

**LEBANESE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY**

The Realism of Communitarians' Clash in the Middle East

By

Hiba Zafer Ramadan

A thesis

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in International Affairs

School of Arts and Sciences

April 2021

© 2021

Hiba Zafer Ramadan

All Rights Reserved

## THESIS APPROVAL FORM

Student Name: Hiba Ramadan I.D. #: 201201517

Thesis Title: The Realism of Communitarians' Clash in the Middle East

Program: International Affairs

Department: Social Sciences

School: Arts and Sciences

The undersigned certify that they have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis and approved it in Partial Fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of:


Master of Arts in the major of International Affairs

Thesis Advisor's Name: Dr. Imad Salamey

Signature:  Date: 27 / 04 / 2021  
Day Month Year

Committee Member's Name: Dr. Sami Baroudi

Signature:  Date: 27 / 04 / 2021  
Day Month Year

Committee Member's Name: Dr. Josehp Helou 

Signature:  Date: 27 / 04 / 2021  
Day Month Year

## THESIS COPYRIGHT RELEASE FORM

### LEBANESE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY NON-EXCLUSIVE DISTRIBUTION LICENSE

By signing and submitting this license, you (the author(s) or copyright owner) grants the Lebanese American University (LAU) the non-exclusive right to reproduce, translate (as defined below), and/or distribute your submission (including the abstract) worldwide in print and electronic formats and in any medium, including but not limited to audio or video. You agree that LAU may, without changing the content, translate the submission to any medium or format for the purpose of preservation. You also agree that LAU may keep more than one copy of this submission for purposes of security, backup and preservation. You represent that the submission is your original work, and that you have the right to grant the rights contained in this license. You also represent that your submission does not, to the best of your knowledge, infringe upon anyone's copyright. If the submission contains material for which you do not hold copyright, you represent that you have obtained the unrestricted permission of the copyright owner to grant LAU the rights required by this license, and that such third-party owned material is clearly identified and acknowledged within the text or content of the submission. IF THE SUBMISSION IS BASED UPON WORK THAT HAS BEEN SPONSORED OR SUPPORTED BY AN AGENCY OR ORGANIZATION OTHER THAN LAU, YOU REPRESENT THAT YOU HAVE FULFILLED ANY RIGHT OF REVIEW OR OTHER OBLIGATIONS REQUIRED BY SUCH CONTRACT OR AGREEMENT. LAU will clearly identify your name(s) as the author(s) or owner(s) of the submission, and will not make any alteration, other than as allowed by this license, to your submission.

Name: Hiba Ramadan

Signature: 

Date: 07/02/2021

## PLAGIARISM POLICY COMPLIANCE STATEMENT

I certify that:

1. I have read and understood LAU's Plagiarism Policy.
2. I understand that failure to comply with this Policy can lead to academic and disciplinary actions against me.
3. This work is substantially my own, and to the extent that any part of this work is not my own I have indicated that by acknowledging its sources.

Name: Hiba Ramadan

Signature: 

Date: 07/02/2021

Dedication Page

To my loving parents

## **Acknowledgement**

I would first like to thank my thesis advisor Dr. Imad Salamey of the Department of Social Sciences at the Lebanese American University. The door to Dr. Salamey's office was always open whenever I ran into a trouble spot or had a question about my research or writing. He consistently allowed this thesis to be my own work but steered me in the right direction whenever he thought I needed it.

I would also like to thank the experts present on the Thesis Committee: Dr. Sami Baruodi and Dr. Joseph Helou for their thorough feedback and guidance.

Finally, I must express my deep appreciation to my parents for providing me with ongoing support and constant inspiration throughout my years of study and throughout the process of exploring and conducting this research. This accomplishment would not have been possible without them. Thank you

# The Realism of Communitarians' Clash in the Middle East

Hiba Zafer Ramadan

## **Abstract**

This study examines the 'clash of communitarians' thesis in the Middle East and North Africa. At the same time, it explores political dynamics of nation-states' foreign policy outlooks. This is done by focusing on the post-Arab Spring's policy orientations of three Sunni-majority regional powers (Egypt, KSA, Turkey) toward regional conflicts in three MENA states: Syria, Libya, and Iraq. It first analyzes foreign policy positions that are driven by the 'clash of communitarians' assumptions, and within the framework of Sunni-Shia regional sectarian struggle. Then, it compares these 'inter-communitarian clash' propositions (Sunni-Shia) with competing 'intra-communitarian clash' (Sunni-Sunni) in regional political struggle over contested regional spheres of influence. Preliminary findings point to the fact the intra-communitarian struggle is often more vicious compared to other forms of disputes. In addition, regional states' foreign policy interests remain predominantly national rather than communitarian. This is evident in strict communitarianism failing to acknowledge the current intra-Sunni states' foreign policy divisions. The finding asserts that foreign policy is largely embedded in Realism's assumptions of national interests and regional balance of power. Communitarianism and nationalism need to be synthesized in analyzing contemporary foreign policy outlooks.

**Keywords** – *Middle East and North Africa, Sunni, Shia, Power Struggle, Communitarianism, Nationalism, Balance of Power, Identity Politics.*



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>I - Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Problem Statement .....	2
1.2 Statement of Purpose .....	3
1.3 Research Question, Objectives and Hypothesis .....	3
1.4 Methodology .....	4
1.5 Summary .....	5
<b>II - Sectarianism and International Theory.....</b>	<b>7</b>
2.1 IR Theories and Politics.....	7
2.2 Religion Vs. Politics .....	9
2.3 Are proxies linked to communitarian or state interests?.....	11
2.4 The None-State Actors.....	15
2.5 Summary .....	18
<b>III- Huntingtonianism and Sectarian Politics in the MENA region.....</b>	<b>20</b>
3.1 The irrelevance of the “Clash of Civilization” .....	20
3.2 Regional Order and the Oil Dilemma .....	22
<b>IV- A Comparative Review of Intra and Inter Sectarian Clashes in MENA.....</b>	<b>33</b>
4.1 Mapping Sunnism in the Arab World.....	33
4.2 Geopolitics: The new trend.....	36
4.3 Geopolitics and the Arab Spring.....	39
<b>V- Synthesizing Communitarian and State Power Struggle .....</b>	<b>44</b>
5.1 Survival through Sectarianism .....	44
5.2 The Intra-Sunni Conflict .....	48
5.3 Change in the regional dynamics .....	50
5.4 Study Limitations.....	52
<b>VI - Conclusion.....</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>57</b>

## **List of Figures**

Figure 1: Sectarian Balance of Power

Figure 2: Oil Production, 2019

Figure 3: The Oil Corridor

Figure 4: The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index

Figure 5: Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

Figure 6: Balance of Power – Saudi Arabia/UAE vs. Turkey/Qatar

## **List of Acronyms**

<b>ISIS</b>	<b>Islamic State in Iraq and Syria</b>
<b>KSA</b>	<b>Kingdom of Saudi Arabia</b>
<b>MB</b>	<b>Muslim Brotherhood</b>
<b>MBS</b>	<b>Mohammad bin Salman</b>
<b>ME</b>	<b>Middle East</b>
<b>MENA</b>	<b>Middle East and North Africa</b>
<b>US</b>	<b>United States</b>
<b>VNSAs</b>	<b>Violent Non-State Actors</b>
<b>VE</b>	<b>Violent Extremism</b>
<b>PIJ</b>	<b>Palestinian Islamic Jihad</b>
<b>AAMB</b>	<b>Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade</b>
<b>AQ</b>	<b>Al Qaeda</b>
<b>KH</b>	<b>Kataeb Hizbollah</b>

# Chapter One

## Introduction

The current political rivalry in the Middle East can better be understood as a rivalry between different states and non-state actors fighting a cold war around two hegemonic regional powers: Saudi Arabia and Iran. It can be characterized as a cold war since the main rivals are not in direct confrontation on a military level. Nonetheless, their struggle for regional control is being waged in neighboring weak states. Gause (2014) observed, “the military and political strength of parties to civil wars, and the contributions that outsiders can make to that strength, is more important than the military balance between Riyadh and Tehran”. However, this cold war, though it is limited to Riyadh and Tehran, it surpasses these two powers to encompass other major opponents. Saudi Arabia is not only dealing with a Sunni-Shia struggle, but also with an ongoing intra-Sunni contestation revolving around the Muslim Brothers (MB) and their opponents. This protracted contention between Saudi Arabia and MB’s brands of Sunnism is responsible for deepening tensions between Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar. Of course, inter-sectarian struggle is among one of the major drivers of polarization in today’s new Middle Eastern cold war. Yet, intra-sectarianism is another and equally important factor in regional struggle. It is surely a conflict to establish a new regional balance of power. A confrontation that can only be understood by “appreciating the links between domestic conflicts, transnational affinities, and regional state ambitions” (Gause, 2014). To determine major fault lines of regional cold war, weak states are typically analyzed as a battlefield theater where major powers fight their wars through proxies. Alliance formation between states is typically formed around political and ideological commonalities. Those international relations theories inform us that democracies are more likely to form alliances among each other rather than with ideological opposites. In the Middle East, hypothetical assumptions assert an exceptionalism where lacking democratic ideals elevates identity as a central pull for coalition formations, often sectarian in orientations.

# Sectarian Balance of Power

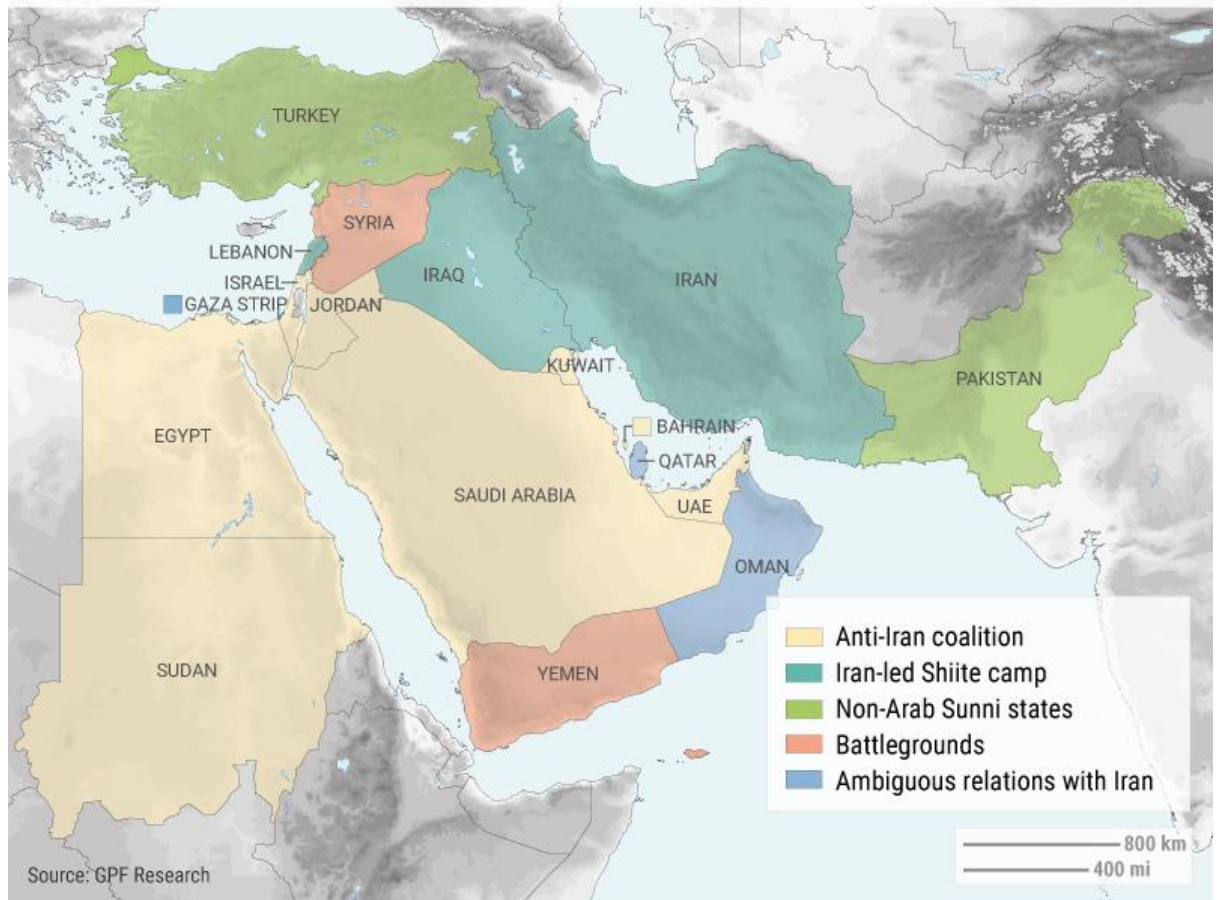


Figure 1: [Sectarian Balance of Power](#)

## 1.1 Problem Statement

Ideology has been internationally recognized as a biproduct of a “different sectarian struggle” in the MENA region (Arab, Jewish, Muslim, Christian, Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish). In most contemporary interpretations, the prime focus has assumed that ideological power struggle has been mainly shaped by Sunni and Shia rivalry. Sectarian ideology has been the main “weapon” utilized by the regional powers to secure mass subordination in their respective peripheries, typically weak states (Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, Syria, and Libya). However, even though sectarian ideology appears to be among the main sources of mobilization, alliances, and conflicts, it is often contested whether such ideological drivers are shaped by communal identities or state interests. Increasing Sunni-Sunni conflicts point to the fact that mobilizations and ideological appeals are formulated primarily to serve state and ruling class interests rather than by strict sectarian identification. Thus, the question whether the conflict in

the MENA region is identity or state driven, is critical for international relations to accurately determine the dynamic of the conflict and its potential evolution. To respond to this question, this study seeks to re-examine identity-conflict assumptions as Shia-Sunni struggle, before closely deconstructing such assumptions in demonstrating the prevalence of intra-sectarian Sunni struggle. Hence, establishing an alternative narrative of regional power struggle dictated by states' political economic interests rather than that of identity or communal solidarity.

## **1.2 Statement of Purpose**

This thesis will analyze the intra-Sunni conflict that is taking place in the Middle East region. The thesis aims to shed light on the Sunni-Sunni conflict and emphasize its importance in relevance to the Sunni-Shia rivalry. The purpose of focusing on the Sunni conflict in the region creates a new realm regarding the power struggle in the Middle East and what fuels it. Generally, many scholars and analysts believe that exerting an ideology and protecting the identity of a specific sect is the main motive behind the ongoing conflicts and wars. Nonetheless, although the Saudi Iranian proxy wars are evident of such a claim, they short fall from explaining other regional conflict drivers. It may very well be that inter, and intra-sectarian ideologies are nothing more than tools to cover up the political motives of the different Middle East rivals. This has been evident by the sanctions imposed on Qatar by Saudi Arabia and UAE. Moreover, the opposition between Saudi Arabia and Turkey in Syria, and between Egypt and Turkey in Libya, asserts this claim as well. Of course, we should not forget to mention the Saudi alliance with the coup d'état against Morsi in Egypt when he was still in power. These conflicts are currently shaping the region's new map. The different Sunni proxies are in an ongoing cold war over who will be the leader of the Sunni Muslim World. This eventually implies that the main struggle is power and not religion.

## **1.3 Research Question, Objectives and Hypothesis**

The thesis ultimately aims to answer the following research question: What are the drivers of the intra-Sunni struggle? Is it an intra-communitarian conflict or a state-based power struggle, or both?

This thesis will be investigating the intra-Sunni rivalry in the Middle East through three fundamental objectives:

- First: Demonstrating how states manipulate (subjects) religious groups (objects) into pursuing their own state-interests
- Second: Identifying the main reasons behind intra-Sunni rivalry
- Third: Showcasing that constructivism/communitarianism solely fails to provide a concrete analysis about the regional order

In the end, the hypothesis that this thesis aims to advocate is that ideological assertions are not the main reason behind the ongoing intra-Sunni conflict. Nonetheless, I will be exploring, how both paradigms, state interests and communitarianism, intersect. The thesis does not aim to refute the notion of the communitocracy theory. This research is examining whether the drivers of the intra-Sunni struggle have communitarian affiliations or driven by the interest of regional power, taking into consideration that both paradigms interconnect in most cases. As such, this thesis, while it regards communitarianism as an essential element in the game of foreign policy, it is not the main driver, but rather it complements the notion of balance of power.

## **1.4 Methodology**

### **Study procedure**

The research will be based on examining country case studies in the current regional dynamics that observes post-Arab Spring policy orientation of three Sunni regional powers (Egypt, KSA, Turkey) on key political events (Syria, Libya, and Iraq). The study will examine their convergence and divergence on key foreign policy issues (or support to proxies) while probing for their respective communitarian orientations. The study will eventually formulate a coherent interpretation of each state's policy orientation as being communitarian or state led. A conclusion can ultimately be reached to assert whether regional politics is driven by communitarian, state interest or both.

### **Chapter Breakdown**

In summary, after introducing the thesis and indicating the hypotheses, research question, objectives and methodology in Chapter I, the thesis will begin by analyzing sectarianism through the lens of International theory (Chapter II). For this reason, the literature review provides an overview on the different IR theories and their aspects on politics. Ultimately, discussing the difference as well between religion and

politics, and how they intertwine in various aspects. This will lead to a discussion revolving around whether proxies are linked to communitarian or state interests. Moreover, since one of the objectives of the study is to demonstrate how states manipulate (subjects) religious groups (objects) into pursuing their own state-interests, which falls under the idea of using religion (ideology) to achieve their greater goals, the research will include observations on some none-state actors. As for Chapter III, it will focus on Huntingtonianism and sectarian politics in the MENA region. This chapter will begin with a debate around the irrelevance of the “Clash of Civilization” in determining the essence of the intra-Sunni conflict. Accordingly, I will add a general overview, afterwards, about how the oil dilemma controls the regional order. This will then feed into the Middle Eastern conflict. Throughout the literature around the conflict in the Middle East, we will be analyzing how individuals tend to be more sensible and agile towards their religion, which will then provide another space to dig deeper into the concept of communitarianism. I will then go into the case-specific section of the research, with all the needed elements of the thesis analyzed. Under this part, we have Chapter IV which will provide a comparative review of intra and inter sectarian clashes in MENA. This will include a synopsis of Sunnism in the Arab world. I will then start compiling all what have been discussed in the first parts of the literature review into one analysis that revolves around geopolitics as the new trend and its relationship with the Arab Spring. This will assert the hypothesis by shedding the light on the role of geopolitics and the dynamics after the Arab Spring in shaping the region today. Finally, the last chapter (Chapter V), will end the thesis by synthesizing communitarian and state power struggle by exploring how states are “surviving” through sectarianism, which feeds into the intra-Sunni conflict, and eventually exploring the change in the regional dynamics.

## **1.5 Summary**

The first chapters of the dissertation will consist of an analysis on the Sunni-Shia struggle and how it developed to constitute what we know today as the intra-Sunni conflict. The thesis will begin with a general overview of the drivers of the regional struggle, which is dominated by the “Oil Dilemma”. The thesis will then test the hypothesis provided through looking at the Sunni-Sunni struggle and trying to see if it contradicts Huntington’s proposition. The analysis will follow with a discussion



about the communitarianism paradigm. The thesis will indicate how people mobilize around their sectarian groups and affiliation identity wise, especially in the Middle East. This paradigm builds on Huntington's perspective. However, the thesis will also suggest how the notion of communitarianism is in fact not really alien to the intra-sectarianism struggle. This is because, communitarianism also suggests the formation of "special" groups and communities within the same sect as well. The thesis will affirm how communitarianism is not essentially a sectarian modality, but it could be established along different intra-sectarian groups. The study will include different point of views from various scholars who either support the hypothesis provided or refute it. The thesis will examine whether the drivers of the intra-Sunni communitarian power struggle is based-on communitarian affiliation or driven by the interest of regional powers, ultimately conforming to foreign policy, while ensuring that communitarianism compliments this paradigm. To conclude why and how we are facing an intra-Sunni struggle, the research will dig deeper into the origins of the different Sunni "communities" through mapping Sunnism in the Arab world. Eventually, the methodology will establish the credibility of the hypothesis proposed through examining post-Arab Spring policy orientation of three Sunni regional powers (Egypt, KSA, Turkey) on key political events (Syria, Libya, and Iraq). In the end, the findings of the study will consist of the present literature and the analysis that will be provided, as per the proposed methodology, to be able to form a concrete conclusion.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Sectarianism and International Theory**

The thesis asserts that community-building efforts across borders are motivated by traditional realist concerns about security, rather than on ambitious beliefs that have to do with basic universal values. States will realize that they will be unable to meet basic needs without greater collaboration, which will lead to the formation of sustainable, cross-border organizations. Moreover, common norms arise through coordination in the face of global challenges, rather than through the establishment of political systems or the exercise of hegemony. As such, this thesis, although it regards communitarianism as an essential element in the game of foreign policy, it indicates that it is not the main driver, but rather it complements the notion of balance of power.

#### **2.1 IR Theories and Politics**

The discourse between liberalism and communitarianism is particularly important for international relations, which deals with the interactions of diverse communities around the world, especially modern political communities known as nation states. Individualism is emphasized by liberals as opposed to collectivism; self-interest is emphasized as opposed to the common good; government is limited to defending individual rights and freedoms as opposed to a strong state; and the role of the market and buyer choice rather than state guidelines in the delivery of goods is emphasized by liberals as well. Liberals also favor a state that is impartial in the face of divergent individual viewpoints. Individualism and self-interest, according to communitarians, are destructive to social life, society, social stability, and equality. Communitarians believe that there is a greater common good or community interest than individual goods or priorities, and that the nation, rather than staying neutral, should promote this common good. The goal of political philosophy for communitarians is to make the community's shared values and meanings explicit, not to maintain the validity of non-existent objective or neutral universal laws. As a result, rather than evidence, political philosophy is concerned with analysis.

As Amitai Etzioni (2004) indicated in the introduction in “From Empire to Community: A New Approach to International Relations”, “A communitarian approach to international relations concerns itself with the question of whether a group of nations can share a robust common purpose and interest . . . without forming a community”. Traditional realism has no answer to this question; it implies that state actors will weigh in on whether the formation of an international society is in their strategic interests (Gvosdev, 2005). Communitarians, predictably, would say no, arguing that the pursuit of common interests should lead nations to establish a global nation over time, just as the modern nation-state was forged from smaller political entities.

Gvosdev (2005) suggested to consider the noticeable impact of the current stage of development of scientific-technological revolutions: Internet, communication satellites, and high-bandwidth fiberoptic cable; fast, low-cost international air travel, and so on. These have managed to bring physically remote areas closer together for a variety of purposes even today. This "mobile-distance" will become even more important as these cultural and industrial trends accelerate. At a distance, cooperation in all areas—economic, educational, and political—have become generally easier. However, now that the old natural trade restrictions and communication—mountain ranges, vast oceans, and other natural barriers—no longer exist, the next most substantial set of barriers—differences in language, customs, legal systems, religions, and other significant values, especially trust—remain. As such, Etzioni (2004) suggested that the first challenge confronting communitarians is to answer the following question “How, if at all, might a global community come about?”. One answer is that a realism-based communitarian foreign policy strategy—a regulatory and rational strategy to international affairs based on tangible and achievable goals—is more likely to accomplish this goal than an idealistic approach. The focus of realism on trying to make the world's nations—particularly the great powers—stakeholders in a consistent and reliable international order collides with the communitarian desire to build a viable global architecture. The defense of national sovereignty is the primary national interest for some traditional realists (Gvosdev, 2005). As a result, they would be horrified by the emergence of a global community. However, it is not self-evident that those who identify as realists must necessarily oppose the communitarian view. Indeed, the resurgence of a global governance system that efficiently deals with national security, like terrorism and pandemics,

while preserving many of its member states' sovereign privileges could be considered a stunningly realist outcome. As such, the point referring to the engagement in a larger global community that serves the strategic interests, is a method that is completely acceptable by realist criteria.

## **2.2 Religion Vs. Politics**

In order to be able to analyze how religions/sects are used as tools in the wider game of politics, we need to indicate first the differences and similarities between politics and religions. When seeking to find the common traits between religion and politics, a fundamental trait is that their main goal is to obtain political power and use it to achieve their objectives. However, the ways and strategies towards achieving their aims differ. Religion uses ideologies and sensitive topics to create a sense of belonging and seize the needed power. When it comes to politics, it is either through diplomacy or dictatorship.

If we want to discuss the power struggle between religion and politics, these two try to undermine each other rather than colliding their forces. For example, when religion is in power, the common attitude is that this power has been given from the divine and the main goal is to fulfill the divine's message by enhancing the society through God's holy books. On the contrary, politics abides by the public law, which can be reformed, that is based on the society's need. So here we can see that the way religion and politics work are directly opposite to each other as per Mubarak (2009):

- Religion defines the control over true faith that cannot be altered by human interference;
- While in a realistic political paradigm, society should move ahead, alter and adapt itself to the current changing problems of time.

There are three models in history related to religion and politics (Mubarak, 2009):

- In one, when both religion and politics combine to centralize state influence together, it is called it a paradigm of incorporation and sharing.
- In the second model, politics, after pacifying and overriding religion, uses it for its benefits. In this model religion plays a submissive role to politics.

- Both fall into dispute with one another in the third model, which then leads to their alienation. They appear in this paradigm as competitors and strive to fight for supremacy.

With the ongoing debates of Islam in world politics, there is more inclination to concentrate on how religion is used by varied social movements, political parties, and militant groups. However, fewer focus has been given to the question of how governments—particularly those in the Middle East—have integrated Islam into their wider foreign policy strategies. Religion can be regarded as a form of soft power and compared to ideologies such as liberalism, socialism, and nationalism in that it has the capability to reinforce a nation’s authority in the international scene. Peter Mandaville (Professor of Government and Politics in the Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University) suggested that the world should "start paying attention again to religion as potentially transnational strength" and observe how states "harness religion as part of larger policies of soft power” (Katz, 2019).

If we want to take the example of Muhammad bin Salman (MBS), it can be argued that MBS views religion as a tool to sustain and develop power. In relation to the issue of the connection between religion and politics, Mandaville expressed that MBS does not "have any particularly strong ideological commitments” (Katz, 2019). Hamid (a senior fellow in the Center for Middle East Policy) argues that Muslim-majority countries are leaning towards focusing on foreign policy that is based on Islam since it is "really the only effective ideological option" (Katz, 2019). He elucidated that this is mainly because Muslims "find Islam convincing and attractive as an ideological discourse in Muslim-majority states”. Moreover, Hamid observed that "other people in the Middle East do not actually want to become Egyptian nationalists" in the case of a country like Egypt, and thus Islam is far more powerful and convincing.

In the sanctions on Qatar, has Islam played a role? Hamid detected that, while the Qatari royal family is not fundamentally part of the Brotherhood itself, they "do not, or are broadly sympathetic to, or do not object on supporting it” (Katz, 2019). In comparison, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia see the form of Islamism of the Muslim Brotherhood as "the fundamental challenge, and they will do everything in their power to ensure that Islamists of the Brotherhood model do not gain ground," according to Hamid.

In the religious soft power environment, Geneive Abdo—resident scholar at the Arabia Foundation and author of several books on Egypt, Iran, and the broader Middle East then reiterated the scope of actors. She remembered that it was not just the Saudis and Wahhabists who took the lead in using Islam in their geopolitics, but also the Iranians who have been doing so since the revolution of 1979 (Katz, 2019). After the 2003 invasion, Iran built schools in Iraq, and also built agencies, sponsored political groups, and financed Shiite factions.

The combination/use of both created a new used term in the field which is referred to as “identity politics”. For Stein (2017), the instability in the region can be attributed to two main reasons. Even though Stein explains that the weakening of the Arab states can be a reliable explanation at times, we cannot completely overthrow the rise of identity politics in the Middle East and its great contribution to the conflict. In his explanation, Steins suggests that “regional dynamics are best explained as the expression of identity politics enacted by states that serve as instruments of sectarian regimes, thus affecting state policies”, if ideology is taken as the main driver of the conflict. According to Stein), both arguments have a missing loop. Scholars who encourage the idea of the states being instruments of sects fail to indicate how identities easily shift and convert. While the scholars who support the idea of the sects as instruments of the states suffer from a parallel set of weaknesses.

*“In our account, deepening sectarian polarization and the sectarian idiom in which current regional conflicts play out are the result not of state weakness but of long-term state building processes that have been more effective in achieving their principal purpose — regime security and survival — than advocates of the “weak state” position acknowledge”* (Steins, 2017).

### **2.3 Are proxies linked to communitarian or state interests?**

There should be a clearer understanding behind the motivations of the Saudi-Irani conflict, or the wider Sunni-Shia conflict. Limiting their incentives to ideology and securing their identities oversimplifies their main goals. Of course, the image these two proxies indicate is a different-sect conflict. Both states have prominent and major sectarian governments, as they use the dominant sects in their countries to legitimize their regimes.

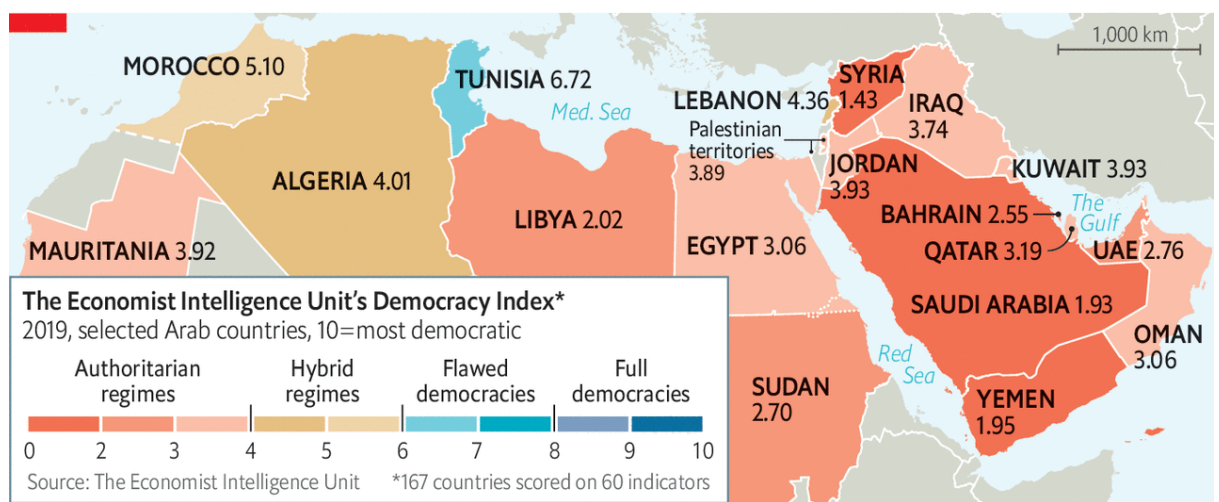
*“It is therefore a simple analytical step to assume that sectarianism drives their foreign policies, but that step is incorrect. Riyadh and Tehran are playing a balance*

*of power game. They are using sectarianism in that game, yet their motivations are not centuries-long religious disputes but a simple contest for regional influence“* (Gause, 2014).

Both regimes tend to blame the other for creating a regional sectarian division, as both states want to be cut off from being “branded” as an extremist regime. It is evident that both proxies understand their audience, as they both tend to deny any sectarian purposes behind their advancements and interventions in their neighboring countries’ domestic politics. ‘Sunni versus Shia’ is an easier perspective of the conflict, but it is not fair to the complications of the new Middle East (ME) cold war. There should be a distinction between how we view the ME conflict, whether as a top-down approach or bottom-up. The difference between the two is that the first suggests that the conflict is initiated by the two proxies. However, with the bottom-up approach, the conflict is attributed to domestic instability that leads to political challenges that need external intervention. Usually, external interventions do not happen unannounced in such similar cases, but rather they are called upon from the weak states themselves to help these governments take control over their people again. “The object of the cold war rivalry for Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other regional powers is not to defeat their regional rivals militarily on the battlefield. It is to promote the fortunes of their own clients in these weak state domestic struggles and thus build up regional influence” (Gause, 2014). Whether it is a top-down or bottom-up approach, states interfere to gain more power.

For Saudi Arabia, the Arab uprisings created a mixture of preaching for democracy and abundance of Islamists politics. This situation, that was reoccurring in different Arab states, was concerning for Saudi Arabia’s regime. With the increase in the popularity of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Saudi regime felt threatened that a new rival is trying to break through the regional competition. However, this time it was different for Saudi Arabia, and maybe even riskier, as the rivalry is taking place with a Sunni competitor that has a chance in grasping the role of the Sunni leader in the region away from the Saudi regime. Saudi Arabia was not alone in this battle against the Muslim Brotherhood, as UAE was also evidently against their rise in the region as well through jailing its followers and supporters and closing associated organizations. On the other hand, another gulf country was positively supporting the Muslim Brotherhood, which is Qatar, and this made it harder for Riyadh to regain control and remove the Muslim Brotherhood from the equation. “Perhaps even more

challenging for the Saudis in the long run, the swiftness with which Egypt’s Salafis entered the electoral fray showed that even within their own ideological camp, anti-democratic arguments were subject to challenge” (Abdallah, 2011). Nonetheless, when Morsi was in power, he showcased his resentment towards both Tehran and the Asaad regime. One might think that such actions and statements should have made Saudi Arabia more lenient with the Muslim Brotherhood taking over Egypt. However, Riyadh, with its allies (UAE and Kuwait), was the first to support the coup d’etat that was led by General Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi. Their support didn’t come cheap as well, as they have spent billions of dollars for Sisi to take the presidency.



The Economist

Figure 4: [The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index](#)

When it comes to the rivalry between Turkey and Saudi Arabia, it can also be attributed to the Muslim Brotherhood and dispute over the political order between the two (Crocker et al., 2018). Even regarding the rivalry between different gulf states, the main reason goes back to supporting the Muslim Brotherhood. This was evident when Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain enforced their pressure on Qatar to cut its funding for the Brotherhood by withdrawing their ambassadors from Doha simultaneously (Abdallah, 2011). The problem is not only with the Muslim Brotherhood, even the Salafis are perceived sometimes as a threat for the Saudi regime, especially when we focus on the “democratic Salafis” in specific (Crocker et al., 2018).

Even though the main focus in the region, especially with the ongoing conflicts in Syria and Iraq, is strictly related to the Sunni-Shia rivalry, the current competition



between the Sunni powers is as important, if not more. This is because this intra-sect rivalry will play a major role in shaping the region's future, and it is clearly evident with the current conflicts in Syria and Libya, with the advancement of the Turkish military.

Recently, another conflict has submerged to surface which also emphasizes the insignificance of ideology regarding the Sunni-Shia dilemma, which is the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh region. This region has been under the spotlight for some time, with Russia supporting Armenia while Turkey taking the side of Azerbaijan (Faghihi, 2020). In this case, it can be simply put that Russia is aiding its Christian counterpart, and Turkey is supporting the Muslims of Azerbaijan, even though they identify as Shia. However, with the new clashes arising, Iran has taken a side that seems a bit peculiar. Behind the scenes, experts are indicating that Iran is backing Armenia even though Tehran has addressed both ends to stop the clashes (Faghihi, 2020).



Figure 5: [Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict](#)

Accordingly, what could be the reason behind Iran's closer relationship with Armenia even though Azerbaijan is a Shia-Muslim country? There is not only one reason for this "hidden alliance". First of all, Iran and Russia have a known political alliance, and Iran has good trade relations with Armenia. However, the experts attribute the main reason to the Azeri Turkish community present inside Iran (Faghihi, 2020). Tehran regards the escalating issue of Turkish nationalism among this community as alarming. This issue has been a source of political conflict

between Azerbaijan and Iran, as the Azeri Turkish community tries to tie more knots with the neighboring country. There has been talks about a greater Azerbaijan, and this proposes a threat to Iran, which ultimately suggests that backing Armenia would be one of the measures to reduce any Azeri ambitions in Iran and eventually throughout the region (Faghihi, 2020). Therefore, we can indicate from this conflict that even though both states (Iran and Azerbaijan) are considered Shia Muslims countries, Iran is more likely to support Armenia for the main reason of safeguarding its own state-interest irrespective of the ideology it holds.

## **2.4 The None-State Actors**

The history of the Middle East is full of violent struggles, including inter-state wars, civil wars, insurgencies, revolutions, coups, foreign invasions, and ethnic and sectarian struggles. Peace in the Middle East has been vague, especially since the 1967 war between Israel and a coalition of Arab nations led by Egypt (Dallas-Feeney, 2019). There are a number of factors in the Middle East that allow a variety of political actors to violently resist or even defeat the authority of the state and its allies, regardless of the organization of the groups we will address in this section of the research.

It should be noted that the cold war includes non-state actors as much as states. The non-state actors, who take the form of religious groups (objects), are being directed by the states (subjects) in order to establish the state's own interests. The most common religious non-state actors would be the Islamist groups that are dominating the MENA region. Islamism — otherwise termed 'political Islam': "the ideology that aims to reform society and politics along religious lines given in the Koran and Islamic legal and cultural traditions — in principle rejects the secular concept of the nation-state and deems the state illegitimate" (Dalacoura, 2001). Such movements are powerful in creating bonds across different societies and cultures under the name of Islam. For these two reasons Islamist movements "can be seen as non-state, transnational actors *par excellence*" (Dalacoura, 2001). An example of how states manipulate, and sometimes even create these non-state actors, would be Iran. After the Iranian revolution, Iran's foreign policy was based on the idea of channeling its revolution to other countries in the region that are dominated by a Shia population (Wehrey et al., 2009). Tehran also established ties with Sunni non-state actors. Some Islamist organizations were already existing while others were created, whether

Sunni or Shia. Iran was able to mobilize Hezbollah and some Palestinian groups, which helped in surging its popularity among Arabs who were against the authoritarian regimes. Iran has also surpassed the Mediterranean countries, and it is one of the most powerful players in the current Yemeni conflict through supporting the Houthis. Accordingly, Iran was able to form alliances in different areas across the region with various non-state actors from different sects.

Competition for regional power, whether established enmities such as Iran vs. Iraq or more recent rivalries such as Iran vs. KSA, is a fact of life in the international system and is especially evident in this area of the world (Gause, 2014). As part of the hegemonic rivalry, violent groups are funded by states as part of an offer to preserve the current structure (Bayman, 2005).

Four nations in the area (Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and Libya) are defeated or collapsing states as a result of civil wars and/or the use of armed power by foreign governments, which provide refuge for many of the most violent and active violent non-state actors (VNSAs) along with the wide range of criminal organizations and military contractors. However, what has emerged in the area in a more challenging aspect since at least 2001 (Dallas-Feeney, 2019), is the entry into the region of the destructive power of multinational VNSAs whose Muslim Extremist political and social vision for the region requires the brutal reconstruction of the Muslim community, starting with the home of Islam, the Middle East's land and peoples. In this section, I concentrate on the roots and primary objectives of four main VNSAs representing major organizations that are able to install ongoing strategic anti-government terror campaigns to accomplish their political objectives in the Middle East, those that use violence, insurgencies, revenge and, where possible, traditional warfare to threaten the existing governments to rule the area. In the Middle East, Shia Lebanese nationalist parties such as Hezbollah and Sunni Palestinian nationalist movements such as Hamas, act as politically diverse as transnational Salafi-Jihadi groups such as ISIS and its branches, and Al Qaeda and its subsidiaries. VNSAs are influential national actors in the expanding political and military disputes, either in resistance to the regime or as a government collaborator (e.g., Hezbollah in Syria,) that have killed hundreds of thousands and forced the migration of tens of millions of people with global implications (Dallas-Feeney, 2019).

Several countries in the region have no control on the use of power within their borders, and that implies, that the VNSAs have crucial and definitive control over the conduct of political events in the area. In reality, the existing degree and scope of conflict in the area seems to weaken the political ability much further. This enables the main VNSAs not only to control the region's politics, but also the 'industry' of many of the other organizations that also serve as essential aspects in the direction and pace of political transition. Life in the Middle East appears to be even shorter, harsher and even more hopeless.

There are a number of parties operating in the background of the broader Islamic political structures and supporting more developed VNSAs such as Hamas or Hezbollah as operational military allies. Generally, the essence of their association is purposely concealed in order to give the political aspect of its parent party some degree of political protection. For decades, groups such as the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade (AAMB) (Dallas-Feeney, 2019) existed, but remained covert and membership was very small and exclusive. In addition to the organization's own violent activities, it also serves as a strategic partner to other bigger organizations that are formed as popular movements. Many other organizations, such as Iran or transnational actors like Al Qaeda (AQ), are also functioning as national actors of foreign bodies. AI is a Salafi Jihadi-based Sunni organization whose main objective has been to oppose the Kurdish ruling party in Iraq and to promote the capacity for Islamic Sunni rule in that area of Iraq. Its leaders were equipped during and after the Afghan war in the AQ camps and are associated with Al Qaeda groups in the region. It has also collaborated and clashed with ISIS other occasions. Kataeb Hizbollah (KH) is a significantly larger armed Shia organization that is allegedly sponsored by Iran and aims to improve Iran's ability to control Iraqi politics in favor of the Shia population in Iraq. KH's military capabilities, estimated to be as big as 30,000 civilian fighters, has been called upon to take action to protect Iraq against the 2014 ISIS invasion of Iraq. In the aftermath of the wars in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Libya, there are hundreds of other VNSAs that have arisen or become famous. Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqa al-Naqshbandia in Iraq (Iraqi Sunni Nationalist) , Ahrar al Sham in Syria (Syrian Salafi Jihadi Nationalists), the Houthis in Yemen (Yemeni Shia Nationalists) (International Crisis Group, 2014), and the Libyan Islamic Battle Group in Libya (Libyan) are some of the influential organizations that have risen in the last 5 to 10 years. Such groups differ in size,

capacity, and belief system, but in their particular national areas of activity, all play/have led the way. Moreover, in response to the oppressive dictatorship of the current President, Abdel Fattah al Sisi, new VNSA groups are forming in Egypt. Groups like Egypt's Hasm and Liwa al Thawra (Dallas-Feeney, 2019) are still limited. However, they have prominent with assaults on public officials and military targets. Even though it was reported that they might have ties to more adherent activist groups in Egypt, such as the Muslim Brotherhood or probably ISIS, it is still not certain. Via abuse, they aim to overthrow the president Elect of Egypt, al Sisi, and create an Islam-based Egyptian community.

## **2.5 Summary**

The Arab Uprisings created a mixture of preaching for democracy and abundance of Islamists politics. This situation, that was reoccurring in different Arab states, was concerning for Saudi Arabia's regime. With the increase in the popularity of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Saudi regime felt threatened that a new rival is trying to break through the regional competition. However, this time it was different for Saudi Arabia, and maybe even riskier, as the rivalry is taking place with a Sunni competitor that has a chance in grasping the role of the Sunni leader in the region away from the Saudi regime. Saudi Arabia was not alone in this battle against the Muslim Brotherhood, as UAE was also evidently against their rise in the region as well through jailing its followers and supporters and closing associated organizations. On the other hand, another gulf country was positively supporting the Muslim Brotherhood, which is Qatar, and this made it harder for Riyadh to regain control and remove the Muslim Brotherhood from the equation. "Perhaps even more challenging for the Saudis in the long run, the swiftness with which Egypt's Salafis entered the electoral fray showed that even within their own ideological camp, anti-democratic arguments were subject to challenge" (Abdallah, 2011). Nonetheless, when Morsi was in power, he showcased his resentment towards both Tehran and the Asaad regime. One might think that such actions and statements should have made Saudi Arabia more lenient with the Muslim Brotherhood taking over Egypt. However, Riyadh, with its allies (UAE and Kuwait), was the first to support the coup d'etat that was led by General Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi. Their support did not come cheap as well, as they have spent billions of dollars for Sisi to take the presidency.

Even though the main focus in the region, especially with the ongoing conflicts in Syria and Iraq, is strictly related to the Sunni-Shia rivalry, the current competition between the Sunni powers is as important, if not more. This is because this intra-sect rivalry will play a major role in shaping the region's future, and it is clearly evident with the current conflicts in Syria and Libya, with the advancement of the Turkish military.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Huntingtonism and Sectarian Politics in the MENA region**

Huntington's main interest was his ability to predict patterns of military tension and warfare based on the idea of cultural clashes. However, if we look at the current situation in the Middle East, we have state and non-state actors and alliances of states from inside the same Islamic society – supported by a diversity of external powers – against each other. Accordingly, the conflicts present in the Arab world today do not fall under the presumption of wars emerging because of cultural differences. The conflict at hand today can be described as an intra-Muslim conflagration. The dispute projected here is that it is more methodically abundant to emphasis directly on how ideologically different political structures clash. The 'civilizational clash' is confusing. It is pointing to civilizational discordancy as the definitive origins of conflict, when conflict over alternative political systems is obviously a more relevant aspect in explaining today's conflicts between the different state and non-state actors in the Middle East.

In his article, *Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War*, Gause (2014) asserts that the only way to understand the Middle East conflict, is to look at how sectarianism is only used as a tool to achieve the greater goal, as it is not the goal itself. Gause (2014) explains that the Saudi-Irani conflict is far away of being a military confrontation, and it is more related to reconstruct the domestic politics of the neighboring weak states. Sectarianism is only a tool used by these two powers, and this is evident as they have secured allies outside of the sectarian game. Gause (2014) attributes the weakness of the Arab States as the main driver behind the Middle East conflict, while sectarianism and other Islamic ideologies are only an image to cover up the real ambitions of these powers.

#### **3.1 The irrelevance of the “Clash of Civilization”**

Huntington's ideas represented in his acclaimed book “Clash of Civilizations”, have contributed immensely to the world of international politics. His work came to light when the entire international context after the Cold War shifted, and an evident rise

of Islamist terrorism was occurring. Huntington's central thesis is focused on the idea that conflicts in the post-ideological era are fueled by differences in identity, religion or, more generally, culture (Huntington, 1993).

To show Huntington's commitment to realism, it is first important to offer a short outline of that convention. Realism is one of the most prominent theories in global politics, and till this day it is holding everyone's attention in the investigation of contemporary foreign relations. However, there should be a distinction between two main schools of realism, which are the classical and structural. Classical realism started out with Thucydides and later included scholars like Machiavelli, Hobbes, E.H. Carr and Morgenthau. It explains international relations through assumptions about human nature and focuses on the idea that international politics is essentially characterized by anarchy and war. As for structural realism, it follows what is known as a "scientific approach" in order to reach its conclusions, and it mainly promotes the idea of balance of power. My dispute in this section is that while Huntington scrutinized a portion of the focal fundamentals of structural realism, his hypothesis of the 'clash of civilization' can be found in progression with classical realism.

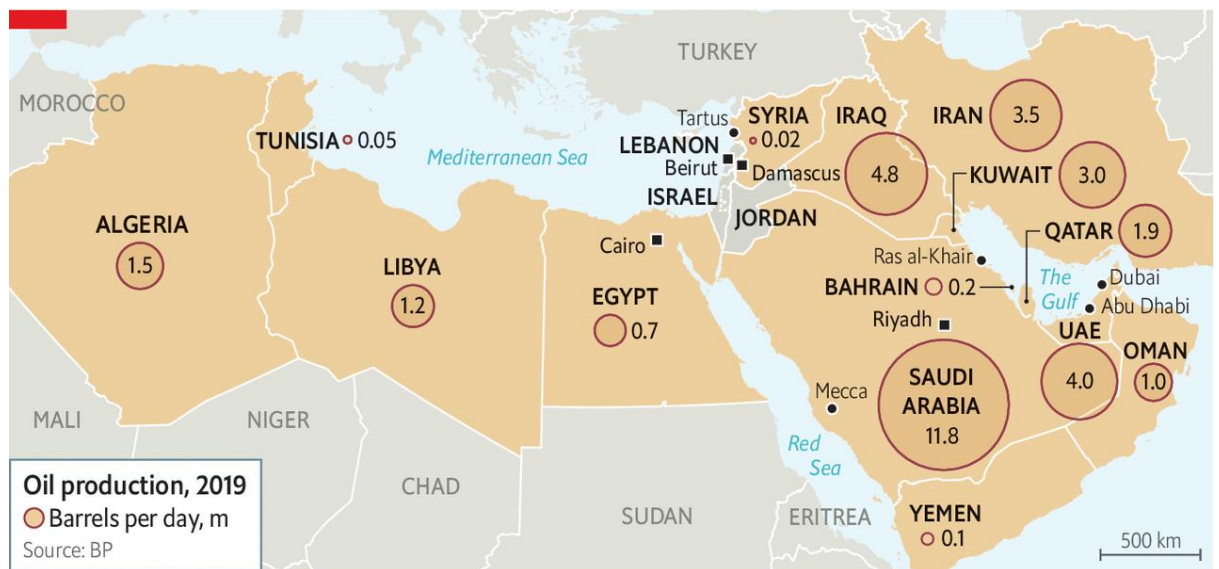
Huntington's main interest was his ability to predict patterns of military tension and warfare based on the idea of cultural clashes. However, if we look at the current situation in the Middle East, we have state and non-state actors and alliances of states from inside the same Islamic society – supported by a diversity of external powers – against each other. Accordingly, the conflicts present in the Arab world today do not fall under the presumption of wars emerging because of cultural differences. The conflict at hand today can be described as an intra-Muslim conflagration. The dispute projected here is that it is more methodically abundant to emphasize directly on how ideologically different political structures clash. The 'civilizational clash' is confusing. It is pointing to civilizational discordancy as the definitive origins of conflict, when conflict over alternative political systems is obviously a more relevant aspect in explaining today's conflicts between the different state and non-state actors in the Middle East. Thus, the irrelevance of the "Clash of Civilization" in determining the essence of the intra-Sunni conflict can be advocated. In that case, how can we determine the essence of the regional dilemma?



### 3.2 Regional Order and the Oil Dilemma

The region known as the Middle East, has always been a target of external invasions due to its geopolitical and economic importance. These external violations, thus, have existed long before the American “invasions”. This mainly is attributed to the fact that the Middle East region is surrounded by different passageways like Sinai isthmus, the Caucasus, the Strait of Gibraltar, the Dardanelles, Bab el Mandeb, and the Strait of Hormuz, along with the Mediterranean, the Black Sea, the Caspian Sea, the Red Sea, and the Persian Gulf , which are of utmost importance for being the connectors of Asia, Europe and Africa.

To be able to understand the American greed in the Middle East, other Western “invasions” should be examined as well. Oil in the region was not recently discovered, it was known for a while that the Middle East possess oil. However, the interest only grew in this black gold when Churchill, the prime minister of the United Kingdom back then, decided to transform the battleships so that they work on oil instead of coal. With this suggestion, the new form of battleships was superior to its precedent. As such, this created a significant interest in oil more than ever. From this point forward, oil was considered as a “crucial but external resource”.



The Economist

Figure 2: [Oil production, 2019](#)

Accordingly, with the superior powers like the United States (U.S.), Britain, and France, it should not come as a surprise that these countries have their own plans for the region. A crucial element to the mix of geography and politics would be the

abundance of oil in the area, especially in the Gulf. The presence of oil in the Middle East has contributed, and has been the main player, to the foreign policies implemented by the leaders of the region. Simply put, the U.S. is in need of the oil present in the region, and the Middle East is in need of the capital and technologies that can be provided by the West. Thus, a strong alliance between the two ends would sound rational, but it is because of these alliances that many conflicts have arose.

The relationship between the United States and the oil exporting countries, also known as the Gulf and Persian regions, was never stable. This relationship reached its most crucial points post the 1970s. Jones's (2012) main claim in his article *America, Oil and War in the Middle East*, is that "the permanent shadow of war that has settled over the Persian Gulf in the last three decades is largely the direct outcome of the ways that oil has been tied to American national security and the ways that American policy makers linked security to militarization". The author provides concrete and detailed examples of the events that occurred, especially the Iraq-Iran war and the Gulf war, where the U.S. was always present to "help" one of the opposing sides in its win. The author also explains the importance of domestic regime security concerns in the foreign policies of Gulf states, which is highlighted by the alliance choices of Saudi Arabia during the different Gulf wars. Saudi maneuvering between Iraq and Iran during the 1980s was dictated more by the ideological threat posed by the Iranian Islamic Revolution than by balance-of-power concerns. As when it comes to the U.S., its main concern across these events and wars that occurred was the oil and the increasing price of the barrel.

The three main players with the U.S. in this article according to Jones are Iraq, Iran and Saudi Arabia. Jones mentions a brief history behind the reason for the U.S. intervention in these countries. America's relationship with Iran grew with the deterioration of Iran's relationship with the British owned Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. During their alliance, Britain received more profits from Iran's oil than Iran itself. This issue created a problem for the U.S., as they were afraid that such imbalance will lead Iran to form an alliance with the Soviet Union. Accordingly, in this period, the U.S. became more involved with Iran's oil. As for Saudi Arabia's oil relationship with the U.S, it all started with the initiation of ARAMCO, which is the Arabian American Oil Company. In this scenario as well, the Americans were able to increase the profits of Saudi Arabia more than what the Britain's were offering.

Jones also claims indirectly that the main reason behind the “roller-coaster” relationship between the Gulf and U.S, is not because of the notion of balancing-of-power with international players. For the Gulf, it was because of the presence of domestic uncertainties related to transnational identities across other neighboring countries. There concerns were more political than military. Jones explained this dilemma by mentioning that “the region’s autocrats have also remained in power. As citizens began to challenge ruling regimes in early 2011 in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Oman—three of the closest allies of the U.S. in the region—it became clear that those governments are all too willing to turn the weapons of war, purchased mostly from the U.S., on their subjects”. Jones continues to assert that these regimes are particularly unstable, and they are very malleable to regional and domestic shocks, which is return shall possess an ordeal for U.S. policy. On this note, it is important to mention that throughout the article, the author is trying to proclaim that there is a critical distinction between trying to directly control the oil industry, or simply protecting the price of the oil and oil producers, which is what the U.S.’ main strategic goal was rather than the misconception of “direct invasion and control”. As for Gause (2009), in his book “The International Relations of the Persian Gulf”, he doesn’t only focus on the three major countries in the triangle which are Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia. He also explains how these countries along with the smaller Gulf countries like Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and the UAE, all contribute to the international affairs of the region. This is because, according to Gause, each of these countries’ foreign policy depends on the others’ policies, not to exclude as well the relation of each with the international scene. Thus, Gause’s main claim is that several Gulf states, either big or small, have a distinctive and crucial role in achieving security in the region, while taking into consideration the role of oil and transnational issues into account to secure the supposed goal of security and peace. Gause focuses on the Iranian Revolution as well to demonstrate how this unique event was able to transcend the borders of Iran and effect the region as a whole. One of the most important effects that this revolution had, was that the U.S. lost one of its “two pillars” in the region which were composed of Saudi Arabia and Iran. It also led to a significant increase in the price of oil and eventually to the Iran-Iraq war. For Gause, the Iran-Iraq war was not a conflict to establish regional dominance only, but to rather reform the political image of the region especially with the emergence of

the “Shiite Islamic” advocates against the Ba’thist Arab nationalism and monarchy in Saudi Arabia.

For Tabatabai and Samuel (2017), in their article “What the Iran-Iraq War Tells Us about the Future of the Iran Nuclear Deal, they focus on the Iran-Iraq war, yet it takes a different approach as they provide a new concept about the war that other scholars failed to mention, which is how Iran’s involvement in this war had great effects on its nuclear policy later on. The authors argue that the most common convention that other scholars usually mention, which only focuses on the revolution without taking into consideration the Iran-Iraq war, is not sufficient and misleading. There is no doubt as well that this war had other implications regarding Iran’s international relations, security outlook and its choices regarding the nuclear program. Tabatabai and Samuel argue that the main reasons behind these decisions came from two substantial facts, which are (1) Iran’s cynicism of what it views as an unfair international system; and (2) its determination to be independently secure. Tabatabai and Samuel approach is taken from Snyder’s rationale behind the Soviet Union’s strategic decisions during the Cold War. They build upon Snyder’s revelations, and they conclude that Iran’s choices and strategic plans are not initiated out of irrationality. Rather, as Snyder argued in the case of the Soviet Union, Iran’s rationale and decision making “reflect real differences in strategic thinking, which have their roots in the Iran-Iraq war”.

The authors argue as well about the fact that Iran’s strategic approach is more likely to be effected by its own desire to achieve enough power to be able to retaliate against the ever increasing U.S. threats in the region. Tabatabai and Samuel describe it in simple words: “units worry about their survival, and the worry conditions their behavior.” With U.S. having major alliances in the region with very powerful weapons that could, as Iran believes, help the U.S in achieving its goal of weakening Iran, Tehran is currently experiencing what is called as defensive realism.

Haliday (2005), in his book “The Middle East in International Relations”, focuses in his analysis about the Gulf region and its downfalls, not on the Western invasion but rather on the political economies demonstrated by the leaders of the countries involved. The Middle East with a treasure like oil could have been one of the most powerful and dominating regions in the world. However, the revenue and wealth generated from this treasure was not invested properly domestically, but rather the autocrats were greedy enough to spend this wealth on military enhancements.

Haliday mentions different scholarly explanation behind the failed political economy of the region, yet he only agrees with one that examines the role of the state, as the central actor in the economic as in the strategic, military, and ideological record of Middle Eastern countries.

Haliday continues to assert the fact that the main Middle Eastern crisis is an inter and intra-state political economy that has not been implemented wisely by the ruling governments. Unlike previous scholars, Haliday does not put too much attention on the consequences of the Western invasion more than that of the state's own strategic plans.

Lastly, Haliday explains that the focus in the Middle East, to reform its economies, should be on commodities like oil, food, and water, but rather on three major issues that have led to this great crisis, which are: the marginalization of the region within the new

'globalized' world economy, the long-run fall in state revenues and the inability of labor markets to provide employment. According to Haliday, most countries, if not all, in the Middle East are not able to fight these challenges. "In sum, in international as in domestic politics the Middle East exhibited to the highest degree the salience of states and the impact of an unstable and inefficient political economy".

Other crucial points that were not mentioned in the above articles, that also have a strong impact on the history of the Gulf region and the reasons behind the Western invasions would be anti-communism and the presence of Israel. Although Jones mentioned briefly these two points, he did not discuss their significance. The reasons behind this invasion that can be summarized in to three words: anti-communism, oil, and Israel. The U.S. tried persuasively to keep the Soviet Union out of the picture in order to be able to secure the oil for itself. On the other hand, the presence of Israel played a very important role in controlling the region as well. Moreover, the strategical passageways around the region can also be considered as a "power to be reckoned" that can cause Western greed in the Middle East. This is mainly because of these passageways' contribution to trade across three continents. There is no doubt that oil was the main trigger for the U.S. invasions and the instability of the region. Nonetheless, other historical events should be taken more into consideration when analyzing the regions international relations and U.S.' control over it whether directly or indirectly. Thus, after analyzing how oil have forever been the driver

behind international interventions and regional dilemma, we can now dig deeper into the details of the Middle Eastern conflict.



Figure 3: [The Oil Corridor](#)

### 3.3 The Middle Eastern Conflict

Indicating when the exact point was where the Middle East's conflicts exploded is a bit confusing. Some say that it all has to do with the Tunisian fruit seller back in December 2010 when he burned himself to death, which exploded in a revolution that was able to cross the Tunisian border to reach various countries around the Arab region. Other attribute it to the American invasion during March 2003 of Iraq. Regardless of the reason, both eventually contributed to the current proxy wars that are taking place in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen. This war includes various regional and international players starting with KSA and Iran, while also having Turkey and Qatar on the other hand, and eventually the interventions from the U.S., Britain, France, and Russia. Nonetheless, Marc Lynch (2016), in his book "The New Arab Wars", starts out his book with Libya's conflict instead of Syria or ISIS, and this is mainly because Libya was a turning point for the Arab Springs, as it altered the peaceful protests to the current regional proxy war. Lynch proposes that the conflict in Libya was able to create the propaganda of "violent" protestors against the idea of

peaceful individuals seeking democracy. This propaganda was able to create two main conclusions as per the author. First of all, it allowed both the protestors and the leaders to believe that armed revolutions could only succeed with the intervention of external power. Moreover, it allowed the Arab leaders to see that they can influence the West to support their goals with armed interventions. The author mainly focuses on Libya to prove, however, that eventually any external intervention will not secure a peaceful resolution. This was true to a certain extent especially that most interventions led to civil wars or state failure. Lynch emphasizes that the one most certain conclusion that we obtained from the Arab Spring is that such peaceful uprisings can easily be transformed to violent actions. He explains however, that the reason why these protests transformed into violent acts is not because the people are not ready to endure democracy. "Obama could not have saved Mubarak or stopped the Arab uprising if he had tried. There is no monarchical exception protecting the Gulf regimes from popular discontent. The resurgence of jihadist groups does not mean they were the real, hidden face of the uprising all along," Lynch explains. Accordingly, external power is not the solution for the region's stability. The author indicates that the main reason behind the failure of the uprisings are the autocratic regimes. These regimes, in order to protect their existence, have allowed external intervention and even helped in "creating" extremist groups to further escalate the conflict and defeat the peaceful protestors.

Accordingly, Lynch emphasized how the leaders of the Arab region are the main problem rather than being the solution. In his book, Lynch provides an overview about the failed uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia in specific, and the wars that erupted in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen. His aim was to indicate the reasons behind the failure of the uprisings while providing a sense of what will happen further into the future, without going into details about each country. He tries to go back to the root cause, which is the autocratic leaders, emphasizing how they were able to transform the region into a proxy war. Eventually, these proxy wars have strikingly changed the region's foreign policy dynamics in a disparaging manner. For this reason, Lynch provides an unpopular view of the current media-led narratives; Lynch summarizes it thus: "the Arab uprisings have not failed; the Arab re- Muslim Brotherhood does not validate anti-Islamist views; and the Islamic State does not represent real Islam, but the challenge of jihadism will persist long after its state is destroyed".

It is not certain if the arguments that Lynch have proposed will be accepted. However, what is certain that after the leaders were able to reclaim their positions, the region's problems have resurfaced in a more aggressive manner. As Lynch indicates, "We might not know exactly when and where the next eruption of mass protest appears, but another wave is almost certainly coming". With that being said, does the Middle Eastern conflict stem from the concept of communitarianism, or is communitarianism a mere driver?

### **3.4 The Concept of Communitarianism**

As we were previously analyzing how individuals tend to be more sensible and agile towards their religion, this has created a new concept which is called Communitarianism. Individuals are now more inclined to support their religion/sect/community rather than their own nation.

It is safe to say that although this perspective cannot be regarded as Huntingtonian, it is not its complete antagonist as well. In his book, the Decline of Nation-State, Imad Salamey (2017) provides evidence of declining cultural nationalism. Salamey (2017) explains how nationalistic systems that have traditionally thrived on territorially based and demographically controlled populations within closed security, economic and cultural boundaries began to be challenged. However, the book aims to assert how communitarianism is a ruling factor in today's Middle Eastern politics, where "communitarianism has emerged to express globalization's double movement that has sought the integration of global security, economy, and culture on one hand while undermining as a consequence the functional order of the nation-state system" (Salamey, 2017).

One of the critical ramifications of the Arab Spring has been the transformation of states' territorial and demographic demarcations to stretch beyond realism's "Middle Eastern exceptionalism" and liberalism's "transnationalism" theses. Communitarian groups such as adherents to Welayat Al-Faqih Shiism and Salafism have been seeking to reconstruct political allegiance along universal lines rather than within the geographic confines of a state.

Communitarian and sectarian groups have ultimately expanded their mobilization across borders to gain leverage against contending domestic groups. In that sense, the Arab Spring expanded the horizon of local national groups to seek the support and backing of kin groups across the borders. In multi-sectarian, multiethnic constituency



states such diversity undermined national cohesion in favor of transnational affiliations. This became apparent as Sunni groups such as the Muslim Brotherhoods and Salifists, as well as Hezbollah and other Shiites groups, strengthened their cross-national affiliations with their brethren elsewhere. Thus, the national model emerged to attract treaters structural challenges by the global interconnectedness of political communities.

Nonetheless, this section will provide an analysis, through taking into consideration Salamey's approach on "communitocracy" as the rule of communities, and as the emerging political system that we are beginning to witness in the region. However, this thesis will assert that even though "communitocracy" is dominant today, these same communities are seeking allies outside their "comfort zone" to implement their political agendas.

As per Salamey, the political scene is taking a different approach than that of what the West was expecting. Salamey describes how the current paradigm is not based on allegiances of nation states or political parties, but rather on communities. This is mainly evident in countries like Syria and Iraq.

This is also evident through the shift that we are realizing in the model of the Arab nation-state that has been dominating for years. The Arab nation-state resembles a "one Arabic nation" that is ruled by a single leader. However, this model can no longer be applied. We are indicating a shift in Arabic nationalism. The same populations who extremely relied on the idea of one nation-state (especially during the Abdel Nasser era) are now being carried away with the idea of communitocracy. As per Salamey's definition, communitocracy (like democracy) resembles political alignments based on "pacts" between different communities. The loyalty that we used to see towards the one-nation has now shifted to a locality towards the one community that the individual mostly identifies with. In the Arab world, such communities are mainly either based on tribes and religion.

Salamey continues explaining that the main reason behind this shift is the concept of globalization. Globalization has led to two main realizations: there is less control on the flow of the information and it also effecting the power over the economy of a sovereign nation-state. Logically speaking, we live in the "information ear", so it will be difficult, even for the most tyrant leaders, to control this flow of information especially through the different social media platforms.

However, realizing that individuals seek communities that they mostly identify with does not eliminate the fact that these same communities seek partnerships and allies from groups that do not identify with them. Thus, returning to the concept of power over ideology.

A good example would be the relationship between Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood. Even though it seems illogical for these two to collide their forces, it has been evident that, in certain cases, their alliance is mandatory to increase their strength in the region. In Iran's case, it might seem as a very cost-efficient strategy to create a common power force with a movement like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (Al-Sayyad, 2019). It can help Tehran to enter a new spectrum from a different angle, thus increasing its reach, indirectly, in the area. As for the Muslim Brotherhood, having a great power like Iran as an ally is necessary to secure their part in the region, especially that Iran does not differ from the Muslim Brotherhood when it comes to the role of Islam in politics and society (Al-Sayyad, 2019). However, it should be noted here that it will not be that easy on the Muslim Brotherhood to take this "friendship" further, especially that one of the MB's main objectives is preserving the Sunni Arab world in the region.

Regarding Tehran, the Brotherhood is a step to enhance the relationship with the Sunnis around the world. MB's international connections could further play a major role in stabilizing the "axis of resistance" against the U.S across the globe. Moreover, the Brotherhood can also play the role of the intermediary between Iran and other Sunni groups as needed. This is because different Sunni groups, in the region or abroad, have always regarded Iran as a "greatest evil", especially after the eruption of the Syrian crisis and Tehran's ongoing support to President Bashar Al Assad.

A friendship with Iran, in the MB's opinion, helps to reinforce the self-appointed position of power of the community in spreading Islamic solidarity internationally (Al-Sayyad, 2019). It also finds it reasonable, considering its position as a major leader, to improve overall ties with Iran. Even the possibility of strengthened relations between the Brotherhood and Iran could act as a negotiating tool to obtain compromises from Tehran-opposed major players, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The Brotherhood, however, has shown less willingness to exacerbate the relations in comparison to the Iranians because of its hesitancy about Iran's foreign exclusion and not-so-good reputation among Sunni Muslims. Rather, as experienced since the political rise of the revolution in Egypt, the

Brotherhood has participated in contacts with Iran when necessary, to support the general interests of the party.

### **3.5 Summary**

Focusing on the Sunni-Shia dispute in the region opens a new realm in terms of the Middle East's power struggle and what drives it. Many academics and analysts agree that the key motivation behind current conflicts and wars is to impose an ideology and preserve a particular sect's identity. Nonetheless, although the Saudi Iranian proxy wars demonstrate this claim, they fall short of explaining other regional conflict drivers. It is possible that inter- and intra-sectarian philosophies are nothing more than smokescreens for the various Middle East rivals' political motives. The sanctions levied on Qatar by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates demonstrate this. Furthermore, the conflict in Syria between Saudi Arabia and Turkey, as well as the conflict in Libya between Egypt and Turkey, supports this argument. These conflicts are currently shaping the region's new map. The various Sunni proxies are locked in a cold war over who will rule the Sunni Muslim world. This implies that the main conflict is over power rather than religion.

## Chapter Four

### A Comparative Review of Intra and Inter Sectarian Clashes in MENA

#### 4.1 Mapping Sunnism in the Arab World

In order to be able to identify why and how the various Sunni parties are relatively head-to-head in their conventions, we must go back in time. The history of the “Sunni Reign” can expose how today’s conflicts between these parties initiated, and the reason behind this clash.

Al-Azhar University, the most established Sunni Muslim instructive foundation on the planet, overwhelms Egypt's standard Islamic organizations. The Azhar foundation has been seen, whether in Egypt or other countries, as open minded, seeking modernity, and accepting pluralism. It's been commonly dubious of the Salafism that educated the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). It disapproves of the politicization of religion, and it comprehensively considers the Salafi ideology supported by the Brotherhood unsound or feeble. As per Hellyer (2012), “it is far more stridently opposed, openly so, of purist Salafism of the Saudi variety for creedal, juristic, and spiritual reasons”. At the point when "Wahhabi" Salafism started to be known during the 1700s, it was viewed as a heterodox development by other Sunni ideologies due to its extremism, Hellyer explains.

The Salafist increase in Egypt was not achievable before the end the 1970s. This was mainly due to the rise of the "Islamist Awakening" following the 1967 Arab rout (Jamestown Foundation, 2010). Following the lessons of Saudi supporters of Wahhabism, while concentrating on following in the strides of the Salaf, Salafism made its way in Egypt. The main scholars that made an impact to this move were Ibn Taymiyyah on the standard of tawhid (the solidarity of God) and the lessons of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and his replacements. “The core message of these teachings seeks to purge Islamic faith of Ash'ari theologies, the Sufist sanctification of saints and the practice of visiting graves of holy men in search of intercession” (Jamestown Foundation, 2010). Accordingly, these movements were devoted to fight principles In Islam that are considered irregular and go against the “real Islam” in the view of the Wahhabists.

“The leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood, after being released from prison in the late 1970s, were able to contain many of the youth radicalized by the Islamic Awakening in Cairo and Minya, attracting them to the ranks of the Brotherhood instead” (Jamestown Foundation, 2010).

As per Hellyer, even though both the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafists have a similar objective, which is creating an Islamic state that follows Shari’a, the Salafists are more extreme in their goal to abolish any unorthodox Islamic practices. It is to be noted that the main Salafi current that exists in Egypt trusts in complete compliance to political authority and discards political activities by religious parties, especially the Muslim Brotherhood. Unsurprisingly, all the Salafists have rejected the disapproval of al-Azhar and they refuse to recognize al-Azhar as the ultimate Sunni foundation of religious scholarship, as indicated by Hellyer, 2012.

Understanding this circumstance entails comprehending the noteworthy changes that have happened in the connection between the Saudi state and the Muslim Brotherhood. A concise assessment of the realities uncovers that the dispute is not just a disagreement with the Brotherhood, yet in addition it is a contention between Saudi Arabia's past and its future – between the state’s Islamic heritages and drive for Muslim solidarity and the Crown Prince's perspective for a new Saudi Arabia (Qandil, 2018).

In their earlier times, the two actors were on good terms. Both Saud bin Abdulaziz and Mohammed al-Hudaybi, the Brotherhood’s second Supreme Guide at the time, established a good relationship between them (Qandil, 2018). The reason behind the strong affiliation between the two was the fact that both actors, the Saudi state, and the Muslim Brotherhood, were again Pan-Arab Nationalism and Nasserist ideology, Qandil suggests.. It can be said that the closest relationship between the two was during the time of King Faisal’s reign. Some Saudis also argue that, even after King Faisal was assassinated, the Brotherhood remained fairly moderate in comparison to other groups.

Qandil continues to explain that, the relationship between the two started to hit dead ends during the reign of Abdullah bin Abdelaziz. It reached its peak during the Arab uprisings. This was mainly due to the fact that the Brotherhood started preaching for reforms. Such new statements were regarded as risky to the Saudi regime, which led Riyadh to take action against the Brotherhood. Examples of these actions can be

specifically seen during the coup d'état against Mohamad Morsi in Egypt that Riyadh supported back at the time.

But what is the reason behind these reactions against the Brotherhood? Some scholars attribute this conflict between the two to the Saudi Arabia's fear of having a competitor in region to take the lead in the Muslim Sunni world (Kedar, 2021). This is especially because of the new "reforms" that the Brotherhood was preaching about. Saudi Arabia understands that the Brotherhood was a main factor in initiating the January Revolution that overthrew former president Hosni Mubarak.

Accordingly, if they were able to rise to power, then they might also be able to call for deposing other regimes and threaten the solidity of the country and the region in general, as per Kedar.

Other scholars on the other hand, believe that Mohamed Salman's reaction against the Brotherhood is associated with his idea of battling radicalism and the developmental and societal change that he has been executing lately, which incorporates permitting ladies to drive vehicles, authorizing cinemas, and facilitating music shows among other reforms, Lipp (2021) claims. Nonetheless, this scholarly analysis is not completely adequate, since Saudi Arabia is familiar with going up against fanaticism by supporting an increasingly moderate translation of Islam, and as previously discussed, the Muslim Brotherhood was seen as the moderation in Islam in relevance to other parties and groups (Lipp, 2021). As such, Mohammed bin Salman does not mean to defuse the role of religion in politics. Rather, he believes that he can use Islam in a new way that will help him challenge the old guard that refuses to change (Lipp, 2019). Accordingly, we can deduce that whether Saudi Arabia supports the Muslim Brotherhood or not is based on the Kingdom's political interests, regionally or at a state level, and it has nothing to do with the notion of a "same-sect" party.

Examples of how Saudi Arabia aligned its forces with non-Sunni actors are plenty. While it was evident that Riyadh tried to take advantage of the sectarian dilemma during the Syrian conflict in specific, its allies were far away from being Sunnis. First of all, the Saudi regime supported the Iraqiya party led by Iyad Allawi during the elections of 2005 and 2011 (Gause, 2014). Allawi is a Shi'ite and his party was not related to any Sunni collation. However, Saudi Arabia needed a "less-extremist" ally inside the country and found a competitive advantage with Allawi. In Syria,

Riyadh supported the “least sectarian” coalition which are known as the Free Syrian Army (FSA) (Gause, 2014).

As such, a sectarian frame cannot clarify Saudi resentment towards the Muslim Brotherhood, and central component of post-Arab Spring regional politics. If sectarianism governs Saudi policy-making, the Brotherhood should be seen by the Kingdom as an ally, but this is barely the case in Egypt, Iraq, or Syria.

## **4.2 Geopolitics: The new trend**

The current enduring conflict in the MENA region is introducing a new regional order that surpasses the existing national borders across various critical districts in the area. Even though we are still indicating ongoing processes of war, peace and negotiations across different borders, these practices are not creating the needed balance. This goes back to the different elements that have occurred in the past decades that have allowed a shift in the “agent-structure”. These elements can be summarized within the frame of failed nations, non-state actors, and threatening peripheral effects, as per Bilgin’s (2004) “Whose ‘Middle East’? Geopolitical Inventions and Practices of Security”. Accordingly, the region is experiencing a change in the meanings of national identity and national structure. These changes are being further engraved within different societies across the MENA region, which are building further divisions and conflicts. It is also evident that such divisions have been reinforced within the area in the post-Arab Spring period. These divisions (followed by the Arab Spring) have allowed for new structures, as we are currently seeing in countries like Libya, Yemen and Syria. For example, in these mentioned states we have a lack of any kind of legitimate administration, which has allowed the major regional and international players to configure and divide these states into separate territorial identities, as Bilgin explains. The authors continue to claim that there are efforts in merging districts across various borders in order to create a “virtual” state unified by “one” identity. This is similar to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, whereby they legitimized their own state across different territories in Syria and Iraq. ISIS can be regarded as a true example of the current trend of re-territorialization that the MENA region is experiencing. Similar re-territorialization efforts are being done in Libya (by Turkey and Egypt) and Syria (by Turkey and Iran), yet it is not as obvious as that of ISIS.

For this reason, we need to also define the meaning of regional order to be able to assess these current trends, Bilgin indicates. As per various academic studies, regional order is directly related to security and conflict management. Accordingly, the MENA region's order has not yet been established. On the one hand, defense-related dialogues and exchanges and, on the other, security governance continuously creates trends of redefinition of the security issues in the area. However, the lack of a stable security order or a rigid governmental institution with the existence of both state and non-state actors does not suggest that there is a solution in the near future that allows for a balanced regional order in the MENA after the Arab Spring, as per. Nonetheless, the current security challenges and absence of rigid governments in specific territories allows for new structures and new strategies for balance of power. As previously mentioned, the concept of "subregions" is the current trend, whereby these regions are shaped through combining different districts across borders that are identified by one common ideology/identity (Dalay, 2017). States on a regional level grouping will describe their roles in the broader MENA region in reference to their domestic interests, the interaction of forces between member states and their future ties with greater powers. It has been identified that both proxies in the region, i.e. KSA and Iran, are not playing the game of backing down or band wagoning, but rather they are influencing many regional nations and states for their own goals, as per Dalay's (2017) "Break-up of the Middle East: Will We See a New Regional Order?". Their domestic objectives are directly related to their regional implications, and thus asserting that their regional policies are governed by their domestic concerns. As such, for these proxies, any regional conflict is considered as an existential matter. Definitely, we cannot undermine the global effect and the interference of the international political realm, which creates even more complexities and divisions. Accordingly, the regional order/disorder is defined by a two-way flow, domestic challenges, and international interventions (Call, 2010). Regional governments and actors have failed to respond to these interventions aside the regular Arab League assemblies that call for peace and unity. It is evident that a new regional order is in the process of being established, with the new structural alliances and territorial divisions. However, it is still not evident whether these new structures can withstand the current political landscape and ensure that "they are here to stay". After all, the new configuration is dictated by the contradictions that arise



between societal and geographical interactions and how existing territorial borders can be subverted under such circumstances(Call, 2010).

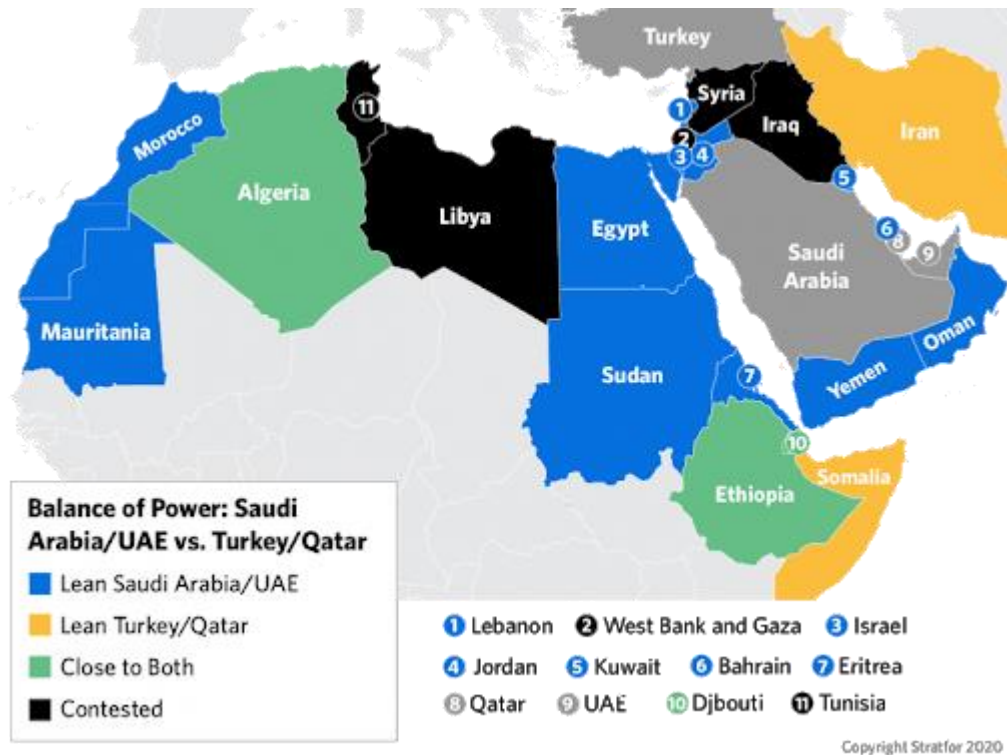


Figure 6: [Balance of Power – Saudi Arabia/UAE vs. Turkey/Qatar](#)

As per Call’s (2010) “Beyond the ‘Failed State’: Toward Conceptual Alternatives”, the image of a new regional order will mostly be dependent on the institutionalization of the changing aspects of socialization among the various players in the region. In the end it all comes to the interests of the different proxies, which will ultimately determine the limitations of each government and the new regional order. The current security conflicts in the region have put the major players in a dilemma between determining policies that limit the occurring conflicts while taking into account how these policies might effect their own existence.

The notion of geopolitical thinking is provided by critical geopolitics, which illustrates the dynamic relation between the strategic situation and policy making (Salloukh, 2013). Geopolitics is the main factor in determining policies and policies are conducted and established in a manner that is parallel to a government’s internal stability and foreign policies. In his piece on “The Arab Uprisings and the Geopolitics of the Middle East”, Sallouk (2013) indicates that by determining allies and enemies among different state actors, policy makers are able to produce official policies relevant to the current geopolitical status quo. It is certain that the new territories that are emerging in the region cause great risks and challenges to the

current states and nations. Yet, it should also be mentioned that these new territories were one of the main reasons why the Arab Spring was deemed as a “failed” revolution (Dazi, Heni, 2016). The Arab Spring was not only able to reoccur in different Arab states, but it was also able to take place in some non-Arab countries like Turkey and Iran. Accordingly, these states were fast in taking action to redeem their image and to take advantage by controlling specific categories. The spill over to non-Arab states was not limited to the Arab Spring, as the refugee crisis and terrorism are also taking part in the international and regional political landscape. The current reality is that both regional and international actors are going around the geopolitical scene without establishing the needed policies to ensure regional security (Salloukh, 2013). There is no doubt, that whether policies are established or not, both situations will be made to adhere to the geopolitical interests of the proxies.

### **4.3 Geopolitics and the Arab Spring**

The Arab Spring had its own set of impacts on the geopolitical scene as well. The main goal of the revolutions across different Arab states is to revive the concepts of dignity and justice as well as good governance in each nation. Even though the uprisings seemed to be on the right track at first, they eventually failed to reach their objectives. Accordingly, states and governments who have weak institutions to begin with, endured greater failures and loss after the uprisings, mainly like Yemen and Libya (Dazi-Heni, 2016). However, the states who have stronger institutions and governmental dominance, like Syria, where able to stand up to the fight, yet it eventually led the country into a civil war. The same civil war was about to erupt in Bahrain, but the intervention of KSA was able to limit it (Dazi-Heni, 2016). On the other hand, we have countries that are neither weak nor strong, like Egypt and Tunisia, whereby the people were able to remove their government, yet eventually the state’s institutions were able to regain the power to control the government. When it came to the monarchical regimes, these states were the riskiest, as the monarchs were afraid that the uprisings might “shake their thrones” (Dazi-Heni, 2016). Nonetheless, they were able to maintain their people through establishing a difference between the state and the government (similarly to Morocco, Jordan and Kuwait). Definitely, it was no surprise, that these uprisings have been taken advantage of by regional and international players in order to change the geopolitical scene of the region. It was thought that when President Obama supported the step

down of Egyptian President Mubarak, that other leaders that are considered allies to the U.S. will also step down. However, the support from the U.S. created a counter effect whereby it paved the way for anti-revolutionary voices (Aras & Yorulmazlar, 2016). Many leaders and monarchs were afraid of the uprisings, and as such they were determined to project them as a threat on the national security. This is mainly due to the fact that these so called “leaders” are not able to secure the demands of their people. As such, talks about democratization were directly repressed. With that being said, in terms of security and controlling these uprisings, stronger states were able to stay intact while weaker states went downhill.

In regard to the geopolitical scene post-Arab Spring, it was evident that the political landscape shifted from the traditional pro vs anti-Western, to bilateral rivalries on the regional level. At the time as well, during the Obama administration in particular, the West was backing off gradually, which left the regional proxies to carry the burden on their own in securing the balance in the area (Aras and Yorulmazlar, 2016).

Accordingly, this led to an incline in the regional conflict that has widened to include “new” rivals, which created a sectarian image to the conflict on the ground. The region’s landscape became more complex with leaders trying to control their domestic scene while ensuring their power over regional territories and stabilizing their foreign policies. This was mainly evident with the growing conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia, who were more cautious than ever to limit any domestic hazards. For this reason, these insecurities within their own nation gave them more incentives to amplify the threats of the region to be able to secure their domestic regimes. Tehran was not completely safe from domestic instabilities, as it experienced a revolt during 2009 (Aras and Yorulmazlar, 2016). The ruling elites did not succumb to the demands, and they were able, in 2011 to completely silence any opposition, especially that the region was experiencing turbulence. Rozsa (2013) states through the price on “Geo-Strategic Consequences of the Arab Spring” that the Iranian government had all the “right” to establish full control with the ongoing events that were taking place. Iran’s main toll in securing its “Islamic” regime was through military involvement in the region. However, due to its intervention in both Syria and Iraq and its clear stance in terms of alliances and objectives in the region, have not allowed Tehran to represent the entire Islamic ummah. The author explains that Iran projected itself as the Shiite state trying to protect the Shiite rights all over the world. As such, alliances were mandatory and Tehran was able to establish either

state or none-state alliances in Afghanistan and Pakistan to Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria, as well as Bahrain and Yemen. It could be said that Iran's idea of a regional Islamic revolution was the reason for paving the way to fight back Sunni ideologies in order to appeal to the Shiite interest and secure popular and mass abidance with the help of Hezbollah and other none-state groups in Iraq and Afghanistan (Rozsa, 2013). On the other end, we had Riyadh who was also trying to compensate both the domestic and regional scene. During the Arab Spring uprisings, a priority was to control its national security (Dazi-Heni, 2016). KSA experienced some riots in the country in Shiite area that were seen as a normal reaction to Bahrain's popular movement, and hence Riyadh was quick to respond through military intervention. As such, we can indicate that Saudi Arabia had taken a defensive approach in ensuring that its domestic stability will not be jeopardized. While KSA was doing all that it can to control its nation's balance, it took advantage of the Iranian "expansion" in the region to further limit any internal riots and legitimize future regional interventions (Dazi-Heni, 2016). On one hand, Riyadh supported former dictators like Ben-Ali in Tunis, and Saleh in Yemen and Mubarak in Egypt. On the other hand, Riyadh tried as much as possible to limit MB's activities in the region especially that they were starting to grow in popularity at the time in countries like Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Gaza, and prospectively Syria and Jordan (Aras and Yorulmazlar, 2016). As the Brotherhood is viewed as an intellectual competition to lead the Sunni debate, the advent of the Muslim Brotherhood developed a separate kind of challenge to the Saudi - led coalition. Thus, by launching a two-fold geopolitical and theological conflict against Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood, the Saudi Kingdom attempted to overcome its internal instability (Dazi-Heni, 2016). While the conflict between KSA and Iran transformed into a sectarian clash, the tension with the Muslim Brotherhood created further clashes with Turkey and Qatar. Up until the coup in Egypt that took place in 2013, Saudi Arabia was mainly concerned with any kind of spillover of the uprising into its domestic scene (Rozsa, 2013). Turkey, on the other hand, was taking the side of the uprisings in removing the current regimes, which had nothing to do with Turkey's internal scene, but rather with its ideational orientation (Dazi-Heni, 2016). Turkey was vocal about being an advocate for a new "Middle East", which goes hand-in-hand with Turkey's current model of "civilian rule and economic development that was built upon electoral legitimacy" (Aras and Yorulmazlar, 2016). Therefore, Turkey was welcoming the uprising and calls for reforms in Egypt,

Tunisia, Libya, and Syria. However, its expansion and intervention in Syria has put Ankara in direct opposition to Tehran and ultimately made Turkey one of the key players in the sectarian games (Dazi-Heni, 2016). As in regard to the popular masses, the uprisings had a huge support across all the Arab countries as they all united on the concept of change. At first, the uprising seemed to be establishing the anticipated change with the overthrow of some critical Arab leaders. However, this changed in 2013 where the masses shifted to support the idea of anti-uprisings (Dazi-Heni, 2016). There were several reasons behind this shift, yet they can be summarized into four main ones. First, the overthrow of the leaders in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya did not lead to better governments or leaders. In contracts, the opposition that was not supposed to be part of the government, was the one responsible for the state building and ensuring the presence of public service, which also did not end up well for the government or the people (Rozsa, 2013). The second reason, as per Rozsa (2013), is that even though an overthrow did take place, the elite stayed put. If we take the example of Tunisia and Egypt, the institutions related to security in the country took the lead in governing the nation and it eventually mimicked the overthrown rulers (Rozsa, 2013). In Libya, on the other hand, it was different scenario since it presented a total shift in power through legitimate elections. Unfortunately, this did not keep up for a while because of “historical and ideological divisions between the tribal groups and geographic entities” had risen to dominate the political landscape of the country (Aras and Yorulmazlar, 2016). As a third reason, the West were not yet sure whether they should support the transitional governments or not. This is because they were yet to determine the long-term goals of the Muslim Brotherhood, especially that MB was considered as a threat to one of the main allies of the West, which is Saudi Arabia (Rozsa, 2013). Even though there was some financial support from Turkey and Qatar for the elected new governments, this proved to be not enough to secure the governments’ legitimacy and popular support from their people, as Rozsa (2013) claims.

The backing-down of transitional governments, reassured the “counterrevolutionary” geopolitical equation to survive the wave of shift. This caused Islamic militants led by Iran to double, particularly after 2013, in fending off the Syrian rebel groups, along with the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Turkey, led and sponsored by the Sunni Gulf States (Rozsa, 2013). The regional conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia, in particular, attracted solidarity from international allies with

similar goals, including Russia and the United States. However, the dwindling of U.S. regional stability obligations, combined with growing Russian resistance, has tipped the balance against pro-Western forces in Syria and Iraq and put them on the frontline in Yemen and Egypt (Rozsa, 2013).

## Chapter Five

### Synthesizing Communitarian and State Power

#### Struggle

##### 5.1 Survival through Sectarianism

It is no surprise that one of the utmost prominent tactics that most regimes in the region have been using in securing their own survival is the idea of sectarianism and ideologies. This is not only related to the Arab Spring, as this tactic has been dominant since even before 2011. Nonetheless, we were able to see new forms of this tactic post the Arab Spring era (Abdo, 2017). Through igniting a sense of fear and exclusion among certain sects/minorities/groups they were able to create a population that is managed by idea of the “survival of the fittest” between the different present sects (Hashemi and Postel, 2017). The notion of sectarianism, however, is not new to the Middle East or to the region in general. In Lebanon, for example, it has been dominant even before the independence (Abdo, 2017). It is the reason why Lebanon has its current set governmental institutions and laws. In Iraq on the other hand, the incline in sectarianism was mainly due to the U.S. invasion that was able to establish great divides between the different sects of the country (Abdo, 2017). However, in countries like Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, controlling their monarchies through creating ideologies of divide between the dominant Sunni sects in their countries and their Shia counterparts, has been dominant way before the Arab Spring uprisings (Salloukh, 2017). Nevertheless, the difference between post and pre-Arab Spring uprisings is that, even though these regimes were using sectarianism as a tactic, it has always been balanced and even “rejected” publicly in order to be able to control explicit sectarianism (Abdo, 2017). However, this changed with the occurrence of the Arab Spring events. If we take Iraq as an example, it was not actually the uprisings that made a shift in the state, yet it is considered the main step in the “explosion” of sectarianism in the region. In Iraq’s case, the U.S. invasion was able to demolish the Iraqi government back then and create a new political system that was enriched with divides based on sects and ideologies (Salloukh, 2017). This was mainly due to the fact that U.S. invasion assisted in weakening the state and

therefore it was easier for militias to come to light, as stated by Salloukh (2107). Iran was one of the first countries to contribute to these divides by supporting Shiite groups in Iraq. After the events in Iraq, the uprisings played a huge role in further widening these differences among the various sectarian groups in the region; transnationalized sectarian conflict and stimulated a new sectarianized discourse (Salloukh, 2017).

If we take a look back at the uprisings, both Syria and Bahrain were experiencing demonstrations across the various sects present in the country. In Bahrain, the government was powerful enough, along with its media, to create a fake image to the demonstrations whereby it was claimed that these riots were basically created by Iran and only the Shia were the ones protesting (Moore-Gilbert 2016). This resulted in the divide afterwards, whereby the Sunni population believed these claims and were not joining the demonstrations anymore. Thus, the image created came true. It should be noted that, in regard to Saudi Arabia's response to the uprisings, the government were hasty to increase sectarian divides in the country. This is because they believed that this strategy could act as counter-revolutionary, in order to decrease nay chances of the formation of non-sectarian groups and pro-democratic clusters in the country (Moore-Gilbert 2016). We even witnessed sectarian divides in countries that do not have a variety of different sects like Jordan and Egypt, whereby the discourse against Shia was heightened and more evident than ever on social platforms, as per Del Sarto et al.'s (2019) *Interregnum: The Regional Order in The Middle East And North Africa After 2011*. In parallel, extremist groups were also adding to the propaganda against Shia (groups similar to all Qaeda and associated with ISIS). On the other hand, we have Shia militias from all over the world (even from Pakistan and Afghanistan) who have been gathered to contribute to the battle that is going on in Syria, which added to the perspective and doubts of the Sunni dominated countries in the region (Moore-Gilbert 2016). Accordingly, it has been indicated that these regimes have transformed the idea of sects into a bubble of fear of losing or diminishing. As such, it contributed to the legitimacy of using violence to be able for each sect to protect itself.

While the securitization of sectarian ideologies in this way is intentional, once it creates hard social reality, self-fulfilling predictions are set up and fear-filled sectarian ethnicities have been established, as we have witnessed in Iraq and Syria, it ends up constructing self-perpetuating gang tensions and socioeconomic disparities



that are impossible to undo (Del Sarto et al., 2019). In Syria, the regime directly associated the demonstrators and riots with Sunni extremist groups, as Assad was claiming that these groups want to dominate the country and take control of its leadership, Del Sarto et al. (2019) continues to explain. In order to further assess this idea within its people, the regime started backing and helping Alawite villages in order to engrave in their minds that the Sunni groups were coming to take over their home. Thus, in this manner the regime was able to create more divisions by fixing sectarian uncertainties among marginal groups and again forming self-fulfilling revelations (Moore-Gilbert 2016). Definitely, this created more violence with groups from different sects battling against each other and even allowing massacres to take place. Today, the divides between the different groups based on their sects and ideologies are even more evident and publicly announced. The idea of previous Syrian nation that is characterized by its various sects and ethnicities has been erased. Accordingly, such tactics that are related to creating divides between sects in order to control the domestic political scenes of the regimes, comes with great risk (Moore-Gilbert 2016). Even though Assad was quick to call for his Iranian allies to come to the rescue, it will be hard for the regime to control now the abundance of the Shia militias in the country. Moreover, in Iraq, the government is seen as purely sectarian (even by some Shia groups), which erases any kind of legitimacy given to it (Moore-Gilbert 2016). Also, establishing this kind of mind set within the nation's communities lead to creating a society that is based on fear and believes in religious identities only. This leads to the diminishing of the ideas of "individual rights, citizenship and inclusivity, working to the disadvantage of ethnic and religious minorities in the longer term" (Del Sarto et al., 2019). In the cases of Syria and Bahrain, both regimes were able to create massive divides and fears between the different communities to the extent that it is still not known whether they will be able to re-stabilize their society that has been occupied with doubt and uncertainty (Moore-Gilbert 2016).

At a regional level, we have seen how states and non-state actors have also jumped on the train of sectarianism, especially that sectarianism allows them to reach populations outside their own borders. This is mainly because when politics engages in sectarian conflicts, it allows states to meddle in the conflicts at hand in the form of "protecting" the rights of their sect. If we take the example of Saudi Arabia, they were able to directly engage in the conflicts taking place in Yemen, Iraq and

Syria, under the notion of providing assistance to their same-sect counterparts in each of these countries (Hashemi and Postel, 2017). On the other hand, we have the Shia sect that is led by Iran and Hezbollah in the region. This side of the conflict was also able to create an “army” and mobilize armed forces to be able to create as much backup for their interventions, while accusing their rivals (mainly Saudi Arabia) of supporting extremism through mobilizing Wahhabis and Takfiris. Here we can see the shift in the regional game, whereby Iran was always trying to limit the sectarian difference between Sunni and Shia through its “resistance axis narrative” before the 2011 era n (Haddad 2011, Malmvig 2019). We can see that Iran was trying as much as possible to diminish any sectarian referrals to its “battle”, which has completely changed in the recent years after the pattern of the Arab Uprising took place. Even Turkey was always against identifying with any sectarian conflict, which has also changed over the past years n (Haddad 2011, Malmvig 2019). We are identifying a lot of regional powers that have shifted their language and have become stricter in creating a sectarian narrative to be able to gain more power. Therefore, we have an expanded number of regional forces using a more basic sectarian vocabulary, loosening what was once a well-established "sectarian taboo" or non-sectarian rule that prohibited the use of violent extremism (VE) in the region.

Interventions and mobilization between different states have led to an increased type of tension across the region. Through creating an “army” under one sect that goes beyond one state, the regional powers were able to demolish any set limits that determine once determined the boundaries between the states, since with the ongoing sectarian era, various states and none-state actors are able to connect transnationally because of the powerful identity dynamics (Hinnebusch 2016). However, even though it may seem that such mobilizations are helping these regional counterparts in gaining more power, they are also deepening the intensity of the conflict which creates more intensified battles and the needs for additional help. Here, it could be noted that the conflict can be seen similar to the Arab Cold War, with the opposition between pan-Arabism and Socialist Arab ideologies. Nonetheless, the idea of allowing religious identities to play a crucial factor in today’s rivalry is creating a new conflict dynamic which is way more dangerous than the rivalries that occurred during the 1950s and 1960s (Hinnebusch 2016). This is because, when “the Other is framed as a sectarian adversary by securitizing actors, the latter must be battled or even destroyed not because of competing geopolitical motives or contradictory

variants of *raison d'état*, but because of the very personality and/or values of the enemy” (Del Sarto et al., 2019). "Objective" war goals tend to recede into the foreground as wars are presented in terms of the protection of individual racial or religious communities, and it is more difficult to seek de-escalation or reconciliation. Identity securitization can also trigger new tensions, as “securitized identities include paranoia and victimization that can be readily manipulated further down the road” (Del Sarto et al., 2019).

## **5.2 The Intra-Sunni Conflict**

Nonetheless, simplifying the regional dilemma as a basic rivalry between Sunni and Shia, cancels out various other factors and important dimensions to the conflict, which may lead to unrealistic policy approaches like separating states based on sectarian lines. Other factors contributing to the current conflicts are evident, and they overlap with the sectarian discourse.

Regional relationships and enmities, rather than sectarian allegiance or affiliation, appear to be motivated by practical geopolitical objectives and balance of power calculations. For example, Iran, Hezbollah and the Assad regime are aligned with "Sunni" Hamas once again, just as the strong relations between the Syrian government and Tehran are strongly embedded in Syria's geostrategic significance for Iran's deterrence of Israel (Del Sarto et al., 2019). The Syrian government may be ruled by the Alawites, but it has close relations with Christians, Druze and other racial minorities, and the wealthy Sunni business elite has effectively co-opted and adopted some of the Sunni religious traditions, while at the same time also identifying as secularly oriented (Phillips, 2015). Likewise, sectarian allegiances clearly have no evidential support in order to explain why many Arab states are pushing closer to Israel, whereas widespread interpretations of dangers are essential. While Saudi Arabia is a regional Sunni coalition leader, Qatar and Turkey will definitely disagree, and both tend to retain separate foreign policies and relations with Iran. This, in brief, makes it impossible today to talk about any consistent "Sunni camp" or opposed Shia coalition in regional Middle Eastern politics. Thus, at a time when links to basic Arab standards or pan-Arab ideologies have lost much of their transnational relevance and ability to mobilize, sectarian comparisons seem to give a better sense of legitimacy and shared sectarian heritage that can be exploited by state and sub-state players in their strategic actions and regional competitions of influence. It is impossible to scale back suspicions of the sectarian "Other" once

released, and regional tensions of identity may render more unsolvable and ingrained (Malmvig, 2016). Yet, in the current Middle East, Sunni-Shia tensions are only one of many cross-cutting axes of hostility and cooperation, and non-sectarian influences deeply affect and reduce coalition alliances and enmities.

May Darwich's book, "Threats and Alliances in the Middle East: Saudi and Syrian Policies in a Turbulent Region" adds value to the literature on the Middle East's threat-alliance relationship. She uses case studies of Saudi Arabia and Syria to identify puzzles not adequately explained by either realism or constancy, building on classic debates over the relative importance of physical/material and ideational factors in driving foreign policy behavior in MENA. For example, neither mainstream theory can explain why Islamist Saudi Arabia saw Islamist Iran as the main threat during the Iran-Iraq war, rather than the militarily stronger (anti-Islamist) Iraqi Ba'thist regime. She follows those who recognize that both methods and ideational threats influence alliance formation, but she goes further to theorize the circumstances under which regimes focus on improving military or ideational threats in addressing such puzzles: While the military threat (from superior contiguous power) is obvious, she contends that those with closely related identities may face increased threat because they challenge each other's ontological security—their self-identities. However, the scope of such a threat relies on whether identities are flexible enough to allow foreign policies (and alliances) that meet the situation's security needs or are highly constrained: for example, Egypt after Nasser had the adaptability to replace Egyptian national identity for Pan Arabism to meet its physical security needs, whereas Saudi Arabia, according to Darwich, has no such flexibility. She argues that realist-style explanations of Saudi animosity based on Hamas' alliance with Iran overlook the fact that Hamas had little choice due to Saudi hostility, and that this was deeply embedded in a struggle to comprehend what their common identity meant: for Hamas, Islamism meant opposition to Israel, while Saudi Arabia had come to place its Islamic leadership on promotion of the Islamic state. In the case of Saudi Arabia, one could contend that it is various versions of the shared identity with opponents, specifically divergences over Islam's implications for foreign policy behavior, that the Saudis found threatening, not so much similarity of identity with other Islamist actors. Thus, the Saudis' similarity of identity to Hamas had not prevented Saudi support for the latter for many years, and enmity between the two arose only after Riyadh chose to support a peace agreement with Israel. For

decades, the Muslim Brotherhood and the Saudi government were allies, and the two only split when the Brotherhood questioned the Saudi government's support for the United States during the Gulf War in 1990. As a result, it appears that rivals' claims to lead the shared identity community in opposing directions is what fuels ontological insecurity and enmity. Saudi Arabia's ontological insecurity appears to stem from its inability to reconcile its claim to Islamic leadership with its close ties to the United States.

### **5.3 Change in the regional dynamics**

The new narrative that occurred during 2011, with the rise of actors cheering for removing authoritarian regimes, while having on the other side actors who were completely against this new trend created a new status quo. Whether the actors were with or against, it all depended on how this new trend can help them to either expand regionally or if it will cause danger to their established powerful regimes. Even though the Arab uprisings did not have a religious or ideological aspect, Morsi's defeat caused a new shift. With Morsi's downfall, the region engaged in an ideological clash, with the main players Qatar and Turkey against UAE, KSA and Egypt (Gause, 2014). Since all the players are Sunni leaders, this conflict was perceived as an intra-Sunni Cold war. This cold war mimics the Arab Cold War that took place during the 1950s-1960s. In that period, regional powers were also interfering in the domestic politics of other countries in the region to be able to secure their won power as tensions were arising between revolutionary republicans and conservative monarchies. Similarly, after 2011, even though the camps are different, the conflict remains around securing one's regime and expanding their regional dominance. During 2011, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt were able to rise again as the "monarchies" of the country experienced their worst downfall (Gause, 2014). The Muslim Brotherhood played it right in positioning themselves as the right transition from the oppressive Barakat family. Turkey and Qatar were the first to support this transition. Doha and Ankara, though, did not portray them as a product of intellectual unity, but instead as attempts to endorse mainstream interests and encourage political reform. For example, Ahmed Davutoglu, then Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs, announced a partnership between the two countries, described as "the Axis of Democracy," promoting a "new order" for the area as a whole (Shadid, 2011). On the other side, the camp formed by KSA and UAE was the number one advocate for any authoritarian regime as they believe the downfall of

one regime might increase pressure on theirs. For this reason, they fought the Muslim Brotherhood whether in Tunisia or Egypt by financially supporting the actors that were against them. Yet again, this was not outlined as an anti-democracy stance, but as a necessity to establish security and fight extremism (Shadid, 2011). As it has already been mentioned, regional powers have always intervened in the domestic politics of neighboring countries under the umbrella of ideology. For example, in the past few decades, while Egypt supported Fatah, Turkey and Qatar backed Hamas. In comparison to the post-2011 era, we can see a similar scenario between these two camps being implemented over Libya and Syria. What was different in the Syrian conflict is the occurrence of transnational alliances, yet between different kind of actors (Del Sarto et al., 2019). The ideological concept started to become more evident with greater powers forming alliances with actors that support the same ideology. Again, we can see that Turkey and Qatar are fully supporting the Muslim Brotherhood, while KSA is funding rebel groups that are either considered Salafis or seculars. As for Libya, two camps composed of four countries were the most influential in igniting the current ongoing conflict there (Del Sarto et al., 2019). The camps are divided between Tripoli, which is backed by Turkey and Qatar, and the other is Tobruk which is supported by UAE and Egypt. When we talk about regional power meddling in their neighbors' domestic politics, it means that these powers are financially and military supporting their allies in these countries. As such, both Libya and Syria are an example of a proxy war lead by different regional powers under the notion of ideology to be able to gain more control and expand its power even further. It is also surprising that in this specific dispute, certain regional forces which are foreign to this intra-Sunni ideological rivalry, such as Iran or Israel, have maintained a low profile. This intellectual struggle (or perhaps this intrusion and involvement in other nations' constitutional systems) is, as mentioned above, reflective of the dispute between the status quo and revisionist interests half a century ago (Del Sarto et al., 2019).

Del Sarto et al. (2019) indicates that since 2011, however, curious improvements have emerged. The once revolutionary Iran, is now maintaining "status quo traditional" structures. Indeed, Tehran rejected the Kurdish secession referendum in Iraq and actively backed Baghdad's gaining back possession of its territories through its anti-ISIS movement from 2014 onwards. In Syria, Iranians backed the government and fiercely opposed the intervention in Syrian internal affairs through

the military assistance of foreign forces to the rebel camp. However, the intervention of Saudi Arabia in Yemen and the funding of the Emiratis for Yemeni nationalist movements, the requirements put on Qatar to lift the boycott of Turkey's aggressive military operations in northern Syria, can all be read as indicators that the “once-conservative/status quo” camp is increasingly likely to take chances and threaten the present system and its structures.

## **5.4 Study Limitations**

### **Limited access to data**

The research could have been more credible if interviews were conducted with experts in the field. Due to this limited access, some points and arguments mentioned throughout the thesis could have been explored further through the lens of those experts, by providing us with their current insights. Nonetheless, this does not decrease the validity or reliability of the research, as all the arguments proposed were based on journals and books relevant to the field of study.

### **Time constraints**

The time available to study a hypothesis and to determine change over time is limited by the deadline of submission. In the field of Social Sciences, very little can be “proven”. That is why this thesis does not intend to prove anything, but instead it explores the validity of the proposed hypothesis.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Conclusion**

Over the decades since World War II, the Middle East has undergone several geopolitical transformations, some of which were fueled by regional political and economic realities, but the most significant changes were brought about by international actors, first the Europeans, then the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Today, the M.E. is undergoing yet an additional change, possibly the most significant in the known turbulent political history of the region. Despite the fact that Russia and the U.S. are involved in the area's "trouble spots", the current transformation is primarily influenced by national and regional elements. The Arab Spring, the crash of the current political order that followed, and the continuing civil wars are the catalysts for a novel M.E. political order to emerge. It is serious to observe how the M.E. has progressed up to this point in order to understand what is speeding this transition and what direction it is likely to put the region on in the future. The proposition here is that the most significant cultural element to consider is how the end of the Cold War, and the subsequent era of American centrality, sparked a power shift in the world. The engagement at the regional and international levels in the current civil wars will also be contended to be the most frequently investigated factor influencing the new Middle East. To be able to consider policy scenarios and approaches for bringing the region from turmoil to a semblance of stability, somehow, we must first comprehend both the historical trajectories that have brought us to this point, as well as the current state of affairs.

Despite the fact that the Cold War has ended since almost three decades ago, its legacy continues to have an influence on the M.E. region. The arrival of this era of world power rivalry coincided with the independence of most Arab countries from the clutches of European colonialism, and it is now necessary to understand the region. As they continued to struggle to facilitate the shift from colony to independent state, each of these newly formed Arab countries had unique security, political, and economic needs. Fear of European colonial expansionism was the omnipotent security concern for most Arab states. There was also the perception that the establishment of Israel was a form of neo-colonialism. Various countries, especially the ones that do not have oil



resources like Syria, were challenged with economic hardships which allowed them to look for external powers to assist them in enhancing their situation.

The United States and the Soviet Union both saw the evolving Arab scenery as hospitable environment for competing with each other's international presence. Each world power competed for Arab allies in attempt to acquire a regional advantage and encompass what they saw as their opponent's devious aspirations. The modern Middle East arose from the meeting of the needs of new nation Arab countries for outside assistance and the supply of that assistance from the United States and the Soviet Union. Arab states requested and obtained support from great powers during their most helpless time of transformation from colonial vassal states to independent nations. Conservative monarchies, such as Jordan and Saudi Arabia, aligned themselves with the U.S., putting their domestic validity at risk to guarantee regime security. Syria, Libya, Iraq, and Egypt, all of whose legitimacy was based on defying European and American norms, allied with the Soviet Union.

Non-Arab states were also involved in the Cold War, though they were not as highly contentious by the major powers as Arab states were. Turkey, Iran, and Israel have all shifted their allegiances to the west, putting them squarely in the American camp. As a result of the convergence of the Cold War's onset with the security and economic needs of independent Arab states, the region began to resemble the bipolar world. The Arab Cold War, which reflected the world power conflict, was proof of this. The Arab world was split in two as a result of this, with the “Soviet-backed, leftist-leaning Arab nationalist camp led by Egypt's Nasser pitted against the more conservative US-backed camp, which included Saudi Arabia and Jordan” (Kerr, 1971).

The most essential element of the Cold War era is that it gave birth to a Middle East political order that lasted from the 1940s until the Soviet Union's downfall in the early 1990s (Primakov, 2009). It is the breakdown of this order, as well as the resulting displacements, that best explains how changes in global geopolitics have influenced the current power struggles in the Middle East today.

The Arab revolt has reshaped what began as a version of the regional hegemony struggle between forces affiliated with and against U.S. interference in Iraq, into an unparalleled sectarian bi-polarization of the regional system. In the interstate power struggle, sectarian bi-polarization was matched by a change in the socially constructed balance away from moderates within both Shia and Sunni Islam, as well as polarizations dividing several identity-fragmented Arab states.

Why has sectarianism spread so quickly in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, approaching hegemony? Using sectarianism in the intense – even existential – power struggles ignited by the uprising is part of the answer. At the trans-state level, sectarian governance competition encourages outbidding by radical sectarian actors, marginalizing moderates, a successful practice that is then widely copied, deepening sectarianism. Similarly, rival states in regional power struggles imitate each other in what is known as "tit for tat sectarianism" – when one side mirrors the struggle in sectarian terms. But what renders this instrumentalization of sectarianism, which had modest results outside of Iraq prior to the uprising, so effective? First, nations have become much more absorbent than they were previously to the expansion of sectarianism via extensive initially transnational linkages – preacher debates, advocacy group networks, and militarized movements. Second, rival regional powers' unparalleled level of competitor interference in failed states results in proxy wars that are trained and supported by like-minded sects. Third, in deteriorating nations, civil war brutality and security obstacles polarize identities, favoring sectarian ideologies over more integrated ones. As a result, states and communities are vulnerable to unprecedented sectarian dispersion due to similar structural factors (state failure, civil war) coupled with trans-state stimulation, amplification, and invasion.

Countries are being driven to pick sides in the region's Sunni-Shia bipolarization as a result of the deepened regional power struggle fueled by sectarian dialogue and proxy wars. The main emphasis has been on the Sunni-Shia rivalry, which has dominated the ideological power struggle. The key "tool" used by regional forces to secure mass subordination in their respective peripheries, which are traditionally poor states, has been sectarian ideology (Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, Syria, and Libya). Despite the fact that sectarian ideology tends to be a major source of mobilization, alliances, and conflicts, it is often debated if these ideological drivers are influenced by communal ideologies or state interests. Rising Sunni-Sunni tensions indicate that mobilizations and ideological appeals are formulated mainly to serve the interests of the state and ruling class, rather than by strict religious principles. As a result, determining whether the conflict in the MENA area is motivated by identity or by state is important for international affairs in order to accurately assess the conflict's dynamics and possible evolution.

To answer this question, this research re-examined identity-conflict assumptions such as Shia-Sunni struggle before deconstructing such assumptions and demonstrating the prevalence of intra-sectarian Sunni conflict. As a result, a new narrative of regional power struggles is centered on states' political economic interests rather than identity or communal solidarity has emerged.

The thesis ultimately was able to answer the following research question: What are the drivers of the intra-Sunni struggle? Through the proposed findings, the thesis indicated that the conflict is a state-based power struggle with intra-communitarian struggle acting as the main “weapon” or driver to help the powerful states in achieving their goal in the region. The research question mainly focused on post-Arab Spring policy orientation of three Sunni regional powers (Egypt, KSA, Turkey) on key political events storming the Middle East and North African (MENA) countries (Syria, Libya, and Iraq). The findings took into consideration the following objectives: (1) demonstrating how states manipulate (subjects) religious groups (objects) into pursuing their own state-interests, (2) identifying the main reasons behind intra-Sunni rivalry, (3) showcasing that constructivism/communitarianism solely fails to provide a concrete analysis about the regional order, and (4) establishing a basis for future research that indicates that the main conflict is a combination between power struggle and ideological assertion in some cases.

## Bibliography

- Abdallah, M. (2011). *Interregional challenges of Islamist extremist movements in North Africa*. Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies.
- Abdo, G. (2017). *The New Sectarianism. The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a Sunni Divide*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ariane Tabatabai, A. T. (2017). What the Iran-Iraq War Tells Us about the Future of the Iran Nuclear Deal. *International Security*, 152–185.
- Bilgin, P. (2015). Region, Security, Regional Security: “Whose Middle East?” Revisited. In E. Monier, *Regional Insecurity After the Arab Uprisings* (pp. 19-39). London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- Byman, D. (2015). *Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist Movement: What Everyone Needs to Know*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Call, C. (2011). Beyond the 'failed state': Toward conceptual alternatives. *European Journal of International Relations*, 303-326.
- Dalacoura, K. (235-248). Islamist Movements as Non-state Actors and their Relevance to International Relations. *Non-state Actors in World Politics*, 2001.
- Dalay, G. (2017, September 2017). *Break-up of the Middle East: Will we see a new regional order?* Retrieved from Middle East Eye: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/big-story/break-middle-east-will-we-see-new-regional-order>
- Dallas-Feeney, C. P. (2019, May 28). *Violent Non-State Actors in the Middle East: Origins and Goals*. Retrieved from E-International Relations: <https://www.e-ir.info/2019/05/28/violent-non-state-actors-in-the-middle-east-origins-and-goals/>
- Darwich, M. (2019). *Threats and Alliances in the Middle East: Saudi and Syrian Policies in a Turbulent Region*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.

- Dazi-Héni1, F. (2016). Can We Speak of a New Regional Order Driven by the Gulf States after the Arab Spring? *The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and Other Actors*, 237-240.
- Etzioni, A. (2004). *From Empire to Community: A New Approach to International Relations*. London: St. Martin's Press.
- Faghihi, R. (2020, October 13). *Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict raises spectre of 'pan-Turkism' in Iran*. Retrieved from Middle East Eye: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/azerbaijan-armenia-iran-conflict-pan-turkism-azeris>
- Foundation, J. (2010). Salafists Challenge al-Azhar for Ideological Supremacy in Egypt. *Terrorism Monitor*.
- Frederic Wehrey, D. E. (2009). Iran and Its Non-State Partners: Assessing Linkages and Control. In *In Dangerous But Not Omnipotent: Exploring the Reach and Limitations of Iranian Power in the Middle East* (pp. 81-128). Santa Monica: RAND Corporation. Retrieved May 28, 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.72>.
- Group, I. C. (2014). *Annual Report Launch*. Brussels: International Crisis Group.
- Gvosdev, N. (2005). Communitarian Realism. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 1591-1606.
- Haddad, F. (2011). *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Halliday, F. (2005). *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics and Ideology (The Contemporary Middle East)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hellyer, H. (2012, August 2). *Foreign Policy*. Retrieved from THE MIDDLE EAST CHANNEL: The battle for al-Azhar: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/08/02/the-battle-for-al-azhar/>
- Hinnebusch, R. (2016). The Sectarian Revolution in the Middle East. *R/evolutions: Global Trends & Regional Issues*, 120-152.

- Huntington, S. P. (2011). *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- III, F. G. (2009). *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.
- III, F. G. (2014). *Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War*. Doha: Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper.
- Jason Seawright, J. G. (2008). Case Selection Techniques in Case Study Research: A Menu of Qualitative and Quantitative Options. *Political Research Quarterly*, 294–308.
- Jones, T. C. (2012). America, Oil, and War in the Middle East. *The Journal of American History*, 208-218.
- Josselin, D. W. (2001). *Non-State Actors in World Politics*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Katz, E. (2019, February 19). *Brookings*. Retrieved from ORDER FROM CHAOS: Islam as statecraft: How governments use religion in foreign policy: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/02/19/islam-as-statecraft-how-governments-use-religion-in-foreign-policy/>
- Kedar, M. (2021, January 4). *The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies*. Retrieved from Saudi Arabia vs. the Muslim Brotherhood: <https://besacenter.org/saudi-arabia-muslim-brotherhood/>
- Kerr, M. H. (1971). *The Arab Cold War: Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir and His Rivals, 1958-1970*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lipp, A. (2019). The Muslim Brotherhood: Exploring divergent views in Saudi Arabia and Qatar. *Graduate Theses and Dissertations*. Iowa, United States of America: Iowa State University Digital Repository.
- Malmvig, H. (2016). *Coming in from the Cold: How we may take sectarian identity politics seriously in the Middle East without playing to the tunes of regional power elites*. Retrieved from Project on Middle East Political Science: <https://pomeps.org/coming-in-from-the-cold-how-we-may-take-sectarian-identity-politics-seriously-in-the-middle-east-without-playing-to-the-tunes-of-regional-power-elites>

- Moore-Gilbert, K. (2016, January 19). *Sectarian Divide and Rule in Bahrain: A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy?* Retrieved from Middle East Institute:  
<https://www.mei.edu/publications/sectarian-divide-and-rule-bahrain-self-fulfilling-prophecy>
- Morrice, D. (2000). The Liberal-Communitarian Debate in Contemporary Political Philosophy and Its Significance for International Relations. *Review of International Studies*, 233-251.
- Mubarak, A. (2009). *Religion and Politics: Integration, Separation and Conflict: Relations to power of religion and Politics*. Retrieved from Irenee.net:  
[http://www.irenees.net/bdf\\_fiche-analyse-884\\_en.html](http://www.irenees.net/bdf_fiche-analyse-884_en.html)
- Phillips, C. (2015). Sectarianism and conflict in Syria. *Third World Quarterly*, 357-376.
- Postel, N. H. (2017). Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East. *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 1-13.
- Primakov, Y. (2009). *Russia and the Arabs: Behind the Scenes in the Middle East from the Cold War to the Present*. New York: Basic Books.
- Qandil, M. (2018, May 18). *Fikra Forum - An Initiative of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy: The Muslim Brotherhood and Saudi Arabia: From Then to Now*. Retrieved from Washington Institute:  
<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/muslim-brotherhood-and-saudi-arabia-then-now>
- Raffaella A. Del Sarto, H. M. (2019). *INTERREGNUM: THE REGIONAL ORDER IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA AFTER 2011*. Roma: Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture: Mapping geopolitical shifts, regional order and domestic transformations (MENARA).
- Rebolj, B. (2013). The case study as a type of qualitative research. *Journal of Contemporary Educational Studies*, 28-43.
- Ridder, H.-G. (2012). Case Study Research. Design and Methods. *German Journal of Research in Human Resource Management*, 93-95.

- Rózsa, E. N. (2013). Geo-Strategic Consequences of the Arab Spring. *19 Papers IEMed - joint series with EuroMeSCo* (pp. 6-28). Barcelona: European Institute of the Mediterranean.
- Ryan Crocker, H. I. (2019). Saudi Arabian-Turkish Rivalry in the Middle East. *Middle East Policy*, 5-25.
- Salamey, I. (2016). *The Decline of Nation-States after the Arab Spring: The Rise of Communitocracy*. London: Routledge.
- Salloukh, B. F. (2013). The Arab Uprisings and the Geopolitics of the. *The International Spectator*, 32–46.
- Salloukh, B. F. (2017). Overlapping Contests and Middle East International Relations: The Return of the Weak Arab State. *Political Science and Politics*, 660-663.
- Shadid, A. (2011, September 18). *Middle East - Turkey Predicts Alliance With Egypt as Regional Anchors*. Retrieved from The New York Times: <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/19/world/middleeast/turkey-predicts-partnership-with-egypt-as-regional-anchors.html?smid=tw-share>
- Stein, E. (2017). Ideological Codependency and Regional Order: Iran, Syria, and the Axis of Refusal. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 676-680.
- Tamer Badawi, O. A.-S. (2018, March 19). *Mismatched Expectations: Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood After the Arab Uprisings*. Retrieved from Malcom H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center: <https://carnegie-mec.org/2019/03/19/mismatched-expectations-iran-and-muslim-brotherhood-after-arab-uprisings-pub-78621>
- Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods*. Thousand Oaks: CA: Sage.
- Yorulmazlar, B. A. (2016). State, region and order: geopolitics of the Arab Spring,. *Third World Quarterly*, 2259-2273.