

Lebanese American University

Department of Social and Education Sciences

Course: POL499-Senior Study

Unpacking the spillovers of the multifaceted Iranian-Saudi Arabian rivalry on Lebanon

by

Nour Salem

ID: 202000795

07/04/2023

Plagiarism Policy Compliance Statement

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

Name: Nour Salem

Signature: Nour Salem

Date: 07/04/2023

Abstract:

Reclaiming the mantle of Islamic leadership has led Iran and Saudi Arabia to engage in proxy-wars to counter each other's efforts in ruling the region. Both rivals target weak States as Lebanon to exert their influence since such States have vulnerable populations that can be swayed away by their promises. Lebanon is a significant pawn in the regional competition found between both camps. Thus, among all the wars, insurgencies and uprisings in Lebanon we always seem to have Iran and Saudi Arabia indirectly involved by supporting opposing sides in the conflicts. In this senior study thesis, the relationship of the aforementioned parties with the different communities and political parties in Lebanon will be examined along with how this relationship influences the domestic politics of the country. Furthermore, the different strategies, coercive foreign policies, national interests, geostrategic ambitions and motives of both countries to finance the ongoing clashes and wars in Lebanon will be analyzed. This senior study thesis will also tackle how Lebanon is an irreplaceable piece for both countries' geopolitical interest in the region and how this has shaped the social, religious and political landscapes of Lebanon. This senior study thesis will explain how the events that unfolded in Lebanon from 2005 till 2008 are indirectly related to Iran and KSA's influence on the country. It will also explore how Lebanon's location in a geopolitical shatterbelt will automatically have the country involved in the Iranian-Saudi Arabian rivalry. It will also analyze how this rivalry is destabilizing Lebanon's socio-political landscape and how their ambitions in Lebanon and their geopolitical, economic and national interests led to political impasses, war outbreaks, insurgencies and uprisings.

Contents

Abstract:.....	3
Introduction:	6
Scope of study:.....	9
Literature Review and Gaps:	10
The Factors Leading to the Hegemonic Rivalry’s Intervention in Lebanon	10
Iran and KSA’s foreign policies towards Lebanon and their allies	12
The domestic impact on Lebanon	13
Gaps.....	14
Argument, Hypotheses, Variables and Concepts:	15
Argument:	15
Hypotheses:	15
Variables and Concept:	15
Methodology	16
Justification	17
Analysis and Findings:	17
Conclusion:.....	26
References	28

Abbreviation list:

KSA: Saudi Arabia

FPM: Free Patriotic Movement

FM: Future Movement

A-Introduction:

A race of hegemony has been shaped between Saudi Arabia (KSA) who claims Wahhabism is the legitimate and pure form of Islam and Iran who contends Shi'ism as the rightful heirs of Islam. This strong division is attributed to the formation of an identity that has been molded by centuries of diverse political, cultural and social aspirations and experiences. The competition started ever since the establishment of Abdul-Aziz Al Saud to its Kingdom in the Gulf and the formation of Iran by Reza Shah. Starting from here, tensions arose over indirect territorial disputes. Iran claimed certain territories in the Gulf to be legitimately theirs since they were under the Persian Empire's rule and KSA alleged that those territories are rightfully Al-Saud's lands. Nevertheless, these territorial disputes were complicated by religious distinctions which intensified the tensions and turned the dispute into a regional hegemonic race. Out of the ashes of Western colonialism and the Ottoman Empire, Iran and KSA started to build their competing empires by establishing buffer governments in different countries to acquire them as allies. This competition has had severe consequences on the region since it redirects the course of politics regionally and drives the area into a period of confrontation and intense crisis. Interestingly, both nations have never engaged in direct military confrontation. Instead, they have divided the region into opposing camps based on different political ideologies under the umbrella of religious aspirations. They target vulnerable societies and mostly appeal to them through religion to gain them on their camp. Their ongoing rivalry that is portrayed as being fueled by opposing religious aspirations for Islamic leadership is truly about opposing political and security aspirations. Nonetheless, they are able to implement their schemes and to sway the population with their never-ending agenda of promises in Lebanon through religion. They consolidated their grip on the country by taking advantage of the Consociational framework and the power-sharing formulas that started with the National Pact

and the Taef Agreement. They infiltrated in the Lebanese system due to its fragile nature and to the deep sectarian divisions that let each sect or community appeal to a certain regional power for protection. This phenomenon enforced clientelism and mobilized people based on political and ethnic considerations. This gave rise to sectarianism and widened the schism within the government, creating a void to be filled by external powers. Iran supports groups that has specific Shiite agendas and some Christian groups meanwhile KSA backs Sunnis and some Christian groups in Lebanon. This division over allegiances have intensified the fractions between the different communities since each resorts to an agenda of a certain foreign country. This has had severe implications on the policies enacted, security, stability, economic growth and development of this country. Each community and political party is conditioned to act and to react in a specific manner according to their allegiances. Iran created Hezbollah to counter Sunni and Saudi's influence in Lebanon. They wanted to gain an ally that would help them implement their agenda of Anti-Americanism and Jihadism against the Israelis. They provide Hezbollah with military aid ranging from rockets, tactical ballistic missiles, logistical support and training and financial aid that is funneled through Syria to reach Lebanese soil. Hezbollah's existence in Lebanon has a tremendous impact over the stability and the course of politics in the government. The rising power of the Party of God is instrumental for Iran since it represents Wilayat el Faqih's extended reach to the Arab world and gives them an asymmetrical edge in the region. Consequently, KSA had to find a way to secure its grip on Lebanese affairs to beat Iran's influence. Hence, they proctored the Taef agreement to exert their influence on Lebanon. This has provided a fertile ground for the rise of sectarianism, divisions among the Lebanese communities, political conflicts, instability and unequal power sharing. They invited Lebanese politicians in 1989 in the city of Taef on the basis of helping them negotiate an agreement that would end the calamity of the civil war. Nonetheless, KSA

crafted this agreement with a power sharing formula that would give them an advantage in Lebanese politics. They allocated the Lebanese Prime Minister's office exclusively to Sunni sect and reduced the President's powers to assign them to the Prime Minister. Through this agreement, they empowered the Sunni community and conveyed all executive powers to the Sunni Prime Minister that will be guided by them to stand against Hezbollah's rising power. Thereafter, to have a substantial influence in the Lebanese arena, they shepherded the governments of Rafiq el Hariri and his son and their Future movement. They also mobilized Lebanese Sunnis as their loyal supporters and resorted to finance some Christian movements. Overall, those indirect interventions maneuvered Lebanon's course of politics throughout the century leading to many clashes, political impasses and economic and social crises.

Hence, this senior study thesis will build upon the argument that Iran and KSA are indirectly involved in Lebanese politics to neutralize each other's expansionism and that this involvement has a significant impact on the domestic affairs of the country. It is apparent that they use different strategies to feed their agendas in Lebanon: KSA resorts to a containment policy meanwhile Iran relies on a deterrence strategy.

The following questions can be raised: What are the religious, social and political factors that helped Iran and KSA intervene in Lebanon's domestic affairs? What are the strategies employed and the allies drawn in to feed their agendas in Lebanon? How did this play out on the domestic level in Lebanon specifically on a political, religious and social landscape?

These questions provide a comprehensive examination of the religious and socio-political motives and the impact of the Iranian-Saudi Arabian rivalry on Lebanon. By answering these questions, the study will provide valuable insights into the ways in which this regional conflict has influenced the stability, security, social, and political landscape of Lebanon. These

questions are important for understanding the strategies employed by both camps and their impact on the Lebanese system. This will help us have a better comprehension of the implications of this regional rivalry on Lebanon's failed state.

B- Scope of study:

This senior study will start by unraveling the causes behind Iran and KSA's intervention in Lebanon. Then, the thesis will pinpoint the strategies employed by KSA and Iran and the allies they formed to feed their agendas. Finally, this thesis will examine the ways in which the ongoing rivalry between KSA and Iran has influenced the religious, social and political sceneries of Lebanon. It will explore how the events that unfolded in Lebanon from 2005 till 2008 are indirectly related to Iran and KSA's influence on the country. The thesis will start by covering the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik el Hariri since it was a turning point in Lebanon's politics. The assassination led to the Cedar Revolution which polarized the country into two camps and increased the tensions between Iran and KSA as they sought to exert their influence in this era. Then, the Mar Mkhael agreement and the July War in 2006 will be tackled since they highlight Hezbollah's growing influence in Lebanese politics. Furthermore, the 7 may 2008 clashes and the Doha agreement will be tackled since they showcase the deepened divisions between Iran and KSA's allies in Lebanon. This topic is of high importance since it sheds the light on the far-reaching implications of this regional conflict on Lebanon. This thesis is meant to explain the reality behind Lebanon's identity, politics, clashes and government failure while focusing on the Iranian-Saudi Arabian rivalry's power dynamics' impact on Lebanon.

C- Literature Review and Gaps:

To understand the tensions occurring in Lebanon, this senior study thesis seeks to tackle the following questions: What are the underlying religious, political and social drivers that prompted Iran and KSA to engage in Lebanon's internal affairs? What tactics and alliances did Iran and KSA employ to advance their interests in Lebanon and in what ways did this intervention impact Lebanon's domestic affairs?

This literature review provides information about the impact of Iran and KSA's rivalry on Lebanon and the driving forces behind their interest in this country. Therefore, three strands will be focused on: The motives behind the Hegemonic rivalry's interest in Lebanon, the foreign policies and the allies of both parties in Lebanon and finally, the domestic impact of this rivalry on the country. These themes will provide a comprehensive understanding on the dynamics of the rivalry and its drastic impact on Lebanon.

The Factors Leading to the Hegemonic Rivalry's Intervention in Lebanon

Throughout the years, Iran and KSA adopted different Islamist ideologies that shaped their own State identity. They also developed distinct cultural, religious and political systems that formed their greed for power. Therefore, to capture the mantle of Islamic leadership, both rivals race to form alliances and buffer governments to support their cause. They work on exporting their ideologies and model beyond their borders to the whole region. To do so, they target weak States as Lebanon since such countries leave societies with scarce opportunities, resources and wealth. This fuels violence within the country and paves the way for "legitimacy bids" sold to the highest bidders that are in our case KSA and Iran. Both were able to implement their schemes and to sway the population with their never-ending agenda of promises due to Lebanon's fragile nature and several other factors. Lebanon is vulnerable and

permeable to international and regional conflicts primarily because of the plurality of the society. The latter lacks consensus on fundamental principles: national identity and fairness of representation. Secondly, it is because of the weak military, economic and political capabilities and structures. Thirdly, disagreements over the foreign policy orientation and the identity of Lebanon increases its vulnerability to international and regional conflicts. That is because local agents bandwagon with foreign powers or deploy transnational ideologies to tighten their grip on power and their positions in domestic struggles. As such, this creates a strong sense of clan and regional allegiances. Fourthly, Lebanon suffers from regional reverberation and domestic events that tend to invite international interventions to the domestic political affairs. Whenever the ruling elites fail to reach any agreement, they tread the road to Tehran or Riyadh in search for a solution to their political impasse. Lebanese communities search for outside patrons to rely on as political and religious survival strategies since they feel threatened and fear marginalization. This is primarily caused by the country's deepened sectarian structure consolidated by the Taef agreement that weakens the system and hinders the government from fulfilling its legitimate role. This agreement built Lebanese institutions upon a religious negotiated settlement that is programmed to fail since this subsequent agreement causes a military stalemate where no party is capable of prevailing over the other. Therefore, political rulers and communities will settle for any ally that will guarantee them maximum power and autonomy as the government is incapable to protect them. Lastly, ever since the murder of former Prime Minister Rafik el Hariri, the country became polarized into two concrete camps: 8 and 14 March blocs, creating a power vacuum to be filled by regional powers. Thereby, Iran and KSA seized the chance to intervene in Lebanon's domestic affairs due to the aforementioned factors.

Iran and KSA's foreign policies towards Lebanon and their allies

KSA applies a containment foreign policy which is about providing military, economic and political aid to Lebanon in hopes of countering Iranian expansionism and ostracizing the Iranian regime. They want to maintain the loyalty of the Lebanese by portraying Iran as a religious and security threat. By framing the conflict through a sectarian lens, KSA hopes to blur the line between ideological concerns and hard power considerations. Thereby it is easier to rally popular support throughout Lebanon. As for Iran, to gain popularity, they studied the gap between the incumbent regime and the Lebanese population and created a power vacuum that will be later on filled by them. They appealed to the minorities in order to secure unity on all fronts and they encouraged them to revolt against the ruling regime. They made out of their pariah status a domestic and regional propaganda. They incited civil unrest by galvanizing Lebanese Muslims to reform their regime and spread the Iranian revolution and regime model. Iran builds strategic partnerships and proxy allies as Hezbollah to form an "axis of resistance" that will serve as an important asset to counter any near-threat. By creating and empowering proxy actors as Hezbollah, Iran's adversaries will be deluded into thinking that the costs of taking an action against Iran or its proxies will outweigh the benefits. This is the core of Iran's deterrence strategy. To maintain credibility in Lebanon, their foreign policy choices merge ideological imperatives and security considerations with reference to culture, religion and history. This rivalry formed a new inter-confessional competition between Shias and Sunnis in Lebanon. This competition was apparent during the cedar revolution in 2005 that polarized the country into two concrete camps: the 8 March Shia-led coalition and the 14 March Sunni-led bloc. The former bloc represented pro-Syrian parties: Hezbollah and Amal backed by Iran. The latter alliance included parties that are Anti-Syrian as the FM, the Lebanese Forces and the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) that was sponsored by KSA. These two alliances are the

primary representatives of the Iranian and Saudi Arabian agendas. They are also central in fueling the Consociational and neo-patrimonial systems in Lebanon. Nonetheless, in 2006, the FPM shifted their allegiances to the 8 March bloc in hopes of neutralizing the Sunni's dominance in Lebanese politics. Therefore, as of 2006 after the Mar Mikhael agreement that was signed between Hezbollah and the FPM, Iran gained a new ally in the Christian class.

[The domestic impact on Lebanon](#)

After the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik el Hariri in 2005, Lebanon became submerged in a series of protests provoking a cycle of domestic conflicts. Starting from here, Iran and KSA competed to consolidate their grip in Lebanon and to fill the political vacuum created due to the chaotic events. Lebanon's vulnerability to foreign interventions laid the ground for the feud between Iran and KSA to extend its sphere of influence on the domestic politics of the country. Foreign interventions have a detrimental and lasting impact on the pervasiveness of confessionalism and on the "rules of the game". Interventions have trapped Lebanon in a vicious cycle of adaptation and re-adaptation to the rules of the game. This is all just to fit in the directions of the day's strongmen and the current interest of the dominant foreign major power. This situation has contributed to the weakness of the State and to the failure of institutionalizing politics. External powers such as Iran and KSA take advantage of Lebanon's weak institutions to draw in internal actors into their games. This contributes to the environment of protracted social conflict. Moreover, Hariri's killing broke the post-civil war status-quo and elicited the rival protests of 8 and 14 March, the 2006 July war, the Nahr el Bared battle, the 7 May 2008 clashes and the Doha Agreement. Since 2005, in Lebanon, the consociational balance of power has become intertwined with the regional dynamics. This is due to the rise of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and the heightening of the competition between the Shia and Sunni's political leadership over power-sharing. This has generated a political impasse

and a dispute over representation and participation of these two sects in the Lebanese political arena. This has awakened sectarian feelings and heightened sectarian tensions within the society. It has hindered the government from fulfilling its main duties and has assured that the government has no monopoly over the use of legitimate force or violence. For instance, during the July war and the 7 May confrontations between the 8 and 14 March blocs, the Lebanese Army remained on the sidelines or deployed limited deterrence capability. They gave the mantle fully to Hezbollah, Iran's pawn, to handle the situation. Letting Hezbollah carry weapons openly within Lebanon with the presence of the Lebanese Army, questions the ability of the military to fulfil its role as the sole defender of the country. The army leadership bestows Hezbollah with the ability to sustain its military activities.

Gaps

Prior studies in the field have focused on the effects of the rivalry on a regional level whereas the impact of this rivalry on Lebanon during 2005-2008 was under-studied. Therefore, this thesis will be an addition to the existing literature review in the field. It will help build knowledge on the topic and will reveal how the few literature analyzing the impact have applied different concepts into the topic. This senior study will consider new evidence regarding the political and social impact of the rivalry on Lebanon and new factors explaining why Lebanon is targeted by the rivalry. The thesis will also confirm already existing findings tackling the foreign policies implemented by KSA and Iran. It will also clarify who are the allies of each camp. Past studies failed to draw the connection between Iran and KSA's rivalry and Lebanon's Neo-patrimonial and Consociational systems and did not consider that this rivalry helped in destabilizing the country. The literature partially explains the societal and political involvement of Iran and KSA in Lebanon and seldom reveals the real motives behind their

involvement. They mainly focus on the religious aspect. Hence, this thesis will also identify the political and societal impacts of the rivalry.

D- Argument, Hypotheses, Variables and Concepts:

Argument:

It can be argued that Iran and KSA are indirectly involved in Lebanese politics to neutralize each other's expansionism. This involvement has a significant impact on the domestic affairs of the country. Both rivals use different strategies to feed their agendas in Lebanon: KSA resorts to a containment policy meanwhile Iran relies on a deterrence strategy.

Hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Lebanon is located in a geopolitical shatterbelt, hence, it is more likely that the country will be involved in the Iranian-Saudi Arabian rivalry. Shatterbelts are regions prone to conflict, foreign interventions and to competition among neighboring countries that are vying for influence and power. Thus, it can be hypothesized that due to its location, Lebanon is more likely to be caught between Iran and Saudi Arabia's rivalry.

Hypothesis 2: The Iranian-Saudi Arabian rivalry is more likely prone to destabilize Lebanon's socio-political landscape. Iran and KSA's ambitions in Lebanon and their geopolitical, economic and national interests are more likely going to lead to political impasses, wars outbreaks, insurgencies and uprisings. The sponsoring effort of Lebanese political parties and communities, the patron-client and consociationalism systems and nepotism in Lebanon are more likely rising due to the Iranian-Saudi Arabian race of hegemony in Lebanon.

Variables and Concept:

The first hypothesis encompasses an independent variable which is Lebanon's geostrategic location that is characterized as a shatterbelt. The dependent variable is Lebanon being caught in the crossfire of the Iranian-Saudi Arabian rivalry. The first hypothesis suggests a causal relationship between the dependent and independent variables. It states that Lebanon's location increases the likelihood of it being involved in the Iranian-Saudi Arabian competition. This implies a direct cause and effect relationship between the variables. The causal relationship signifies that Lebanon's geostrategic location makes it more prone to conflict and interventions which makes Lebanon automatically a pawn in the race of hegemony of Iran and KSA.

In the second hypothesis, the independent variable is the Iranian-Saudi Arabian rivalry and their ambitious interest in Lebanon whereas the dependent variable is the destabilization of the domestic affairs in Lebanon. This hypothesis proposes a causal relationship between the variables. It suggests that the rivalry is more likely going to affect and destabilize the internal affairs in Lebanon due to Iran and KSA's regional interests. This implies that the rivalry has a direct causal effect on the sustainability and stability of Lebanon's socio-political landscape.

E- Methodology

The appropriate method to use is the qualitative approach. This approach can answer the research questions of the paper adequately and examine the Iranian-Saudi Arabian rivalry's influence on Lebanon. This type of research design is suitable to explore the complexities of this rivalry and can generate a wide array of data. A qualitative study allows for thorough explorations of political, social and security implications of the rivalry in Lebanon. It also examines how different political and religious groups in Lebanon responded to these regional hegemon's agendas. To provide a comprehensive understanding, a review of relevant

secondary sources retrieved from the LAU Library Database, JSTOR Journals, Lebanese governmental archives will be conducted. The thesis will analyze previous literature review in the field, scholarly articles, books and academic studies. Also, a wide array of data will be collected from primary sources such as news articles, government documents and historical archives.

Justification

The goal of this thesis is to explain the influence of the rivalry between KSA and Iran on Lebanon during 2005-2008 by particularly focusing on the political, social and religious interests. It will also explain the motives behind the rivalry targeting Lebanon, the allies formed and the strategies employed to achieve the agendas of both rivals. This senior study will provide a manuscript for readers to understand the ongoing rivalry between KSA and Iran in Lebanon. Through a qualitative approach, the study will explain their competing interests in Lebanon. This approach was chosen to explore experiences and concepts in more details and to obtain objective and subjective data. This is attainable by analyzing secondary sources such as books and scholarly articles and primary sources as newspapers, letters and speeches concluded by people involved in the topic. Secondary sources were considered since they describe and interpret the events that unfolded and at the same time primary sources will be analyzed to look at the evolution of the event over time. The research questions formulated are hard to be answered through a quantitative method.

Analysis and Findings:

The rise of Iran and Saudi Arabia as regional powers started ever since they escaped colonial rule at a time when the whole Arab region was distributed among European countries in the 1920s. By avoiding the mandate system and by fighting for their own sovereignty, they

asserted their own independence and power. They proved that they could form their unique identity independently from European influence, when other Arab countries were struggling for independence and were being constructed on a Western basis. As a result, KSA and Iran developed distinct cultural and political systems and adopted different Islamist ideologies that shaped their own State identity. From here, ideological and security threat perceptions and balance of power concerns started to be formed and to fuel a rivalry between both countries. This political zeal descended the region into a sectarian and political conflict playing out in a series of proxy wars in the region. This embittered rivalry is characterized by a competition for dominance in nuclear technology, energy markets and social, religious and political influence. Both countries publicly challenged each other's leadership. Iran was formed on the basis of advocating for the down trodden Muslims globally and for Anti-americanism. Meanwhile KSA was shaped to empower Sunnis, spread Wahabism and to welcome US' military presence in the region. Iran and KSA perceive each other as a threat, therefore, they infiltrate in the governmental structure of States in the region to counter the expansionism of each other. Unfortunately, Lebanon was captured as a pawn in Iran and KSA's chessboard due to its fragile social, economic and political situation and its advantageous geographic location in the Arab region. Lebanon is a victim of its geopolitical location in the "Middle East", a key shatterbelt region that became a battlefield manifesting the clash of the two realms: KSA and Iran. Lebanon is located at the heart of a conflict zone and is a victim of regional shockwaves, thus, it is inevitable to have the country in the crossfire of this regional hegemonic competition. Especially that the country is experiencing a strong division among its population, violent clashes, a decline in the legitimacy of the ruling political regime and a failure of maintaining its national security. This created a power vacuum prone to be filled by external powers that seek hegemony as KSA and Iran. Lebanon, a country with a multifaceted

social fabric, is considered as an important player in both regional powers' national security concerns. It is entangled in larger geopolitical struggles and international machinations. The Lebanese population is a heterogeneous society highly responsive and susceptible to external influence. This heterogeneity shaped a confessional system that was polarized into two camps since 2005. This sectarian balance of power and its institutionalization by the State, weakened Lebanon since each sect has an independent governance over their community. Thus, they will be responsive to external powers to assert their protection and longevity on the throne. Iran and KSA took advantage of the religious brainwashing of Lebanese. They began exercising their fight for power projection and for regime security while depicting it to the Lebanese as a rivalry for religious self-assertion and self-determination. Due to their strong religious affiliations, Lebanese are susceptible and vulnerable to be swayed away and attracted by any power that uses religion as a tool. Iran and KSA managed to create allies and agents in Lebanon by appealing to them mostly through religion and through each community's greed for power between 2005-2008. The murder of Hariri altered the situation and caused political unrest in Lebanon. As a result, Saudi Arabia and Iran used religion, the geostrategic location of Lebanon, its vulnerability and its weaknesses as an opportunity to increase their influence and their support base in the country.

Ever since the Taef Agreement, Lebanon's domestic politics have been guided by KSA's foreign policy. It is constructed on the basis of achieving and preserving their national interests beyond their borders. That is why, KSA has spent a fortune in supporting different Lebanese leaders as Rafik el Hariri and Saad el Hariri. The Hariris established the FM to represent Riyadh's influence in Lebanon and to balance out the influence of Iran that is manifested through Hezbollah. Ever since the Iranian revolution, the country has strived to influence political and social movements around the world. They also turned them into proxy

actors that will act based upon their agendas in the Arab region. Iran succeeded in luring these groups by exploiting the notion of promoting Shia Islam in the area. Henceforward, they became a pivotal actor in Lebanon's politics since they supported the creation of Hezbollah in the country. They programmed the movement to act based upon their revolutionary model and to align with their doctrinal and ideological beliefs. Tehran provides military and financial assistance to movements as the Party of God in Lebanon to promote its own beliefs and to create in the region a threat to Saudi expansionism. Iran's religious identity portrayed as the pre-eminent Shiaa power gives it a means of co-optation and influence over the co-religionists in the region. Iran's revolutionary themes of resistance: justice and Shiaa unity are the core slogan of its foreign policy. Out of their pariah status they made a propaganda of their own and promoted their version of war on terror to face the Sunni takfiri threat. Iran always portrays itself a victim of sectarianism and the defender of the oppressed. It expands its religious activities' outreach across the Shia world while building religious and diplomatic infrastructures. The country provides legitimacy to its activities in the region through its transnational religious linkages. Tehran created civil unrest in Lebanon by galvanizing Shias to reform the regime and to spread the Iranian revolution's model in the country. They empower Hezbollah and incentivize it to intervene militarily to protect Lebanon's borders. This is mainly to delude its adversaries as KSA into thinking that they are very powerful and that the costs of taking any action against them outweighs the benefits. According to Levitt (2021), Hezbollah, Iran's proxy, gets annually between 700 and 1 billion dollars per year to fund their activities in the region. Iran employs a deterrence strategy to dissuade its adversaries from launching any attack against them. Meanwhile KSA, used the United States' policy of containment in which they depict Iran as a plague to the region and a rogue State that sponsors terrorism to attract its allies. KSA promises to provide military, economic and political aid to

communities in weak countries as Lebanon. This is to counter the balance of power and to oust Iran and its allies out of the country. Altogether, both countries frame the rivalry through a sectarian lens to rally popular support in Lebanon's institutionalized confessional system. They trick the masses in Lebanon into thinking that the rivalry is purely religious by referencing religion, culture and history to appeal to them and gain credibility. As a result, an inter-confessional competition arises within Lebanon, creating a power vacuum that would be eventually filled by Iran and KSA. Their foreign policy choices merge ideological imperatives and security considerations. They benefit from the competition between Shias and Sunnis in Lebanon to spread their political incentives. This competition was concretely distinguished after the Cedar revolution and the Mar Mkhael agreement, with the formation of the 8 March coalition backed by Iran and the 14 March alliance supported by KSA. The 8 March alliance that manifests Iran's influence encompassed Hezbollah, Haraket Amal, the FPM (after the ratification of the Mar Mkhael agreement in 2006) and the Marada Movement. While the 14 March alliance that mostly exert Saudi influence includes the FM, the Kataeb and the Lebanese Forces.¹ These two alliances are central in the divisive struggle of Lebanon and drowned the country in constitutional impasses ever since 2005.

The assassination of former PM Rafik el Hariri marked the beginning of a new era in the national political scene and altered the political dynamics of Lebanon. Shortly after the assassination, the Cedar revolution erupted. This led to the withdrawal of the Syrian army present in Lebanon since 1976 and to their replacement by the Iranians. In parallel, KSA was directly exerting their influence on Lebanon through the Future movement and el Hariri's

¹ Elisabeta-Cristina Dinu, *Consociationalism in Lebanon after the Cedar Revolution: External Threats, Political Instability, and Macrosecuritizations*. Taylor & Francis Online (2022).

empire. The two regional powers treated Lebanon as a theatre to their rivalry. This is displayed in all political, social and economic crises the country faces. The two powers influenced the political decision making in Lebanon after the assassination of Rafik el Hariri through their allies. They supported their allies logistically and financially which weakened and undermined the independent decision making process in the country. The Saudis supported the FM while the Iranians backed Hezbollah which increased the tensions between both parties. In fact, the Cedar revolution and the Mar Mkhael agreement show the significant proliferation of both countries in the Lebanese affairs. Iran supports the March 8 alliance through Hezbollah and the Saudis sponsor the FM and the March 14 alliance. These events polarized the country and failed to strengthen any democratic institution or framework. Those multi-confessional alliances hindered national unity and the reinvigoration of the State. They strengthened the schism within the government since it invited KSA and Iran to intervene and strike deals with each party. The country became ruled by a government that has no political vision and whose actions are dictated by KSA and Iran. This two bloc system drowned Lebanon in instability and uncertainty. It also molded a government paralyzed by the power struggle between political parties that are linked to foreign patrons as Iran and KSA. It has also consolidated and institutionalized the consociational system which promoted even more the agendas of the two regional powers. Therefore, stability, security and peace in Lebanon is dependent on foreign actors' agendas. The Lebanese government's central authority is challenged by this rivalry. The latter is taking advantage of the sovereignty gaps existing in the incumbent regime by manipulating local proxies into initiating wars and partaking in the decision making process. In 2006, with the support of Iran, Hezbollah challenged the Lebanese government's authority and waged a war against Israel. This war that lasted for 34 days, escalated the tensions within Lebanon between the 8 and 14 March coalitions. The 14 March bloc backed by KSA, started

accusing Hezbollah of acting based on an Iranian agenda that would dump Lebanon in huge losses. Whereas the leaders of the 8 March camp accused the opposing coalition of implementing KSA's agenda and of backing the Israeli assault in an attempt to undermine and eliminate Hezbollah from the political map. These opposing ideas heightened the tensions between the two coalitions.² Nonetheless, the Party of God proved through the July war that they have a de facto power that challenges the central government's authority. This showed that Iran is a pivotal actor in Lebanon that can achieve victories, launch wars and take any action they find suitable regardless of the government's position or support. The period between 2005 and 2008 was characterized by political and security instability due to the heightening of the rivalry in Lebanon. Any minor event happening was pinpointed to the rivalry and increased the tensions between the different coalitions that became their local proxy actors. For instance, in 2007, the two coalitions started blaming each other of supporting different parties in the Nahr el Bared battle where the Lebanese Army confronted Fatah-Al-Islam, a Sunni Islamic fundamental group. Then, in May 2008, tensions culminated into a two-day open armed conflict. The March 14 led-government lacked Shia political representation. Therefore, they provoked Hezbollah by investigating their private communication networks. As a result, violent confrontations took the shape of sectarian clashes between Sunnis and Shias. KSA and Iran, who control the reins of the internal politics, were incapable of reaching a consensus.³ Therefore, under the auspices of the Arab League, a peace agreement known as

² May Darwich, *Threats and Alliances in the Middle East: Saudi and Syrian Policies in a Turbulent Region*. Chapter 4: *The 2006 Lebanon War* (2019)

³ Amanda Rizkallah, *"The Paradox of power-sharing: stability and fragility in postwar Lebanon"* Taylor & Francis online. (2015)

the Doha agreement was brokered to institute peace, stability and a government of national unity that has a fair distribution of ministerial seats to each coalition. Nonetheless, this deal empowered Hezbollah and divided even more the Lebanese.⁴ Through the events that range from 2005 till 2008, with the Iranian logistical, political and military support, Hezbollah challenged the central authority and implemented their decisions regardless of the government's stance. The Iranian aid is manifested through military support. They aim to build a State within a State and a resistance society with Hezbollah. Whereas the Saudi aid is noticeable by the economic impact it leaves. Saad el Hariri, the main conduit of KSA's aid, became a confessional political boss. KSA sponsored Saad's clientelism to mobilize people and Lebanon's Central Bank to stabilize the pegged currency during times of crisis. As we see, both KSA and Iran fund the confessional clientelism of their local allies to assert the longevity of their influence in the region. They know that to safeguard and accomplish their objectives they have to gain the populations' loyalty by paying them rents and giving them favors. From here we see that, nepotism, clientelism and neo-patrimonial systems were fueled by Iran and KSA as a way to assert loyal supporters. For example, Hezbollah with Iran's funding initiated its own army, electricity services, hospitals, schools and charitable organizations and instituted its acolytes in ministries or in the public sector. As for the FM, funded by the Saudis, have established through el Hariris: hospitals, universities, schools and charities and have also employed their partisans in the public sector. Every political party with the help of KSA and Iran has offered alternatives to the non-existent government services. Nonetheless, these

⁴ Nada Bakri and Robert Worth, "*Deal for Lebanese Factions Leaves Hezbollah Stronger*". New York Times. (2008)

services were created to strengthen their ties with the population and to build a patron-client relationship in order to have an army of loyal partisans.

With that being said, the findings of the senior study thesis match the argument and have validated the Hypotheses proposed. Lebanon's location in the heart of the Middle East, a geopolitical hotspot, makes it prone to conflicts and foreign interventions due to its historical significance and strategic position in the region. As part of a shatterbelt, it is inevitable to not have Lebanon caught in between Iran and KSA's rivalry. The thesis discusses also how the internal sectarian divisions weakened Lebanon and made it even more vulnerable to external influence and to foreign manipulations. Therefore, the first hypothesis suggesting that Lebanon is a pawn in the Iranian-Saudi Arabian rivalry due to its location is valid. Moreover, throughout the thesis, the indirect involvement of Iran and KSA in Lebanese domestic affairs to counter each other's' expansionism was analyzed thoroughly. All along the thesis, the impact of this rivalry was discussed in depth. It was shown how the competition between Iran and KSA have caused political unrest, instability, security concerns and the formation of a system based on a confessional power-sharing formula. They have fed the neo-patrimonial system by creating a patron-client relationship. They have contributed to the consociational system through the alliances of March 8 and March 14 and the clientelism system since every service given by KSA and Iran's proxies involve a quid-pro-quo. They played a significant role in the cedar revolution, Mar Mkhael agreement, the July war, the 7 May 2008 clashes and the Doha agreement. Therefore, the second hypothesis suggesting that the rivalry destabilizes the country is proven since it has led to war outbreaks, insurgencies and to political impasses. The analysis supports the argument suggesting that Iran and KSA are indirectly involved in the Lebanese politics through their local proxies (the FM and Hezbollah mainly). It also matches

the suggestion of a cause-effect relation between Iran and KSA's involvement in Lebanon and the political, economic and social instability of the country.

Conclusion:

The key power brokers in the Middle East continue to frame their bilateral relations in antagonistic terms as they compete against each other for regional influence. The bitter rivalry that started ever since the formation of the States of Iran and KSA, has had a significant impact on the politics of the Middle East. It has generated instability in the region which made us characterize it as a shatterbelt. Therefore, Lebanon was mainly caught in the crossfire of this rivalry due to its strategic location in this shatterbelt. Nonetheless, its weak military infrastructure, contested politics, multifaceted social fabric and economic failure has also made it fragile and vulnerable to be under the influence of this rivalry. Iran and KSA are constantly competing for regional dominance so they will seize any opportunity that comes at their door to exert their power over a country to gain loyal supporters to their agendas. Lebanon is caught up in the Saudi-Iranian storm to the extent that it became a battlefield manifesting the rivalry of both sides. They have exploited the confessional system and Lebanese' attachment to their religion to exert their influence and mold the course of politics based on their interests. They benefitted from the sectarian polarization of the Lebanese population in 2005 into 2 camps. Each section of the society opted to ally with either Iran or KSA to have regional protection and ensure their longevity on the throne. Nonetheless, characterizing this rivalry as a Shia-Sunni enmity is simplistic and undermines the geopolitical dynamics at play. That is why, this senior study has analyzed the major political and social factors that has incentivized Iran and KSA to be involved in the Lebanese arena. It has assessed mainly the socio-political impact of this rivalry on the domestic level in Lebanon while explaining the different strategies employed by both rivals. This senior study thesis argues that Iran and KSA are indirectly involved in

Lebanese politics to neutralize each other's expansionism. This involvement has a significant impact on the domestic affairs of the country. Both rivals use different strategies to feed their agendas in Lebanon: KSA resorts to a containment policy meanwhile Iran relies on a deterrence strategy. From this argument two valid hypotheses were suggested. Throughout the senior study, it was proven that due to its location, Lebanon is more likely to be caught between Iran and Saudi Arabia's rivalry. Also it was proven that the rivalry has destabilized the socio-political affairs of Lebanon since Iran and KSA's ambitions and national interests lead to war outbreaks, political impasses, insurgencies and formed a neopatrimonial system.

References

- Akbarzadeh, S. (2019). The Blurred Line Between State Identity and Realpolitik. In *Routledge Handbook of International Relations in the Middle East*. essay, Routledge.
- Darwich, M. (2019). *Threats and alliances in the Middle East: Saudi and Syrian policies in a turbulent region*. Cambridge University Press.
- Dinu E (2022). *Consociationalism in Lebanon after the Cedar Revolution: External Threats, Political Instability, and Macrosecuritizations, Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 28:3, 290-312, DOI: [10.1080/13537113.2022.2092959](https://doi.org/10.1080/13537113.2022.2092959)
- Fawcett, L. (2019). The Emergence of the Middle East into the Modern State System. Edited by Rogan, E. In *International Relations of the Middle East* (5th ed.). essay, Oxford University Press.
- Kerr, M., & Knudsen, A. (2012). The Limits of Corporate Consociation in Lebanon after the Cedar Revolution. Edited by Hamdan, A. In *Lebanon: After the Cedar Revolution*. essay, C. Hurst & co.
- Kerr, M., & Knudsen, A. (2012). "Foreign Interventions, Power Sharing and the Dynamics of the Conflict and Coexistence in Lebanon. Edited by Zahar, M. In *Lebanon: After the Cedar Revolution*. essay, C. Hurst & co.
- Mabon, S., & Wastnidge, E. (2022). *Saudi Arabia and Iran*. Manchester University Press. <https://www.manchesteropenhive.com/display/9781526150844/9781526150844.00011.xml>
- Norton, A. (2023) *Hezbollah: A Short History on JSTOR*.. Jstor.org. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7srbn>

Support, in. (2021). *Hezbollah's Regional Activities in Support of Iran's Proxy Networks*. Middle East Institute. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/hezbollahs-regional-activities-support-irans-proxy-networks>

Rizkallah, A. (2015). *The Paradox of power-sharing: stability and fragility in postwar Lebanon*. Taylor & Francis Online. <https://www.tandfonline-com.ezproxy.lau.edu.lb:2443/doi/full/10.1080/01419870.2017.1277031>

Van der Heiden, P., & Krijger, A. (2018). *The Saudi-Iranian rivalry: An ominous zero-sum game for supremacy*. *Atlantisch Perspectief*, 42(2), 11–15. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48581412>

Worth R. F. & Bakri N. (2008). *Deal for Lebanese Factions Leaves Hezbollah Stronger*” New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/22/world/middleeast/22lebanon.html>

World Defense Review (2008). *The Nasrallah Speech: Hezbollah Ruled, the West is Fooled*. Foundation for Defense of Democracies. <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2008/06/01/the-nasrallah-speech-hezbollah-ruled-the-west-is-fooled/>