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Communitarian Politics in the Middle East and The Sunni-Shia Balance of Power

by
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Dedication

In the journey of life, there are both bad and good days. Tough roads will be crossed for smiles to appear on good days. Throughout my journey, a mix of people will be there – some will leave memories, and some will always be there for me to count on.

When there was nobody for me, you were there – you sacrificed time, money, and many other things. My work, as my whole past, present, and future achievements will be in dedication to you, my family, father Ali and mother Houwaida.

You are what makes everything worthwhile. You are the constant. Thank you!

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I will not forget anyone who had faith in my skills and helped me reach who I am today.

Finally, I dedicate this work to a soul who did not leave before making me ready to face all life's obstacles, my Grandfather Hussein!

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Communitarian Politics in the Middle East and The Sunni-Shia Balance of Power

Bashar Zaiter

Abstract

Sectarian contention has shaped Middle Eastern politics for centuries, in addition to the historic grievances over the right to leadership succession and power. It has been extended to contemporary disputes that have deepened economic, social, and political rivalry among sectarian communities in the region. The current Saudi-Iranian standoff is among the most serious divisions, prompting each side to assert regional control and influence through proxies. The outcome has been a raging and protracted social conflict, expanding across multiple countries. This thesis maps existing sectarian conflict drivers within the context of Azar's Protracted Social Conflict (PSC). It conducts a Transnational Conflict analysis (TNC) to reveal the multi-level drivers rooted in contemporary Sunni-Shia sectarian divide. The different TNC levels are closely examined in light of transnational proxy armed actors (Hezbollah, Islamic State, and Qaeda) and intra-state national actors (in Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen). Particular examination focuses on Velayat-e faqih as an ideological catalyst insinuating a disruption of the traditional Middle Eastern Sunni-dominant balance of power. This thesis seeks to identify the root causes of the sectarian-based PSC and to explore potential mitigation propositions.

Keywords: Sectarian conflict, Sunni, Shia, Velayat-e faqih, Political domination, Power distribution, Protracted social conflict, PSC, Transnational conflict, TNC, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, Conflict prevention.

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Chapter One

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The Sunni and Shia are the main sects of Islam, with 15% of Muslims being Shiite and 85% being Sunni, but these numbers also include various sub groups in the sects. For instance, the Shia sect includes the Alawites, Ismaili, and Itna'ashari (Hall, 2016; Luomi, 2008). Sunnis are mostly found in the Arab Gulf, North Africa, South East Asia (particularly Malaysia and Indonesia), and Central Asia. On the other hand, most Shia make up a significant share of the populations of Iran, Lebanon, Iraq, Bahrain, Kuwait, Yemen, Syria, and Azerbaijan (Council on Foreign Relations, 2014). It is important to note that Shiites make up approximately 90% of the population in Iran (Nasr, 2006). Even though both Shia and Sunni believe in the divinity of the Quran, they have differing opinions on the words and actions of Prophet Muhammad. Sunnis believe in the power of God in the physical world, but Shia focus more on rewards in the afterlife and are therefore more inclined towards martyrdom as a pathway to the afterlife (Hall, 2016). This theological divide has created a wedge between the Shia and Sunni, and each side refuses to accept the legitimacy of the other's faith.

The arguments between the two sects are generally complicated, but mainly center around the fact that the Sunni believe that Prophet Muhammad's friend Abu Bakr was the rightful leader of the caliph, while the Shia believe that the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law Ali was the rightful heir (Hall, 2016). Abu Bakr held the title first after the

Prophet died, while Ali held it after two other caliphs were assassinated. Ali's rulership was beset by numerous mutinies and wars which increased the tensions between the followers of Ali (the Shia) and those who ultimately founded tribal rulership that was based on Umayyad (Salamey and Othman, 2011). However, the split significantly occurred over who should come after the above two leaders. This is because the Sunni mainly argue that they follow the ways of Muhammad, but the Shia argue that Ali should have rightfully been the first caliph, and it is his descendants who should be considered the true leaders of Islam. Therefore, the transition from a caliphate to a monarchy, as well as the divisions of political and religious authorities under the leadership of the Umayyad, caused the Shia to refute the legitimacy of the previous caliphs as well as the entire Umayyad – they insisted on the supreme authority belonging to Ali's successors (Salamey and Othman, 2011). As a result, the Shia were politically subjugated as they were placed outside the rulership of the Umayyad and all succeeding rulers, including those of the cotemporary Sunni-dominated Arab countries (Bazzi, 2010). Since then, Shia communities have been largely perceived as a challenge to different ruling empires in the Islamic world. Consequently, Sunni monarchs have viewed the Shia suspiciously and violently repressed their efforts to gain power. However, the Shia have survived and adhered to their idea of a lineal association that hails directly from Prophet Muhammad. This means that initially, the Shia and Sunni were separated due to political reasons, and the conflict became religious in later years. The political conflict was aggravated by years of fighting, war, and the Sunni oppression of the Shia (Luomi, 2008). The sects have consequently witnessed protracted violence,

war, repression, and power succession conflicts, and have never reconciled their differences since the Prophet's death (Hall, 2016).

The death of Al-Husain ibn Ali, a grandson of Prophet Muhammad, also exacerbated the conflict between the two sects. The latter is an important figure in Islam because apart from being Prophet Muhammad's grandson, he was also the third Shia imam. Before his death, the Umayyad ruler Mu'awiya selected his son Yazid as his successor, in defiance to what was originally agreed upon in the Hasan-Mu'awiya treaty (Madelung et al., n.d.). Once Mu'awiya passed away, his son demanded that Al-Husain pledges allegiance to him; but the latter refused, knowing well that this would cost him his life. Al-Husain therefore went to take refuge in Mecca in AH 60 (Dakake, 2012). While living in Mecca, he received pledges of allegiance and requests for help from the people of Kufa; which prompted him to embark on a journey to the latter city. However, he was intercepted by Yazid's army on the way and was killed by Yazid in the Battle of Karbala in AH 61 along with his family members and companions, while the women and children were taken captive (Madelung et al., n.d.). The people became angry about Al-Husain's death, and their rallying cries helped to cement his title as a martyr and to undermine the legitimacy of the Umayyad caliphate (Robinson, 2010).The move by the caliph was supposed to quell the claims to leadership by the Shia; but instead, Hussein's martyrdom at Karbala became the central story in Shia tradition and fueled more conflict – his martyrdom fueled Shia movements and was a deciding factor in the Islam ad Shia history (Hazleton, 2010). The disagreements between the Shia and Sunni sects have thus split the Muslim community and stirred the struggle across various Islamic dynasties, especially between the predominantly Sunni rulership and the suppressed

Shia community. However, since the split over the disagreement, the Shias have established a distinct conception of Islamic laws and practices (Hall, 2016).

The fact that the Shia were oppressed after the Prophet's death has played a critical role in shaping the relationship between the two Islamic sects. In spite of – and because of – their history of oppression, a typical attribute among the Shia believers is the idea of regaining power. This is because Shiism was established as a result of a power struggle, and it has never lost this original objective. This has consequently made the Shia a significantly powerful group in the Islamic world and has shaped social stratification in modern Muslim-majority states.

The current Saudi-Iranian standoff is based on this Sunni-Shia animosity and on their battle for domination in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia (competing for the leadership of the Sunnis) and Iran (competing for the leadership of the Shias) have utilized sectarian mobilization to pursue their respective power expansion ambitions in the region. Sectarianism refers to the classification of groups or individuals along identity or religious lines (Hashemi, 2011). In this case, sectarianism refers to the divisions along religious identity between the Sunni and Shia. This conflict has spilled over to sectarian-mixed countries in the region such as Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq (Salamey and Othman, 2011). Furthermore, the current conflict has also led to the creation of international jihadi networks which implicate other countries in the Middle East, as well as in international security. Armed militants have also joined the conflict, motivated by the goal of cleansing the faith. These militants can easily trigger a broader conflict that can affect the region as well as the world. Even though numerous Sunni and Shia clerics have attempted to find a resolution and reduce tensions between the sects, it is

conceivable that the conflict will result in escalating violence and threaten international peace and security.

The Ayatollah Khomeini therefore used Velayat-e faqih as a tool for gaining control in the Middle East (Khomeini, 2005). The Iranian ruler argued for Shia ideology based on Velayat-e faqih, noting that the politics of the region should be governed by religious leaders so as to defeat the imperialist plan to control the Middle East. As such, Khomeini propagated this ideology and used proxies in countries such as Lebanon, Yemen, and Iraq to promote it.

Nasr (2007a) notes that what is important for understanding the modern sectarian identities and conflicts is that they are not based on events that happened after the Prophet's death, but rather that they have been shaped lately based on the rule that being a Sunni or Shia defines who has power and authority, and who does not. Nasr (2007a) further argues that Arab nationalism has proven biased against the Shia, and that it is usually the Sunni who capitalize on and exploit their sectarian position rather than the Shia. This is because the Shia have always wanted to belong, but have almost always been denied a chance at power. However, it is essential to remember that even though history alone cannot explain the region's current political situation – or the emerging identities in the Middle Eastern Muslim countries – it is critical to take history into account due to the modern-day references to the past, which are symbolically important in the memories of both sects.

This research aims to examine the persistent and contemporary context of this sectarian conflict, to reveal aspects of contentions, and to present possible resolutions. The conflict at hand precludes major aspects of Azar's characterization of a Protracted Social

Conflict (PSC) and can be analyzed through the Transnational Conflict (TNC) matrix, especially that it has raged for several centuries without a clear end in sight. Despite originating in the same Islamic religion, such non-resolvable feuds have primarily centered on the legitimacy and the share of power (Salamey and Othman, 2011). Thus, over the years, protracted differences and recurring violence have set each community on a separate path to develop its own unique and separable culture, doctrines, and schools of thought. This is because sectarian differences have always been linked to power and to resources, and to the desire to gain a rightful place in Muslim world. Therefore, while some Sunni accuse the Shia of causing trouble and unrest, the Shia, on their part, also feel that they have been denied their rightful place in the system.

Hence, this thesis attempts to reveal aspects of contemporary irreconcilabilities and sources of ongoing tensions, and ultimately to explore aspects for mitigation and conflict management. The thesis will also use case studies from Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen in order to demonstrate how Iran has used the Velayat-e Faqih ideology in order to gain more influence in these countries. The case study countries were selected because Iran has proxies in these countries (Hezbollah, PMU, and Houthis), who propagate Iran's ideas using various means. Ultimately, the study discusses how the presence of the proxies in the said countries has affected political and social operations within these countries.

1.2 Sectarian Conflicts and Contemporary Power Struggle

Throughout history, religion has played a central role in causing conflict, especially when it is used as the main form of identity among people or countries. This scenario

applies to the Sunni and Shia, as conflict was born due to differences in tribal affiliation and power struggles after Prophet Muhammad died (Hall, 2016). Throughout the centuries, the conflict evolved based on various factors and conflicting variables. However, in recent times, the conflict has been shaped by global, regional, ethnic, economic, and social drivers, with each sect seeking to gain dominance, especially in the Middle East. As such, the contemporary sectarian wars are now rooted in modern nationalism rather than in Islamic ideology (Nasr, 2007a). The conflicts ultimately turned into proxy wars between Saudi Arabia and Iran, with each pursuing their strategic rivalry in places where governance has collapsed. The current events are therefore not based on the re-emergence of ancient conflict and hatred, but the mobilization of a new animosity. The instrumentalization of religion and sectarianization of a political conflict can be perceived as a more appropriate way of approaching the issue, rather than assuming that religion is the main factor behind the contemporary conflict. This is because in previous years, the sects have managed to coexist – e.g., through means such as marriage and prayer – when some semblance of political order provided security to both sects (Council on Foreign Relations, 2014). As such, the Shia and Sunni are not inherently inclined to fight each other, because conflict and war are not defining attributes to them.

The same can be said for Saudi Arabia and Iran, because the conflict between the two countries is not ancient or inflexible. In fact, as recently as the 1970s, the two countries were monarch allies against Egypt's republican rule led by Nasser (Nahas, 1985). Basically, this means that the two sects are not fighting a religious war; rather, their conflict is based on regional rivalry, especially in Syria and Iraq, where there is no

effective governance. Therefore, the international community should not wholly focus on Islam as the cause of the conflict, but should pay more attention to the political, economic, and social drivers of conflict in the region. Otherwise, the erroneous assumptions will merely result in false recommendations for achieving peace in the Middle East.

Robinson et al. (2018) note that the struggle for power domination, recognition of beliefs, and legitimacy in the Middle East has been perceived as inseparable from political discourse. This has consequently aggravated the conflict and affected politics in the region in terms of religious polarization. However, conflict mapping will directly reveal that horizontal and vertical stratification of the conflict has touched on all social, economic, and political aspects of both communities. Thus, such deeply-entrenched conflict would require extraordinary mitigation and resolution strategies, which this thesis will attempt.

1.3 Research Hypothesis and Significance

Understanding contemporary political conflict in the Middle East, thus, is critically tied to the Sunni-Shia contentions. The main research questions that this study therefore seeks to answer are:

- What are the major conflict drivers of contemporary Sunni-Shia disputes?
- What protracted social conflict resolution strategies are applicable to prevention and de-escalation?

The contemporary conflict between the Sunni and Shia is multi-faceted, and the contemporary revival of Shiism through Velayat-e Faqih is among the most disrupting

conflict drivers against the traditional Sunni-dominant regional balance of power. This thesis hypothesizes that the Saudi Arabia-Iran contemporary conflict is driven by the desire for power and dominance in the region. The confirmation of those hypotheses will help shed light on conflict drivers in the Middle East, as well as on potential resolutions and responses that can support de-escalation.

1.4 Preview

In the following section, an extensive literature review is presented, with particular focus on the roots of the conflict at hand, the corresponding theoretical context, and the rivalry between Shiite Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia. Chapter 3 will discuss Velayat-e faqih and how it emerged in various countries after the Arab Spring of 2011. Specifically, the chapter will use Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen as case studies and highlight the level of control that Iran and its revolutionary ideology have on those countries. Chapter 4 will provide an analysis of the findings from Chapters 2 and 3, as well a conclusion and some recommendations for resolving the conflict. Finally, Chapter 5 will examine models of conflict prevention based on transnational conflict theory.

Chapter Two

2. Sunni-Shia Rivalry: PSC & TNC Analyses

2.1 Introduction

This part will present literature on to the origins of the Sunni-Shia tension. It will also analyze the theories of PSC (Protracted Social Conflict) and TNC (Transnational Conflict) and how these models are applicable to the Saudi-Iran contemporary conflict. Furthermore, an analysis of the Saudi-Iran conflict and the roles of various dynamic groups and proxies is presented to highlight how that these two countries use sub-national proxies to gain influence, especially in countries such as Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen.

2.2 Islam as a Religion of Power

Islam, arguably, provides a framework for guiding the use of political power. However, in most instances, it is used as a weapon by political actors to gain power and legitimacy in their regimes. In the past few years, Islam has been largely linked to political struggle – especially in matters of terrorism, or during the Arab Spring. As such, contemporary research (e.g., Rieffer-Flanagan, 2009) has sought to determine whether Islam is being used a tool to attain power and enforce state policies.

From the efforts by Islamist groups (e.g., the Muslim Brotherhood) to gain power through voting (Mandaville and Hamid, 2018) to the violent actions and radical beliefs of ISIS (Foreign Policy, 2019), the most common perception about Islam in the global political arena is that Muslim countries push their religious ideologies in order to create

a region in which religion forms the foundation for politics. However, this international perception is significantly different from the perceptions of the Muslim states themselves. Most of the conflict between the Middle Eastern countries is, actually, more about hard power and supremacy. For instance, Saudi Arabia's war against the Houthis in Yemen is based on the fact that Saudi Arabia perceives the Houthis as seeking to support Iranian expansion, which is a threat to the Saudi regime (Shaif, 2019).

However, most Muslim governments leverage their religious power in order to gain political authority. Many Muslim-majority countries perceive Islam as an important – and in some cases, the only – ideological approach that should influence politics. With the decline of pan-Arabism and socialism in the Middle East, the single remaining ideological opposition to Islam's influence on politics originates from nationalism (Roy, 2003). However, nationalism, by definition, cannot be effectively advocated for outside one's own nation. Consequently, both religious and secular governments have a powerful incentive to embed Islam into their domestic and foreign policies, so as to use their religious ideas to enhance their power bases and to promote their interests in the global arena. This ultimately means that the governments often attempt to deploy Islamic influence.

2.3 Tensions between the Sunni and the Shia

The roots of the Sunni-Shia conflict can be traced to the time after Prophet Muhammad's death in A.D. 632 (Hall, 2016). While most of the Prophet's followers believed that the other elite members of Islam should select his successor, a smaller group believed that only someone from the prophet's family (his cousin and son-in-law

Ali ibn Abi Taleb) should succeed him. The smaller group became known as the followers of Ali (*Shiat Ali* in Arabic) – an association simplified with time to *Shia.* The main problem is that the Prophet died without a male heir. This was important because by the time the Prophet died, he had already brought all the Arabic tribes together into a sort of confederation that became the ummah, the people of Islam (Hazleton, 2010).

Ultimately, the Sunni majority won and selected the prophet's close friend Abu Bakr to become the first caliph – i.e. leader – of the Islamic community. Ali, eventually, became a caliph – the fourth one – but only after the two previous caliphs were assassinated (Hall, 2016). Ali was, however, killed in A.D. 661 as the power struggle between the sects continued. What was at stake in this conflict was not only the ability to control the prophet's religious and political legacy, but there were also significant sums of money to be obtained in the form of taxes and tributes paid by the tribes operating under Islamic reign. It was perceived that the power and money could only increase with time. Indeed, within a century after the Prophet's death, his followers had created an empire stretching from Spain to Central Asia (Pew Research Center, 2006).

In A.D. 681, Ali's son, Hussein, led 72 supporters and family members to Karbala to challenge the corrupt caliph Yazid of the Ummayad dynasty (Naqvi, 2016). There was, however, a large army sent by the caliph awaiting them. By the end of the ten-day war between the two groups, Hussein was killed and decapitated, with his head brought to Damascus as a tribute to the caliph. The move by the caliph was supposed to quell the claims to leadership by the Shia; but instead, Hussein's martyrdom at Karbala became the central story in Shia tradition and fueled more conflict. Additionally, these events gave rise to the Shia concept of martyrdom and the rituals of grieving (Hazleton, 2010).

In addition to Karbala's war, various other events, across many centuries, increased the tension of the Sunni-Shia conflict. For instance, the rise of the Safavid dynasty in the 16th century forcefully converted Iran from a Sunni majority to a Shia stronghold in the region (Roy and Volk, 1994). Between the 16th and 18th centuries, the Safavids reunified the country as an independent nation; and in 1501, established Shiism as the official religion of their empire, which marked a turning point in Islam's history. Additionally, the Iranian Revolution in 1979 created a radical brand of Islam that would clash with the Sunni conservatives in Saudi Arabia and other parts of the Middle East in the years that followed (Roy and Volk,1994).

Even as Islamic rulers and fundamentalists increasingly exploited Islam to serve their individual purposes, sectarian tensions significantly increased in the 21st century, mainly as a result of the Persian Gulf Wars (Ehteshami, 2013) and the uprisings in the region that started with the Arab Spring (Salloukh, 2013). These sectarian divisions have fueled the Syrian civil war as well as fighting in countries such as Yemen, Iraq, Iran, and Lebanon. The common denominator in all these wars is the ongoing conflict between Shia Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia for political and regional dominance.

2.4 Sunni-Shia Rivalry as a Protracted Social Conflict (PSC)

Azar (1983) notes that PSC is characterized by persistent – and often violent – struggle for basic needs that include economic stability, security, access to political institutions, and recognition. When citizens are deprived of their basic needs, they will continue to seek ways to satisfy them, even if violence would emerge. However, this deprivation is usually caused by various reasons that can be linked to state, government, and

international actors. In addition, conditions such as a country's domestic setting, ethnicity, colonial legacy, and cultural/religious diversity play a critical role in shaping the origins of PSC. However, according to Azar (1983), politically-minded individuals believe that conflict is often a result of a power struggle, as actors attempt to gain a comparative advantage. Azar (1990) also adds that various causal factors and dynamics are evident in such conflicts, and come as a reflection of the changing goals of conflict, as well as the goals of the actors and targets. Consequently, PSCs usually occur within countries rather than between different countries.

In order to reduce overt conflict, governments resort to taking the necessary steps to ensure citizens receive not only their security needs, but also political and identity needs. Many countries that experience protracted conflict are often perceived to have corrupt, authoritarian, and incompetent leaders who are more focused on their own interests rather than on meeting the needs of their citizens. Their political authority is monopolized by dominant identity groups or sects that ultimately capitalize on state resources to maximize their interests by exploiting others (Azar, 1990).

Additionally, it is not only the type of governance in a country that causes communities to find it challenging to obtain basic needs, recognition, or security. Rather, there is also the degree to which internal policies are affected or controlled by international factors. These factors include client relationships and economic dependency. For instance, countries that economically depend on international actors often see their independence weakened, as some of their economic policies will be controlled by outside forces (Azar, 1990). Client relationships are defined as arrangements in which a country's security is guaranteed if the government remains loyal to the international supporter. This could

result in a government being distracted from performing its main responsibilities of supporting its citizens and rather being more occupied with satisfying the needs of the protector.

Azar (1983) noted that states usually have dominant groups – or a coalition of dominant groups – that do not take into consideration the needs of other groups in the society. With 85% of all Muslims being Sunni and only 15% being Shia (Luomi, 2008), this means that, according to PSC theory, Sunni Muslims are the dominant group. This imbalance has, over the years, denied the minority Shia a chance to participate in state and social development, and led to conflict over the years. Consequently, the Sunni and Shia each perceive that membership to their individual sects will enable them to achieve their desired goals – which, in this case, are political and religious dominance. Additionally, their need to gain dominance results from their basic needs as Muslims, and the perception that their religious, economic, and political needs have not been satisfied by the ruling sect. Therefore, the drivers of the conflict have also varied to include religious, economic, political, ethical, legal, and geographic issues that have played different roles at different times in infuriating conflicts between the two sects.

The type of regime that rules in a country is a critical link between PSC and the needs of various groups. In the case of the Sunni-Shia conflict, Saudi Arabia is a Sunni-led country that oppresses the Shia minority, while Iran is Shia-dominated and aims to impose its ideology of Velayat-e Faqih across the region (Paul, 1999). This means that each country aims to impose its sectarian beliefs on the minority group – and, in this way, to gain control over the entire state. However, it is such dominance that has led to PSCs in various Middle East countries. Shia armed forces are supported by Iran and

international powers in many countries, while Sunnis are supported by Saudi Arabia and other countries with huge oil reserves. It is widely known that the international actors offer financial and military support to their allies, and this often makes the situation difficult and results in increased sectarian conflict.

The Shia-Sunni conflict has also been fueled by succession, leadership, and religious beliefs. This conflict was not continuous but has occurred intermittently over the years due to sectarian conflicts over power and domination in the Middle East. This contemporary conflict has continued over the years and has shaped social stratification and caused a rift in countries like Syria, Iraq and Yemen. As such, the Saudi Arabia-Iran conflict has fueled sectarian wars across the region (Hall, 2016).

2.5 Analyzing Sunni-Shia Contentions through TNC

TNC signals that the international factors of conflict that are influenced by geopolitical power changes are significantly and directly linked to countries facing conflict. Transnational violence thus includes covert war, militarized disputes, support to state and non-state aggressors in an internal war, as well as sponsorship and suppression of coups. It can be utilized to analyze conflicts at the international, regional, national, local, and ideological/elite levels. TNC makes the connection between all these levels in order to reveal actual drivers of conflict. This connection occurs as a result of globalization in which economies, workers, ideas, criminal networks, illicit financial flows, and weapons are easily transferred across international and domestic boundaries (Dewaal, 2019). Many civil wars have become internationalized through foreign state support of proxy forces. For example, it is widely believed that ISIS had received support from Sunni

criminal networks in the Gulf region. It also used social media projection and a political-criminal approach, which is currently very common. According to Samad and Hassan (2009), ISIS ensured that it maintained strong partnerships so as to enhance its power domestically and internationally. It achieved this by effectively governing through fear, which allowed the terror group to ensure its sustainability in both regional and international arenas (Samad and Hassan, 2009).

Regional TNC is defined by complex conflict systems, such as the conflict occurring in the Arab world – which is the result of regional rivalries and cross-border demographics. Such conflict is thus apparent in weak societies, economies, and political structures where there is ethnic imbalance, partisan governments, and relative deprivation. Generally, the main drivers of TNC include conflicts over resources, identity, ideology, and interstate structures (Bavinck, Pellegrini and Mostert, 2014). These drivers are evident in the Sunni-Shia conflict, in which the sects are fighting for their religious ideologies, identities, and sectarian dominance. Globalization has also fueled the Sunni-Shia conflict. For instance, terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda influence – and are influenced by –the Sunni-Shia conflict because they operate back-and-forth between the conflict-ridden countries across international borders.

2.6 Shiism Threat: International TNC

One of the aspects of transnational conflict, in the context of the Sunni-Shia rivalry, is that Shiism is increasingly emerging as an international threat. This is because some members of the sect are interconnected with alleged terrorist groups and are thus perceived as a threat to global peace. Sectarian politics emerged more strongly after the

fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq in 2003. The war routed out the Sunni regime that had ruled Iraq for centuries and empowered the Shia, thus resulting in the first Arab Shia government in history. Additionally, it set in motion a Shia revival throughout the entire Middle East. What started in Iraq swiftly turned into a regional political dynamic as Shia followers across the region looked to Iraq, hoping to see similar changes in their own countries (Salamey and Othman, 2011).

Since this regime change, the Shias have become recognized in regional politics for using both peaceful elections as well as violent conflicts. The leadership of the Shia supported the developments in Iraq, and senior Iraqi Shia leaders endorsed the political system introduced into the country by the U.S. Additionally, Iran and Lebanon's Shia religious leaders supported Iraq's elections. After these elections, the Shia joined the Iraqi government as well as its security forces in large numbers. This is because the political environment after Saddam's fall presented an opportunity to create stable relations between the U.S. and Iraqi Shia, and this included all Shia in the region by default (Fuller, 2003).

Radical Islamist terrorism poses a threat to the international community. This is because alleged "proxies" supported by Iran have caused havoc in many parts of the world. For instance, the U.S. perceives Hezbollah as a terrorist threat to international security (The Heritage Foundation, 2019). In spite of the rise of Al-Qaeda since 2001, Hezbollah is perceived by the U.S. as a bigger and more organized threat to international security. This is because Hezbollah is supported by Iran and Syria, two countries that sponsor, according to the U.S. and other Western countries, "terrorism" on the domestic and international scene. Worthwhile mentioning is that Hezbollah has expanded beyond

Lebanon and the Middle East due to increased funding from supporters on various continents. Hezbollah allegedly also threatens security for the U.S.'s NATO allies in Europe. The group has been active in Europe since the 1980s, with many of its members living in various countries of the continent. Additionally, the group receives financial and logistical support through its numerous European cells, and has used it to target countries that oppose their activities, such as the UK and France (Phillips, 2007).

Shiism has mainly been an invisible political force that was excluded from power over the years. In the Middle East, the Sunnis had perceived themselves as the destined rulers; but Iran empowered the Shia, thus challenging sectarian power balance and Sunni domination, as well as transforming politics in the region (Nasr, 2007b). However, increasing Shia power has caused the sect to be perceived as an international threat. For instance, Iran is accused of supporting El-Zakzaky's activities in Nigeria so as to increase its religious and political power in the country. Ultimately, there are now tensions between Nigeria's Sunni leadership and the Shia Muslim population in the country as the government has banned El-Zakzaky's group (Tangaza, 2019). This could eventually lead to increasing conflict between the Sunni and Shia in the Muslim world, as well as escalations in other parts of the world, such as in Nigeria. This further contributes to the perception of Shiism as an international threat.

Saudi Arabia deeply cooperates with Western countries such as the U.S., although some Shia politicians also enjoy warm relations with the U.S. It is important, however, to note that Al-Qaeda, which is a fundamentalist Sunni group, is a sworn enemy of the U.S. As a result, arguably, Saudi Arabia has been interested in improving its relations with the U.S. through actions such as dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, addressing

problems with Iraq and ISIS, cooperating on matters of oil pricing and strategic use. It is worthwhile mentioning that Saudi Arabia is also strongly allied with some regional countries such as Egypt, Jordan, and other Gulf States (Noi, 2013); and that it also partners with China, with the relationship between the two countries growing significantly over the past few years (Gao, 2017).

2.7 Saudi Arabia-Iran as a Regional TNC

The Saudi Arabia-Iran conflict is one of the major drivers of the contemporary Sunni-Shia divide, and has extended into other countries in the form of proxy wars. Saudi Arabia's support for Sunni Islam started as a rationalist policy that was designed to benefit the Saudi state rather than the Islamic religion. Muhammad Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab is a religious leader and theologian who also contributed to the Saudi version of Wahhabi Islam by founding the Wahhabi movement (Asad, 2003). He was brought up and trained in the classical Sunni tradition, but started to gradually oppose many of its practices, which he believed were idolatry. Even though his beliefs and teachings were opposed by members of his family and by Muslim scholars, he established a religious and political partnership with Muhammad bin Saud to create the first Saudi state. This dynastic alliance and political collaboration are still alive in contemporary Saudi Arabia. Additionally, the Al ash-Sheikh family, which is Saudi's top religious family, is descended from Ibn al-Wahhab, and it is this family that usually leads the ulama in Saudi Arabia (Obaid, 1999).

After the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which can be considered the starting point of modern sectarianism in the Middle East (Robinson et al., 2018), Saudi Arabia perceived

that Iran was a threat to Saudi's national interests, and to the long-term sustenance of the kingdom. Sectarian divisions increased as some Muslims became dissatisfied with living in countries that had no religious ideology or adequate representation across sectarian lines. This scenario was most evident from the Iranian Revolution, which got rid of the country's secular shah and installed a theocratic Shia government. In addition, this revolution increased the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, as each claimed to be the rightful leader of the Muslim world (Duran and Yilmaz, 2013).

The revolution also inspired Muslims from both sects to become more politically active. Iran's back-then theocratic leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, used his political shrewdness to campaign for the country to have a larger political role in the world (Robinson et al., 2018). As such, he positioned himself as a pan-Islamic leader and as a supporter of Shia Muslims, thus enshrining himself as the supreme religious leader of Iran. It is this concept that formed the foundation of the country's attempt to export the Iranian Revolution across the Middle East. Additionally, it is these assertive Iranian foreign policies that Saudi Arabia and other Sunni-based regimes perceived as a threat to their survival (Marr, 2012; Rieffer-Flanagan, 2009).

According to Pager (1988), the Iranian leadership style that was non-hierarchical and based on the ruling of the *ulema* clergy posed a threat to the Saudi monarchy because its revolutionary fanaticism could be exploited by the Shia minority who were, back then, living in the province of Qatif in Saudi Arabia. This was significant because Qatif was a crucial oil province, and Saudi Arabia could not afford to have it destabilized. Consequently, the Saudi monarchy found it vital to spread its Sunni brand of Islam in

order to ensure the survival of the regime. As Pager (1988) noted, this initiated the international competition for Islamic legitimacy between Saudi and Iran.

The Saudi Arabian desire to eliminate the doctrinal charm of the Islamic Revolution is therefore partly responsible for the resolve with which the Saudis spread their Wahhabi doctrine to the entire Muslim world (Moniquet, 2013). This demonstrates how, even in a policy that seems to be genuinely based on Islamic doctrines, the relationship between religion and politics is usually one of pure political convenience and the drive for power (Rieffer-Flanagan, 2009).

As a result, Iran and Saudi Arabia do not have currently strong ties, and their bilateral relations continue to be strained due to issues such as their oil export policies, their interpretations of Islam, their aspirations to lead the region, and their relations with the U.S. and other Western countries. At best, the two countries have lukewarm relations due to the fact that they are connected by the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca – however, even this pilgrimage tradition has been a bone of contention over the years (The Crisis Group, 2005). In terms of resources, Iran and Saudi Arabia are both major gas and oil exporters, and they have numerous differences over energy policy (Wehrey et al., 2009). Saudi Arabia has large oil reserves and a smaller population, and its objectives are to set moderate oil prices so as to ensure its long-term survival in the global oil market. However, Iran has a larger population than Saudi Arabia, and it wants to set high prices in the short term because it wants to reap quick rewards, especially because of the low living standards in the country and the sanctions set against the regime (Wehrey et al., 2009). Different economic goals have thus cause further strain on the Saudi Arabian-Iranian relations.

Events in other countries have also contributed to the deterioration of the relations between the two countries. When the Syrian Civil War starting in 2011, the two countries were working with different factions. While Iran gave the Syrian government military support and significant financial aid, Saudi Arabia supplied aid to Syrian rebel groups. This increased the tensions between the two countries, with each fighting to ensure that the group it supported wins the war. Ultimately, both Iran and Saudi Arabia have accused each other of supporting terrorism (Erdbrink and Mashal, 2017). The rivalry has increased recently because Iran seems to be winning the regional battle. The current Iranian support for Syria's president has enabled the Syrian government to eliminate the rebel groups that Saudi Arabia supports. Therefore, Saudi Arabia is attempting, but failing, to contain the growing Iranian influence even as tensions in the region rise.

The two countries are thus not fighting directly, but are currently engaged in conflicts where they support rival sides across the region. However, if Saudi Arabia wages a major and direct attack against the rebel Houthi movement in Yemen where Iran appears to have significant influence and is smuggling weapons to the group, then it is possible that this will lead to direct war between Saudi Arabia and Iran (Shaif, 2019).

Ultimately, the Saudi-Iran conflict is an extension of the Sunni-Shia conflict. This conflict is also part of the protracted social conflict that stretches back to the Sunni-Shia struggle for control of the region. On the other side, the Arab Spring expressed the many aspects of TNC regional dynamics. It was initially inspired by political and social demands, before drifting into regional sectarian contention. While some scholars (e.g., Al-Rasheed, 2011; Ardic, 2012) argue that religion helped to prevent revolution (e.g., in

Saudi Arabia and Morocco), others argue that it is religion and ideology that fueled the Arab Spring (Benhabib, 2011).

When the uprisings started in 2011, Iran's leadership expressed its joy and stated that such uprisings would enable the region to achieve its objectives of creating a pan-Islamic Middle East (Abdo, 2017). This view was supported by many members of the sect and helped to fuel the conflict between participants in the uprisings. Thus, the mass protests offered new hope of political participation for the Sunnis in countries like Syria, and for the Shia in countries like Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. For instance, most Shiites in Bahrain supported the Arab Spring; but ultimately, there was solidarity between the Sunni and Shia in the early demonstrations in the country. However, since then, the Sunni government has mainly attempted to divide the country along sectarian lines in order to weaken the opposition out of fear that the Shia would create a religious state (Abdo, 2017).

Most demonstrators in the Arab Spring across the region had genuine intentions, but they used pre-established societal rules to take sides. For instance, their communal identities influenced their perceptions on the risks and benefits of a regime change, and the protesters mobilized by utilizing community resources and networks. Amid the death tolls in the Arab Spring, sectarian discourse was widely used in social media. Each sect projected extremist ideology and showed violent imagery and rhetoric that spread rapidly and fueled the uprisings, and social media became a tool to express a desire for a transnational Shia identity in some countries (Karolak, 2013).

Additionally, government responses played a significant role in the uprisings. Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shia Iran perceived the potential shift in the relative power of the

networks as priorities for their foreign policy plans. Saudi Arabia therefore helped to support Sunni protesters agitating in Syria and Iraq, and also ensured that its partner regimes such as Bahrain and Lebanon could prevent Shia encroachment. For Iran, the uprisings meant that the country had to support the Shia regimes in Syria and Iraq, and that it could also exploit any weaknesses emerging from the uprisings. Consequently, sectarian conflicts increased in Iraq, Lebanon, and Bahrain (Henley, 2017).

Although the uprisings across the region began with cooperation between the Sunni and Shia protesters against autocratic governments, the regime scapegoating of certain sects sowed discord between the protesters and led to suspicion. For instance, the regimes spread rumors of violence that eventually scared many protestors from participating in the uprisings. Once they had controlled core protest groups and prevented them from spreading the revolution, the regimes were thereafter able to rally their supporters to resist a supposed sectarian threat. Ultimately, sectarian ideology proved to be a guiding point in taking sides in the Arab Spring (Henley, 2017).

2.8 Proxies and Ideologies in TNC Analysis

Transnational non-state armed actors are typically utilized as proxies in regional and national disputes. In the past two decades, conflict in the Middle East has been primarily waged through proxies. Hezbollah, ISIS, and Al Qaeda have been among the major proxies who have attempted to disrupt, or at least preserve, the sectarian balance of power in the region.

2.8.1 Hezbollah

Hezbollah is a political movement that has been linked to the Velayat-e Faqih ideology and to Iran's plan for regional domination. According to Dingel (2013), Hezbollah uses arms provided by supporters such as Iran to gain more Shia power in Lebanon, and this has placed the Sunni on the defensive. As such, the group relies on its participation in Lebanese politics to claim legitimacy as a democratic party and thus to prevent the international community from forcing its members to disarm. Horowitz (2013) adds that Hezbollah is perceived as a combination of a political party, a social movement, as well as a non-state armed group. On the one hand, many countries such as Iraq, Iran, Syria, and even Russia perceive Hezbollah as a resistance movement that is defending Lebanon and that is committed to social justice ("Hizbullah: Views and Concepts," 1997). However, the U.S., Canada, France, UK, Saudi Arabia, and the European Union, among others, consider Hezbollah to be a "terrorist" organization (The Heritage Foundation, 2019).

Hezbollah receives massive support from Iran and Syria, and maintains extensive security apparatus, social services networks, and political organizations in Lebanon, to an extent that the group is described as a state within a state. As such, it is perceived as Iran's proxy in Lebanon, whereby the group is provided with the necessary support to ensure it remains relevant in Lebanese politics and society. Hezbollah's resistance to Western involvement in the Middle East and to Israel have made it a supporter of Iranian foreign policy, and also garnered support from non-Shiites. However, Hezbollah's increasing involvement in the Syrian civil war has made it lose some of its Lebanese supporters (Malaeb, 2018).

Various major operations in the world have been attributed to the group and its affiliates, even though Hezbollah disputes its involvement in many (Masters and Laub, 2014). Some of these operations include: the 1983 suicide attack on U.S. facilities in Beirut; the hijacking of TWA flight 847 in 1985; the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005; and the 2012 bombing of a bus carrying Israeli tourists in Bulgaria (Masters and Laub, 2014).

Generally, Hezbollah's presence and activities in Lebanon demonstrate that Iran and Velayat-e Faqih are significant tools that can be used to garner Iranian support – and thus domination – in Lebanon. Therefore, it is important for stakeholders in the Middle East to understand the potential effect of Velayat-e faqih and Iran's influence on the communitarian politics in the region.

2.8.2 Al Qaeda

Al Qaeda's activities in various countries have targeted non-Sunnis and exacerbated the Sunni-Shia conflict (Thomas, 2018). Apart from having followers in Pakistan and Afghanistan, this militant group has affiliates in Africa and the Middle East. Some of its affiliates include Al Shabaab, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. Furthermore, it is active in Syria through its relations to the Nusra Front (Thomas, 2018). Its main interests lie in attacking American citizens, infrastructure, and non-American facilities that host American citizens (Thomas, 2018). The aim of the concentrated attacks on America is to make the U.S. leave Muslim territories and cause American allies to be defeated (Al-Zawahiri, 2013).

Al Qaeda is particularly supported by Saudi Arabia, which is fighting against Iran for regional domination. Therefore, while Iran supports Hezbollah and the Houthis, Saudi Arabia, though less publicly, supports Al Qaeda – both financially and militarily. This shows how Saudi Arabia is a financier for Sunni terrorists, who are proxies for potentially winning the war against Iran. This means that in addition to being a terrorist organization, Al Qaeda is helping fight Saudi Arabia's war in the communitarian politics, and this has affected regional and international activities (Walsh, 2010).

The group has not supported the Islamic State after their split in 2013, noting that the latter had killed fellow Muslims, created conflict between jihadist ranks, and prematurely declared a caliphate without consultation with other jihadists. When territory held by the Islamic State was seized by the U.S. and its allied military groups in 2017, Al Qaeda had the opportunity to recruit the Islamic State's former militia members – and ultimately, wage more war against the U.S. By 2018, Al Qaeda's leadership had classified the Islamic State among its enemies along with Shia and Crusaders (Thomas, 2018).

Al Qaeda's activities have gradually decreased over the years, mainly because of the targeted killings of many of its senior leadership, thus making it difficult for the group to plan for and execute international attacks (Gruenewald, 2017). Additionally, events in the Middle East have made the region a more suitable target as compared to attacking the West. The competition from the Islamic State has also made Al Qaeda's operations much more complicated (Hamming, 2017).

2.8.3 ISIS

ISIS, despite having roots ever since 1999, became relatively prominent after the American intervention in Iraq in 2003; but their rise to effective power saw light after the majority of U.S. troops left Iraqi soil in 2011 (Jones et al., 2017). After the involvement of ISIS in the regional struggle, Sunnis lost their political power to the Shia, and this led to a divided and dissatisfied Sunni group. Militant Sunni extremists took advantage of this divide to form partnerships with Sunni tribal leaders in order to resist American occupation and the current Shia government. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi thus formed Al Qaeda in Iraq with a main purpose of fighting American influence (Jones et al., 2017). By partnering with Al Qaeda, al-Zarqawi gained credibility with fellow Salafi jihadists across the globe, and became the recognized leader of a fractured Sunni Arab Iraqi insurgent movement. Al Qaeda in Iraq created the jihadist umbrella organization Mujahideen Shura Council in 2006, which Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi joined. When al-Zarqawi died in 2006, the organization changed its name to Islamic State of Iraq, with al-Baghdadi as one of its leaders. He became the leader of the Islamic State of Iraq in 2010 after the group's leader and deputy died (Jones et al., 2017).

When American forces withdrew from Iraq in 2011, the Syrian civil war was also beginning. Therefore, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi moved the group's headquarters to Syria. He attempted to assert his authority over an already-existing Al Qaeda affiliate in Syria, but failed. Abu Bakr consequently left Al Qaeda in 2014 and formed ISIS in order to gain global leadership of the Salafist-jihadist movement, and demanded the allegiance of Muslims worldwide (Callimachi and Hassan, 2019).

ISIS gained control of the territory from North of Aleppo to southern Baghdad, including the Syrian city of Raqqa and Iraq's Mosul (Akkizidis and Khandelwal, 2008). There were approximately 6 million people under its rule, with its rulership based on alliances with local actors who were mainly Sunnis, members of Saddam Hussein's army, intelligence services, as well as actors who were dissatisfied with the Shia government of Iraq at the time. However, the group used a comprehensive approach to amass territory by subduing weaker adversaries – irrespective of their sectarian or political leanings – through kidnappings and by capturing territories that have beneficial resources such as wheat, oil, and water. Samad and Hassan (2009) noted that ISIS aimed to maintain its partnerships but also to increase its power in the region. This was achieved by effectively ruling through fear tactics, and giving consent in other instances, so to ensure its sustainability in the domestic and international platforms.

Jones et al. (2017) noted that ISIS had attempted to obtain its legitimacy from the Muslim religion. This is because as a self-declared caliphate, the group is expected to appeal to Muslims, and the militant group has capitalized on the widespread beliefs of Salafists that the Muslim world must restore the simplicity and unity which was prevalent in the early days of the religion. However, unlike Al Qaeda, the Islamic State focuses its violent revolutionary tactics in Muslim-majority countries rather than on Western countries. The destruction of the Islamic State's territorial base in Iraq and Syria most likely reduced the group's wider appeal. However, it is possible that the group, just like Al Qaeda before it, will continue to metastasize and increase its influence even without a home base (Jones et al., 2017).

The presence of ISIS in regional conflicts thus increases the Sunni-Shia divide because even though ISIS has been in conflict with the Saudi government, ISIS members follow Wahhabism, the same ideology that Saudi Arabia embraces. As such, allegations have been made that Saudi Arabia has been giving logistical and financial support to ISIS (Wikileaks, 2014). This support thus further fuels the Sunni-Shia conflict.

2.9 Lebanon's Sectarian Conflict as a National TNC

Sectarian conflict in Lebanon provides a clear example of TNC at the national level of analysis. It demonstrates how regional conflict is reflected in different countries where a large percentage of Shiites reside. The Shia and Sunni percentages are almost equal in the country, at 28.65% and 29.25% respectively (the remaining population groups are mostly Christians, and there exists a Druze minority) (CIA World Factbook, 2019). Decades of sectarian fighting in Lebanon have, however, destabilized its sovereignty and allowed international extremist groups to flourish in the country. Additionally, competition between the Sunni, Shia and Christian populations have fueled political unrest, enhanced the ideology of radicalization, and allowed Hezbollah (a Shiite political party) to become a main political power in Lebanon.

During the Lebanese Civil War, Hezbollah effectively installed itself as an alternative to the fragmented Lebanese government, providing social services to the Shiite communities, and at the same time resisting Israeli, French, and American interests in the country (Malaeb, 2018). Even though the war ended, Lebanon remains very sectarian and the negative effects of the war still impact political activities. The current political leaderships are supported by different international powers. More specifically,

Hezbollah is supported by Shia Iran and Syria, while their rivals, most notably Hariri's Future Movement party, are supported by Sunni Saudi Arabia.

As a result, Hezbollah, which is overwhelmingly supported by the Lebanese Shia population, has repeatedly used its political influence to sway the government and to collapse it when it acts against Hezbollah's agendas. For example, in 2016, Hezbollah ensured that during the elections, its preferred presidential candidate won the elections (Abi-Habib and Raydan, 2016). Iran has fully supported Hezbollah by giving them funds, training, and weapons over the years and is thus its main backer. Consequently, as the relations between Shia Iran and the region's Sunni powers become worse, the relations between Lebanon and the region's Sunni powers have also deteriorated (Malaeb, 2018).

Even though Hezbollah has very few Lebanese Sunni supporters, it has the support of some Christian parties, many of which perceive that the group is protecting them from ISIS and other jihadist groups. However, other Christian parties, such as the Lebanese Forces and the Kataeb, oppose Hezbollah's actions. Therefore, Lebanese citizens are fractured by sectarian lines in their opinions on Hezbollah and its involvement in the Syrian war, and even in its role in Lebanon (Pew Research Center, 2014). In recent years, Sunni jihadi groups such as ISIS and Kataeb Abdallah Azam have targeted and attacked Hezbollah fighters, Shiite areas, Iranian infrastructure, and the Lebanese army. The groups did this in retaliation for the military support that Hezbollah and Iran have offered to Syria. The Lebanese government has instigated measures to increase security, but little has been done to address the main cause of the violence. Basically, sectarian tensions have radicalized the Shia, who perceive Sunni extremists as an existential threat

to Shia and Christians alike, and suicide attacks only make the conflict between the two sects worse (Counter Extremism Project, 2019).

2.9.1 Conclusion

The Sunni-Shia conflict appears as a PSC. However, it can also be mapped by the TNC framework as it embeds strong international and transnational connectors to transnational proxies. It is also embedded in regional dynamics, as revealed through Saudi-Iranian rivalry. National-level implications in countries such as Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen are massive as Velayat-e Faqih undermines traditional national coherence in favor of communal affiliations.

Chapter Three

3. TNC and Velayat-e Faqih in Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen

3.1 Introduction

This chapter builds on the previous sections and discusses three country-specific cases where TNC analysis can reveal main conflict drivers. In particular, this chapter will examine Velayat-e Faqih and it activities in Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen; and presents an analysis of TNC in their respective contexts.

3.2 Background on Velayat-e faqih

Before the Islamic Revolution in Iran, many Shiite leaders believed that they needed to concentrate mainly on religious matters and leave political issues to secular rulers. However, the religious leaders also ensured that the secular leaders did not interfere with religion. This perception was based on the Shiite ideology that a hidden imam would return and lead the Islamic community politically and religiously. As such, until the return of the hidden imam, it was expected that no one would be able to perform such a role (Rosset, 2011). However, after the Iranian Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini's work called *Islamic Government: Governance of the Jurist* (Khomeini, 2005) argued that religious leaders should manage governmental matters without having to wait for the return of the hidden imam (Rosset, 2011). The government would be modeled along the one advocated for by Prophet Muhammad himself: combining a religious and political

leader into one. Khomeini argued that separation of religion and state was an imperialist plot aimed at derailing Islam and its people. As such, he designated himself as *Wali Faqih* (supreme jurist) and gained the title of Leader.

Khomeini consequently established a revolutionary attitude towards nationalism in Iran. Even though previous regimes used the ideology of Iranian nationalism, Khomeini stated that there were no people or states in Islam; rather, Islamic unity should be returned so that the Muslim *Umma* could follow the guidelines issued by Prophet Muhammad (Paul, 1999). Khomeini described himself first and foremost as a Muslim – and not an Iranian or Shiite – and termed the revolution an Islamic one rather than an Iranian one. The leader believed that nationalism is contrary to Islam, a religion that was established to unite the Muslim world. He argued that it was Western nations that had introduced the idea of nationalism so as to divide a united Muslim world into temporary states (Khomeini, 2005).

The idea of exporting the revolution was derived from his teachings about anti-nationalism, because Khomeini taking control of the Iranian government was the stepping stone towards creating a comprehensive Islamic revolution that was designed to liberate the oppressed in the community. As such, Shiite Muslims inside and outside Iran started to believe that Khomeini and his successors were the temporary representatives of the hidden imam and consequently were Ali's (Prophet Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law) successors (Hall, 2016). Ali and Muslim imams are perceived as infallible and holy. Khomeini received absolute power as al-Wali al-Faqih, which enabled him to gain absolute control and consequently bypass the constitution and the will of the country. Therefore, using such qualities on contemporary and mortal leaders

has created problems and controversy, both inside and outside Iran (Hall, 2016). This also strengthens this paper's hypothesis as this shows that contemporary leaders are more interested in economic and political gain than in religious unity between the Shia and Sunni.

In spite of Khomeini's grand ambitions for Velayat-e faqih, the fact that the ideology is Shia-based means that the supreme leader's influence has mainly gained traction among Shia Muslims. This means that not only it is positively effective in Shiite nations, but it is also being propagated as a unifying factor in the Muslim world. Numerous Shia Islamist political parties and non-state agencies outside Iran, especially those that are closely associated with Iran, continue to believe in this ideology (Aarabi, 2019). Such parties include Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Badr Organization in Iraq. This demonstrates that Iran targets sub-national groups within states in order to achieve its desire for Shia supremacy. The concept of Velayat-e faqih thus continues to have major implications for the stability of the Middle East and other countries because as long as Iran uses it as a mean of gaining control of countries in the region, the contemporary Sunni-Shia conflict is bound to continue until a clear resolution is arrived at.

Iran has numerous charitable, educational, media, and social service organizations throughout the Middle East that it uses to expand Velayat-e faqih. These organizations usually work in collaboration with political movements that are affiliated with Iran to ensure that the latter's ideas are accepted by citizens in the region. Philanthropy is thus merely a secondary function of these charitable organizations, as their main aim is to create loyalty and patronage and increase people's reliance on Iran. Iran uses media networks to propagandize and show that the country and its proxies are charitable

institutions; and it also uses educational institutions to indoctrinate loyal followers with revolutionary ideologies, most particularly Velayat-e faqih (Aarabi, 2019).

One of the preferred strategies used by Iran in establishing Velayat-e faqih's ideological influence throughout the Middle East is to use Hezbollah, which is also perceived as a political party and social movement (Horowitz, 2013). Iran helped to create the organization after Israel invaded southern Lebanon in 1982 by exploiting the long-held grievances of Shiites in Lebanon (Feltman, 2019). By financing Hezbollah's military and social services, Iran enabled Hezbollah to solidify its role as the protector of Shiites in Lebanon, and this allowed the movement and Iran to fight for dominance throughout the Middle East (Feltman, 2019). Hezbollah is therefore an efficient foreign policy partner for the Iranian regime. In fact, Hezbollah uses military resistance to carry out operations across the globe with guidance and direction from Iran in order to propagate their mutual anti-U.S. and anti-Israeli agenda. This comes in agreement with Dingel (2013), who notes that the military activities undertaken by the movement have made the Sunni more defensive, and this is likely to exacerbate the conflict between the two sects unless a resolution is reached.

The Middle East is largely dominated by Sunnis, but Iran's soft power strategy has been typically based on using Shiite offshoots such as the Alawites in Syria and the Zaidis in Yemen. Nevertheless, basing its foreign policy in the region on Shiite identity would limit Iran's ability to control the region. Therefore, it used objectives such as pan-Islamic unity, the fight against Israel and America, and opposition to monarchies such as Saudi Arabia in order to ensure that it received significant recognition in the Middle East. After the Arab Spring, Iran largely invested in increasing Shiite influence in the

region so as to create a link between its own territory and Hezbollah's stronghold via Iraq and Syria. In order to ensure the survival of this project, Iran instructed Hezbollah to enter the Syrian civil war and thus ensure its success in the region (Hilterman, 2017).

Iran's efforts to weaken its neighbors have therefore not only increased its influence and control in the Middle East, but also ensured that there is more Sunni outrage over its dominion, thus contributing to the contemporary Sunni-Shia conflict. The Iranian government therefore believes that no decisive actions can be passed in countries such as Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria without Iran's consent (Houssari, 2017). This shows that Iran is confident of its control in such countries, in spite of their independence; and that it plans to exercise control over many nations in the region, which will escalate the Shia-Sunni conflict. However, Iran's confidence in its power ignores its delicate position that directly comes from the sectarian repercussions of regional activities. Therefore, Iran's capacity to retain control in the region will mainly depend on its ability to use soft power tactics in order to retain the loyalty of its supporters in the region (Houssari, 2017).

3.3 Velayat-e faqih and TNC

Velayat-e faqih is a modern pillar for Hezbollah's identity. This is because the political party, as well as other Shia-supported groups such as the Houthis in Yemen, share transnational links. This means that Iran uses these proxies and movements as tools for regional domination, thus causing conflict between national politics and Wilayat ideology. For instance, Hezbollah uses its growing power and dominance in the Lebanese parliament to control political activities, and possibly guide the country

towards Shia-based governance (Feltman, 2019). As such, the national interests of Iran and its propagation of Velayat-e faqih transcend transnational connections, especially in nations such as Yemen, Lebanon, and Iraq. This has created more transnational and national tensions between Iran's neighbors, because Iran has ensured that its transnational ideology of Velayat-e faqih acquires a national form and identity that would receive popular support in various countries (Ali, 2018).

3.4 Velayat-e faqih in Lebanon

Clashes between Sunni and Shia in Lebanon are not a result of religious or sectarian conflict, but more of a reflection of the Lebanese political system that is characterized by power struggles and sectarian alliances (Henley, 2016). The country's political system, which is significantly defined by religious identity politics, has strengthened the division of the country among religious communities. Hezbollah has a significant supply of weapons and is perceived as the strongest political and military power in Lebanon (Horowitz, 2013). Together with the Amal Movement which grew after the Iranian Revolution in 1979, it represents the majority of the country's Shiites and is supported by Syria and Iran (Norton, 2007).

Hezbollah is very loyal to the ideology of Velayat-e faqih and its principles. As a result, the political party is under the authority Iranian leadership. Even though the party proudly declared Velayat-e faqih's ideology initially, various reasons led to a making it less explicit. Specifically, Hezbollah was not so vocal about the ideology after Khomeini's death and its entry into political affairs in Lebanon (Rosset, 2011). However, the group continued to be privately involved in the ideology and remained

loyal to Iranian leadership. As a result, most Shiites in Lebanon believe in the basic principles of Velayat-e faqih, and Hezbollah continues to instill this ideology among their followers. With acceptance from the Shia population and with support from Iran, Hezbollah and Velayat-e faqih have gained widespread acceptance in Lebanon (Blanford, 2015). Hezbollah also requires the continued support of the Lebanese multi-religious and multi-confessional community to ensure that it survives (Israel, 2017). However, the interests of Lebanon's Shiites are not always compatible with those of the leaders of Iran, to whom Hezbollah is obligated. The party has consequently faced numerous challenges in balancing the needs of the community and those of Velayat-e faqih.

Hezbollah uses a soft approach to instill Iran's Velayat-e faqih ideology in the areas of southern Lebanon that are under Hezbollah's control. It does this by creating a significant network of social services and facilities such as hospitals, charities, mosques, and satellite TV networks. By providing necessary healthcare and services to the marginalized Shia communities, Hezbollah has effectively addressed the gap in provision of such services by the government of Lebanon. This has ensured that many communities perceive Hezbollah as a viable alternative to the government and thus boosted the movement's popularity. As such, through Hezbollah, Iran has exploited the weakness of Lebanon's government in order to fund various cultural, social, and religious projects so as to justify its presence in the country and to promote its ideological and political agenda (Majidyar, 2014).

The political party uses a combination of its genuine popularity among many Shiites in the country, its position in the country's parliament and cabinet, and its armed forces to

maintain power – and thus to reject Lebanese government policies that it opposes. Additionally, Hezbollah has set in place strategies to ensure that there is limited public or parliamentary accountability over any decisions that it makes. In effect, this means that Iran, through Hezbollah, has significant power over the political and religious activities undertaken in Lebanon (Feltman, 2019).

Iran can therefore be confident that its investment in Hezbollah has borne fruit because the armed division of the movement has grown significantly and has repeatedly been used by Iranians to fight for Iran's political ideology (Feltman, 2019). Hezbollah also collaborates with some Christian leaders such as Suleiman Frangieh and Gibran Basil in the Lebanese parliament, and this has allowed the movement to bend the government to satisfy its interests (Yee and Saad, 2019). In addition, due to demographics, there is a campaign to revise the country's confessional divide by changing the division of power from an equal 50-50 between Christians and Muslims, to equal thirds between Christians, Sunnis and Shiites (Feltman, 2019). If such a decision is approved, it will mean that Hezbollah – and by proxy, Iran – would obtain a permanent ability to block any government decisions that they deem inappropriate to their needs as long as it receives a little support from its Christian or Sunni collaborators (Feltman, 2019).

Therefore, Hezbollah now has the ability to greatly influence Lebanese politics, which is statistically evident. For instance, Hezbollah and its political allies achieved a significant victory in the 2018 parliamentary elections, when the movement won 13 seats – while its ally, the Shiite Amal Movement, also won 15 seats (CSR Insight, 2018). This gave the party a high political advantage and the ability to shape the country's politics. Not only that, but Hezbollah was also able to break into other communities that are

dominated by Sunni leadership. For instance, its candidate in Beirut, Amin Mohammad Sharri, won his seat with 22,961 votes, even though the city has a majority of Sunni population (UNDP, 2018). The seats won in parliament have enabled the movement to become a major player in the government. This is important because the Lebanese President Michel Aoun noted that members of the Hezbollah movement are Lebanese citizens and thus have a right to participate in the country's growth (Al Manar, 2019). Therefore, it is impossible to isolate the movement's members when their party is expected to contribute to government and civil performance.

Hezbollah's creation of parallel pseudo-state structures induces loyalty and support to the movement – and consequently, to Iran. This has weakened official structures in the Lebanese government and ensured that Hezbollah becomes an important power broker with the ability to halt government operations. Most of the funds provided by Iran are used to pay salaries and to provide social services to the movement's members and fighters, thus motivating young Lebanese Shiites to join Hezbollah and their families to accept it (DeVore, 2012). The salaries that the fighters receive (between $500 and $1,200) are stimulating enough to ensure that Hezbollah does not lack fighters and manpower for its operations, such as the participation in the Syrian civil war (Ghaddar, 2016).

The Imam Khomeini Relief Committee (IKRC) is one of the most important Iranian aid organizations that are in operation (American Coalition, 2020). Its Lebanese branch is mainly used to provide Hezbollah with financial and material support. This committee's assets are controlled by the Supreme Leader of Iran, and it obtains its finances from the Iranian government. It directly employs more than 10,000 Lebanese citizens and has

1,000 volunteers, who enable it to deliver aid to over 400 cities and rural areas in the country. Beyond offering aid in the form of money, health and educational services, loans, and housing, IKRC is also a diplomatic tool which is used to promote Iran's ideology of Velayat-e faqih in Lebanon, thus gaining loyalty to Iran from its beneficiaries (Majidyar, 2014).

The Cultural Center for the Islamic Republic of Iran in Beirut (CCI) is an initiative of Iran's government. It generally operates as Iran's propagandist in Lebanon, using educational institutions, cultural centers, mosques, and the media to promote Hezbollah's and Iran's ideologies. The center provides free education and cultural activities, and also manages various schools, religious seminaries, and even universities (Majidyar, 2014). This has given Iran access to the country's citizens and to effectively inculcate the Velayat-e faqih ideology in them. Iran also makes use of Lebanese politicians who are motivated by self-interest – as the latter realize the possible shift in the region's politics, they tend to find that collaborating with the Tehran-Damascus-Hezbollah alliance would help them retain their power (Feltman, 2019).

However, Hezbollah has recently lost some of its support in Lebanon. For instance, many of its Shiite fighters who came back from Syria are jobless and have limited ability to migrate or work abroad – especially not in Sunni states in the Arab Gulf who are fiercely opposed to Hezbollah (Ghaddar, 2016). Hezbollah is also struggling to pay salaries and suppliers, an indication that the American sanctions against Iran and its allies are affecting its flow of finances (Katzman, 2019).

Without significant financial support, the popularity of Hezbollah – and thus Iran – has decreased; and also created divisions within the movement. For instance, fighters are

still getting financially rewarded for their work; but non-combatants are expected to wait until the movement receives compensation after achieving a victory (Gaddar, 2016). Additionally, social services are prioritized to fighters and their families in comparison to non-participating Shiites, which has increased the discontent of the latter group (Ghaddar, 2016). Therefore, increasing pressure and sanctions on Iran is a major strategy that is being used to weaken Hezbollah, and consequently Iran's power in Lebanon and the region. Indeed, Lebanese Shiites have become marginalized and rejected by other groups in the country and region.

In spite of Hezbollah's claims, not all Shiites in Lebanon support the movement or its Iranian ideology. However, the Shiite community is largely identified with the movement. As a result, many Lebanese Shiites face challenges in finding work in the region and in Sunni institutions in Lebanon. They are ultimately forced to rely on Hezbollah and its resources for their survival – but if a viable alternative is provided, then they might switch to it, even if under a leadership that does not agree with Hezbollah's ideologies (Ghaddar, 2016).

In addition, the recent protests in Lebanon are a reflection of the citizens' reduced belief in their country. This is because the Lebanese (with Shiites and Sunnis demonstrating together against the deteriorating economy) have realized that their government and its political leaders are corrupt. Many of these leaders are, however, backed by Hezbollah. Hence, when Hezbollah (which previously described itself as a supporter of marginalized people) publicly supported the government over the recent demonstrations, it revealed its fears over the unity between the sects that became apparent (Ghaddar,

2019). Thus, for arguably the first time since Hezbollah's formation, Shiites have turned against the movement, and this is bound to affect Iran's power in the country.

3.4.1 Transnational Conflict in Lebanon

TNC is caused by global, regional, state, identity group, and elite factors, each of which impacts the conflict in different ways, as shown in the table below.

Table 1: Framework on the sources of contemporary conflict

	Level	Example
1	Global	Geopolitical transition, North–South economic divide, environmental constraints, weapons proliferation, ideological contestation
2	Regional	Clientage patterns, spillover, intervention, cross-border social demography, diaspora
3	State	
	Social	Weak society: cultural divisions, ethnic imbalance
	Economic	Weak economy: poor resource base, relative deprivation
	Political	Weak polity: partisan government, regime illegitimacy
4	Conflict party	Group mobilization, intergroup dynamics
5	Elite/individual	Exclusionist policies, factional interest, rapacious leadership

Source: Ramsbotham, Miall and Woodhouse (2011).

Lebanon is affected by the North-South economic divide, which is a global driver of TNC. This is because the U.S. sanctions against Hezbollah are meant to deprive it of income and thus curb its activities. While the U.S. sanctions might be targeted at Lebanon, the main aim is to prevent Iran from supporting the Hezbollah political party. Therefore, the sanctions end up hurting Lebanon in the U.S. war with Iran because it means that Lebanon's economy will continue to suffer (Mroue, 2019). This supports the theory of TNC, in which the regionalization of conflict is now more common and is described by Dewaal (2019) to include covert war and support to state- and non-state aggressors.

Another driver of TNC associated with Lebanon is global ideological contestation. The 1979 Iranian Revolution created a radical form of Islam that was more politically inclined. As such, the revolution helped to increase Muslim resentment against Western ideologies and sectarian conflicts have made the transnational conflict much worse (Lewis, 2002). As such, Velayat-e faqih can be perceived as a driver of TNC because of its ability to cause global and regional conflict. This is in agreement with Samad and Hassan (2009), who noted that groups such as ISIS use strong partnerships with groups and individuals who are against Western ideology in order to increase their power – both domestically and internationally. Furthermore, ideological contestation is a major factor between the Sunni and Shia in most Muslim countries, including Lebanon (Samad and Hassan, 2009).

Additionally, Lebanon's TNC consists of transnational connectors of people in the form of more than 1,500,000 Syrian refugees who live in the country since the civil war in their country (Vohra, 2019). Many Lebanese feel threatened by the presence of the refugees, mainly because of deep-seated xenophobia and sectarian nationalism. Such feelings fuel TNC as they can lead to conflict between Lebanon and Syria if each side feels mistreated. By providing Hezbollah with arms and financial support, Iran serves as a transnational connector in Lebanon's conflict as it gives Hezbollah the power to support Velayat-e faqih and Iran itself, even though it is aware that the Lebanese government does not support its actions. Nasr (2007b) adds that by empowering the Shia, Iran has challenged the Sunni-Shia balance of power and Sunni domination, thus changing the political landscape in the region.

Regional-level dynamics include regional conflicts that have occurred, for instance, between Lebanon, Israel, Syria, and "militias" that are based in Lebanon (Guo, 2012). As such, these states have remained as potential threats to one other over the years. Additionally, the regional conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia has affected Lebanon because of the presence of Iran-backed Hezbollah. The spillover effects from the Syrian war have also led to the immigration of Syrian refugees into Lebanon, and this has caused a strain on Lebanon's already fragile economy. Thus, when the individuals' basic needs are threatened, this can lead to conflict over scarce resources in the long term. The influence of Iran over Hezbollah and Shia Muslims in Lebanon is also an intra-regional driver of conflict in the country. While Iran seeks to ensure its dominance in the Middle East, Saudi-backed Sunnis in Lebanon also seek to gain control, and this has led to continued sectarian conflict in the country. Malaeb (2018) noted that Hezbollah has designated itself as an alternative to the country's ruling government – and with Iran's financial help, the movement offers social services to citizens while also attacking American and Israeli interests in the country. In this way, Lebanon is firmly entrenched in the contemporary conflict, which is largely driven by rivalry for economic and political control.

A state-level analysis of TNC in Lebanon suggests that communitarian politics have created cultural divisions among Lebanese citizens. Thus, sectarianism spilling over into politics has weakened the country and led to a weak economy, clientelism, and partisan politics wherein politicians are corrupt and use state resources to enrich themselves (Calfat, 2018). This has led to widespread unrest among citizens as the economy deteriorates and basic infrastructures and services are insufficient.

Ethnic and sectarian differences and beliefs between the Sunni and Shia in Lebanon's identity groups have also caused conflict in the country. Each sect believes that its ideology is the right one and seeks to impose it on the other. Even movements such as Hezbollah base their activities on sectarian affiliation, and this can be perceived by the Sunni as a form of resistance and thus a reason for conflict. Leaders and politicians have also played a significant role in fueling sectarian conflict in Lebanon, and their actions affect the conflict at the elite or individual level. Salloukh (2013) concurs, noting that Islam is highly politicized in contemporary society – and this was evident in the Arab Spring in 2011 which led to increased visibility of the Shia as they used their sectarian beliefs to campaign for more political control. As such, Sunni and Shia citizens turned against each other rather than working together to improve their political and economic situations.

3.5 Velayat-e faqih in Iraq

The two countries that were not affected by the Arab Spring, back then, are Lebanon and Iraq because their systems of government were already perceived as democratic. However, with time, and even though their countries are not dictatorships, Iraqis and Lebanese have gradually realized that Iran has become a strong interfering force in their politics. While some of the citizens approve of Iran's activities in their country, others (especially the Sunni) do not. Most of the illicit drugs, food, consumer goods and construction materials used in Iraq are obtained from Iran, and media reports in the country are also sympathetic to Iran. In addition, movements in the country are sponsored by Iran and are used to transport fighters and weapons to proxy forces in

Syria and Lebanon while some Iraqi politicians have benefitted politically and financially from Iran's leadership (Arango, 2017).

When the U.S. invaded Iraq in 2003 and defeated Saddam Hussein, it perceived Iraq as a basis for democracy and Westernization in the region. However, Iran grabbed the opportunity to turn Iraq into a client state, even though the latter had been its enemy previously. The success of such a plan would ensure that Iraq would never threaten Iran again, and that Iran could use Iraq as a base for spreading Iranian influence in the region. When the U.S. withdrew its troops from Iraq in 2011, Iran exploited this opportunity to promote its extensive religious connection to Iraq's Shiite majority and local allies in order to portray Iran as the only reliable defender that Iraq could have (Congressional Research Service, 2019).

Iran has been successful in achieving its objectives in Iraq over the years. Iran controls and trains many militias in the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), which contains approximately 50 militias (Atallah, 2019). What makes Iranian influence more pronounced is that PMUs are integrated into the Iraqi army, military, and security institutions (Ghaddar, 2016). This means that Iran's militias in Iraq have obtained legal protection that prevents the international community from classifying them as terrorists. Iran's investment in Iraqi political and militant groups is aimed at countering the presence of American forces in the country, and guiding the re-emergence of the Iraqi state (IISS, 2020).

The Middle East received 35% of the global volume of arms imports between 2014 and 2018, and this flow had increased by 87% within this same period (SIPRI, 2019). Iraq, in particular, imported 3.7% of the global share (SIPRI, 2019), meaning that the

government was heavily invested in protecting the country against groups supported by countries such as Iran. As such, even as Iran gives military support to proxies such as PMU, the government also has the ability to arm its supporters, and this could lead to a protracted war as each faction has the military power to support its interests.

Even though PMU staffs are from diverse ethnic and religious groups (Atallah, 2019), Iran gains its power in the organization because some of its leaders and members are former exiles who have spent time in Iran and are connected to the country. Within the PMU, the militant factions which receive support from Iran are usually better equipped and have deployed fighters in Syria under Iranian direction, but without receiving formal permission from the Iraqi government. However, Iran portrays a picture of public ambiguity about its role in the PMU because militia fighters are usually paid by the Iraqi government, and some of the weapons that they use are provided by Baghdad (IISS, 2020).

Consequently, Iran incurs minimal costs in sustaining these groups, which allows it to maintain its authority over the factions that serve its interests best. Iran also collaborates with many of these PMU factions in fighting in Syria and also in Iraq. In addition to the financial support that some PMU factions receive from Iran, these factions are also favored by Iran and are consequently emboldened to ignore Iraqi authorities, thus making the country's politicians and security official unable to impede them. Such PMU groups often abuse their power by using severe military campaigns and making profits from oil smuggling. On the other hand, the PMU has the largest parliamentary bloc in Iraq – the movement has become a major political faction with a majority of the seats in parliament (AP News, 2019). As such, it has the ability to influence the country's

economic, political and social development. The movement also gets political legitimacy from the fact that many Iraqi ministers – as well as the Prime Minister – support it. Particularly, former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki helped to establish the movement in 2014 (Mansour, 2018). The Prime Minister had decreed that PMU leaders should be integrated into the government's state armed forces that are legally controlled by the Ministry of Defense. However, the PMU's leaders have countered that they should form an independent security body that protects the state but is controlled by the Prime Minister's office. Either way, the movement is bound to become a participant in state affairs (Mansour, 2018).

The influence of Iran in Iraq has become very dominant, and this has increased sectarian tensions in the region as Sunni states – who are allies with the U.S., especially Saudi Arabia – collaborate in order to suppress Iranian expansionism plans (Arango, 2017). By meddling in Iraq through supporting sectarian policies by affiliated politicians, and also backing Shiite groups, Iran has made sectarian tensions become worse. In fact, Iran now largely controls Iraq's politics, economy, and culture. It allows military groups to cross from Iraq into Iran without identification, where they are trained and sent to countries such as Syria to fight for the Syrian president, who is a supporter of Iran (Arango, 2017).

When ISIS attacked regions in Iraq, Iran took the initiative to ensure that the terrorist group was routed out. It used a large militia force trained inland to gain victory, and later used the same forces to secure its interests in the region. To achieve this, Iran marginalized the Sunni minority in Diyala and neighboring areas so as to gain a route to Syria, and also ensured that it maintained positive relations with top political leaders so

that it could retain access to Hezbollah in Lebanon (Arango, 2017). Iran maintains militias and advisers close to ISIS-controlled areas so as to ensure that the terrorist group does not interfere with its activities, and to retain the support of the Iraqi government. The militias have been accused of sectarian cleansing so as to eject Sunnis and thus increase Shiite dominance (Human Rights Watch, 2015).

Iran's influence is especially strong in southern Iraq because of the mostly Shiite population. Militias who are backed by Iran defend Shiite shrines in cities like Karbala and Najif that rely on the shrines for religious tourism. Additionally, the political parties and local councils that receive support from Iran tend to have a large number of followers, and their campaigns promote the relationship between Iranian imams and Shiite believers. This strategy ensures that Iran is perceived as a positive influence in these cities and thus continues to receive support from citizens (Arango, 2017).

In spite of the fact that the region controlled by Iran in Iraq is very small, it has proven useful because it enables Iran to transport its militia, military supplies, goods, and Iranian delegations between Iraq and Syria (Arango, 2017). As such, it appears that Iran is using the conflict to increase its influence in the region. Iraq has no goods or services that it can trade with or export to Iran apart from oil, meaning that Iraq has a heavy economic reliance on Iran.

Iran's recruiting strategy for soldiers in Iraq is mostly based on the idea that Shiites have a duty to defend their shrines, many of which are located in Syria (Arango, 2017). However, a great number of the soldiers who sign up with the Iran's Revolutionary Guards often do so because they need the money. They are trained in Iran, where their trainers often use Shiite spirituality and the martyrdom of Imam Hussein (Hazleton,

2010) as a reason for the soldiers to join the cause. Hence, it seems that by using the Shiite faith as its weapon, Iran aims to create a theocracy in Iraq. However, such a system might not be applicable in Iraq because the country has a large Sunni population and tradition. In addition, Iraq's clerics, who include some Shiite ones, also oppose the Iranian ideology.

There are also some political movements that are aligned to Iran, albeit slightly less than the ideological militants. These political movements support Iran's ideology on Velayat-e faqih, but have adapted it to Iraq's conditions. One of these movements is the Badr Organization, which was originally a Shia military group of volunteers that fought with Iran during the Iran-Iraq war (IISS, 2020). Even though Badr is predominantly Iraqi, it has a strong foundation in Iran because many of its top leaders previously studied and trained militarily in Iran. However, the organization's leaders do not openly display their ties to Iran the way other factions do, and they often proclaim their Iraqi identity and belonging (Filkins, 2013).

More than any other faction aligned to Iran, the Badr Organization has gradually gained access to Iraq's political, governmental, and state agencies (Jamestown Foundation, 2016). The organization's militia is perceived as the largest in PMU due to its significant technical capabilities and professionalism. The leaders of Badr perceive themselves not as Iran's servants, but rather as Iraqis who are attempting to adapt some concepts of the Iranian ideology of Velayat-e faqih to Iraq's local context. However, even though the organization does not deliberately request Iranian guidance in all its operations, it is still a trusted associate of Iran inside Iraq and retains strong grass-root ties to it. For Iran, the significant presence of the Badr Organization and other aligned

militia groups thus provides it with control over forces which seek to prevent the influence of Iran over Iraq. Therefore, Iran can use its power through such militias to make sure that its opposition does not gain sufficient power to remove it from Iraq.

There have been demonstrations recently in the country against corruption and poor economic reforms. These demonstrations have mainly occurred in Shiite cities and towns, showing that Iran's ability to influence the country has reduced. The Shiite communities in Iraq perceive that Iran and its proxies have not turned political and military success into economic growth, and that the Iranian ideology does not provide economic benefits to the citizens (Ghaddar, 2019). Therefore, in spite of Velayat-e faqih's religious, social, and political outlook, Iran did not effectively consider the importance of economic success. Even as it attempts to instill its control into the region's governmental and political institutions, the Iranian government failed to realize that power also requires a long-term goal (Ghaddar, 2019). Consequently, as events unfold in Iraq and in Lebanon, Iran appears to be losing its influence over the population, as evident from continued citizen protests. This is because Iran established and supported proxies such as Hezbollah and PMF so that it could infiltrate their governments. As such, the Iraqi – and even Lebanese government – appear to be protecting and serving Iranian interests rather than their citizens' needs.

Iraqis in Baghdad and other Shiite-majority areas protested over the failure of the government to provide citizens with basic services, reduce corruption, and enhance economic growth (Ghaddar, 2019). However, Iranian-backed militias swiftly responded to the demonstrations and deliberately killed numerous protestors. Iran's role in the response and the Iraqi government's inability to protect its citizens shows how Iran has

significant influence in Iraq. Many militia commanders who were previously supported by Iran are now part of the government and have helped to promote Iran's agenda, as well as to create an alternative economy for Iran under U.S. sanctions (IISS, 2020).

Despite installing its supporters in the government, Iran does not attempt to dictate the results of political disputes in Iraq, but rather concentrates on making sure that chosen leaders become its allies. Furthermore, Iran exploits existing domestic rivalries so as to ensure its long-term survival in the country (IISS, 2020). The alternative economy supported by political allies in government consequently enables Iran to thrive in the region despite the sanctions. Therefore, if Iran's influence is allowed to continue, the proxies of Iran in the country will become stronger and ultimately defeat the Iraqi army – thus giving Iran power to decide whether war or peace prevail in Iraq.

Iran also exploits the conflict between different militia groups in Iraq (Hannah, 2019). The former's relationship with Iraqi militants is based mainly on mentorship rather than control. Iran realizes that the political context of Iraq is bound to affect how Iran influences operations in the country – and so, letting the military groups compete against each other is beneficial, as long as they do not undermine each other and thus do not reduce Iran's power in the country. The use of Iran-backed militias in Iraq has consequently helped to counter ISIS threats, entrenched the military groups, and enabled Iran to meet its security objectives. In many cases, Iran's objectives are aligned to Iraq's government – and sometimes even to those of the U.S. (IISS, 2020). By integrating themselves into Iraq's security system, the military groups have given Iran an opportunity to obtain significant security and political advantages that go beyond defeating rivals. These advantages include using limited resources to threaten U.S.

interests in the Middle East, creating a territorial region that stretches from Iran to Lebanon, and making sure that Iraqi territories cannot be used to threaten the sovereignty of Iran (IISS, 2020).

3.5.1 Transnational Conflict in Iraq

Geopolitical transition was a key driver of TNC in Iraq when the U.S. intervened in the country in 2003 so as to instill democracy (Congressional Research Service, 2019). However, this invasion eventually gave power to Iran as the latter gained control in Iraq through Velayat-e faqih over the years. This outcome showed that conflicts are often regionalized, and sometimes even strong nations like the U.S. do not have the power to manage them. Global ideological contestation occurred in the form of radical religion, when Khomeini pitted Shia beliefs in the form of Velayat-e faqih in the face of Western consumerism and capitalist beliefs. The presence of Iran-backed PMU forces in Iraq have propagated the idea that Western beliefs will further erode Islam; so, the ideology fuels sectarian and religious conflict in the country. This is in agreement with Bavinck et al. (2014), who noted that identity and ideology can fuel TNC; and this can be seen as Muslim countries fight to protect their religious ideological beliefs against Western consumerism.

Additionally, transnational connectors of people (e.g., radical Muslim groups like Al Qaeda) have further exacerbated TNC in Iraq and further propagated the Sunni-Shia conflict (Thomas, 2018). Such groups have created violence in the country and formed criminal and terrorist networks that engage in illegal military and financial activities. Many of those activities have targeted non-Sunnis in various countries and exacerbated

the Sunni-Shia conflict (Thomas, 2018). As such, Iraq is perceived as an unstable country that is in conflict within its own borders and with the outside world.

Regional TNC is evident in the Middle East because this is a region in turmoil, with countries like Iraq having internal conflicts that affect the entire region. That is why countries like Iran are interfering in Iraq and forming proxy alliances with groups in the country. This has further increased tensions between Sunni and Shia Muslims, considering that Iraq has a large Sunni presence, and yet Shia Iran is increasing its dominion over the country by supporting and fueling conflict between militia groups (Hannah, 2019). Iran's presence has thus affected the distribution of power in Iraq, and the conflict in Iraq must be seen within a complex that includes Iran, Lebanon, Syria, and other neighboring countries. The countries in the region are consequently interconnected as they fight against each other to gain political and economic control. The regional conflict affirms this study's hypothesis, because the conflict confirms that the countries in the region, especially Iran, are using economic and political stakes in order to gain dominion over the region.

The conflict in Iraq is currently being played out at the state level. This is because the government is the main mediator in creating balance between international countries such as the U.S. that might seek to sanction Iraq and gain control, and the fragmentation caused by discontented citizens who are struggling to survive because most of their goods and services must be imported from Iran (Arango, 2017). The Iraqi economy has significantly deteriorated; and citizens are forced to rely on Iran, which ultimately aims to gain control of Iraq and force its revolutionary ideological beliefs on the people.

Iraq appears to be a community of people who have been influenced by the politics and the religious and social norms of the region in the TNC scene. As such, the Kurds in Iraq form an identity group in TNC because they are an ethnic minority which was consistently ignored. They rebelled against the Iraqi government, and tensions between the two have remained strong over the years (Rogg and Rimscha, 2007). As such, this ethnic conflict is caused by a collective fear of the future because when a group like the Kurds begins to feel unsafe, critical and dangerous situations (that cannot be easily resolved) tend to arise and could lead to violence (Lake and Rothchild, 1996). Ultimately, it is the elite and leaders in a country who instigate violence rather than the masses (Brown, 1996). For instance, the 1980 Iraq-Iran was deliberately triggered by the then president Saddam Hussein, leading to a protracted war – mainly because Iran was unwilling to end it, while Iraq could not end it ("Iran Iraq war," 2018). Ultimately, it was the citizens who paid the bill, and they still lack basic services and infrastructure until this present day.

3.6 Velayat-e faqih in Yemen

The Zaydi school of Islam is an indigenous Yemeni branch of Shia Islam that is separate from the Twelver Shiism practiced in Iran. Even though most Yemenis are Zaydis and Sunni, their sectarian divide was of little importance over the years. However, after the Arab Spring of 2011, sectarian discourse increased and led to a realignment of Yemenis along sectarian lines. The Houthis are Yemeni rebels who follow the teachings of Hussein bin Ali bin Abi Taleb, a major figure in Twelver and Zayid Shiism (Hazleton, 2010). In 2014, they started to follow the examples of Iraq, Lebanon, and Iran in celebrating religious ceremonies associated with Hussein. As such, it became apparent

that modern identity politics after the Arab Spring had motivated the Houthis to revive the grudge between Shia supporters and their Sunni rivals.

The Houthi militant Islamic group in Yemen, which belongs to the Zaydi school of thought, receives support from Iran. It gained power and began to exert its influence over northern Yemen when the government collapsed during the Arab Spring in 2011. After the revolts were over, the Houthis and Salafists employed sectarian discourse as a way of obtaining more soldiers to their causes (Al-Muslimi, 2015). This meant that previously marginalized groups gained influence in this new arrangement. In 2014, the Houthis defeated their Salafist rivals in Dammaj, who fled to the south of Yemen. While the Salafists continued their anti-Houthi campaigns, the Houthis also used Zaydi Shia ideology to campaign against Sunni rivals. For instance, they use mosques to deliver their socially and religiously provocative messages; and also destroy the homes and facilities belonging to their rivals (al-Muslimi, 2015).

Yemen is often depicted as a stage for the proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran (Al-Muslimi, 2014). When the Houthis seized Sanaa and its security apparatus in 2014, they induced a new political reality in the region. Saudi Arabia appeared to have lost its control when Iranian and Shia influence increased on the southern border. However, Saudi's influence in Yemen remained strong; and so, in order to retain their mutual interests in Sanaa, both the Houthis and Saudis had to come to an agreement. This is because Saudi Arabia controls the border to the Houthis' core areas in the north, so the latter are obliged to cooperate with Saudis in order to access these areas (Al-Muslimi, 2014).

After the Arab Spring, Iran started to offer financial and military support to the Houthis. Additionally, when the Houthis conquered Sanaa in 2014 – and during the subsequent Saudi Arabian intervention – Iran once more began to offer economic and military support to the Houthis (Alley, 2014). Iran has consequently become committed to ensuring that the Houthis survive in Yemen and that the group can help it project power in the region, especially against Saudi Arabia. At the same time, the Houthis have a similar relationship with Hezbollah. In fact, Hezbollah fighters often train in Yemen (IISS, 2020). This relationship demonstrates the close ties between Iran, Hezbollah, and the Houthis because if Iran was not their benefactor, the two groups would not be willing to collaborate in their training activities.

SIPRI (2018) reported that Iran's military expenditure increased by 37% between 2014 and 2017 due to the lifting of sanctions against the country by the United Nations and European Union. Therefore, even though there is a lack of data on Yemen's current military spending, it is evident that some of Iran's military expenditure is spent on its proxies in Yemen – just as in countries like Lebanon and Iraq. However, it was estimated that the country spent 3.97% of its GDP in 2014 on military activities (Index Mundi, 2015). This is significant as it shows the government's readiness to fight against invaders such as Iran. The availability of funds from Iran therefore means that the Houthi rebels are easily empowered to fight against the Yemeni government.

According to Gordon and Parkinson (2018), Iran's actual control and collaboration with the Houthis in Yemen remains unclear. However, it is apparent that Iran's military, financial, and moral support for the Houthis is not based on Shiite faith or Iran's desire to export its revolution. Instead, the support appears to be more of a deliberate attempt

to cause conflict in Yemen in order to gain control. As such, the Houthis were not born as Shiites, but instead adapted this belief because of the Yemeni president's and Saudi Arabia's portrayal of the group as a Shiite rebel group that receives support from Hezbollah. The idea behind the portrayal was to instill fear in Yemeni citizens about the possibility of Iran increasing its activities in the country (Gordon and Parkinson, 2018). Therefore, the Saudi war against the Houthis is framed as an effort to resist the Iranian influence in Yemen.

Iran is therefore supporting the Houthis for various reasons. First, the growing conflict in Yemen has created opportunity for external actors to intervene in the situation, including Iran. Second, the Houthis have become increasingly unhappy with the political regime in Yemen (which is backed by Saudi Arabia), and this has motivated Iran to support the Houthis against Saudis. The Houthis perceive that the government has marginalized them and is unwilling to include them in decision making in state affairs. The Houthis therefore perceive that the transition government that was formed in 2011 merely helped allocate state power to elitist groups, without giving marginalized citizens and groups – such as themselves – a chance to participate in governance. Furthermore, this leadership is supported by Saudi Arabia (Juneau, 2016).

Consequently, such anti-government incentives are what united Iran and the Houthis, rather than a shared belief in Shiism or in Velayat-e faqih. Many people, internationally and domestically, portray the Houthis as Shiite and use this to explain the relationship between the two (Black, 2015). The Houthis, however, are not really Iranian proxies because the latter's influence in Yemen is marginal. The civil war in Yemen, which started in 2015, was initially caused by political and domestic factors rather than

sectarian confrontations or international reasons – it was mainly fueled by domestic grievances and competition for resources and power in the country (Juneau, 2016). The Houthis were therefore attempting to remove the existing political order that emerged after the Arab Spring and to have a larger say in the country's affairs. Although Iran's support for the Houthis has increased since 2011, the support is still too limited to significantly impact the opposing forces in Yemen or to significantly increase Iran's influence in the country (Schmitt and Worth, 2012).

Iran seems to downsize the importance of Yemen in the Saudi-Iranian conflict. Yemen is not classified as very important in Iran's list of foreign policy priorities as compared to countries such as Iraq and Lebanon. Iran is also aware that Yemen is of significant concern to Saudi Arabia, so Iran would rather limit its relations with the Houthis in order to prevent direct confrontation with Saudi Arabia (Vatanka, 2015). Iran has therefore realized that providing limited support to the Houthis will produce minor yet interesting benefits; but it would not be worth it for Iran to make a major investment in Yemen because the country is highly unstable, and large investment would take away from its activities in the high-priority countries.

3.6.1 Transnational Conflict in Yemen

The U.S., UK, and France have significantly intervened in the Yemeni war by providing intelligence and logistical support to the Houthis' opponents, and this comes in line with Dewaal's (2019) observation that TNC is often fueled when external actors support state and non-state aggressors in an internal war, or when entities sponsor or suppress coups. Such activities have been a global driver for the conflict in Yemen, because the interfering countries support one faction over another rather than mediating between

them. These Western countries formed a coalition with Saudi Arabia and other Sunni states in order to defeat the Iran-backed Houthi rebels, who are mostly Shiites (BBC News, 2019). This conflict initially began due to uncertainty arising from the poor political transition after the Arab Spring of 2011. As such, uncertainties caused by regime change can lead to conflict. Even in Yemen, global ideological contestation is observed due to the presence of radical religion as propagated by Iran after the revolution. The Houthi rebels are backed by Iran and have served Iran's interests in Yemen against those of Saudi Arabia, who is a supporter of the government (Aarabi, 2019). The transnational shift is thus deepened because Saudi Arabia and Iran embrace different sectarian beliefs, which they expect their dependents to adhere to. Ultimately, this fuels the contemporary Sunni-Shia conflict as each side attempts to gain political, religious, and economic dominion.

The Yemeni war has led to regional conflict because Saudi Arabia and Iran are invested in the resulting outcome as they fight for leadership of the Muslim world (Duran and Yilmaz, 2013). As such, the Yemeni conflict is shaped by Iran's attempts to impose Velayat-e faqih and Shia ideology in the country (Robinson et al., 2018), while Saudi Arabia wants to impose Sunni control and the Wahhabi doctrine (Moniquet, 2013). This regional instability has consequently affected Yemen's internal politics due to clientage and the intervention of outside governments in its operations. Consequently, this has turned into a state-level TNC because both the Houthis and government want to gain state control, and thus institute their own revolutionary ideas and secure their own economic interests. The Zaidi sect thus is the identity group in Yemen, which is mostly a Shia minority that is linked to Iran and Hezbollah. Hence, the Alawite Shia are in

conflict with Yemen's Sunni majority, and this conflict has been protracted. Due to the interference of internal and external elites and leaders, and their fueling of sectarian differences, Yemenis are facing starvation and lack of basic needs (UN, 2019). The communal violence between the sects in Yemen is thus the result of the leaders' desire for domination, rather than religious differences.

3.7 Conclusion

Iran has faced – and will continue to face – numerous challenges as it builds hegemony in the Middle East; and its actions will have other consequences for the region. As it gains control over some regions in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon – and continues to impose its Shiite ideology in the communities – Iran will also have to ensure that it continuously and significantly invests in these proxy citizens. This means that Iran will effectively be in charge of all the Shiites in the region, and none of the controlled states will have autonomy. However, when such states collapse, it will not only be Iran who will attempt to regain control, because even Sunni groups such as ISIS will try to conquer them. Additionally, even as Iran's power in the region grows, groups such as ISIS will also grow and become more aggressive in order to defeat Iran.

Therefore, sectarian rhetoric will not decrease unless all sectarian groups are handled similarly. The plan for Iran to establish Velayat-e faqih in the region has been effective in countries like Iraq and Lebanon, but marginally successful in Yemen. Therefore, Shiite communities in these countries are part of Iran's plans, whether they agree to or not. On the other hand, Sunnis are also driven by violence and fear, similar to the Shiite. This will result in endless wars in the region, which is already fragile as states and sects

fight for revenge. Therefore, the only way to improve the situation is to prevent Iran and militias, especially ISIS, from gaining further power in the region. A solution would be to offer the communities viable economic alternatives for the short term, and enablement to constructive citizenship.

TNC is evident in Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen because the international factors of conflict that are influenced by the hunger for power are present there. The three countries are involved in proxy wars that are state-sponsored and utilize covert activities as well as coups. In general, the main drivers of TNC are materialized in these countries through a fight for sectarian dominance, religious beliefs, and distribution of resources.

Chapter Four

4. Reflections on Sectarian Driven TNC Analysis

4.1 Introduction

This section discusses how the Saudi-Iranian conflict has been drive by various social, political, and economic drivers. It also discusses the futility of the conflict and what strategies can be used to bring back balance to the structure of power distribution. With this rebalance, the conflict should end. The chapter also discusses various perceptions that others have on Velayat-e Faqih and how the Sunni-Shia conflict can be mitigated.

4.2 Sunni-Shia Conflict Driven by Political, Economic, and Social Drivers

This study found that the Sunni-Shia conflict is mainly driven by political, economic, and social drivers as opposed to religious factors. This is because the two sects have coexisted peacefully earlier on when some semblance of political order provided security to both (Council on Foreign Relations, 2014). Consequently, other factors in play are more responsible for the conflict than religion, and they must be resolved to ensure that the sects can coexist. Indeed, the Sunni-Shia conflict has a significant historical background; but religion is merely a small part of the complex issue. This is because the killings and violence in countries such as Yemen and Syria will not stop if the Sunni and Shia decide to agree on who is the rightful successor of Prophet Muhammad. This study therefore found that analyzing the sectarian conflict based on issues raised after the Prophet's death would be misleading.

Hence, the contemporary sectarian conflict is a modern conflict that is taking place in failed or failing nations, and is fueled by national, political, and geostrategic rivalries. This confirms Nasr's (2007a) opinion that the sectarian conflict has its roots in modern nationalism rather than in Islamic theology. Instead of being a religious war, the conflicts have turned into proxy wars between Saudi Arabia and Iran, both of which are seeking dominance in collapsed or poorly governed states. Therefore, the events occurring are not the presumed re-emergence of ancient hatreds, but the deployment of a new animosity. It would therefore be more appropriate to conclude, as this paper suggests, that Saudi Arabia and Iran are using religion as a mere instrument, and turning political conflicts into sectarian-based issues in order to gain political dominance (Rieffer-Flanagan, 2009). Therefore, religion is not the driver nor root cause of this conflict.

The Sunni and Shia have coexisted well since the beginning, so they are not naturally inclined to be fighting each other. This sentiment is also relevant in the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran because as late as the 1970s, the two countries were united against other countries, such as Egypt (Council on Foreign Relations, 2014). What this basically means is that they are not fighting a religious war but rather to gain political domination. Therefore, the way in which international actors, media, and policy makers are focusing on Islam without understanding the economic, political, and social drivers of the Sunni-Shia conflict is bound to create a false diagnosis – and consequently, ineffective recommendations for an end to the protracted conflict in the region.

4.3 The Futility of the Saudi Arabia-Iranian Conflict

The Saudi-Iranian conflict is an ongoing one that is based on the need for control in the MENA region. This paper has so far shown that at the moment, Iran appears to have the upper hand; and in case of escalating conflict, Iran would most likely win in a war with Saudi Arabia. These rivals seek dominion in the Middle East and have employed various tactics in order to gain control. It is true that Saudi Arabia has numerous expensive weapons; but it suffers from limited military training when compared to Iran. These findings are in agreement with TRTWorld (2019), wherein it was reported that Saudi Arabia has a superior air force, naval, land, strategic missiles and fighting mechanisms; but Iran's troops have a lot more experience as their soldiers have trained for and fought in Iraq and Syria, and the Iranian military leaders are highly skilled in war strategies.

Both countries have been fighting each other in proxy wars since 2011, but have not directly come out to fight each other. The two sides perceive that direct conflict would not benefit either side, but they have sought to gain dominance by exploiting ongoing conflicts in other Arab countries. As such, they are using the conflict-ridden countries as pawns in their power struggles while attempting to cover up their desire for power using religious reasons. However, when it comes to all-out war between the two nations, neither country has a bigger advantage over the other. If they were to enter into war without the involvement of external actors, the goal of the war would not be about gaining territory or changing regimes (TRTWorld, 2019). Rather, it would be about attempting to completely eradicate the competition. Therefore, such a war would be very brutal and aimed at inflicting as much damage as possible in order to force an end to aggression.

However, even though Saudi Arabia would be more capable of undertaking such a protracted conflict because of its superior financial resources and access to foreign military hardware, Iran might also prevail due to its significant experience in warfare (TRTWorld, 2019). This is because Iran has endured conflict and pressure from countries much stronger than Saudi Arabia. However, open war between the two countries, as should be evident by now, would not be limited to the two of them. Rather, it would most likely lead to regional conflict and bloodshed as their respective allies and proxy militias rush to support them due to religious divisions and the need to maintain sectarian superiority (TRTWorld, 2019). Alternatively, the two countries can contribute to stability in the region if they find a sustainable solution to their differences and stop supporting other countries with the same position. However, taking into account the current situation in the region, this is not going to happen anytime soon. As such, international intervention might be the only way to bring such a conflict to an end.

4.4 Reasons for the Rebalance in Power Distribution

The findings of the study so far indicate that the attempts to rebalance the power distribution in the Middle East is greatly due to Iran's employment of Velayat-e faqih ideology that has exploited Shiism to a large extent in order to convince all Shia of the need for gaining control in the region. This conclusion is supported by Nasr (2007a), who stated that the contemporary conflict and consequent power redistribution are rooted in modern nationalism rather than in Islamic ideology. This means that rather than being a Shia revolution, the new power distribution is a result of Iran's insistence on establishing Velayat-e faqih in the Middle East.

Iran is perceived as a regional power and an important international player (Bruno, 2015). This is in agreement with the study's results which indicate that Iran has changed strategic balance in the region; but it also has the ability to stop the sectarian conflict, neutralize ISIS, and help to increase peaceful coexistence in the region. Iran's continuing support of parties such as Hezbollah, PMU and the Houthis on the basis of Velayat-e faqih has also contributed to the new power distribution because as these movements win their wars, they demonstrate that Iran is a powerful and thus formidable enemy to those who resist its dominion and religious ideology.

4.5 Velayat-e faqih as a Tool

Originally, Velayat-e faqih was a principle accepted in Shia faith as a way of protecting a small section of the population who were incapable of taking care of themselves. However, this ideology has been converted into a tool for Iranian governance in the region rather than a way of ensuring that both the Shia and Sunni citizens receive equal treatment in their countries. The original imams who used Velayat-e faqih were not politically active because they believed that a legitimate Islamic government could not be achieved during the time when the twelfth imam was still hidden (Aarabi, 2019).

As previously mentioned in this study, Ayatollah Khomeini turned Velayat-e faqih into a political tool and expanded it from a concept that protected marginalized groups in the community into one that included the entire population. As such, the literature in the study demonstrates that Velayat-e faqih, as used in Iran, is an innovation of Khomeini which the country has used as an instrument for convincing movements such as Hezbollah and PMU to support its plans for regional domination by providing them with

financial and military support (Blanford, 2015; IISS, 2020). What these supporters do not understand or know is what will happen once Iran gains the political supremacy it is seeking in the region. For instance, will it allow its movements to govern themselves, or will it insist on using Velayat-e faqih as a reason for controlling these new territories? Currently, Iran dictates the activities of its proxies in these countries and might be inclined to gain absolute control; but if the latter understood Iran's end-game, they might not be so quick to support its cause.

4.6 Perceptions of Shia on Velayat-e faqih

Not all Shia adherents support Iran or endorse its ideologies, but Shiite ideology is what guides the Iranian Revolution (Burns, 1996). Velayat-e faqih was thus historically used to justify limited clerical leadership over marginalized populations and those incapable of taking care of themselves – for instance, orphans and widows (Aarabi, 2019). This aspect of Velayat-e faqih is what the Shia who do not support Iran believe in. The current interpretation of the ideology and how Iran has appropriated it to gain dominion was formulated by Ayatollah Khomeini to denote the Iranian Revolution. Therefore, the Shia who support Iran believe that the revolution based on Velayat-e faqih is the right path towards achieving absolute political and religious leadership. Such Shia thus have no compunction supporting Iran in its bid to gain political dominance using proxies in countries such as Lebanon, Yemen, and Iraq. The Shia in various countries have gradually accepted the doctrine of Velayat-e faqih and allowed it to significantly shape their culture and political activities (Mneimneh, 2009). This is particularly applicable in Lebanon, where Hezbollah has deeply integrated itself into the country's economy,

politics, and social scene and thus gained control of many aspects of the citizens' lives, especially Shias.

4.7 Other Perceptions on Velayat-e faqih

The international community and non-Muslims typically believe that there has been a war in Islam (between Sunnis and Shiites) that has been going on for hundreds of years. As such, the concept of ancient sectarian hatred appears to be tailored to explain the Iranian Revolution as well as the contemporary Sunni-Shia conflict and how each side perceives their religious ideology as ideal. This study found that the international community perceives the Iranian Revolution either as a sort of madness, an accidental occurrence, or a bizarre anomaly that should be corrected (Axworthy, 2019). This is because the international community relates any mention of Iran with its militia allies, which in turn are associated with violence. As such, Iran's doctrine of Velayat-e faqih creates images of violent people and religion, especially when people do not understand the underlying differences.

Chapter Five

5. Prospects for the Mitigation and Prevention of Sectarian Conflicts

5.1 Introduction

This chapter provides recommendations on how to end the Saudi-Iran conflict based on several scenarios. It is important to note that in order for the conflict to end, both parties, and other international and domestic actors, must be willing to compromise and thus chart the way forward.

5.2 Sunni-Shia Conflict Mitigation Possibilities

In order to prevent the contemporary sectarian conflict from worsening, Muslim majority governments from both sects need to respect the rights of their citizens irrespective of their sectarian beliefs. As such, the Sunni-majority states should learn to treat the Shia minority citizens as equals and Shia-majority states should do the same for Sunni minority citizens. This will also include bringing an end to Iran's and Saudi Arabia's meddling in other countries to allow these countries to deal with their problems, democratically and practically. It will also be important for international actors to avoid exploiting the sectarian conflict in pursuit of their interests. Another option would be for Muslim countries to desist from using religion as a weapon of security and international and domestic policy, thus concentrating on finding practical strategies for conflict resolution and sustainable peace.

Banks (1994) noted that in the current world, conflict is never properly understood and often ends up being mishandled. This supports the notion that ethnic and/or religious conflicts are often protracted and appear stubborn to resolve because there are usually many causal factors which make them unique. Additionally, such conflicts are seldom resolved, mainly due to the fact that their underlying causes are usually not properly outlined or understood. Therefore, using conventional ways to resolve them tends to produce ineffective or inadequate outcomes. Conventional methods of conflict resolution are typically based on a realist approach that relies on compromise and settlement.

This study recommends using structural conflict resolution, which revolves around economic and political construction (Burton, 1987), because it would be effective in protracted conflicts. This will involve creating economic and political reforms in the Middle East, particularly in the collapsed or collapsing states. The result of such reforms will be equity among citizens because they will all be able to participate in nation-building and in enhancing economic growth. However, this should be accompanied by reforms that increase public awareness on the need for long-term peace as a way of enhancing the region's economic and political growth and sustainability.

Consequently, overcoming contemporary sectarian conflict will involve state-building so that Arab states have strong democratic governments that use the rule of law rather than religion to govern citizens (Mintner, 2018). Those countries also need to enhance national identity, provide excellent security and social services, and improve their economies. These strategies will ultimately defeat the challenge of needs that is seen as the reason for a protracted social conflict (Azar, 1983). This is because sectarian conflict

is based on underlying challenges such as underrepresentation, poor governance, economic distribution, and inclusion. Once these issues are solved, the conflict will cease.

5.3 Resolution Prospects of the Sunni-Shia Contentions

Most commentaries on the Shia-Sunni conflict convey a sense of inevitability and permanence about the conflict in the region where there are substantial Shia minorities. Clearly, the differences between the sects cannot be denied, but they have coexisted over time, partly due to the fact that the Shia never gained dominance before and were forced into a politically quietist position. However, with the Shia increasingly seeking recognition and power, the Shia movement became radicalized as the sect sought to gain a national identity, while the Sunni felt threatened by this growth. It can therefore be said that the conflict is mostly a reaction to contemporary political and economic events such as poor governance and corruption. Therefore, Muslims today are like brothers and enemies at the same time. The Sunni and Shia sects each exploit their religious and ethnic identity to confront each other in a futile war, in which they are all bound to lose in the long term. Generally, the fall of Arabism or Islam as a source of identity might lead to numerous civil wars between the sects, and it would be impossible to determine how the war will end as long as sectarian ideology is used as an excuse for the conflict.

This study aimed to answer questions on the major conflict drivers of contemporary Sunni-Shia disputes and the protracted social conflict resolution strategies that are applicable in prevention and de-escalation. The findings demonstrated that the Sunni-Shia dispute is driven by economic, political and social factors. The PSC strategies

recommended in this study include ensuring equality between Sunni and Shia citizens, ending the Saudi Arabian-Iranian fight for domination, eliminating the interference of international actors, and using structural conflict resolution as it is effective in protracted conflicts.

5.4 Preventions of Sectarian TNC

Most conflicts are caused by both general and specific causes. As such, they require systems of conflict prevention that will solve both the general conditions that can lead to conflict, and the potential triggers which could lead war-prone regions to armed conflict (Ramsbotham et al., 2011). As such, direct conflict prevention in the Middle East would help to prevent armed conflict in future, while structural conflict prevention will enable countries to manage emerging conflicts when they are still at an early stage. Table 2 below gives examples of direct and structural approaches that can be used to prevent conflict.

Table 2: Preventing interstate conflict

Factors generating conflict	Possible preventers
Global level	
Inappropriate systemic structures	Changes in international order
Regional level	
Regional diasporas	Regional security arrangements
State level	
Ethnic stratification	Power-sharing/federalism/autonomy
Weak economies	Appropriate development
Authoritarian rule	Legitimacy, democratization
Human rights abuse	Rule of law, human rights monitoring/protection
Societal level	
Weak societies	Strengthening civic society, institutions
Weak communications	Round tables, workshops, community relations
Polarized attitudes	Cross-cultural work
Poverty, inequality	Poverty reduction and social reforms
Elite/individual level	
Exclusionist policies	Stronger moderates

Source: Ramsbotham et al., 2011.

It would therefore be beneficial to classify conflicts as a threat to international peace and security, even when countries are not at war. This will change international order and attitudes about war because when internal conflicts involve the violation of international human rights, efforts will be made at the international level to prevent such a conflict (National Research Council, 2000). Nations should understand that conflict in their countries will harm international peace and could lead to reprisals, so they should avoid war at all costs. For example, tensions between Russia, the U.S. and China, as well as the competition over oil, can reduce tensions between the Sunni and Shia as most countries focus on such conflicts. On the other hand, these conflict dynamics might increase the tension between countries and increase the risk of interstate conflict in the coming years – for instance, between Saudi Arabia and Iran (Department of National

Intelligence, 2019). As such, conflict should be treated as an international affair. However, this would not prevent a buildup of underlying causes of conflict, and these should be resolved in order to fully prevent escalation in the long term.

Alternatively, countries in the Middle East can establish regional security arrangements to deal with conflict. In places where the arrangements are aimed at promoting cooperative security, the countries should engage in building up each other's confidence and in working together on certain security issues – for instance, border patrols. However, it would be important to initially examine the types of resources and competencies that the cooperating nations have, so as to ensure that each operates based on its abilities and is thus not over-tasked (Haacke and Williams, 2009). It will also be important to examine the possible agendas for hegemony that countries participating in the regional agreement possess, as this will avert a future conflict if one country seeks more dominance over the other, thus preempting conflict. In such circumstances, it is critical to understand the role of regional proxies such as Hezbollah in the agendas for hegemony so as to be sure that such groups do not exploit their resources and political power to gain and maintain control.

While power sharing can be perceived as a possible prevention strategy for conflict at the state level, the example of Lebanon shows that this is not an effective method. This is because in spite of the almost equal distribution of power in the Lebanese government among the various sects, the country still faces sectarian conflict that is fueled by external actors. Additionally, power-sharing deals between Houthi rebels and the government have collapsed several times since 2017, with each side fighting to gain control (BBC News, 2020). Therefore, strengthening the economy might provide better

results, especially when citizens in the country become empowered and have no reason to look for sectarian excuses to create conflict in order to meet their basic needs.

NGOs, developmental agencies, and civil organizations can also help prevent conflict in the region, especially in poor countries such as Yemen. Even though such a task might be very challenging due to the ingrained sectarian differences between communities, their ability to establish community awareness programs and to collaborate with government should help to bridge the gap between citizens so that they can look beyond their sectarian and cultural differences and focus on political and social development (Ramsbotham et al., 2011). Appropriate economic and social development can thus help to prevent conflict. Therefore, poverty reduction and social reforms at the societal level are what will most likely prevent conflict in some cases, because the latter is usually a natural outcome of societies' economic, social, and political problems (Penh, 2009). Ultimately each of these preventive measures has its benefits and challenges, and each should be examined to prevent the implementation of a strategy that could generate more conflict.

Ultimately, the contemporary sectarian conflict in the Middle East can be resolved using various strategies if all the actors and stakeholders in the peace process use an appropriate strategy. It would therefore be important to seek long-term peaceful solutions rather than solving the political, social, and economic problems in a fragmented manner. This is because merely solving some drivers of the contemporary conflict will mean that some stakeholders remain unsatisfied, and they could fuel the conflict afresh. It would be especially pertinent to find a permanent solution to the Saudi Arabia-Iran conflict because this is a major driver of the communitarian politics in the

region. Once this conflict is resolved, then countries will be in a better position to solve their own internal challenges related to political, economic, and social inadequacies so as to provide citizens with the basic needs that they currently lack and eliminate the protracted conflict in many countries in the region.

This study thus examines Table 2 in respect to Velayat-e faqih and determines that the ideology of Velayat-e faqih should be moderated so as to facilitate positive mutual existence between Sunnis and Shias, especially that such an understanding would easen tensions. Additionally, it will reduce TNC because when the two sects live in mutual understanding, the proxies and militant groups that support them will also learn to coexist and understand each other's ideologies.

Similarly, Saudi Arabia, which is the Sunni's center of religious power, should have a different approach towards Iran and its Shia control by accepting and facilitating power sharing agreements between the two religious sects. Although such an approach appears not to have worked effectively before in Lebanon and in Yemen, the two sects and their corresponding governments should establish fair division of power so as to remove control from one side. Such a strategy will eliminate the regional and state level TNC because all sides will have an equal share in available resources and in political control. These are strategic aims, knowing the difficulties to be implemented, but they worth being considered in future researches and studies.

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