Sunni-Shi'i Relations and the Iran-Saudi Security Dynamic

In the years after the Arab Uprisings, the rivalry between Sunni and Shi'i has become increasing viewed as the source of all geopolitical uncertainty that has characterized the region. Underpinned by the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, this view suggests that religious identities have been mobilized as part of a broader theological struggle. In contrast, this chapter refutes such claims, instead, placing them within political and social contexts.

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Introduction

In the years following the Arab Uprisings, conflict across the Middle East has taken on an increasingly sectarian nature, seemingly pitting sunni against shi'i in a 21st Century reworking of a primordial struggle. As history has shown us there is nothing inherently violent about sectarian difference, yet as such identities become bearers of political meaning, differences have the capacity to become increasingly violent.[1] Speaking before the 9/11 attacks the then Saudi Ambassador to Washington, Prince Bandar bin Sultan Al Sa'ud stated that 'The time is not far off in the Middle East when it will be literally "God help the shi'a"! More than a billion sunni have simply had enough of them'[2].

This quote sharply illuminates a deep-seated thread in Saudi political thought which reveals much about themselves, and their relationships with others – principally the shi'a and how they – and others similarly – choose to use the sectarian as a tool for contemporary political ends. To understand the emergence of sectarian violence, we must then locate and separate meaning that is proscribed to these identities. But the labels mask huge regional and cultural variation in what it means to be shi'i (and sunni) and, also, what is perhaps actually happening. However, since we are considering Saudi Arabia and Iran, our focus is Wahhabism and Twelver Shi'ism, the belief systems that are dominant within the two states. Theology matters, without question; but a struggle for leadership, political pre-eminence is, we suggest, the principal driver for contest between Saudi Arabia and Iran and shapes contemporary sunni-shi'i "relations" in the Middle East, and also further east. Moreover, this position also frames a "Western" view of what is taking place which can confuse both understanding the issues from that perspective and also the nature of external relationships with regional players. As a consequence, it also shapes how Western actors engage with the region, on the basis of their (miss)perceptions.

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[1] Simon Mabon and Stephen Royle, *The Origins of ISIS: The Collapse of Order and Revolution in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017)

[2] Bandar was talking to the then Chief of MI6, Sir Richard Dearlove, quoted by Patrick Cockburn, T*he Age of Jihad; Islamic State and the Great war for the Middle East* (Verso, 2016), p. 350

Within the literature on Saudi-Iranian relations are three main approaches that seek to understand the rivalry. The first approach [3] suggests that the best way to characterise the rivalry is to frame it within debates about the balance of power within the Persian Gulf. Regional security then plays a prominent role in shaping the rivalry, with a Manichean view of regional order resulting in the emergence of serious tensions between the two. The second approach[4] suggests that religion cannot be ignored and that to understand the nature of the rivalry across the Gulf, one must understand how religious identities emerge and how sectarian divisions are constructed. The third approach suggests that we must combine questions about the distribution of power across the Middle East with a consideration of the spread of religious identities and the construction of sectarian divisions.[5] We locate ourselves in this third camp, stressing that both religion and security are of paramount importance but that we must understand how the issues interact with one another and their local context.

Given this, the importance of political context should not be understated. Since the events of 1979 – the revolution in Iran, the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, the uprisings in the Eastern Province, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the beginning of the Afghan wars, and the Camp David Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty – religion has become an increasingly important tool of the foreign policies of states across the Middle East. Religion plays a political role, serving to ensure the legitimacy of particular ruling élites, whilst also providing scope to interfere in the domestic events of other regional states. This chapter seeks to interrogate the role of religion within the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. In doing that, we must begin by providing a theological overview of the differences between sunna and shi'a and their role within the fabric of the Saudi Arabian and Iranian states. We then turn to a discussion of the theological tensions between the two before considering how religion is used as a tool of geopolitical interests. We end by considering how religion and geopolitics play out within the context of the Arab Uprisings and the fragmentation of state sovereignty across the Middle East.

The Religious and The Political

Prince Bandar's sense of an approaching crisis was prescient, yet not quite as conveniently binary as he had suggested, nor even as balanced in favour of the sunna as his rhetoric would imply. The battle lines are, of course, presently drawn as sharply between competing sunni narratives, as the conflicting responses from Gulf States to the rise of Islamic State (IS) and the temporary rule of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt under President Morsi bear witness. But with Iran in mind as Saudi King Salman

[3] Henner Furtig, *Iran's Rivalry with Saudi Arabia: Between the Gulf Wars* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 2006); and Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, *Iran-Saudi Arabia Relations and Regional Order* (London: Oxford University Press for IISS, 1996).

[4] See Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam will Shape the Future* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007)

[5] See Simon Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Soft Power Rivalry in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013)

surveys the contemporary Middle East, the Saudis see a ranging of shi'i influence[6] in the region - if not direct control from - that emanates for them from Tehran.

Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut, and Sana'a feature prominently within that perceived Saudi worldview of shi'i encroachment although, as said, it is simplistic for them and us simply to refer to the shi'a as if they were a neat homogenous bloc, disregarding ethnicity, tribalism and ultimately politics. They clearly are not, even aside from the obvious ethno-political distinctions of Arab and Persian, any more than Saudi Arabia's own population is a single coherent force; and the Al Sa'ud are torn between an internally attractive and comforting drive to try to make all Saudis unquestioningly adhere to the tenets of Wahhabism[7] on the one hand, and trying to navigate an external, more pluralist strategy that does acknowledge diversity. The implications of such issues are severe, not only for internal security but also for external factors contributing to the construction of regime security. Understanding the "Islamo-Liberal"[8] trend (an outward-facing line of thought opposing the hard-line conservative *salafi jihadis*) in modern Saudi Arabia is as relevant as unpicking that unhealthy support that Saudi Arabia has directly or indirectly[9] offered to the likes of IS, and examining its own emergence as a modern state delivered by Ibn Sa'ud's *ikhwan* in the early 20th century.

Similarly, in Iran, the tension between progressive social movement and political conservatism is a wider gap to manage than between the various conservatisms of Saudi Arabia; the shi'a have kept alive better than the sunna the concept of being able to adapt and change the message of the revelations to each generation. What is known as *ijtihad* – from the same Arabic word root as *jihad* - is the way in which the religious experts of a given generation may provide exegesis of the Qur'an. In the tradition of the sunna this process was completed several centuries ago, where the "gates of *ijtihad* were closed" and the four schools of sunni Islam were codified and handed down[10]. In the shi'i tradition they were kept wide open. There is a theological and political dynamic in the Iranian shi'i relationship with the world that is both advantageous (and challenging to the likes of Saudi Arabia and the "West") and self-threatening in that it allows for a greater and often constantly implicit test of the authority of the Council of Guardians within Iran. But Iranian identity is indeed wrapped tightly in the shi'i cloth, albeit with Persian nationalist trim. In Arabia, there is a tension that drives deep into how Saudi Arabia identifies itself that is more challenging than the simple piety of being the Guardian of the Two Holy Places.

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[6] What King 'Abdallah II of Jordan in 2016 called a "crescent of shi'a", reflecting a changing balance of power and influence across the region, particularly stemming from the location of Shi'i communities.

[7] The particularly conservative strain of sunni Islam preached initially by Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab following the *hanbali* school

[8] Stéphane Lacroix, 'Islamo-Liberal Politics in Saudi Arabia' in Paul Aarts & Gerd Nonneman (Eds.), *Saudi Arabia in the Balance; Political Economy, Society, Foreign Affairs* (Hurst & Co.: London, 2005), pp. 35 - 56

[9] Be that through the provision of financial or ideological support

[10] *hanafi, maliki, shafi'i and hanbali*

Geography plays its part, too. Most recently the Second Gulf War in 2003 resulted in a huge change in the local landscape of the Arab lands; for the first time the shi'a are in Government of an Arab country in Iraq. Saudi Arabia, already concerned at the charismatic attraction of Hizballah and Iran in the aftermath of the 2006 war in Lebanon and what it sees as a marginalising of Levantine Sunnism, is now trying to reassert a sunni hegemony, to devastating effect in Syria. Across the region, alliances have been formed that have largely taken place along sectarian lines. In Lebanon, Iraq, Bahrain, Syria and Yemen, the importance of sectarian identity largely secures the support of sectarian kin in the Gulf. Yet the case of Hamas proves to be an outlier. As a member of the so-called 'Axis of Resistance',[11] a group comprised of Iran, Syria and Hizballah, Hamas' rejection of Israel and the regional status quo sees geopolitical considerations trumping sectarian identities.

Theological Reflections

It is politics rather than theology or dogma that is the struggle; the division in Islam between sunna and shi'a is far more to do with legitimacy of leadership of the community than profound religious differences. After the Prophet's death in 632 there was argument about who should succeed the Prophet Muhammad and have authority over the Islamic community (*umma[12]*), and whether this succession should be based on kinship to Muhammad or on the worthiness of the successor, *khalifah* (Caliph) in his knowledge of the life of the Prophet and his teachings. Those who favoured Muhammad's descendants proposed his cousin and son-in-law, 'Ali; they were the "party of 'Ali" (*shi'at 'ali*). Others favoured the Prophet's closest male companion, Abu Bakr who duly became the first *khalifah* (Caliph). 'Ali got his turn then only after 'Umar and 'Uthman[13] and whilst the sunna regard all four Caliphs as legitimate, the shi'a begin their allegiance after Muhammad with 'Ali whom they style "Imam" (not Caliph).

The theological differences between the sunna and shi'a are actually negligible - but handily played upon by both sides and, frequently unwittingly, overplayed in turn by external observers. Both sunni and shi'i are orthodox, recognised parts of Islam. The shi'a are not some off-shoot of sunni Islam; the different paths have their origin in that argument about the succession following the death of the Prophet. The Qur'an and the hadith(s) are shared plinths, as are the Five Pillars of Islam: the *shahadah* (the professions of faith bearing witness to the one god, Allah and his Prophet, Muhammad); *salat* (prayer); *zakat* (the paying of alms); *sawm* (fasting in the month of Ramadhan); and *hajj* (pilgrimage to Makkah). Sunni myths about shi'i belief in different texts, straying from the "true path" and general *takfiri* slanders about the shi'a are manufactured. Doctrinal and religious self-definition and differentiation came after - was added to - an already well understood social construct based on group loyalty *('asabiya*). The vehement resistance to difference, dissent (*fitna*) "otherness" that pervades so much apparently religious disagreement today in the

[11] Rola El-Husseini, 'Hezbollah and the Axis of Refusal: Hamas, Iran and Syria', *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 5 (2010)

[12] The *umma* – those people who are the objects of a divine plan for salvation

[13] The Rashidun – the "Rightly Guided" – Caliphs

Saudi-Iranian context taps into this ancient core sense of identity. 'For posterity, history became overlaid with meta-history, so much so that the actual events were less important than the accretions of myth and sentiment surrounding them.'[14] But it is identity less than sectarianism, power less that rightness that drives the struggle. Perhaps the most important feature distinguishing shi'a from sunna since the end of the eighteenth century is the separation of religious and political authority and the consequent autonomy of the religious institutions from the state.

We should not ignore the power of religion within the Middle East. Sectarian difference is an integral part of the construction of identity politics and such identities – and their histories – have strong contemporary relevance when understanding the behaviour of a range of actors today. Take, for instance, the legacy of the Battle of Karbala, which occupies a central role within shi'i thought. The battle saw the deaths – martyrdom – of Hussein and 'Ali, establishing feelings of guilt, shared martyrdom and sacrifice, which are central to the shi'a identity today.[15] Moreover, the notion of acting in support of marginalized peoples, particularly the shi'a.

It is temptingly easy to point to modern Saudi Arabia and Iran and to define their actions in polarising, sectarian terms. Both, indeed, are "sectarian" in terms of their desire to mould their own population's identity – Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia, Twelver shi'ism in Iran. So they duly both use sectarianism in their projection of regional power. Nevertheless, it is striking how careful both parties are themselves not to ascribe sectarian divisiveness as a reason for their contest for regional influence; it is other commentators who pin that badge on things. Saudi Arabia and Iran are playing to regional domestic audiences (Arab and Persian) whose ears are better attuned to getting along with each other than most external observers would credit, and has historically been the case for centuries; ethnicity, history, shared space and tribal hinterlands provide a deeper foundation for many of the relationships being tested currently. And those same foreign observers who try to make sense exclusively by seeing dichotomies find a recognisable Cold War paradigm in presenting the Saudi-Iran "contest" in sectarian terms whether that fits or not locally or chronologically.

Islamic Narratives and Political Action

The power of Islamic narratives and the demographics of the region, where sunni often lived side by side with shi'i, meant that a number of Middle Eastern states were left open to external interference from states who were able to mobilize such narratives. Speaking to the *umma* involved transcending state borders, adding to security concerns.

The constitution of the newly formed Islamic Republic of Iran demonstrates this more universalist approach, stressing:

[14] Malise Ruthven, *Islam in the World* (Pelican Books, 1984), p. 181

[15] See, for instance, Simon Mabon, 'Hizballah, muqawimmah and the rejection of 'being thus'', *Religion, Politics and Ideology,* 18:1 (2017) and Nasr, Op Cit.

> the cultural, social, political, and economic institutions of Iranian society based on Islamic principles and norms, which represent an honest aspiration of the Islamic umma. This aspiration was exemplified by the nature of the great Islamic Revolution of Iran, and by the course of the Muslim people's struggle, from its beginning until victory, as reflected in the decisive and forceful calls raised by all segments of the populations.

In contrast, the constitution of Saudi Arabia is more focussed upon the exclusivity of a statehood with more tightly defined edges:

> The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a sovereign Arab Islamic state with Islam as its religion; God's Book and the Sunnah of His Prophet, God's prayers and peace be upon him, are its constitution.

1979 proved to be a seismic year within the Middle East, witnessing an Islamic revolution in Iran, the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Saudi Arabia and the rise to power of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. These events would dramatically alter the balance of power across the Gulf region and had serious implications for the construction of Middle Eastern security calculations. The events brought Islam – and Islamic difference – to the forefront of political calculations that got to the very heart of régimes across the region. In Saudi Arabia, the Al Sa'ud faced existential threats to their legitimacy both internally and externally, stemming from the concept that religion serves as a 'double – edged sword'. For the Al Sa'ud, religion served as a means of ensuring their political vitality and the centuries old alliance with the Wahhabis was instrumental in creating the third – and current – Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932. This concept demonstrates how religion (and other concepts) can serve two different roles, both legitimizing a régime by demonstrating Islamic credentials whilst also providing other actors with fertile ground to criticize rulers for not being Islamic enough.

In the years following the 1979 revolution in Iran, the region witnessed an instrumental use of Islam for political ends. Religious rhetoric and symbolism became a prominent feature of foreign policy behavior, serving to speak to domestic and foreign audiences, opening up a new front for rivalry between states. The establishment of an explicitly Islamic state only 200 kilometers from the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia would be a serious concern to many in Riyadh. Yet in the formative stages of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini would initially seek to demonstrate unity across the *umma*:

> There is no difference between Muslims who speak different languages, for instance the Arabs and the Persians. It is very probable that such problems have been created by those who do not wish the Muslim countries to be united [. . .] They create the issues of nationalism, of pan-Iranianism, pan-Turkism, and such isms, which are contrary to Islamic doctrines. Their plan is to destroy

Islam and Islamic philosophy.[16]

Things quickly changed however:

> We will export our experiences to the whole world and present the outcome of our struggles against tyrants to those who are struggling along the path of God, without expecting the slightest reward. The result of this exportation will certainly result in the blooming of the buds of victory and independence and in the implementation of Islamic teachings among the enslaved Nations.[17]

Such vitriolic rhetoric would become directed at the Al Sa'ud, which became a prime target for the régime in Iran.

> If we wanted to prove to the world that the Saudi Government, these vile and ungodly Saudis, are like daggers that have always pierced the heart of the Moslems from the back, we would not have been able to do it as well as has been demonstrated by these inept and spineless leaders of the Saudi Government.[18]

It was also the case that after the 1979 overthrow of the Shah in Iran, the return of Ayatallah Khomeini, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the shared resistance to that between the US, UK and Saudi Arabia that the "West" paid scant attention to Saudi/sunni support for sunni fundamentalism, being distracted by what appeared to be the more threatening version of "Islamic fundamentalism" taking shape in Tehran and spawning proxies in the likes of Hizballah in Lebanon. The shi'a then were globally seen as anti-American, hostage-taking and suicide bombing terrorists. Saudi Arabia was then seen - if it was considered in this way at all – as wanting both to control its own shi'a minority in the Eastern Province of the country and to stem Khomeini's challenge to the Islamic legitimacy of the Al Sa'ud and their Kingdom.

Despite the increasing prominence of Iran and its proxies in the years after the revolution, it was sunni militancy that began to grow to become the dominant concern globally from the early 1990s onwards even if it took time for this to be recognised. In the decades that followed, sectarian difference became co-opted by states and régimes seeking to perpetuate their national interest, using religion as a tool through which to achieve this. Set against the centuries of relatively constructive cohabitation experienced by the wider sunni and shi'i communities this is far more challenging for the likes of a Prince Bandar. It truly is fundamental. Whilst many suggest that the Middle East is experiencing its own '30 years war', akin to that experienced by Europe in the 17th century, such an approach is both Orientalist and suggestive of a linear

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[16] Lawrence Rubin, *Islam in the Balance: Ideational Threats in Arab Politics* (Stanford: Stanford Security Studies, 2014), p2

[17] Ibid., p7

[18] Ibid., p5

process of development that all states must go through. It is also factually inaccurate in so far as parallels can be accurate.[19]

From this, it appears that it is sunni militancy and Wahhabi activism, not shi'i revolutionary fervour, remains the greatest danger to those inside and outside the region not wholly devoted to the dogma of the likes of ISIS, because that sunni militancy is an uncritical, self-justifying, ideological (and cruelly violent) force that is not only anti-shi'i but also explicitly anti-anything other than itself (a hard part of the equation for conservative *salafis* in Saudi Arabia to swallow even if their *salafi jihadi* outliers welcome it). The use of an acerbic sectarian discourse since the so-called Arab Spring is a striking aspect of Saudi rhetoric empowering the *takfiri jihadis*.

But before examining the geopolitics and fragmentations in the region more (see below) let us return to the question of identity. Saudi Arabia and Iran are modern names for places. The degree to which their chosen ideological standpoint shapes their worldview has fuelled the aberration of bitter sectarian struggle. But from where did the two states emerge? And how has that process shaped the position of the current stage?

In Persia, Twelver shi'ism took form under the sixth Imam, Ja'far al-Sadeq (d.765). Ja'far specifically dissociated overarching religious authority from any political rule. Unlike the sunni mainstream, Twelver shi'ism has always refrained from giving the ruling powers any religious authority. The Safavids turned Persia from sunni to shi'i in the early 16th Century by military force. The Safavids were a millenarian sufi warrior order. The extremist fervour of the fighters for the early Safavid conquest was valuable in conquest but less so in subsequent state creation when it became a threat. The Safavids used Arab shi'a to inculcate "moderate" twelver shi'ism and created an emergent priestly rule (hierocracy). The Safavid legacy remains important, with the term used to negatively denote Iranian influence in Iraq.

In Arabia, in the Nejd desert of the 18th Century Muhammad ibn Sa'ud made his politico-religious pact with Muhammad ibn 'abd al-Wahhab, the ascetic revivalist, and propagated Wahhabism across the region. Subsequently defeated by forces from the Ottoman Empire in1818 the al Sa'ud lost power. Over the following century they struggled with a rival tribe until in 1902 'Abd al-'Aziz bin 'abd al-Rahman Al Sa'ud returned from British Kuwait and with a force of fanatically motivated Wahhabis (the *ikhwan*) conquered the Nejd, what is the modern day Eastern Province and took the Hejaz (and Makkah and Medinah). At which point, rather like the Persians, the Al Sa'ud then had to eliminate the *ikhwan* who had a too fundamental view of the overlap of politics and religion.

This tension about who controls which levers of power, and how, persists:

[19] Stemming from the nature of political organization across the region and the extent to which states have been established. The 30 years war was an attempt to attain control and establish autonomous areas. Across the Middle East, this set of conflicts is about influence and ultimately, geopolitics.

> Know that kingship and religion are twin brothers; there is no strength for one of them except through its companion, because religion is the foundation of kingship, and kingship the protector of religion. Kingship needs its foundation and religion its protector, as whatever lacks a protector perishes and whatever lacks a foundation is destroyed. What I fear most for you is the assault of the populace. Be attentive to the teaching of religion, and to its interpretation and understanding. You will be carried by the glory of kingship to disdain religion, its teaching, interpretation and comprehension. Then there will arise within religion leaders lying hidden among the lowly from the populace and the subjects and the bulk of the masses – those whom you have wronged, tyrannised, deprived and humiliated. '[20]

From this, it is clear that religion and politics are intertwined and that we cannot analyse one without the other. Moreover, although couched in religious terms, what we are dealing with is an attempt to shape the political environment within which ruling elites are located. This environment transcends the domestic and with the presence of sectarian kin across the Middle East also includes regional politics.

A Geopolitical Approach

To understand the nature of contemporary relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran one must return to the years before the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, to engage with factors that shaped the rivalry between the two. At this time, whilst there was a degree of mutual suspicion with occasionally fractious periods, the two were largely able to co-exist. The discovery of oil would play a transformative role within Middle Eastern states and also their foreign policies. In the case of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, oil provided a new dimension for tensions, whilst also boosting domestic capabilities. Such rapid societal changes – both demographic and technological – would have serious ramifications for the nature of domestic and foreign policy, providing financial means for regimes to pursue their agendas. At this time, the Shah of Iran realising wrote a letter to King Faisal, urging him to modernize the Kingdom: "Please, my brother, modernize. Open up your country. Make the schools mixed women and men. Let women wear miniskirts. Have discos. Be modern. Otherwise I cannot guarantee you will stay on your throne."[21]

It would also lead to growing international focus upon the region and, ultimately the penetration of the region by external powers. Such penetration can be traced to the turn of the century and the British presence in Persia, which was then furthered by the fallout from World War 1 and the establishment of the mandate system. This was largely centered on European states, however, and the rising importance of oil would

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[20] Quoted by Said Amir Arjomand in *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran* (OUP, 1988), p. 76, this is a pre-Islamic, Sasanian, tract preserved from an 8th Century Arabic translation, attributed to Ardashir, son of Babak, the King of Kings to his successors among the Persian kings

[21] http://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/04/world/a-nation-challenged-ally-s-future-us-pondering-saudis-vulnerability.html

solidify the importance of Gulf stability within international security calculations. Supporting this were US efforts to create an alliance between the Iranians and the Saudis as a means of ensuring the stability of the Gulf region. Of course, the revolution would prevent any chance of such an alliance gaining traction.

It was the establishment of a religious dimension that would prove to be the catalyst for the emergence of a deeply fractious rivalry across the Gulf. Whilst one should not reduce the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran to a religious competition – which overstresses the importance of religion and downplays the role of other factors – it is undeniable that religious competition added a new factor to the rivalry. It provided a new arena for competition and, given the importance of religion with the fabric of both states, religious rhetoric would take on existential importance.

In addition to such rhetoric, Khomeini created a new constitution which enshrined religion within the fabric of the state. This would be front and centre of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy. Article 3.16 would article how:

> the organization of the nation's foreign policy based on Islamic criteria, fraternal commitment to all Muslims, and unrestrained support for the impoverished people of the world.[22]

Perhaps the most powerful example of this support to the downtrodden of the Muslim world can be seen in Lebanon, where the shi'a community had long experienced marginalization and persecution. The establishment of Hizballah, the Party of God in 1982 demonstrated that the newly emboldened régime in Tehran was serious about providing support to marginalized groups across the region. In the years that followed, one can trace this support to include groups such as Hamas, in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain, who orchestrated a (failed) *coup d'état* against the Al Khalifa in 1982.[23]

At this point, the Gulf region was in the throes of what appeared to be a war of attrition between Iran and Iraq, with the latter attempting to prevent the proliferation of revolutionary ideas across the region. The demographic constitution of both states led to concerns in both capitals as to the loyalty of minority groups – be it sectarian or ethnic – amidst the suggestion that these may be 5th columns. Broader concern amongst sunni Arab states about Iranian expansionism ensured that Iraq had their support, however, only two years after the end of the war, their allegiance would move.

Amidst Iraq's expansionist aspirations, as seen in attempts to annex Kuwait, sunni Arab states, smaller in terms of demographics and military security yet with great

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[22] Iranian Constitution. *Article 3.16.* Available from: www.alaviandassociates.com/documents/constitution.pdf [Accessed: 24 August 2010].

[23] Hasan T. Alhasan, 'The Role of Iran in the failed coup of 1981: The IFLB in Bahrain', *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 65, No. 4 (2011)

financial might, turned elsewhere to ensure their security. Despite the offer of protection from a wealthy Saudi millionaire who would later fund the attacks of 9/11, King Fahd preferred the military might of the United States, who would act as security guarantor, maintaining an 'over the hill' presence.

In the following decade, a rapprochement with Iran shaped the nature of regional security, stemming in no small part from Saudi support to victims of a powerful earthquake in Iran that caused the deaths of 70,000 people. At this time, leaders of both states visited the other to build trust and facilitate this rapprochement, yet in 2001, world affairs shaped the regional security environment. Following the 9/11 attacks and the onset of the War on Terror, Saudi Arabia and Iran would find themselves on different sides, putting an end to this burgeoning friendship.

In his~~the~~ State of the Union speech in early 2002, US President George Bush posited Iran as a member of an 'axis of evil', alongside Iraq and North Korea. A year later, Operation Iraqi Freedom would lead to the toppling of Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist régime and the installation of the Coalition Provisional Authority, a transitional government that would aim to facilitate the implementation of a democratic political system within Iraq. In the following years, Iraq would become a zone of proxy competition as Saudi Arabia sought to counter the increasing influence of Iran within Iraq. The ascendancy of Nouri Al Maliki and the Da'wa party would serve Iranian interests well, as a number of members of this shi'a party had sought refuge in Iran during the Ba'ath era. Fearing this, Riyadh regularly sought to reduce Tehran's influence in Iraq whilst also urging the US to strike against the Iranian threat. One US diplomatic cable released by Wikileaks recalls:

> the King's frequent exhortations to the US to attack Iran and so put an end to its nuclear weapons program. "He told you to cut off the head of the snake," he recalled to the Chargé', adding that working with the US to roll back Iranian influence in Iraq is a strategic priority for the King and his government.[24]

The Kingdom's long-standing security relationship with the US would continue in Iraq, despite the rising anti-American sentiment at this time. Such a reliance would remain a source of antagonism across the Gulf, with Iran considering itself to be 'uniquely qualified' to ensure the security of the region. Tensions in Iraq would continue across the decade, as the struggle to preserve the sovereignty of the country would result in violence amongst a range of different actors.

The Arab Uprisings and Regional Fragmentation

In December 2010, Mohammad Bouazzizi, a Tunisian street vendor, self immolated. Frustrated at structural conditions across his country, coupled with a stagnating economy that provided few opportunities, Bouazzizi's act triggered a wave of protests

[24] 08RIYADH649_a SAUDI KING ABDULLAH AND SENIOR PRINCES ON SAUDI POLICY TOWARDS IRAQ (20.04.08) Available from: https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08RIYADH649_a.html

across the Arab world that challenged régime-society relations, opening up a number of violent schisms. The fragmentation of régime-society relations provoked people to turn elsewhere to ensure their basic needs, facilitating a return to sub-state identities of religion and tribe and raising important questions about the about the construction of identity across the Middle East.

The Arab Uprisings quickly spread across the region and a number of previously embedded autocratic rulers were deposed by popular veto. Other régimes managed to maintain control over their populations through a range of different strategies, including the manipulation of domestic populations. This fragmentation provided opportunities for a range of actors to improve their standing across the region, increasingly at the expense of the people of the Middle East as agency was marginalized by broader metanarratives. Such meta-narratives around sectarian identities denied local agency and created artificial schisms within societies that perpetuated broader geopolitical agendas.

Whilst there is nothing inherently violent in sectarian difference, when such identities take on a political dimension they have the capacity to become violent. Such political context provides a lens through which to engage with domestic affairs and concepts get their meaning when placed within particular milieu.[25] As such, amidst increasingly hostile and political framing about the nature of sectarian difference, violence became increasingly prominent part of difference.

We must, at this point, identify that there are a number of deeply problematic issues at play here. As noted at the start of our exploration, Western analysis of Middle Eastern affairs still suffers from the legacy of Orientalism, also is beset by a lack of nuance about theological difference and the nature of relationships between different groups. In particular, a great deal of analysis on the events of the Arab Uprisings suggested that Iran was guilty of manipulating the behavior of shi'a groups across the region. If one goes deeper, one sees that there are two serious problems with such a claim. First is a legacy of Arab-Persian tensions which has characterized the region for centuries and continues to do so.[26] Secondly, is that within the hierarchy of shi'a Islam, clerics in Najaf are seen by many to possess much greater legitimacy than their Iranian counterparts in Qom. Moreover, there are serious political differences between clerics in Najaf and Qom, with the former suggesting that clerics should remain outside politics whilst the latter advocates clerical involvement.

Despite this, lazy analysis suggests that a malevolent Iranian hand is behind unrest across the region. If one considers events in Syria, Yemen and Bahrain, following events in Iraq, one can see that societies were characterized by sectarian difference.

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[25] See: Frederic M. Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf: From the Iraq War to the Arab Uprisings* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2014); Lawrence Potter (ed) *Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf* (London: Hurst, 2014); and Toby Matthiessen *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the arab Spring that Wasn't* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013)

[26] See, for example, the dispute about the name of the Persian Gulf, leading to the cancellation of the Islamic Solidarity Games in 2010.

Within these contexts, régimes and external actors were able to frame events within particular ways as a means of ensuring their survival and the furthering of geopolitical interests. Such factors are also seen in the strategy that both apply to oil issues, particularly efforts by the Al Sa'ud to drive down prices in an attempt to detrimentally impact upon an Iranian economy less able to take the hit of low prices.

For reasons of brevity we are not able to offer an in depth exploration of the nature of proxy competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran in all of these cases. Instead, we offer a brief overview that demonstrates how religion has been used as a political tool to engender support to presumed sectarian kin across the region. Historical precedent coloured the views of many as to the extent of Iranian involvement with shi'a groups across the region. Indeed, in the aftermath of the protests, many régimes sought to frame events as a consequence of Iranian manipulation.

In Bahrain, Syria and Yemen, Iran provided support for shi'a groups, albeit in a range of different guises. In Bahrain, Iranian involvement in the protests is difficult to accurately ascertain, despite a number of allegations to the contrary.[27] Protest movements took to the streets of the island in early 2011, calling for better democratic processes, comprised of both sunna and shi'a. In the months that followed, the Al Khalifa régime framed events as part of a broader programme of Iranian intervention in, and manipulation of internal affairs. In addition, a Saudi-led Gulf Co-Operation Council Peninsular Shield Force was deployed to prevent the protesers from gaining too much ground. In the following years, the shi'a threat was securitized and structural processes were created and modified to restrict the capacity of shi'a agency to act. Similar issues arise in Yemen, where Houthi rebels directly challenge the government in Sana'a, which is supported by Saudi Arabia. Regular cross border incursions into the Kingdom forced Saudi Arabia to become directly involved in the conflict, participating in a bombing campaign to eradicate the Houthi threat, yet in doing so, contributing to a large scale humanitarian disaster.

The most devastating case, however, is in Syria, which is widely accepted to be the worst humanitarian crisis since World War II. In the six years since the uprisings, around 500,000 people have been killed whilst 11 million people have been displaced from their homes. The uprisings in Syria provided Saudi Arabia with a strong opportunity to weaken Iranian influence across the region and to break the so-called 'Axis of Resistance' between Iran, Syria, Hizballah and Hamas.[28] Sensing this threat, members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps became increasingly involved in the conflict and in doing so, ensured the survival of the Assad regime.

Following the escalation of the Syrian conflict, the Saudi Foreign Minister, Adel Al Jubeir, set out perceptions of the Iranian regime, exposing:

> its true [character], as expressed by [its] support for terror, and continue the

[27] See Matthiessen, Op. Cit., and 'Restricting the Space, Responding to Protest: The Case of Bahrain', *Global Discourse* with Sossie Kasbarrian. Vol .6 No.4, 2016.
[28] El Husseini, Op. Cit.

> policy of undermining the security and stability of the region's countries... By defending the actions of terrorists and justifying them, the Iranian régime becomes a partner to their crimes, and it bears full responsibility for its policy of incitement and escalation."[29]

Whilst the rise of Da'ish had occupied the minds of many, for Adel al Jubeir, Iran posed the most serious threat to regional stability. Indeed, for Jubeir, Iran was "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".[30]

Concluding Remarks

It is clear that religion matters, but we must not dismiss the importance of other aspects of identity that define both individuals and groups, but also feed back into religion. The construction – and performance – of identity is essential to understanding the rivalry, yet we should be careful not to frame identity in binary, zero-sum ways. Identity is a complex, malleable construct, which resides at the heart of contemporary politics and whilst not necessarily the driving factor of political action, it certainly underpins much of what occurs. Religion has a prominent role to play within such identities, along with the political behavior of actors who bear these identities.

Within these struggles for identity – and efforts to secure legitimacy within these struggles – we can locate broader regional struggles that harness religion as a means of achieving their political ends. Iran and Saudi Arabia are effectively engaged in a new Cold War; yet it is unlikely that either party would seek actually directly to engage militarily. This is largely "war" by proxy, soft-power projection but, in Yemen for example, the heat can rise sharply. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia have crossed the sectarian fault line in seeking regional allies, although we should be reminded that Iran has also allied itself with Hamas. Perhaps this is more of a strategic call for Iran than Saudi, as a 'purely sectarian frame locks them into a minority position in most countries'[31].

The ramifications of using religion as a means of securing legitimacy are felt across the region. Of course, religious tensions have political ramifications, and the onset of proxy conflicts across the Middle East is a consequence of the differences between Saudi Arabia and Iran, driven by the instrumentalised use of religion. We must not downplay the prominence of religion within the rivalry, yet we must not overstate it

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[29] H. Varulkar and E. Ezrahi, *Unprecedented Tension Between Saudi Arabia, Iran Following Execution Of Shi'ite Cleric Nimr Al Nimr*, (MEMRI, 04.01.16) Available at: https://www.memri.org/reports/unprecedented-tension-between-saudi-arabia-iran-following-execution-shiite-cleric-nimr-al

[30] Al-Jubeir, (2016).

[31] F. Gregory Gause, III, 'Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War', *Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper,* Number 11 (July 2015), p.6

either. Instead, we must remember that religion plays a prominent role within political rivalries, but only as a contributing factor. To reduce tensions in the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, we must be conscious of the role that religion plays in escalating tensions, but we must also address other factors that have a much stronger impact across the region. Until we do this, we risk misplacing the focus of our analysis with potentially dangerous consequences.