an all-out civil war in the years since 2014, the nation's internal and external tensions still pose a threat to stability.

In the last two decades, the regional security architecture has been largely influenced by Iranian and Saudi interests. Old rivalries succumbed and new alliances pivoted. Lebanon's strategic value in the Saudi-Iranian foreign policy dimension increased year after year. The successive Israeli-Lebanese wars in 2000 and in 2006, the downfall of several Arab regimes in the region, and the worsening of the Syrian Civil War in 2012 transformed Lebanon into an irreplaceable strategic piece for both sides.

The Sunni political landscape in Lebanon

In a historical perspective, the involvement of Saudi Arabia within Lebanon has shifted frequently, relying less on longstanding alliances with any single entity and more on strategic alignments with groups and individuals that could be incentivized to oppose pro- Iranian interests. The Saudis generally failed to organize a unified social base or direct all of their resources towards building up one local Sunni political party. Nor have they ever successfully brought together a diverse, broad-based coalition within Lebanon's variegated Sunni Muslim community.

Perhaps the main exception to this trend of shifting, singular alignments for the Saudis is the Hariri clan, whom they have supported as their allies in the country's politics since the Taif Accord in 1989 (Baumann 2016). The Saudis believed that they could pursue their main objectives in Lebanon by building up the Hariri clan's sizable political base within the country's parliament and aligning Saudi interests with those of the Prime Minister's cabinet members[28] [30]. Using these sources of internal, institutional power, the Saudis sought to obstruct Iran's efforts to extend the control of Shi'a political groups, such as Hezbollah, over Lebanese politics.

However, the Saudis' efforts here focused solely on the Hariri clan, which, despite holding the single largest share of Sunni representation, does not represent the interests of all of the various parts of Lebanon's Sunni Muslim community. By doing so, the Saudis alienated other Sunni groups, such as the Karami and Solh clans, and inadvertently fragmented the Sunni community into several political

[28] This made intuitive sense as a strategic path for the Saudis to follow due to the nature of the consociational power-sharing arrangement provided for in the post-civil war Lebanese agreement. Under this arrangement, the Prime Minister is always a Sunni Muslim, and their cabinet appointments often fall along sectarian lines.

parties. Furthermore, the political landscape was already treacherous for any sort of efforts aimed at unifying Lebanon's Sunni population under one banner. During the 1960s and 1970s, multiple secular Pan-Arab parties played a vital role in Lebanese politics – and although they were not characterized by religious identity, they did capture much of the Sunni population's support. The turmoil of the civil war served only to fragment these interests, deepening resentments and weakening most groups. After the Taif Agreement, the Saudis seemed to believe that the Hariri clan's political clout could unite these competing groups with some help from the Kingdom's vast financial resources. The political parties claiming to represent the interests of Lebanon's Sunni population, however, have remained deeply divided.

Four main groups exist within this landscape of Sunni-dominated parties. Some of them are ostensibly secular, while others more openly espouse a sectarian bent. Only one, the Future Party of Hariri, aligns consistently with Saudi Arabian interests, while some of the other factions often consider the Kingdom a strategic rival. The four groups are as follows:

Nasserist Pan-Arab parties, which include a fairly diverse range of groups:

1. The Popular Nasserist Organization of Osama Saad, a historical Pan-Arab movement based in the southern Lebanese city of Sidon;
2. The Lebanese Syrian Social Nationalist Party, another pan-Arab party;
3. *Tayar al-Karama*, formerly known as the Arab Liberation Party, a group dominated by the Karami clan and opposed to the Hariri clan, albeit with a balanced relationship with Saudi Arabia;
4. The Union Party, led by former minister Abdelrahim Mourad, a traditional Sunni Pan-Arab group espousing an ideology of secular Nasserism;
5. The Lebanese wing of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party;
6. The Independent Nasserite Movement, also known as *Al-Mourabitoun*;

The pro-Saudi Future Party, dominated by the Hariri clan:

1. Secular independent parties such as the Azm Movement of the former prime minister Najib Mikati;

2. Pan-Islamist anti-Salafist groups such as *Al-Ahbash* and *Al-Jama'ah Al-Islamiyah*.

All of the Pan-Arab parties have long since been rejected by Riyadh as potential allies, as Saudi Arabia viewed Pan-Arab movements as a threat to its own political legitimacy and thus worked to undermine them. Instead, former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri built a strong relationship with the Saudi royal family over the course of many years, gaining their support for his party's claim to act on behalf of the Sunni sect in Lebanon since 1990. An endorsement as the "legitimate" political representative of the Kingdom's interests in Lebanon carries with it a great deal of weight for those who believe in Saudi Arabia's special status as a protector of the Islamic faith – without Saudi endorsement, it would be nearly impossible for a Sunni religious-political leader to gain widespread support in Lebanon (Salamey 2013) – but it clearly does not mean that all Sunni political groups will fall in line.

In fact, in the years since 2006, Riyadh has had to shift its diplomatic modus operandi in order to counterbalance the increasing dominance of Hezbollah. Saudi Arabian support now flows in various forms to a variety of other parties – particularly those aligned with Lebanon's Christian population, such as the Maronite militia turned political party known as the Lebanese Forces. Now, just as in the past, the relationship between Saudi Arabia and its allies is generally not characterized by ideological alignment, but rather Riyadh will work with groups of any sectarian or ideological grouping so long as they have a possibility of counterbalancing Iranian and Syrian influences. For the House of Saud, an increase in the power of a Sunni party in Lebanon only benefits their interests if its strategic objectives align with this overarching goal – preventing Iran from influencing the Lebanese political decision-making process will curtail Tehran's force-projection capabilities in the region and build up Saudi hegemony, whether that involves extending Saudi control in Lebanese politics or simply disrupting Iran's dominance (Saad 2019). The evolution of Saudi foreign policy towards Lebanon from 1990 to the present reflects this key consideration at each step of the way.

The Saudi model for Lebanon

In order to gain a comprehensive perspective on the evolution of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy towards Lebanon, I must first note one of the key principles of the Kingdom's model of diplomacy that

has now persisted for forty years. Saudi Arabia and Iran have a paradoxical foreign policy doctrine and different methodological models of diplomatic implementation. Whilst the Saudi model is verticalized and relies on financial sources to achieve the country's objectives in something resembling a mercantilist formula, the Iranian one is horizontal and based on transversal cooperation without trade-off machination and incorporating a strong component of ideological linkage. In order to better understand the different methodologies and variables at play in the case of Lebanon, we can look at the two competing models which, in this case, are exemplified by the strategic approaches of Iran and Saudi Arabia.

In Lebanon, Saudi Arabia has never organized a bloc of support based on ideology. Instead, Saudi Arabia's methodological approach centers on the power of petrodollar coercive diplomacy, seeking to use forms of economic incentivization to counterbalance Iran's presence in the country. The Saudis have vast economic resources at their disposal, and the main way that they incentivize Lebanese actors to align themselves with the Saudis' political interests is by supporting these groups financially. The relation among Riyadh and certain political groups in Lebanon tends to be transactional rather than based on an Ideological framework.

The Saudis view their role in the region as something of a guardian of Sunni Muslim empowerment, increasing their regional influence throughout the Middle East and establishing a tutelary model that will provide them with long-term control over the internal functioning of Lebanon's political system even in the face of unfavorable demographic changes in that country. In the specific case of Lebanon, the Saudis began employing their strategy of economic incentivization mostly in the 1990s, moving to fill the relative power vacuum that the Iranians were simultaneously seeking to exploit. Since then, the Saudis have endeavored to maintain friendly Sunni groups in power and make sure that they are perceived as legitimate by the wider population. Geopolitically, this strategic architecture has been oriented – at least since the 2006 Lebanese-Israeli War – towards preventing the establishment and consolidation of a Shia axis of power reaching from Iran's western border to the Eastern Mediterranean.

The Saudis' strategy primarily aims to control internal aspects of Lebanon's power structures, and they expect to use this internal control to limit the ability of pro-Iranian groups to engage in externally focused operations. Riyadh hopes that by controlling the internal structure of the country they can curtail the expansion of Iranian power both within Lebanon and within the region as a whole. From the Saudi point

of view, the Kingdom plays a diplomatic role as the protector of Sunni Muslims in the Middle East and beyond. In the perspective of Saudi foreign policy, 'Iran was responsible for regional upheaval and sought to obscure its dangerous sectarian and expansionist policies, as well as its support for terrorism, by leveling unsubstantiated charges against the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Adel Al Jubeir, the Saudi foreign minister, also argued that Iran is "*the single-most-belligerent-actor in the region, and its actions display both a commitment to regional hegemony and a deeply held view that conciliatory gestures signal weakness either on Iran's part or on the part of its adversaries*' (Mabon 2018).

The three phases of Saudi foreign policy towards Lebanon:

Saudi foreign policy has maintained the same overarching goals throughout all three of these phases – countering the expansion of Iranian power in the Levant and using petrodollar diplomacy to extend its control over Lebanese internal politics – but the areas of focus and the methods by which they seek to achieve them have changed over time. Some of this is in response to the maneuvers of Iran and Hezbollah, while other changes result from shifting geopolitical calculations – for instance, the exogenous shock of the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war. The three main phases in the evolution of Saudi foreign policy towards Lebanon from the end of the Lebanese Civil War to the present are described below.

The First Phase – Following from the Taif Agreement (1990-2005)

When the Taif Agreement brought an end to the Lebanese Civil War, it coincided with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. In the 1990s, the regional powers of the Middle East replaced the influence of the Cold War superpowers and their European allies by playing an assertive "tutelary" role over the Lebanese political system. Saudi Arabia and Syria emerged as the first main stakeholders within the Lebanese political arena followed closely by Iran due its influence over Hezbollah and the south of the country (Salloukh 2017).

Saudi Arabia and Syria adopted a tacit division of roles within this tutelary system, with Damascus building up the country's security and defense apparatus while Riyadh guided the process of

economic reconstruction. It was during this time that Prime Minister Rafic Hariri and his allies from a variety of sectarian backgrounds worked closely with Saudi officials to organize the reconstruction process (Salloukh e Verheij 2017), becoming something of a kingmaker in the economic arena (Salloukh 2019). However, despite this considerable influence, most of the Saudis' power only extended as far as their economic patronage, which primarily flowed to Hariri's Future Party and was then distributed to other party leaders such as Fouad Siniora and Marwan Hamadeh. Unlike with Iran's Hezbollah, there was no political party functioning as a full-on ideological proxy for Saudi interests and no cohesive Sunni base that shared their goals. In this period Saudi Arabia have had a very moderate and constructive diplomatic role within the Lebanese political landscape.

The Second Phase – The Rupture with Syria and the Israel-Hezbollah War (2005-2016)

In 2004, Hariri stepped down as Prime Minister after a series of disagreements with Damascus over the continued presence of Syrian military forces in Lebanon. His subsequent assassination in 2005 led to the Cedar Revolution, a popular outpouring against Syrian involvement in Lebanese affairs which, with the support of western powers, led to the end of Syria's tutelary role. Bolstered by this, the Hariri clan's Future Party won the 2005 parliamentary elections at the head of the March 14th coalition. After defeating the March 8th coalition by a margin of 69-57 seats, Fouad Siniora, one of Rafic Hariri's main allies, became the Prime Minster. Saad Hariri, Rafic's son then became the new leader of the Hariri clan and acted as a power-player in the internal dynamics of the Future Party, further consolidating their leadership.

Bassel Salloukh (2017) argues that *'long before the popular uprisings snaked their way to Syria, Lebanon had emerged as a site for two overlapping political struggles. At the domestic level, Hariri's Saudi-sponsored Future Movement sought to re-establish its control over the state's political, judicial and bureaucratic institutions immediately following the withdrawal of Syrian troops on April 26, 2005*' (*Ibid)*. On the regional stage, the Saudis and Iranians continued their maneuvering for primacy and influence in Lebanese politics – a struggle reflected in the positioning of the March 8th and March 14th blocs.

But in 2006 came another shock to domestic politics and the regional order alike. Cross- border fighting between Hezbollah and Israel culminated in an air, sea, and land invasion by Israeli Defense

Forces into Lebanese territory. In an effort to restore the balance and improve their strategic position, Saudi Arabia put pressure on its allies within the country to force the demilitarization of Hezbollah and limit Iran's ability to wage a proxy war against Israel. In order to accomplish this, the Saudis rallied an international coalition of western powers to make similar demands and began using their economic leverage to increase Hariri's base of popular support[29] [31]. Sectarian cleavages were exacerbated, and Lebanon's domestic politics were immobilized by a lack of cooperation between pro and anti-Iranian groups. The main representative of Iran's agenda was, of course, Hezbollah, but the pro- Saudi groups came from a variety of backgrounds and did not constitute any sort of united front. Michel Aoun, the most prominent Maronite politician, sealed a crucial deal with Hezbollah in 2006, and their coalition went on to win the 2009 parliamentary elections; Saudi pressure had failed to demilitarize Hezbollah and deprive Iran of its main avenue of force projection in the Levant. The installation of Saad Hariri as the prime minister that same year was simply a concession designed to prevent further sectarian conflict. This status quo would effectively be maintained until large-scale uprisings against the Assad regime emerged in 2011, a development that piqued the interest of all major powers in the region.

With the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2012, Saudi Arabia readjusted its foreign policy strategy yet again. Sectarian tensions in Lebanon heightened, and the Kingdom sought to support groups advocating for regime change in Syria. Their modus operandi involved bankrolling media campaigns, asking western powers to implement sanctions against the Assad regime, blocking the exploration of gas resources in the region, and tightening their control over Lebanon's legal and economic institutions (Phillips 2016).

Joseph Bahout (2013) argue that 'Syria's crisis is intensifying Sunni-Shia tensions in Lebanon on two levels, symbolic and identity- based on the one hand, and geopolitical or interest based, on the other hand' (Bahout 2013). In parallel, Salloukh (2017) explains that besides the multi-sectarian coalitions' disagreements over mixed visions of Lebanon, its security priorities and its alliance choices, these components nevertheless exemplified a political struggle among the mainly Sunni and Shia political elite and their external patrons over who should control the post-Syria Lebanese state (Salloukh 2017).

If the Assad regime fell, the Saudis could cut off any remaining avenues of resource provision for Iran's allies and strangle their opponents in the domestic political arena. But Assad's regime, with the support

[29] http://www.salemzahran.com/home

of the Russian Federation, did survive. The 2015 negotiation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action between Iran and the P5+1 further strengthened the position of the Saudis' opponents, forcing Riyadh to reconsider its strategy.

The Third Phase – Moving on from Acephaly (begun in 2016)

2016 saw the election of Michel Aoun as President, ending a two-year period of political deadlock and acephaly that had paralyzed Lebanese domestic politics. Aoun had positioned himself as a candidate friendly to Hezbollah in order to secure his victory and made concessions to Sunni families in the appointment of cabinet positions to broaden his appeal. Saad Hariri accompanied him as Prime Minister, signifying the agreement between pro- Saudi and pro-Iranian blocs. After the election of Aoun as President and Hariri as Prime Minister in 2016, the Saudis, under pressure from France (Semo 2017), adopted a less involved but more confrontational policy towards Lebanon. They encouraged western powers and the Gulf States to level sanctions on the country while curtailing their own economic investments, hastening the collapse of the Lebanese economy. They cooperated with U.S. President Donald Trump to enact a campaign of "maximum pressure" on Iran and its allies. Trump's administration even withdrew the United States from the JCPOA, making the future of the agreement precarious, to say the least. But despite these efforts, Hariri lost ground in the parliament (Azar 2018), and the position of Saudi Arabia's transaction-based internal alliances weakened. Iran's ideologically aligned allies triumphed in the 2018 elections and allowed Hariri to keep his position as Prime Minister. This move would help legitimize the government in the eyes of the Sunni population and de-sectarianize the domestic political situation somewhat, staving off an outbreak of violence. Despite ideological divergences, the pro-Iranian bloc's recognition that Saad Hariri is the major Sunni representative leader was beyond a mere diplomatic move intended to preserve the socioreligious and political stability of the country. It was, in fact, a strategic sign that Iran's allies were ready to keep working with the pro-Saudi alliance and also to preserve the peaceful *détente* in the elite political landscape that was created in 2016 with the installation of Aoun as head of state and Hariri as head of government.

Additionally, Saudi Arabia realized that they committed a deadly mistake in 2017 when they arrested Hariri on Saudi territory and forced him step down as prime minister and to decry Iran and Hezbollah,

damaging his legitimacy and revealing more clearly the transactional nature of their relationship. French President Emmanuel Macron intervened in the situation and negotiated Hariri's release, but the damage was already done. In 2018, Hariri and his allies lost the parliamentary elections, strengthening the electoral position of Hezbollah and other pro-Iranian parties. Macron's intervention was crucial to reestablish the 2016 national pact among the three major sect of the country, but the Saudis now find themselves in a state of flux, seeking to realign their circumstantial, instrumental relationships in order to counterbalance Iran's strong ideological ties The 2019-2020 popular demonstrations in the country, later dubbed the October Revolution, attacked the government's inability to provide sufficient services for the civilian population as well as its issues with corruption. The protests led Hariri to tender his resignation from the position of Prime Minister, setting the stage for Hassan Diab, with the support of Hezbollah and its allies, to replace him in this role. Although the October Revolution did not fundamentally alter the chessboard of Saudi and Iranian maneuvers, it did provide the Saudis with a chance to undermine a Hezbollah-dominated government, in part by mobilizing popular dissent and dissatisfaction.

In the last two years, Saudi Arabia has determined that neutralizing Lebanon – in effect, preventing it from becoming an Iranian ally – would be a victory as far as they are concerned. Their new strategic approach involves endorsing and sponsoring, both directly and indirectly, the continuation of the October revolution of 2019 against the existing political system – this strategic approach has been discussed by the Lebanese political analyst Salem Zahran[30]. Instead of relying on groups like Hariri's, the Saudis are now working to support popular movements against state corruption and foreign influence. Riyadh knows that its allies within the system have failed to counter Hezbollah during the first and second phase of their foreign policy evolution, but its statesmen may be able to achieve the Kingdom's goals by empowering popular dissent against all establishment political actors – especially representatives of foreign interference such as Hezbollah.

Furthermore, the decision-making for the execution of the Saudi tutelary model in both Lebanon and the region in general has become increasingly centralized under the leadership of Mohammed bin Salman, meaning that his individual determinations should be viewed as a significant variable in understanding the future course of action by Riyadh. Not only has the decision-making become more

[30] See http://www.salemzahran.com/home

centralized, it has also become more decisive and perhaps even less risk-averse, as evidenced by action such as the decision to intervene militarily in Yemen (Mabon 2023, 20). As Mabon (2023) argues:

> *In Saudi Arabia, much like Iran, foreign policy decision making is dominated by those in positions of power. The distribution of political portfolios across the Saudi state is carefully designed to consolidate power, meaning that those loyal to the King are often put in prominent positions, including in the Foreign and Defence Ministries. Whilst individuals matter, in the Kingdom the King remains the final arbiter of power, with decision-making highly centralised. Whilst previously, senior princes held fiefdoms of patronage, under the Salmans, this patronage has become highly centralised, reflecting the widespread dominance of the Saudi state by the Salmans.* (Mabon 2023, 21)

The Iranian model: ideological alignment

Akbarzadeh (2015, 89) argues that "*The 1980s and 1990s were formative years for the new regime in Iran. The rhetoric of anti-Americanism and revolutionary Islamism became engraved in Iran's foreign policy formulations. These two characteristics constitute untouchable pillars of the state's identity. Indeed, Iran's foreign policy in the twenty-first century continues to be affected—and some say entirely informed—by anti-Americanism and Islamism. Yet, Iran has also experienced two discernable episodes of deviation from the rhetoric of its revolutionary days. First, under the presidency of Mahmoud Khatami and, then, under the current presidency of Hassan Rouhani, Iran has toned down its anti- Americanism and its appeal to the Arab streets for revolutionary change*."

According to Akbarzadeh (2015, 97), "Iran's foreign policy could appear chaotic and contradictory. The consolidation of Iran's reorientation towards Russia under Ahmadinejad's presidency presented a marked departure from the revolutionary rhetoric of the Islamic regime in its early years." In the Iranian press, Ahmadenijad's foreign policy reorientation and his outreach to the member nations of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization became known as the "Look to the East."

Such efforts marked a strong current of Iranian diplomacy towards Russia, China and India in order to find potential allies who could counterbalance the threat posed to Tehran by western nations who were already heavily involved in the Middle East. Iran's allies in Lebanon started to reproduce the same discourse by looking to the East in order to offset the power of the West. In Hezbollah's view, keeping an eye on the East clearly means seeking out an alignment with the interests of Iran, Russia and China – the main rivals to Saudi Arabia, France and the United States in the region.

Iran's individual strategy in the region involves emphasizing points of ideological alignment that will encourage actors within Lebanon to cooperate with Iran regardless of resource provision. It is no question that Iran provides resources (often in the form of armaments) to those groups that it cooperates with in this scenario, but due to the underlying ideological alignment of interests, the activities of these groups will continue benefiting Iran's general strategy in the region even if resources are not provided.

Mabon and Wastnidge (2019) emphasize that religion plays a prominent role in domestic and foreign politics across the region. It serves as a source of legitimacy and a means of uniting people. However, it also can play a divisive role for social, political and economic relations. During the Lebanese civil war, local actors involved in the fighting sought external patrons to support their cause, while external actors sought local patrons in pursuit of their own agendas. The nature of these relationships differed across time and space, reflecting myriad, often competing agendas at play. Shared sectarian identities have provided increased opportunities for the cultivation of trans-state networks and relationships – the ongoing trend towards sectarianization of political life has increased this possibility as well.

This approach is possible in large part because of Iran's strong historical connections to the region as well as the relationships and credibility that they have built up over many years of involvement. It is overall much less concerned with the internal activities of actors within Lebanon and more focused on their external, regional actions – take, for instance, Hezbollah's involvement in Syria. The ultimate goal for this strategy is to expand Iranian power and influence in not only Lebanon, but the region as a whole. Amal Saad (2019) argues that Hezbollah's leadership believes that Lebanese self-determination and sovereignty will only be granted by acquiring deterrence power vis-à-vis Israel. To them, this path involves acting in several chessboards, such as the Syrian one, under Iran's tutelage (Saad 2019). It is easy to see how this dovetails quite effectively with the Iranian geopolitical objective of constructing its Axis of Resistance from their western border to the Mediterranean Sea.

Hezbollah's opponents in Lebanon, such as the Lebanese Forces, the Falange Party and the Future Party, view Iranian influence over Lebanon as an obstacle to national unity and to the progress of the Lebanese state, particularly vis-à-vis the western countries and the Gulf monarchies. Leaders within the pro-Saudi bloc, such as Samir Geagea, leader of the Lebanese Forces Party, argue that Lebanon is a hostage of what he calls the "double occupation model". In his view, Israel occupies the country through its southern borders while Hezbollah does so through its role in government, implementing the Iranian security agenda in Lebanon (Alarabya News 2019).

From the Saudi allies' perspective, the asymmetric power of Hezbollah within the country has two impacts. The first involves the breakdown of the existing governmental rules that had underlaid the Saudi strategy of gaining domestic political control, and the second is the creation of a "parallel state within the state" beyond the reach of Riyadh's influence. The fragmentation between those aligned with the western bloc and those aligned with Iran has a significant effect on Lebanese national defense strategy and to the country's foreign policy. Moreover, the confrontation also take place in matters such as the revision of electoral regulations as well as in the spectrum of structural economic reforms. The pro-Iranian coalition has made a trade-off deal by agreeing with an electoral law that preserves the pro- Saudi bloc's preferred electoral landscape in exchange for that bloc's not raising the question of demilitarizing Hezbollah (Mohseni e Kalout 2017; Kalout 2020). This compromise, in addition to ensuring internal peace, also aligns with Iran's preference for regional force projection capability over internal power dynamics.

This dynamic could also shed light on the processes by which Hezbollah has turned into a regional actor and the consequences this has for regional politics and Lebanese domestic politics alike. It produces new knowledge on how to think about and approach the subject of Lebanon in Middle East geopolitics – from a passive actor or neutral landscape that always becomes entangled and pulled into regional conflicts to an active actor and an active landscape. Furthermore, Iran's strategy in this theatre can shed light on similar processes that are occurring throughout the Middle East, from the rise of Ansarallah as a domestic Yemeni party to a regional actor able to deter and strike Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and possibly the rise of other non-state actors such as the Hashd al-Shaabi in Iraq. The operational-level maneuvers in each of these examples vary depending on the local context, but all of them point to a shared strategic framework that the Iranians are employing. Since 2006, Tehran's regional security doctrine has centred on empowering allied non-state actors to help them become more influential

and powerful than state actors in regional geopolitics (Saunders 2019).

Iran, with its majority Shi'a population, has been viewed as a threat by Arab rulers whose rivalry with the country has long dominated the security calculations of Middle Eastern states (Mabon 2018). This perception has played out in Lebanese society in the form of a narrative holding that Hezbollah will dominate Lebanese politics in order to shift the Lebanese sectarian power-sharing system to one mainly dominated by Shi'a groups. In this narrative, Hezbollah seeks to accomplish this by positioning pro-Iranian allies into top ranked positions in the state apparatus. This perception has further deepened preexisting sectarian cleavages and led the country towards religious tension that erupted into armed clashes in the streets of Beirut in 2008 between pro-Iranian and pro-Saudi groups. Furthermore, this narrative heightened the paralysis of domestic institutions by contributing to a serious vacuum of power – approximately two years without a president in office. Mutual concessions made by both blocs were necessary in order to bring an end to this state of political deadlock. Hariri and his supporters agreed to accept Aoun as President, and Aoun and his supporters agreed to accept Hariri as Prime Minister. Neither side was able to achieve their most desired outcome, but the division of power in Parliament and the pressure of public opinion necessitated such a compromise (Perry e Nakhoul 2016).

Lebanese politics and Hezbollah's emergence

When looking at the analysis of the foundation, trajectory and structure of an organization like Hezbollah, it is necessary to preliminarily observe the historical situation and the idiosyncrasies that guided the formation of Lebanon's social, religious and political framework. The impacts of the Cold War on the geopolitical framework of the Middle East and, in particular, its reflections on the fifteen years of the Lebanese civil war, comprise, in the end, a set of ordinations that make it possible to search the foundations of the group beyond its militaristic apparatus and of their nationalist cause.

Such instruments, however, do not in themselves explain the consolidation of Hezbollah as one of the most influential political forces in the Middle East. One of the most important things to keep in mind when decoding the evolution of the group is to understand that Hezbollah passed through four antagonistic phases linked to regional developments from its foundation to the present day. Some of the defining periods in the evolution of Hezbollah's regional force projection include the second

Israeli-Lebanese War in 2006 and Hezbollah's engagement in the Syrian war, starting in 2012, alongside the forces of President Bashar Al-Assad's regime.

However, the historical root and the catalyzing elements that drove the emergence of Hezbollah fundamentally derive from the combination of four essential factors: 1) marginalization of the Shiite population in the Lebanese socio-political context; 2) the abandonment of the south of the country by the Lebanese state apparatus, including with regard to the protection of the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity ; 3) the Iran-Iraq War between 1980 and 1988; 4) Israeli invasions of Lebanon in 1978 and 1982 known, respectively, as "Operation Litani " and "Operation Peace of Galilee" (Mohseni e Kalout 2017).

Furthermore, it should be noted that the sectarian nature of Lebanese politics that enabled the eventual ascendence of Hezbollah and groups like it is not a fully recent historical development. Although we are highlighting the recent history in order to better identify key factors in the evolution of the group's power and prominence, we should also acknowledge that:

> *Scholars writing on Lebanon have spent a great deal of time engaging with the implications of sect-based tensions and the broader tension between loyalties to sect or nation, but a few points require repetition. Whilst Ussama Makdisi is correct to assert that sectarianism is a neologism, born in the age of nationalism, serving as the antithesis of nationhood, the power of the sect as an identity signifier has long resonated across the Lebanese state, aiding in the ordering of all aspects of life.* (Mabon 2023, 155)

The Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the vacuum left by the Lebanese armed forces in defense of the country's territorial integrity fueled the emergence of a conglomerate of paramilitary forces called the "Lebanese nationalist resistance" that had been erected to repel Israel's military incursion. In the midst of this scenario, the seed that led to the constitution of Hezbollah that same year and its consequent official proclamation in 1985 would germinate (Fisk 2002).

Since its formation, Hezbollah has gone through four antagonistic political phases marked by profound distinctions. Depending on the analytical perspective, it is possible to say that the group oscillated through intermittent phases of ideological inflections and political inconsistencies. In this sense, the appropriate format that allows a description of the group's trajectory consists of stratifying its evolution in temporal periods and the indicative classification of the nature of each phase as follows:

1. Phase One (1982-1984)
2. Phase Two (1985-1991)
3. Phase Three (1992-2005)
4. Phase Four (2006-2022)

Phase One (1982-1984)

The first phase, marks the foundation of the group as an indigenous movement of nationalist resistance against foreign occupation. The group presented itself as an armed movement of a nationalist nature willing to defend the national territory, particularly the southern region of Lebanon, from repeated Israeli invasions.

In this first phase, Hezbollah's objective was detached from greater political or hegemonic aspirations both at the national and regional levels. From an armed perspective, it was a relatively rudimentary, ill-equipped organization that lacked a long-term strategy. Despite this, the movement was recognized, albeit to a limited extent, as a popular and legitimate organization.

Fundamentalist Phase (1985-1991)

The second phase define the political topology of the group. During this period turned to an extreme bias from the religious perspective and a refractory compass from the socio-political perspective. The group oscillated between oblique nationalist court speeches and constant flirtations with separatism, often referring to the possibility of southern Lebanon becoming independent from the rest of the country, establishing an Islamic Republic along the lines of Iran (Alagha 2006).

The impact of the Iranian Revolution and the course of the Iran-Iraq War influenced the organization's

political narrative significantly. Particularly at this stage, the rate of rejection of Hezbollah was high among the Lebanese public and, above all, among secular Shiite Muslims.

The eagerness to gain legitimacy and the desire to expand its power over the predominantly Shiite pockets resulted in two wars between Hezbollah[31] and the main Shiite political party at the time, the Amal Movement, which took place in 1988 and 1989. The Amal, established in 1974, was the *Alma Mater* of the top leaders who laid the foundation of Hezbollah in the 1980s.

It is important to note that during the 1980s, the relationship between Syria and Iran in the Lebanese political landscape had been affected by skepticism and diverging views about the role of Hezbollah in the country. According to Edward Wastnidge (2017, 151) 'There were some tensions between Iran and Syria during the 1980s due to Hezbollah's rise, checking the power of the Syrian-backed Shia faction Amal'. Damascus, for its part, was concerned about the Amal faction's loss of hegemony within the Shia base, but eventually came to a political armistice with Tehran.

Wastnidge (2017, 149) also argues that "the relationship between the Islamic Republic and the Assad dynasty has its roots in the sanctuary that Hafiz Assad provided to members of the Iranian opposition who were seeking the ouster of the shah during the 1970s. Although Assad had established limited relations with the Pahlavis, it was the Lebanese context that helped provide the initial impetus for relations between the Syrian regime and those who were to become key figures in post-revolutionary Iran. Lebanon has long provided a key link between the two countries, and, while the religious element has arguably not been a determining factor in the Iran-Syria alliance, it does play a significant role via the shared value that both place on Lebanon's Shii community."

In 1989, when peace negotiations between the various Lebanese political factions were initiated with the aim of imposing an end to the Civil War that devastated the country, Hezbollah was one of the only national forces that rejected the Taif Agreement[32] [34], adopted in October 1989 in Saudi Arabia. The Taif Agreement, in essence, has been operating since 1990 as a new *"*social contract*"* and a legal-political framework tailored to address the asymmetries that outlined the molds of sectarian

[31] The Amal Movement is the acronym of *Afwaj al-Muqawama al-Lubnaniya* (Lebanese Resistance Regiments). Additionally, the word "amal" means "hope" in Arabic. Amal was founded in 1974 by a religious and political leader, Imam Mussa Al-Sadr, who was seen as an important emerging voice of the Shiite muslim population in the 1960s and 70s.
[32] The Taif Accords were mediated by the Saudis in the city of Taif, forging a new governmental arrangement between the political factions in Lebanon. The accords are celebrated as a new act of national reconciliation.

democracy in Lebanon (Abdallah 2003). According to Bassel Salloukh (Salloukh e Verheij 2017; Salloukh 2019 the Taif agreement (1989) could be read in many different ways. It could be framed as a ceasefire agreement among the Lebanese militias after the civil war, as a document reorganizing the sharing of power and governance in Lebanon through an equal redistribution of offices among the major sects – but it also elevates sectarianism as the only mode of political organization and the only meaningful mode of political mobilization – where independent movements are not seen as legitimate outside their sects' ruling leaders. The preservation of this *Status Quo* allows Tehran and Riyadh to interfere constantly in the domestic politics through their mutual allies and sectarian linkages.

Phase Three (1992-2005)

The third phase, however, represents a shift in Hezbollah's structure, approach and *modus operandi*. In practice, a revolution was underway that intended for a re- foundation of the organization's structural pillars. Part of these reforms led to the removal of the party's general secretary, Sheik Subhi al-Tufayli, considered the main actor responsible for the intra - Shiite conflict with the Amal party and an obstacle to the Taif Agreement.

In addition, al- Tufayli and his political nucleus were responsible for the installation of the *phase two* and the divisionism implanted in the country's socio-political sphere, especially in the Shiite Bantustans in the south of the territory, in the Beqaa valley region and in the southern periphery of Beirut known as *Al-Dahyie*. The decision to expel al- Tufayli was formulated by the young party leadership, captained by Sayyed Abbas Al- Musawi[33] and Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah[34] in concert with Tehran and Damascus - who also saw in the separatist narrative brought up by al-Tufayli and his supporters as a dangerous and anachronistic risk. As a result of Syrian and Iranian influence on Hezbollah (and Lebanon in general), al-Tufayli was left with no option but to resign from his position.

This period was decisive for Hezbollah to direct its strategic priorities, particularly vis-à-vis its political aspiration to brand itself on the national political scene as a political party, as a nationalist resistance

[33] The Secretary-General of Hezbollah from 1991 to 1992, Al Mussawi was killed by Israeli forces in February of the latter year.

[34] The current Secretary-General of Hezbollah since 1992. Nasrallah is considered one of the most influential figures in Middle Eastern politics and the transformation of Hezbollah into social, political, and military camps is attributed largely to him.

movement[35] and as a social assistance entity. Therefore, at this stage, Hezbollah was compelled to carry out a profound reform to survive within Lebanese politics, recognizing the legitimacy of the Taif Agreement and adopting a more pragmatic stance on the domestic political scene.

Since rising to the post of secretary-general of the party in 1992, Nasrallah has emerged as a skilled articulator and expert speaker, captivating the masses and reinvigorating Hezbollah's identity. Political pragmatism and the change in the group's approach within Lebanese society were determining factors in the party's rapprochement with the country's various Christian and Muslim political segments. At this stage, Hezbollah crossed the bridge from sectarian political culture to nationalist political culture[36].

Additionally, Nasrallah's prudence and coolness in shaping the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East, as well as its geostrategic implications for the country and the region, placed him among the most influential political leaders in the Arab world (Sobelman 2009). Indeed, Nasrallah emerged as an Aristotelian political actor in every way: a strategist capable of deciphering in detail the rules of the regional political game. Nevertheless, despite Nasrallah's adroit political maneuvering, there was also a great deal of dissatisfaction among members of the political elite who aligned themselves with the March 14th coalition (*Ibid)*. Some of these political elites, particularly among the Sunni and Maronite segments of the population, were afraid that Nasrallah's rapid accumulation of power on the national stage would weaken their own leadership positions within their sects. With his increasing power, Nasrallah's ability to potentially oppose the economic interests of certain major groups grew significantly, compounding these concerns (Russell, Shehadi, e Horowitz 2005).

Phase Four (2006-2022)

Hezbollah's *fourth phase* began in the period following the Second Israeli-Lebanese War in 2006. In practically all senses, this new phase has become emblematic for Hezbollah, Lebanon and

[35] In this period, a large part of the Lebanese political spectrum recognized the group as a legitimate movement, and its legality in the regional playing field was not contested. This dynamic was altered somewhat by the 2006 conflict with Israel and the 2011 beginning of Hezbollah's participation in the Syrian Civil War.

[36] Balqazīz, ʻAbd Al-Ilāh., and Markaz Dirāsāt Al-Waḥdah Al-ʻArabīyah. Ḥizb Allāh Min Al-taḥrīr Ilá Al-radʻ, 1982-2006: Nuskhah Muwassaʻah Li-kitāb Al-Muqāwamah Wa-taḥrīr Janūb Lubnān. 1.ed. Bayrūt: Markaz Dirāsāt Al-Waḥdah Al-ʻArabīyah, 2006.

the Middle East. It was during this phase that Hezbollah cemented its status as one of the most militarily powerful groups in the region, even though it was technically a non-state actor.

The results of the July 2006 War, as the group calls it, sparked a series of internal and external disputes, deepening the political-sectarian divide in Lebanon and also triggering a series of schisms between Hezbollah and some Arab countries in the Persian Gulf. The group's military power came to be seen as an artifact of "regional deterrence" vis-à-vis the parameters that determine the distribution of regional power.

One of the striking features of this phase is the degree of power and influence that Hezbollah came to hold over the framework of collective security in the Middle East. In addition, the group's subsequent engagement in the Syrian Civil War alongside the armed forces of the regime – their combined forces fighting against the interests of Daesh and its supporters such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey according to Bashar al-Assad himself – increased Hezbollah's relevance at the regional level[37] [39]. The combination of these two theorems shows that the group is no longer a political appendage constrained by local politics or an actor with a restricted role in Lebanese territory. Hezbollah came to be seen as a key player in the gear of the pro-Iranian bloc called the ″Axis of Resistance″ and a geostrategic danger to regional powers antagonistic to the Russian-Syrian-Iranian strategic alignment in particular.

The group's rise to the level of regional actor changed the strategic framework of the Middle- Eastern geopolitical playing field, especially as a non-state actor began to impact the rules of the game among the main power holders in the region such as Israel, Egypt, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, further intensifying the asymmetries between the group and the Arab countries that oppose Iran.

In Amal Saad (2019) theoretical framework of the structure of Hezbollah within Lebanon, she states that Hizbullah's deployment of both 'hard' military power and 'soft' normative power throughout the region represents a new paradigm in international relations; it is a non-state actor which performs some of the central functions of the state, effectively making it a state within a non-state in the Lebanese context, while also fulfilling some of the strategic imperatives of a regional power'. These strategic imperatives involve not only operations within Lebanon, but also the projection of force beyond its borders, such as in the Syrian Civil War.

[37] Exclusive interview conducted with the President of the Syrian Arab Republic, Bashar al-Assad, with the American television NBC on the 13th of July, 2016. The site was accessed on 7/15/2016.

However, it is important to underline that the military and political cost of Hezbollah's participation in the Syrian conflict is substantial. From the group's perspective, engagement in the Syrian conflict would be not only a strategic involvement to assist a historical ally like the Bashar Al-Assad regime, but a matter of survival for Lebanon's organization and socio- religious cohesion.

On the other hand, in the post-2006 period, the party constantly emphasized that its military arsenal would not be used against Arabs and Muslims, but rather in the defense of Lebanon's territorial integrity against eventual confrontation with the Israeli Armed Forces (Phares 2008). In this case, its intervention in Syria overturns this premise and casts a shadow over what the group's strategy and narrative will look like in the post-Syrian conflict process.

The conversion of Hezbollah into a regional player and one of the strongholds of strategic influence in the region reveals that the organization has reached the threshold of influence capable of impacting not only the pillars of the collective security order, but also the outlines of the geostrategic architecture of the processes of peace and war in the Middle East, especially in the Levant. Saad (2019) explains some of the implications of this new position of power for Hezbollah, which, while proving costly in human and material terms, has increased its influence exponentially and given added credence to its threats. Its interoperability with other actors in the Resistance Axis and the interlinking of all battlefield arenas, has transformed its Resistance Army into the backbone of a much larger armed body which is ready and willing to deploy 'hundreds of thousands of resistance fighters from all around the Arab and Islamic world' to Hezbollah's defense in case of an Israeli attack, to borrow Nassrallah's words' (Phares 2008).

Finally, it is chapter to see that since the 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel, Beirut has become a key player in the intricate political landscape that mires the Arab and Muslim world. Furthermore, it occupies a position on the central stage of the geopolitical clash playing out between some of the main regional powers in the Middle East, especially the Iranians and the Saudis. The country's geostrategic location makes it into a region of vital importance for any power seeking to extend its control over the Levant.

Conclusions

The way forward for Lebanon

Throughout this study, the intricate rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has been explored in depth, particularly as it influences and modulates domestic politics in third-party countries such as Lebanon. This thesis has illuminated how this rivalry permeates the Lebanese political landscape, resulting in the establishment of external tutelage over dominant factions and influencing the country's internal policies. The manifestation of this rivalry varies significantly across the Middle East, shaped by complex interactions between regional dynamics and local political contexts. For instance, while direct confrontations occur in some arenas like Yemen, in Lebanon, the competition manifests differently, primarily through ideological and strategic alignments rather than violent engagements.

An enduring consequence of the Saudi-Iranian tutelary competition in Lebanon has been the erosion of the country's sovereignty. Over time, these tutelary models have deeply penetrated Lebanon's political and state structures, exerting influence over key decisions ranging from electoral processes to national security strategies. This study has highlighted how Lebanon, despite its formal independence under international law, remains subject to the strategic calculations and rivalries of external powers, which often supersede internal demands and hinder genuine political consensus.

The thesis has meticulously detailed the characteristics and evolution of the tutelage regimes imposed by Saudi Arabia and Iran, underscoring their distinct ideological underpinnings and operational methodologies within Lebanon. It has underscored Saudi Arabia's reliance on economic leverage and transactional relationships, contrasted with Iran's focus on ideological alignment and support for specific local factions such as Hezbollah. These contrasting approaches reflect broader regional strategies aimed at consolidating influence and countering rival hegemonic ambitions.

Moreover, this study has introduced the concept of tutelary democracy, wherein external powers intervene strategically to ensure outcomes favorable to their interests, thus perpetuating political paralysis and preventing genuine national reconciliation. Lebanon's experience illustrates how entrenched sectarian divisions, perpetuated by external patronage and internal political dynamics, hinder efforts towards democratic reform and national cohesion. The ongoing dominance of sectarian identities and external dependencies underscore Lebanon's enduring vulnerability to regional power struggles, complicating efforts to achieve true sovereignty and self-determination.

Thus, this framework invites further scholarly inquiry into the dynamics of regional power competition and its implications for state sovereignty, particularly in contexts where domestic politics are deeply intertwined with broader geopolitical ambitions and regional security considerations.

The clash between Saudi Arabia and Iran manifests in a range of different ways across the region as a consequence of the interaction of regional forces with local politics. Across the Middle East, religious, ethnic, social, communal, tribal and economic issues have provided opportunities for Saudi Arabia and Iran to exert influence across the region, albeit in myriad ways across different spaces. For example, the way the rivalry between the two states manifests in Yemen is dramatically different to Lebanon as a consequence of the interaction of geopolitical issues with local politics and identities. While in Yemen direct Saudi-Iranian confrontation was possible, in Lebanon the competition does not include direct violent confrontation between the two regional powers.

In Chapter 01 I argued that the interplay between enduring rivalries and socialization schemes can engender tutelary models of regional competition. Accordingly, I propose that foreign tutelary models happens when formal democratic institutions operate alongside a dominant foreign authority that retains overarching control and intervenes as necessary. This foreign authority can operate either through proxy actors or formal political processes to exert control or block rivals' initiatives.

In this sense, one of the main effects of this tutelary model competition exercised by Iran and Saudi Arabia over the past years within Lebanon is the pronounced decrease of the country's sovereignty. The long-term establishment of tutelary models of this type has effects that reach far and deep in sociopolitical power dynamics both inside and outside of the country. Practically all of Lebanon's political and state structures have been affected, and the longer the tutelary models stay in

place, the greater their penetration will be.

Throughout the five chapters, the work sought to detail the characteristics of the guardianship and tutelary regime exercised by each of the regional powers, its evolution over time and its multiple layers. Also, in this sense, the thesis sought to explore the difference between the ideological models proposed by potential tutelary models and adopted by each actor to maximizing their interests in the Lebanese context. I argue that the two tutelary models are products of unsuccessful socialization schemes produced by Saudi and Iran. Once they could not fully socialize Lebanon, the goal became to leave Lebanon paralyzed rather than allowing it to gravitate towards the rival. The tutelary models sought to control partial factions within the Lebanese domestic politics.

The fundamental result of this research indicates that only in religiously fragmented political systems, ideologically divided and socially porous, it is possible to verify a penetrability of external forces and the conditioning of the rules of the game. Although Lebanon is an independent country from the perspective of international law, the country's sovereignty is far from being efficient. That is, the country's sovereignty is primarily conditioned by the logic of rivalry and the interests of internal actors that, ultimately, override internal demands and largely regulate the electoral process, the formation of governments and State decisions concerning strategic issues such as regional security and peace.

As for the two major Islamic powers, I sought to explore the ideological model that each religious industrial complex operates. I also tried to demonstrate the confrontation between components of Pan-Islamism and Pan-Arabism as instruments that permeate the logic of social and political relations at the regional level and also in the Lebanese context. In the categorization of Pan-Islamism, I explored the existing subdivisions and also the difference between the different groups, in addition, of course, to how the regional potentials interact with the different groups and movements in the Middle East, in the Muslim world and especially in Lebanon.

I divided the thesis in five chapter. Chapter 01 discusses the literature on regional powers and regional rivalries. I reviewed the IR literature on regional powers to understand how rival regional powers seek supremacy through socializations schemes. I argued that one by-product of socialization schemes is tutelary power models. This is a novelty, in my view, on the literature on socialization and regional powers. The bulk of the literature on how regional powers socialize small powers is centered on the ideational and material mechanisms of socialization. There is a growing literature

on how small powers either withstand or question these same regional power socialization instruments However, the literature does not properly address how these socialization schemes can produce tutelary models when facing rival mechanisms within specific small powers. That is, the literature does not discuss, to my view, how competing socialization schemes for one single small powers can paralyze each other and produce different tutelary models that freeze the small power domestic politics. In this sense, more studies on how competing regional powers create or generate tutelary models ae necessary to understand how socialization schemes can be paralyzed despite the regional powers prowess and intentions to expand its regional clout.

In chapter 02, I discussed the history of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran. I portrayed the geostrategic objectives the Middle Eastern regional order, with a focus on the Lebanese political system.

A continuation of chapter 03, the chapter 04 discussed the direct implications of this rivalry and competition upon the evolution of the regional security architecture in the Middle East and the establishment of a new geopolitical order after 2006 Lebanese-Israeli War. In the case of Lebanon, it is commendable to emphasize that the academic literature has not sufficiently explored the interplay between regional and local politics. In this sense, I showed how this rivalry within Pan-Islamism after the 2006 war and later the Iranian nuclear program negotiations have changed drastically the Saudi and Iranian involvement in Lebanon. In this chapter I made clear that the situation Lebanon is crucially linked to both the Saudi and Iranian defense and security policies in their pursuit of the strategic goal of regional dominance.

Finally, chapter 05 is the most important one of this thesis. I explored the tutelary model that has been implemented by each state. O showed that while the Saudi model is verticalized and relies on financial sources, the Iranian approach is more horizontal and based on transnational cooperation without requiring financial trade-offs. Its focus is the ideological linkage between Iran and specific Lebanese elites.

In this chapter, I showed that Saudi Arabia has never organized a bloc of support based on ideology. Instead, it centers on the power of petrodollar coercive diplomacy, seeking to use forms of economic incentivizing to counterbalance Iran's presence. The relation among Riyadh and certain political groups in Lebanon tends to be transactional rather than based on an ideological framework, despite

Sunni's allegiances. They also view their role in the region as something of a guardian of Sunni Muslim empowerment. On the other hand, Iran's strategy involves emphasizing points of ideological alignment that seek to encourage actors within Lebanon to cooperate regardless of resource provision. Iran does provide resources (often in the form of armaments), but due to the underlying ideological alignment of interests, especially with Hezbollah, the activities of these groups continue benefiting Iran's general strategy in the region even if resources are not provided. Iran manages to more efficiently convince these Lebanese groups that they are central part of the struggle for regional supremacy.

I showed that a tutelary democracy is a regime which is apparently competitive, but in which some power apparatus retains the capacity to intervene to correct undesirable political results. I also showed that tutelary systems usually include a criterion of tutelary interference, which helps disentangle the influence of the tutelary power in the political system. In the case of Lebanon, the criterion for tutelary interference is represented by the control both Saudi Arabia and Iran exert over specific groups within Lebanon's political system, which leads to paralysis. Each tutelary model seeks to stop other from expanding power and influence. A political defeat in Lebanon, however small, means a defeat in the struggle for supremacy in the Middle East. I argue that not only the Ta'if Accords make political life in Lebanon almost impossible to find political solution and common grounds, but that constant foreign interference produces and enhances two competing tutelary models.

Lebanon's modern history is an example of how denominational factional rivalries are exploited and manipulated, even if unwittingly, obfuscating the real causes of the country's political asymmetries. Since the Ta'if Accords, Lebanese society has always been faced with a discussion about the need to adjust confessional representation. This discussion ends up being divided into three camps:

1) those who seek the establishment of a liberal democracy supported by a secular State and with an end to the sectarian distribution model of power;

2) those who advocate the preservation of Christian nationalism and, in particular, Maronite Christianity as a central and inseparable part of national identity and power-sharing; 3) those who postulate the realization of a new national sense so that, based on the new data, a new regime of consociated power-sharing can be carried out.

The fact is that these visions ultimately reveal the absence of a national consensus on resolving Lebanon's socio-political and socio-religious divisions. This explains, in a sense, the reasons why neither the internal political (and religious) forces have an interest in this revisionism (and prefer the status quo) nor the tutelary powers seek to change this format, which would gradually undermine their influence and would collapse its strategic interests in Lebanon. Lebanon's importance, whether in the Saudi foreign policy dimension or in the Iranian foreign policy dimension, are deeply interconnected with the regional security order of the Middle East, the strategic interests of both countries and the future of the geopolitical architecture of the region – something far beyond the mere commonplace problems of the country. The regime of tutelage exercised by the Saudis and Iranians has balanced over sixteen years between how to avoid the failure of the Ta'if agreement for Riyadh, which would be the biggest failure of Saudi foreign policy in the Middle East, and how to preserve the existence of resistance, a vital project for Iranian foreign policy.

In the post-civil war period, Rola El-Husseini emphasizes that Lebanese politics became a status reserved for the dominant economic elites and for the political dynasties of the traditional oligarchy, so that external tutelage became a vital component for the survival of this mechanism. In other words, these castes need external tutelage to have internal legitimacy just as the guardianship countries need these political castes to advance their interests. The entrenched and institutionalized sectarianism in sectarian identities, the promotion of clientelism on religious bases and the practice of systemic populism, are components and keep Lebanon hostage to the regime of external patronage. The rupture of the guardianship model is seen as a real impossibility as long as the country: 1) does not achieve full economic independence; 2) does not modulate a national defense strategy consensual among all the political forces in the country; 3) does not build a new desectarianized social contract; 4) does not to carry out the real and effective separation between the constituted powers of the State; and 5) and does not guarantee, finally, the absolute independence of the judiciary.

In the Lebanese case, there are two decision-making interfaces. The first interface deals with micro-political issues that have no direct relationship or are susceptible to the direct influence of regional powers. These themes have to do, for example, with issues related to health, education, urbanization and public transport. However, the so-called macro- political themes are all susceptible to the influence of the power game and the competition between the tutelary powers Saudi Arabia and Iran.

The regime of guardianship of Riyadh and Tehran over the different political forces has a structural impact, as demonstrated by the electoral process, the process of government formation, the presidential election, the country's defense strategy and foreign policy. Even access to energy in the country is mitigated by the tutelary forces.

At the tactical level, the parties or political forces under their wing are practically free to decide on the best course of action for their local political interests. However, at a strategic level, this decision-making power is directly oriented or is consensual with the tutelary power. So, in strategic matters, local actors do not have absolute and total independence in decision-making. Or even if they have this independence, decisions are communicated peremptorily for validation and reflection on their impact on the geopolitical architecture and on the impact of the interests of the tutelary powers.

In recent years, the emergence of the March 8th and March 14th political coalitions and the complete state of impasse that existed between them from 2014-2016 has demonstrated the immense degree of polarization within Lebanon. But although the country has long experienced serious (and often violent) sectarian-based political divides, these recent developments have indicated the extent to which these divides have become inextricably linked to the regional power struggle playing out between Tehran and Riyadh. Lebanon remains a heated geopolitical battleground, with its internal political struggles becoming increasingly subsumed within the strategic chessboard that pits the interests of the Saudi- Europe-US axis against their Russia-Syria-Iran aligned counterparts.

While the Iranians are aiming to expand their power so that they can play a strong role in determining the rules of the game and the power-based hierarchy in the region, the Saudis are aiming primarily to stop them from expanding their power. While the Iranians aim to empower Shia factions in Lebanon and other countries, the Saudis aim to empower Sunnis with the goal of offsetting the Shia axis of resistance and increasing the relative power of the US-Europe-Saudi axis instead. Furthermore, the Saudi strategy has not been working effectively in recent years, much has the deployment of their tutelary model in Lebanon has proved less successful overall than that of Iran. Even when they make progress in controlling the internal power structures of the Lebanese state, Riyadh has been unable to counteract the activities of Iran-aligned groups conducting external power projection. It remains to be seen if the Saudis will reorient their approach further in the future and achieve greater success, but the current trajectory of the region’s dynamics of power lies relatively in favor of the Iranian-led axis

of resistance.

This leaves us with some important questions to ask about Lebanon's situation, both in terms of the nation's future and our conceptual understanding of its political reality: Does national self-determination still matter as a concept for our understanding of Lebanon's government? And can we still consider Lebanon a sovereign state?

The framework presented in this thesis opens up numerous questions about the democratic character of the political system itself and about the country's independence and sovereignty. It opens up a consistent margin for sociological and political discussions on whether Lebanon can be an independent country, however, it is not fully sovereign, since the functioning of the political system. It also shows that the model of political interoperability in time and space cannot be decoupled from the demands of its external guardianship regents and its strategic priorities in the regional context.

Regional and specialized literature criticizes the functioning of the confessional arrangement in terms of its effective religious representation and state efficiency. However, the literature does not offer a clear and definitive path to the solution of Lebanese immobility. This solution may not be factually possible as long as Lebanon is not an absolutely sovereign state free from external guardianship models. Despite being an independent State under international law, Lebanon is not the master of its destiny in terms of matters concerning the power game between regional powers or what affects geopolitically the regional order - whether in its security dimension. or politics.

In conclusion, this thesis has not only elucidated the complexities of Saudi-Iranian rivalry and its impact on Lebanese politics but also raised fundamental questions about Lebanon's future as an independent and sovereign state. It challenges conventional narratives surrounding Lebanon's political immobility and calls for a reevaluation of international norms regarding sovereignty in contexts dominated by external tutelage. Moving forward, understanding and mitigating the effects of external interference will be essential for Lebanon to chart a course towards genuine autonomy and political stability.

Finally, as Mabon (2022) underlines in his research on Lebanon, by catalyzing identities around the religious element, representation is structured around the orientalist imaginary, reinforcing immutable and atavistic identities taken as endogenous, categories deconstructed by decolonial

literature. As a result of its prolonged institutionalization, the system reproduces itself in different spheres, in material and immaterial, temporal and spatial forms, mobilizing not only legally institutionalized structures and bodies, but also imaginary and uncontrollable narratives.

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