

Beyond Sectarian Identity Politics within the Middle East: the Case of Rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia

Yıldırım TURAN *
Lan Nguyen Hoang **

Abstract

Iran – Saudi Arabia’s rivalry is the main reason behind the conflicts and instabilities in the region. However, the political nature of this rivalry is often oversimplified by mainstream media outlets. Similarly, a significant part of literature on identity politics on rivalry between Iran – Saudi Arabia, has mainly provided a comprehensive and descriptive account of their history as well as current conditions with ethnic and sectarian identities as roots and origins of regional instabilities; or focused mainly on the politicization and manipulation of Sunni and Shia Islam by actors in their struggles for power. Synthesizing the theories on identity politics already in existence, namely Primordialism, instrumentalism, and social constructivism, this research constructed an integrated theoretical model. In this model, sectarian identity - one essence intrinsic to Middle Eastern societies and been built alongside regional history – is not only measured by its tremendous influences on political processes; but also compared in the usage of political actors of all levels in political practices.

Keywords: Sectarianism, Identity Politics, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Middle East

*Assist. Prof., Sakarya University, Middle East Institute,
yildirimturan@sakarya.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0001-7440-9237

**MA, Sakarya University, Department of International Relations,
hglann.ng@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0003-1710-9478

Ortadoğu'da Mezhepsel Kimlik Politikalarının Ötesinde: İran-Suudi Arabistan'ın Rekabeti Örneği

Öz

Ortadoğu bölgesindeki çatışma ve istikrarsızlık ortamının ardında İran - Suudi Arabistan rekabeti bulunmaktadır. Bununla birlikte bu rekabetin politik doğası, çoğunlukla ana akım medya tarafından aşırı derecede basitleştirilmiştir. Benzer biçimde İran - Suudi Arabistan rekabetinin içindeki kimlik politikaları üzerine yazılmış literatürün büyük bir kısmı bölgesel istikrarsızlıkların kökeni ve kaynağını ağırlıklı olarak tarihlerinin genel ve betimleyici bir hesabını sunmuş veya oyuncuların iktidar mücadeleleri içerisinde Sünni ve Şii İslam'ın politikleşmesine ve manipülasyonuna odaklanmıştır. Bu araştırmanın teorik modelini halen mevcut olan Primordialism, araçsalcılık ve sosyal inşacılık gibi kimlik politikaları teorilerinin bir sentezi oluşturmaktadır. Bu modelde, mezhepsel kimlik - Orta Doğu toplumlarına özgü ve bölgesel tarihle birlikte inşa edilen bir öz olarak - yalnızca siyasi süreçler üzerindeki etkileriyle değil, aynı zamanda siyasal aktörlerin tüm seviyedeki siyasal uygulama pratikleri ile ölçülmüştür.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Mezhepçilik, Kimlik Siyaseti, İran, Suudi Arabistan

1. Introduction

The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is the regional manifestation of the dispute between Sunni and Shi'a, which has become the primary focus of many recent debates on sectarian schism. Both of them are regarded as the leading players in the fight to declare themselves as the actual Islamic State and their policies. Besides, their communities embody fundamental Islamic ideals, and their systems are divine law and Sharia rule. Several executions took place in Saudi Arabia at the start of 2016. Once news broke about the execution of Shia cleric Sheik Nimr al-Nimr, a group of protesters rallied at the Saudi embassy in Iran's capital, to which Saudi Arabia responded by severing diplomatic ties with Iran, worsening already hostile relations between the two countries (Hubbard, 2016). In September 2016, two countries exchanged a war of words when Iran suspended its hajj

pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia, accusing the “puny Satins” of Saudi Arabia of deliberately murdering more than 2,400 people in a stampede in 2015¹. In response, Saudi Arabia’s top cleric said that Iran’s leaders “are not Muslims” (Hubbard 2016a). The trials are two of the most recent in some Sunni-Shia schism examples and signs in the Middle East. Then there were debates in which many described the case and many others as examples of the battle fought for centuries as the position of Islam as one of the critical elements of diplomacy, firmly rooted in its Middle East history and culture. Other developments have been brought about by sectarianism, ranging from the Iranian nuclear agreement to Saudis ‘intervention in Yemen to two countries’ ties with the US. In his declaration on “all options, including the acquisitions of nuclear weapons, to face whatever eventuality might come from Iran.” Saudi Arabia expressed its disappointment at the U.S. and Iranian nuclear deal (Gauette, 2016). This statement can be seen as a sign of sectarian conflict between the Iranians and the Saudis, but the other recent account of a potential alliance with Israel by Saudi Arabia (Staff, 2016) indicated that the calculations against the nuclear threat were based on a series of tectonic shifts in power politics in the area rather than on sectarian rivalry or differences.

Furthermore, the regional dimension of the rivalry has created enormous and even direct impacts on other countries that are connected to these two ostensibly by sectarian similarities. The religious diversity weaved in artificial borders of Middle Eastern states that were created by imperialists has become a useful source for conflicts where Saudi Arabia and Iran exert their influences, and their sectarian rivalry exacerbates the situation.

Nevertheless, percent of the truth is represented in this view that is dominating the media and the literature of international relations and politics analysis today? Is it true that the endemic sectarian

¹ Among which there was 472 Iranians.

conflicts provide the best framework to understand Saudi Arabia – Iran’s Cold War that has created and accelerated instability in the Middle East today? Do sectarianism and the ancient divisions that were deeply rooted in the inception of religious groups and have been nurtured for hundreds of years explain the rivalry and the struggle for power of the two regional leaders?

As much as sectarian identity has always been intimately and uniquely intertwined in Middle Eastern politics; weak and corrupted regimes, human rights violations, civil suppression, social and economic inequalities, terrorism, mass killings, struggles over sectarian differences alongside conflicts over control of oil-rich regions are also the features of the region. This reality calls into question the assertion that Saudi Arabia’s rivalry with the related conflicts in their “spheres of influence” is sectarian-based and religious-driven. This fact sheds more light on Saudi Arabia-Iran rivalry, where their political interests are thoroughly calculated and artfully pursued under the influence of the inherent sectarianism of the Middle East. If this tension dates back to the sixth century when Islam took root, and if it represents the resurrection of the old sectarian struggle to determine the form of Islam which can rightfully dominate the Middle East, then why has it been rekindled now in the twenty-first century rather than any other time? The Saudis got along well with the secular Shah ruler of Iran in the mid-20th century, then does that mean Saudi Arabia would see no threat from secularization in a regional power state where 90 percent of the population is Muslim, especially after the Arab Spring? While understanding sectarianism as an essential aspect of the rivalry, focusing only on the religious side is to fall in the trap of the oversimplification while ignoring the complex struggles for influence, control, and power of regional and global forces that are manipulating sectarian identities for political gains.

This paper tries to examine aspects of Iran and Saudi Arabia's rivalry, from its sources, its manifestations, its expressions, the dynamics and factors entangled in this regional Cold War to retrieve the true nature of political processes involved and the actual – versus the exaggerated - influence or usage of sectarian identity. It aims to address these questions mentioned above based on a thesis that the view of Iran – Saudi Arabia's rivalry as sectarianism-driven competition is a simple approach while sectarian identity politics provides a better framework in understanding this game of politics under the influences and manipulation of religious differences.

2. A theoretical framework for Sectarian Identity Politics in the rivalry between Iran & Saudi Arabia

There are three approaches to sectarian identity in the literature on identity policy in general and Middle East Sectarian Conflicts in specific.

Primordialism asserts that religious identity is deeply rooted and virtually unchangeable. As this intrinsic quality of identity makes sectarian boundaries fixed and immutable, sectarian conflicts “based on ancient hatreds among groups” of different religious demarcations seem nearly irreconcilable (Geertz, 1973, 259). Nevertheless, this strategy “disregards the multifaceted tensions, relationships and conflicting ideologies between so-called Sunni and Shiite groups” (Malming, 2015, 34), thus portraying Iran and Saudi Arabia's confrontation with the over-simple elements of the sectarian schism.

Instrumentalism, noticing the use of sectarian identities as a strategic method to gain advantages and resources, states that sectarianism is a superficial political construct that is open and susceptible to manipulation and exploitation by political actors to acquire power domestically or gain allies for their game of power balance regionally and globally (Malming, 2015,34). As far as Saudi

Arabia and Iran are concerned, instrumentalists perceive that the current upsurge in Shia and Sunni sectarianism is the product of a power game between two powers played on the battleground of other weak Arab states and non-state actors, which not only serve their geopolitical rivalry through promoting their clients in domestic struggles and thus enhancing regional influence but also dampen local opposition in both.

Nevertheless, if sectarianism is just as a tool cynically used by political actors, the prominence and effectiveness of sectarianism in the Middle East's contemporary politics cannot be explained. Besides, with insufficient attention to identity formation and the meaning behind the sectarian claims and commitments to religious affiliation, instrumentalists omit to assess the case in which religious option is symbolic, non-rational, nonmaterial-driven, and psychologically satisfactory in sentiments of personal fulfillment and social attachment (Yang, 2000, 47).

The third approach, as its name - "social constructivism," indicates -focuses on the social construction in sectarianism formation and highlights the historical and structural forces that create and sustain sectarian identity. Constructivists state that sectarian identity is originated from customs constructed by myriad "invented traditions," or "Myth-symbol complex" (Haddad, 2011) defining the group's past and the requirements for determining whom a member is; recognizing heroes and enemies; and glorifying the signs of the sectarian identity of the group. The weakness of this approach lies at its insufficient consideration of inherited nature of identities as well as the political and economic interests in the construction of identity, which renders its presumption that sectarian identity is passive and open to the utilization of political actors.

As three current strands on sectarian identity have revealed both the validity and limitations in their arguments, and integrated

approach which collects valuable insights from each would provide a better theoretical framework for sectarian identity: The first thesis contends that sectarian identity is partly ascribed as it is ancestral and cultural inheritance and customs of people in certain groups. However, it is not immune to change, acquisition, and transformation. The second point of the approach acknowledges that self-interest reasonably determines limited options because the rational or non-rational costs and benefits of denominational affiliation and the calculation of material or non-material gains and losses pay a pivotal role in people's decision and practice to choose or avoid an association with a sectarian group. Therefore, identities are not only of primordial origins but also constructed along social lines, as the mass of the population can decide the maintenance and sustenance of integrity through their selection. In return, participants of an Identity community must accept the influence of the specific status. This thesis is the interconnection that joins the first and the third. However, if the anatomical map of Identity were illustrated in the form of a tree, this part is only the trunk of which half lying in the roots and half belonging to the foliage. The third thesis of this approach is framed on the utilization in practice of sectarian identities via political players in power pursuit to achieve their political interests. In this case, identities are either skilfully selected or promoted according to its effectiveness in realizing political goals or directly manipulated in various political processes (including, notably, mass mobilization or the implementation of "divide and rule" tactic, alliance and rivalry formation in calculations over balance of power, etc.) according to their influences on specific political communities where political actors wish to gain control. In short, sectarian identity is not a fixed phenomenon in Middle East's politics, or it has a particular impact on its own in the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia, but it also adapts to the changes of societies and political environments, and political actors may use it for their purposes, for "good or evil".

Tablo 1: Integrated Approach on Identity

1 st thesis	Primordialism	Identity \rightleftarrows People (object)	Identity: ancestral & cultural inheritance → partly ascribed
2 nd thesis	Instrumentalism	Identity \leftarrow People (object)	Identity: an instrument for political elites → used for political objectives
3 rd thesis	Social constructivism	Identity \leftrightarrow People (object) (object)	Identity: constructed along with society → people choose or avoid association with an identity + identity community requires the acceptance of identity influence

Applying this approach to the broader Middle East image, where sectarian identity is regarded as the state identity of both Iran and Saudis, and the battlefields for this rivalry are the nations of the Middle East, where sectarianism plays a significant role in politics, and then what is the position of sectarian identity in protection and conflicts of states?

The philosophy of Identity in groups' nature, perception, and actions as well as in relations among groups and states which has widely and consistently been attached to the conceptualization of "us-others" binary in social and the attempts of Western European governments in the 18th century to foster internal stability and growth through foreign conflicts have given birth to political science. Theory from Emmanuel Kant that needs to defend from the threatening "others" was the foundation of a state (Kant, 1991, 41-53). Friedrich Hegel considered conflicts among states as developments of self-knowledge and self-recognition of each nation (Hegel, 1999). Alexander Wendt builds on Hobbes, Locke and Kant's theoretical

views, and names three communities of world politics which have explicit reference to their fundamental assumption about the existence of other States: war, competition, and cooperation, which are respectively or Hobbesian, Lockean and Kantian respectively (Went, 1999). One of the most notable works in scholarly studies in the 20th century of Identity Politics is Samuel Huntington's, in which he assessed that "global policies have begun to be reconfigured along cultural lines", namely identities (Huntington, 1996, 19). However, researches in comparative politics, as well as facts in international relations and politics, raise severe doubts on the validity of these arguments. There is another strand of thought which reasonably suggests that the formation and development of Identity were not based on and did not require hostility towards the "others." As Richard Lebow points out, we have as "many historical examples of the stereotypy and exclusion of others as a means of solidifying national identities [...] at least as many examples of the success of identity formation and consolidation in its absence" (Lebow, 2008, 486). Karl Deutsch finds that although the shared symbols and history of a nation may be constructed on the resistance to "other," it is not a prerequisite (Deutsch, 1966, 165). Sherif Muzafer even theorized that "transcendent" identities might diminish hostility because they provide the base for collective identity and empathy among groups (Sherif & Sherif, 1953, 44).

Then in what way these identity politics become pathological? According to Richard Parker's, there are three paths to the end of sectarian identity politics where it is utilized to "stifle and smother" democratic politics: First is the tendency of "essentialism", with respect to sectarian rivalries in the Middle East, is not only reflected in the tendency to categorize political groups under the over simple umbrella terms of Sunni and Shia with biased stereotypes for each; but also embedded in practice where political actors represent themselves as "spoke men" or "advocates for" the religious group they belong

while pursuing other political goals and distorting the more complicated truth in their favor. Second is the tendency for “demonization,” in which proper grievance against “others” turns to take the blame and then to embrace discrimination. The third pathology is the “victimhood syndrome,” which first arises when blame and prejudice against wrongdoers become a central part of a group’s identity but becomes extreme when the tendency of “victim talk” undermines self-responsibility and manipulates support (Parker, 2005, 53-54). One example is the sectarian identity politics of the “minorities” in small states under the influence of Iran and Saudi Arabia, where the victimization of the minority and the demonization of the majority can become the sources and the tool for either mobilization or suppression. These political processes, as well as their extreme ends, can be witnessed in the interactions between actors of all levels – sub-state, state, intra-state, supra-state through Iran – Saudi Arabia’s bilateral relations, their influence or intervention in proxy wars and sectarian conflicts, their domestic and international calculations with the involvement of world powers in regional affairs.

3. Historical and Theological Origins of Iran – Saudi Arabia’s Sunni-Shia schism: Identity Politics vs. Political Power

Regarding this primordial viewpoint of Iran – Saudi Arabia’s rivalry, the origin of the sectarian strife that has been dictating this contention dates back to the death of Muhammad ibn abd Allah in 632 who had received revelations and founded the religion of Islam in Arabia. Descendants of the Prophet Muhammad’s daughter Fatima and her husband Ali – the Shias - argue that he and their sons were unfairly deprived of the prophet’s mantle in favor of a rival family, the Umayyads in Damascus and later the Abbasids in Baghdad, who succeeded Ali as the fourth caliph (Hiltermann, 2007, 797). The victimhood over the killing of Hussein in Karbala in 680, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad, left antagonism and resentment as identity symbols in the Shia community, and thus exclusion, injustice, and

martyrdom as leitmotifs of Shia Islam. However, the Shia community is not unified as differences arose over the proper line of succession: mainstream Shias claim that twelve Imams are present when Zaydi Shias, located in Yemen mainly, recognized only the first five Imams, Ismaili Shias – the second-largest - Shia sect broke off in the eighth century at the seventh, and Alawite Shias – broke off at the twelfth (Corbin, 2006, 30-31). Clashes between Sunnis and Shias in the early time translated into the rivalry between the Ottoman and Safavid Empire, and it has been widely believed that the hatred was also injected in the population of about 1.3 billion Sunnis and roughly 200 million are Shias out of 1.6 billion Muslims in the world nowadays.²

Thus, it has been generally argued that religion promotes sincere devotion and dedication as opposed to other identities. For instance, in the most extreme case, religious warriors perceive that “terrorism assumes a transcendental dimension, and its perpetrators are thereby unconstrained by the political, moral, or practical constraints that seem to affect other terrorists” (Horman, 1993). Furthermore, Islam – the religion that encompasses various ethnic and racial groups - in a particular case. Religion, perception of political power, and ruling right as well as Identity Politics has always been closely entwined.

However, when political power is stripped away from the narrative, people of two sectarian groups have largely coexisted in peace throughout history: they have shared not only geographically

² Some Sunnis have referred to Shias as *al rafidha* - which means rejectionists , or infidels, while some Shias have called Sunnis *takfiris*- which means apostates; and the hatred has been transferred into violence in cases where Sunni insurgent groups kill Shias or Shia militias murder Sunnis, both with the charge of heresy and apostasy See more: Pew Research Center, “Mapping the Global Muslim Population (2009)”, Pew Forum on Religion, Access: (22 October 2017), <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/10/07/mapping-the-global-muslim-population/>; Ashraf al-Khalidi – Victor Tanner, *Sectarian Violence: Radical groups Drive Internal Displacement in Iraq* (University of Bern Project on Internal Displacement, the Brookings Institution, 2006).

overlapped provinces struggles against common enemies, but also inter-friendship, the praying together at the same mosques, and even intermarriage (Hartman, 2012). As mentioned early, the Sunnis and Shias came into conflict first when their ideas concerning the political authority of the leader first contradicted: Sunnis supported the Status quo and new bodies, Shias believed that rightful successor of the Prophet, the Religious translator, and defender of his esoteric knowledge, should also have the political rights of ruling (Nasr, 2013, 144).

Similarly, the sources of the rivalry that it is in the core of the sectarian tensions and conflicts in the Middle East come from distinctly different and broad interpretations by two regional powers of the modes and laws of Islamic governance. Thus the fissure in Iran – Saudi Arabia’s relations are based on this different conveyance of Islam in the same race for political power. Wahabbism, for example, which reflects the marriage of Saudi influence and Wahhabi teaching – the strict interpretation of Sunni Islam, first in 1744 and again in 1902, was the means of overthrowing the Arab tradition and convention, the path of seizing power, and basis of the monarchical rule of Saudi Arabia. Islam was used to aligning rival tribes and peoples politically divided under a single unified authority (Cleveland & Bunton, 2009, 231). Understanding that the identifying culture and traditions of the region requested the newly incorporated tribes to be loyal to their ruler, Ibn Saud created religious establishment, constructed mosques for the communities, sent the ulama – the learned of Islam - to spread the Wahhabi code to them, at the same time provided material supplies and infrastructures, and thus generated the sense of commitment to the ruling authority and the expansion of their belief and faith in the puritanical Wahhabi doctrine. On the other hand, the Safavid dynasty adopted Shia as the state religion not only for it had an intimate connection with the Persian population but also because it was willing to promote Shia through armed means in order to create a nation independent from the

Ottomans.

In our metaphorical expression, this massive gap between these interpretations represents the instrumental branches that received the nutrition from the primordial roots. However, this process can only be established through the instructive social aspects of sectarianism. Along the process, all the catalysts of “essentialism,” “demonization,” and “victim syndrome” have played their role in shaping sectarian identity politics.

Today, in the rivalry of Saudi Arabia and Iran originated from the competition of both dynasties, two states want to compete as regional contending power while monitoring the other’s sectarian ideology and its implications in the practice of Islam (Ramazani, 1972,24). Sectarianism plays the role of the institutional collection of arrangements that decide familial, local, regional, or also loyalties and affiliations worldwide, and the sectarian identity politics is inherently associated with inter-sectarian, and intra-sectarian violence in the region's battle for political power has increased rapidly.

4. The Iranian Revolution

The 1979 Iranian Revolution is considered to be a historical moment when sectarianism was first revitalized in the region because Middle Eastern states started to get out of the iron-fist of the Ottoman or Imperialism that had held the region with all its simmering sectarian conflicts for centuries. It was nurtured since the Iranian population grew increasingly discontent with the Shah when it made efforts to modernize and westernize Iran in the 1970s when the vast community distrusted the West and severely marginalized Iran’s Shia clergy in the process. Moreover, the economic downturn in 1977 made Iranian citizens seriously doubted the Shah’s ability while suffering more political repression. The ensuing enlistment of the masses towards revolution with Ayatollah Khomeini playing a central role

overthrew the government of Mohammad Shah Pahlavi and signified a great transition in Iran.

Religion has played a significant role in mobilizing this movement as Khomeini's conception of "real Islam" in which the eventual transformation of Islam into a pure Islamic state from the corrupt regime of Shah, lies at the center of the success that the revolution achieved, equipped the State with religious doctrines as well as common consent (Hunter, 1998,160). They claimed that the freedom of Iran from Western hegemony and imperialism of culture, as well as the Islamic political and economic system that prevailed over secular influences, would be the elixir for all the problems of Iran. The Shah's overthrow was not just a rare occasion where Islamists have been succeeded in the transition from challenging to taking over the constituted political authority but also represented a rare case in the Muslim world where Shia Islamists had only a quiet political stance against the government, for a long time (Euban, 2009,155). Khomeini advocated for a direct clerical rule, the rule by supreme Islamic jurisprudence – an entirely new concept, politically empowered the ulama, imposed his theocratic doctrine, the legal and religious authority of the Shia mujahidin has been restored and wanted to reinforce the traditional Islam.

The establishment of the first Islamic Republic and the popularization of Islamic fundamentalism presented significant challenges to Sunni sensitivities and Saudi leadership, thereby directly affected the Kingdom. It brought to power in Iran "a man who had explicitly argued that Islam and hereditary kingship were incompatible, a threatening message to say the least, in Riyadh" (Fisher, 2016; Quant, 1981,39).

Iranian Revolution was hard for Saudi Arabia to accept as Islam is an essential foundation for its entire political systems and the legitimacy of its ruling elite. As a result, Saudi goals have been to

spread Wahhabism across the Muslim world. As the “Custodian of the two holy sites” of Islam, the host of the annual Muslim pilgrimage, and equally if not more important, the owner of tremendous oil and wealth from oil, it has enormous influence in the region. To promote Wahhabism, it funded the construction and operation of religious and educational institutions that sermonize Wahhabism as well as the training of imams, and provided financial resources for the teaching and propagating Wahhabism abroad (Lewis, 2004,126). This situation also solidified its role in regional identity politics in its pursuit to consolidate authority and power in the region.

Behind the scene of the Iran-Saudi rivalry marked by this revolution is an unhappy US – who had supported the Shahs in Iran and made sure the oil wealth would be in constant exchange to buy advanced American weapons while the US and Israel advised the regime - to finally see the Shah overthrown. The Shah regime, similar to the Saudis – the traditional ally of US in the region, was the result of US method of “propping up repressive elites that support the West’s business and military interests” after the World War II when the US took over the place of Britain to dominate the Middle East. It could bring about two benefits: First, it extinguished the prospects for the emergence of more widespread and democratic governments; secondly, it helped “to fan the flames of religious extremism that is often the only alternative available to those being repressed” (Curtis, 2003,253-257). These outcomes can be witnessed in the Middle East’s problems nowadays. In Iran, Iran had nurtured a secular political opposition, which paved the way for an independent Iran - until the US-backed Shah regime removed the actual political debate, which left a void that was filled by the religious factions in the country. After the Islamic Revolution in 1979 that replaced the Western-backed Shah, Shia militias also emerged, including Hezbollah. This approach to the Middle East by the US also accounted for not only the success of the Taliban fundamentalists, nurtured in the madrasas of Pakistan with

CIA training (Mufti, 2012, 33) and Wahhabism ideology of the Saudis (Alikuzai, 2013, 558), who drove the Soviet army out of Afghanistan and then went on to take over the country, offering a base to Islamic militants from across the region (Taylor, 2014); but also the rise of the Sunni jihadi movements labelled as al-Qaeda, and other jihadist groups who have expressed a destructive longing for Islamic self-sufficiency, unity and revolt against Western interference in the region.

On the consequences of the Iran Revolution, it should be noted that even with the salience of political Islam in its height after the Iranian Revolution and the presence of sectarian identities in the region, Arab governments did not fall through some faced crisis and upheaval. It was because the regimes had stronger political institutions that were better able to control and repress their population, which also were not intervened by foreign forces. In weak states, Iran and Saudi Arabia have tried to position themselves as the patrons of their respective religious clans to assert influence, and they have sustained the sentiments of sectarianism to promote fear of the other side or to mobilize for their side (Fisher, 2016). Sectarian identity has become a useful instrument in creating violence and an umbrella under which Middle Eastern militias and political parties are mobilized and forged into alliances.

5. The Politics of Alliances under the Rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia

In the sectarian rivalry, Saudi Arabia has not only exported Wahhabism but also pursued reciprocal containment through the forging of alliances and the effort to counter Iran's ideological and geopolitical interests in the region by any means. Iran-Iraq war instigated by Saddam's Ba'athist regime was a battle to contain Iran's ideological and geopolitical role in the region (Tirman and Maleki, 2014, 92). The ostensible issues seem to be sectarian rivalry in which

Shia militias under the influence of Iran was the reason Saudi Arabia and its allies provided highly advanced weaponry to the Ba'athist regime and drew in conservative Arab countries including Kuwait, Qatar, Egypt, and Jordan who considered Khomeini, his involvement, and his Shia ideal as anathema (Cleveland & Bunton, 2009,417). The alliance against Iran's religious identity resulted in the formation of organizations and coalitions including the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) which aside from curbing Iran's role in the region's politics also served as a dominant instrument for US influence – the world power that lost its share in Iran's oil when the Islamic Revolution overthrew the Shah regime (Herath, 2012,21). By coordinating military and security arrangements in the region, Saudi Arabia and other GCC members received large advanced weapon deals and the protection from the defensive nuclear umbrella and joined the West in their actions against Iran, including coercive economic sanctions campaigns for political condemnation. This effort, albeit a rather slow process, includes Saudi Arabia - proposed integrated command structure for the 100,000-troop GCC military forces that is similar to NATO in 2013 and a followed collective naval force in 2014. In 2015, Saudi Arabia initiated the creation of the anti-terrorism "Joint Arab Force" with 40,000 troops under the umbrella of the League of the Arab States, which was met with enthusiastic declarations and the seemingly all-time high unity of purpose, but has been put on hold since summer 2015.

Supported by Kuwait and Bahrain, howbeit, the Saudis allegedly have not been in harmony with Egypt on strategic priorities. For example, while Egypt, like Russia, wants to see the IS defeated, but Syrian President Bashar Assad's army remains in control, Saudi insists on Syria's regime change. On the side note, while sectarianism is the central theme in the anti-Iran alliance of Saudi, it cannot explain the attitude of Egypt in this issue. Considering other allies, although relations between Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been improved since

the 2014 fallout, Gulf cohesion remains feeble with Oman rejecting the proposed Gulf Union in 2013 and declining to support Saudi Arabia in its Yemen intervention in 2015. In any way, the efforts of Saudi Arabia to forge sectarian alliance in the region, which has been materialized most recently under the form of the Islamic Alliance, primarily serve three purposes: to counterbalance Iranian influence, to restore Saudi's Muslim reputation that has somehow been tarnished, and to create military synergies between signatories (Gaub, 2016,1-4).

Similar to Saudi Arabia, Iran has also made an effort to create an alliance gathered around the Islamic Republic of Iran. Its limited partnership with Syria's Assad regime dates back to the Iran-Iraq war as Iraq had long been Syria's competitor for supremacy in the Arab world while claiming the Alawites as a branch of the Shia. However, at its essence, it is the political relations as Syrian and Iran's shared perception of anti-imperialism and anti-Zionism, as well as the apparent geopolitical interests of each state and the calculations of opportunity that and this alliance provided them to promote their influence in the region.

Additionally, for Iran, Syria represented the access to the Shia community and the chance to both increase its impact in the region by exporting its revolution through Lebanon – the state which was suffering from civil war and targeting attacks against Israel. After the foundation of Hezbollah in Lebanon's civil war and Hamas in the aftermath of the Israeli invasion of 1982, Iran has supported both. If Shia sectarianism were to be the prerequisite for Iran's more than a 30-years alliance with Hezbollah, it does not explain the case of Sunni Hamas. In the early 2000s, Saudi Arabia and Iran supported it, before Hamas shifted to Tehran, which Saudis vocally opposed. While the alliances of Iran with Hezbollah and Hamas are widely depicted as the alliances based on Shia solidarity, it can be said with more significant evidence that they have shared interests in countering what they perceive as US-Israeli plan to reshape the region. This is a consequence

of why it supports Hamas, the Palestinian wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, and a patently Sunni movement. Hezbollah's leader also has downplayed his movement's Shia origins by emphasizing the Arab nationalist character of its fight against Israel: "Here was a national resistance movement holding out against a colonial and predatory occupying power" (Hiltermann, 2007,805).

In general, with the conclusion of the nuclear agreement, with the prospect of the release of impounded funds as part of sanction relief, Iran's commitments with its allies - proxies which it is actively supporting in major contemporary conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories - would be more bolstered.

6. The "Spheres of Influence" in the Battlegrounds of Sectarian Conflicts

With the invasion of Iraq in 2003 played the role of catalyst in conflicts that have drawn deep in sectarian divisions, the Middle East is currently suffering from the widespread instability and violence as well as the collapse of state authority. The Arab Uprisings starting in 2011 that brought down regimes in the Arab world, from Tunisia, Egypt, Libya to Yemen, and created the domino effects in many other countries ranging from Morocco, Algeria to the Palestinian territories, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, the United State Emirates and Saudi Arabia, further exacerbated the situation and caused more instability in the region through the toppling and transformation of existing power structures (Shkolnik, 2012). Violence and conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen – where both Iran and Iraq have influence and interests – run along the sectarian lines; while in others – Lebanon and Bahrain, the perilous sectarian unrest threatens to shatter the fragile peace at any availability.

These events have had their impact on Iran-Saudi Arabia's rivalry and brought a new reality into the political calculations of their

struggle for regional hegemony (Gelvin, 2012, 4-6). While the Uprisings brought Saudi Arabia acute worries, Iran viewed the events as a spread of its revolutionary ideology of Islamic liberation and Islamic awakening coming to fruition (Naysan, 2012, 49-50). As such, the Arab Uprisings create new dynamics for the struggle of political influence in Iran – Saudi Arabia’s rivalry, with the use of Sectarian Identity Politics and the consequences of direct military interventions in their “spheres of influence”.

In Iraq, the civil war that broke out has created the favourable condition for Iran and Saudi Arabia to get involved, along the line or under the umbrella of their pursuit to promote their version of Islam, and then utilize Identity Politics for mobilization and gaining more influence in the race to hegemony. As Iraq was considered one of the big players in the region, the emergence of a new hostile regime in the country would not be in favour of both Iran and Saudi Arabia. For Iran, Iraq is not only a country of Shia majority but also home to the Askari Shrine and two holy cities of Shias - Najaf and Kerbala. Moreover, after the hard lesson from the protracted Iran-Iraq war, Iran, with outmoded conventional force, has come to understand that it needed to seize any opportunity available to influence a modern-equipped Iraq and thus avoid confrontation. For Saudi Arabia, it is worried that the Shia dominated governments in Iraq will allow Iran to form a political alliance for diplomatic propaganda or even subversion effort detrimental to the Saudis (Terrill, 2011, 45). In chief, under the label of the “spokesman for” the repressed Sunnis by the Shia government who wants stability in Iraq, the Saudis real aim is to limit Iran’s regional influence.

To realize its goals, Iran invested in Iraq on all diplomacy and economic fronts and made efforts to cultivate Iranian clients within the Iraqi political system. In the meantime, Saudi Arabia is critical of US policies in Iraq, claiming that it fought a war to keep Iran out of Iraq after Iraq was driven out of Kuwait to see the whole of Iraq handed

over to Iran, and severed ties with Iraq while exploiting sectarian identity politics to join hand with domestic actors. On the surface, people only see that although the Saudis reopened their embassy in Iraq in January 2016 (BBC News, 2016), relations between the two countries still stay strained due to the majority of Shias in the Iraqi government. Nevertheless, the fact that Saudi Arabia has not limited its alliances solely to fellow Sunnis, nor did it adopt every Sunni group as an ally, has revealed its other intention outside the limited scope. For example, it backed the Iraqiya party in the Iraqi elections of 2005 and 2010, although Allawi – leader of the party – is a thoroughly secular politician who is a Shia by birth, and the party included a sectarian cross-section of Iraq (Blanchard, 2010). In sum, Iraq remains divided, while sectarianism has become an instrument used by political entrepreneurs – Iran and Saudi Arabia regionally - looking to create constituencies and rally popular support to enhance their power.

In Syria, as the violence increased, the historical sectarian divisions have come to the front, and the battle lines have approached sectarian boundaries. As the country has hemorrhaged people, two regional powers have tried to get their share: Iran has backed the Assad regime while Saudi Arabia has supported the Sunni-dominated opposition. The relationship between Syria and Iran was forged immediately after the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and enhanced during the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s when Syria supported Iran. Strategically, as Syria provides essential access for Iran to Hamas and Hezbollah, the removal of Assad from power threatens this gateway, and thus its fortress in the Levant (Abdo, 2011). Moreover, Syria's position as a potential transit route for Iran's vast natural gas reserves also carries immense economic weight. It can be noted that at the roots of Iran-Syria relationship are strategic calculations rather than sectarian similarities. Indeed, the socio-political systems of Syria and Iran are secular Ba'athist state and Islamic republic, respectively.

Therefore, “it may be fair to acknowledge a Syrian-Iranian axis, but it is patently incorrect to include the Sunni-majority country of Syria as part of an emerging Shia crescent from Iran to Lebanon” (Lesch, 2015, 305).

As the Syrian government is allied with Iran – the Saudis view it as a holder of an opposing sectarian identity card and the hostility towards Saudi Arabia, and thus, an enemy and the relations between two states have been considerably strained since the 1970s. After the Arab Uprisings in 2011, the Saudis and the other Sunni Gulf States armed and supported the Sunni hard-liner Syrian rebels, aiming to gain their loyalty and make them more hostile to Iran.

Despite the general biased media coverage of Syria’s conflict as a sectarian one, the opposition emerging in 2011 was peaceful, decentralized, and local movements with national goals in the sakes of “the people”, and “Syria” rather than any sectarian group, although Sunnis were present mainly in the protests (Salwa, 2011, 365). While in the beginning, many armed groups that gradually displaced the peaceful opposition adopted inclusive names regardless of sectarian identity, as Syria becomes more chaotic, it has drawn in actors with sectarian agendas (Phillips, 2015, 359). Taking advantage of the situation, the Saudis patronized the sectarian of the rebel groups, among which the Free Syrian Army (FSA) (Khalaf, 2012). It was intended to build and strengthen new Sunni militias and worked with other Sunni states to ensure the implementation of these objectives. The strategy of Identity Politics that use sectarianism in the game of balance of power was expressed in the statement that Arabs would continue to resist Iranian involvement in the Syrian civil war, that it “will be there to stop them wherever they are in Arab countries”, because it “cannot accept Revolutionary Guards running round Homs” (McElroy, 2013). However, with the involvement of Russia and the close ties between Russia and Iran, the Saudis are powerless to counter. In sum, this card of Sectarian Identity Politics has contributed

significantly to the slide of Syria towards chaos, and in turn, the battlefield for the clashes of geostrategic, political, and economic interests in the form of the clashes of sectarian identities.

In Yemen, the current civil war is widely viewed as a battleground of regional Sunni-Shia rivalry: while Saudi Arabia wants to maintain a high level of political influence with the monarchy, Iran seeks local Shia clients to create pressure on the government's political power. The Iranian leadership has aided and supported the Houthis – a minority with the sectarian identity of Zaydi Shia Islam – rhetorically to advocate religious solidarity and make them useful in anti-Saudi proxies, and Saudi Arabia backs President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi and his supporters while accusing Iran of supporting sectarian groups based on sectarian difference. Indeed, neither the Houthi rebels would have got so far without the support of the former president, Ali Saleh nor the Houthi advance would have aroused so much attention without the support of Iran.

On March 2015, immediately after the Houthis took over Aden and disposed of “pro-Saudi and pro-American president” Hadi, Saudi Arabia carried out an intervention under the name “Operation Decisive Storm” in Yemen, in a coalition of nine Arab states with the logistic support and weapons from the US, France, and Britain. The formal pretext of the invasion was the restoration of the deposed president, but the actual goal of the Saudis was to suppress the Houthis rebels. This political aim was realized by the deliberate extermination of Yemen's civilian population in Saudis' targets despite the condemnation of the violation of war crimes (MacAskill, 2016). The President returned to Aden in November 2015.

It should be mentioned that the Houthis initially called their social movement the “Change Revolution” and cooperated with Islah – a supported client of Saudi Arabia - in Yemen's popular uprising (Tayler, 2011). However, the transitional national unity government

brokered by the GCC and endorsed by the UN, while doing little to refer key anti-corruption and social demands by Houthi protesters, over-presented Islah and defined the Houthi conflict as the significant challenge country is facing. Another argument that should also be put on the table against the sectarian narrative of the war here acknowledges that the relationship between Iran and Yemen's Zaydi Shia is "more pragmatic than ideological", as Houthis itself is a schismatic Shia branch distinct from the Twelve Shia practiced in Iran (Khatip, 2015). The description of the opposition of Houthis, including large-scale, nonviolent mobilization of protesters, as a sectarian force rather than a political contest for power, was more likely a tactic of Sectarian Identity Politics. The media's political narrative on the crisis of Yemen as the battle where Shism fights to gain a foothold on the Sunni-dominated Arab peninsula led by Saudi Arabia has drafted a broad emphasis from the Arab states' vulnerabilities to Iran's volatile Arab world.

In Lebanon, Iran has its essential ally – the Hezbollah – which has become one of the most influential political organizations in Lebanese affairs and thus provided Iran with a superior ability to influence Lebanon's politics. For many, Hezbollah is considered a global terrorist threat and perilous to stability in the Middle East; for others, it manages a security and military apparatus as well as political and social service organization in Lebanon which serves not only as an extensive welfare and education network but also as a means to resist Israeli and Western involvement in the region. Hezbollah also ensures that if Israel attempted a strike against Iran's nuclear facility, it would be ready to retaliate (Byman, 2008). The founding manifesto of the organization vowed its loyalty to Iran's supreme leader, while other non-Hezbollah Shias are followers of Iraqi Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani (Qassem, 2005, 56). Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, has viewed Lebanon as its backyard. Based on religion and petrodollars, Saudi Arabia saw the civil war in Lebanon as a means to pursue its campaign to promote Wahhabism, Arabism, and the Islamicization process in the

country.

The sectarian confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran has had a considerable impact on the political deadlock in Lebanon. It has been almost two years since the country has been without a president, as Hezbollah and its allies have “boycotted the legislature’s sessions” for the parliament to elect (Trofimov, 2016), and politicians and factions backed alternatively by Iran and Saudi Arabia are at odds over the appointment of a new president (Williams & Carrion, 2015).

In Bahrain, the Shias constitute 70% of the population, but political power remains in the hands of the Sunni minority.³ This minority government has a close relationship with Saudi Arabia due to several reasons: The first is the shared borders with Saudi Arabia on eastern province and thus the deep connection with the eastern Saudi region, in addition to its heavy dependence on Saudi support - to the extent that some have referred to Bahrain as a “province of Saudi Arabia” (Kaplan, 2016). The second is the source of Bahrain’s primary oil revenue derived from Saudi Arabia because of the shared Abu Safa offshore field with the Saudis, creating an economy that is mainly dependent on Saudi Arabia. The third, concerning its security, is Bahrain’s membership to the GCC.

When Bahraini opposition movements in 2011 began calling for constitutional reforms, and other democratic rights, the Khalifa

³ Shias are far less likely than Sunnis to obtain jobs in the public sector, and those who hold government jobs fill lower ranking occupations on average compared to equally-qualified Sunnis. They are almost entirely disqualified from police and military service. In addition, Shia citizens are systematically underrepresented in Bahrain’s elected lower house of parliament due to rampant electoral gerrymandering. In the last fully-contested election in 2010, for example, the average Shia-majority district represented about 9,500 electors, the average Sunni district only about 6,000. See more: Justin Gengler, “How Bahrain’s crushed Uprising spawned the Middle East’s sectarianism”, in Project on Middle East Political Science, “Reflections Five Years After the Uprisings”, (2016, 45).

monarchy responded by violent repression to the Shia community under the divide and rule tactic with Saudi's support through direct military intervention under GCC security framework. While the US criticized the Saudi action without explicitly condemning its ally, the American Fifth Fleet in Bahrain has been considered as one factor in the sustenance of the Sunni autocracy in the country (Hashmi, 2014, 278). Saudis and Bahraini government, shying away from democratic demands, tried to emphasize the extreme sectarian rhetoric by accusing Iran of instigating a coup attempt- claims which Iran denied (Qaidaari, 2015). Instead, in accusation of Saudi's for the wreaking havoc in the region, the head of Iran's judicial system stated: "The Muslim world today is witnessing numerous crimes committed by Saudis in different regions and all instances of belligerency happening in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and Bahrain, Saudis' fingerprints and their support for terrorists are seen" (Black & Dehghan, 2016). Moreover, the possibility of Iran's intervention in the country is low as Bahraini Shia clergy maintains the quietest stance, and opposition groups in Bahrain rejected accusations of foreign ties. Some factions within Bahrain's Shia opposition groups spoke about the expectation of the Saudis, condemned the country's ruling family as well as Saudi Arabia, and some have even claimed to be followers of Ayatollah's doctrine (Mathiesen, 2013, 41).

7. Domestic Vulnerabilities

The tensions, which on the surface are the results of regional competition between opposing sectarian identities stem actually from a range of other issues, from regime security, domestic security, to oil policy, and relations with the West. The primordial sectarian lens provides a convenient and easy albeit incomprehensive prism to see the ongoing Saudi Iran rivalry, but the proliferation of the primordial and straightforward sectarianism itself has enhanced the use of Sectarian Identity Politics for political interests and power while distracting domestic populations from crises of governance.

As the ruling family of Saudi Arabia views the toppling of long-standing authoritarian regimes across the Middle East as an alarming development that threatens its ruling position and political interests domestically, it has expanded the policy of buying political loyalty through the increased financial funding, the propagating of Wahhabism, and the invoking of sectarian fissures throughout the Middle East to be able to stifle dissents and opposition movements, ensure its influence and power in regional and domestic affairs, and thereby sustain its social welfare for its security and stability. Saudi Arabia's behavior can be explained through the vulnerabilities which transformed from a regional level to the domestic level. The state's signature foreign policies - including the goals of blocking Shia Iran's nuclear deal, removing Assad's regime in Syria, and settling Yemen's war - have been widely seen as failures by not only other states but only by their citizens. In this context, regional Sectarian Identity Politics, which depicts the country as an unyielding fighter and advocate for Wahhabism and Sunnis helps Saudi Arabia to minimize its domestic challenges from criticism of its foreign policies to the ramifications of cheap oil and unprecedented budget deficits.

Saudi Arabia's practice in the Middle East's affairs to appease critics of domestic problems and vulnerabilities was seen by Iran's foreign ministry spokesman, Hossein Jaber Ansari as follows: "It seems that Saudi Arabia considers not only its interest, but also its survival in the continuation of tensions and conflicts and is trying to settle its domestic problems through blame games" (Black & Dehghan, 2016).

However, Iran also has its domestic problems ranging from the Green Movement protests erupted in the aftermath of the 2009 presidential elections, the high unemployment rates of 40 percent, social and political repression to the condemned violation of civil and human rights. Similar to it is rival's case, Identity Politics appears to be

useful in drawing attention away from domestic problems (Vakil, 2016). As a result, neither Saudi Arabia nor Iran is going to stop generating their regional influence or supporting proxies and allies in the regional battleground in the Middle East or cease to employ the useful and practical sectarian narratives to serve their political purposes.

8. Oil, Geopolitics, and the Role of International Powers

The world has witnessed the devastating slump in oil prices since mid-2014, partially because of the new supplies from Iraq and the expanding shale fields of the US. This has significantly affected the Middle East politics as the economic power, and political and social systems of significant countries here are heavily dependent on oil exports. In November 2014, the OPEC (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) meeting in Vienna, led by Saudi Arabia, failed to reach an agreement on production cuts or a freeze. The Iran – Saudi Arabia rivalry plays a primary role here, as the Saudis wanted to punish Iran and Russia for policies in Syria. After two years, however, the Saudis had faced low oil prices, the cut on domestic benefits of oil, which had significantly contributed to settle their “large and potentially restive population”, especially when the regime got entangled in the costly Yemeni war. This led to the expectation of more positive results in the Doha meeting in April 2016 (Klare, 2016). The draft document produced by preliminary negotiations among Russia, Venezuela, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia was considered by participants as mostly ready for signature, turned out to be a failure due to one factor: Iran. The recent deal to limit Iran’s nuclear program has resulted in the lifting of international economic sanctions on Iran, which led to Iran’s determination to raise its production (Mooney, 2016). Saudi Arabia wants Iran to do the same instead of obtaining added oil revenues from the agreed freeze. This is just the nearest event on the old rivalry of two oil-powers in the region in the battle for political power, in which Sectarian Identity today is a card.

Covered by Identity Politics in the webs of alliances of countries and international powers in the Middle East, there are economic and political dynamics that are hidden but could explain the chaos in totality. First of all, oil is vital for these two regional powers in their alliance with international powers. For example, control of oil has been one significant interest in US foreign policy since World War II. The US has long recognized that the Gulf's energy sources are "a stupendous source of strategic power and one of the greatest material prizes in world history." (Foreign Relations of the US, 1945, 45) In Iran, the Shahs, who signed the similar oil deal with European and Soviet companies, had ruled Iran for many years until a nationalist prime minister - Mohammed Mossadeq nationalized Iran's oil industry in 1951 and carried out a protracted power struggle to the extent that the Shahs ended into exile in 1953. The Shah was put back into power by the USA and the UK, which resulted in the new oil concession with an international consortium, led by American companies (Kinzer, 2008, 167-209).

Similarly, the ruling of the Saudis in Saudi Arabia in the assured Western backing also came with the expense of oil concession in the 1930s (Yergin, 2008, 385-386). The traditional alliance between Saudi Arabia and the US-based on oil cooperation, which survived the oil embargo in 1973, may explain America's "otherwise baffling decision" to ignore the Saudi citizenship status of 15 out of 19 men who hijacked the planes used in the September 11 attacks and focus on Saddam Hussein who had no known connection (Cook, 2008, 16). Despite differences in issues of Palestine-Israel conflict and the 2011 Arab protest movements and Saudi Arabia leaders' discontent with what they perceive as the retreating US in the face of a resurgent Iran, both sides understand the significance of the relationship and common interests in the region.

Oil is a critical factor in explaining the relationship between Russia and Iran. On the energy front, Russian oil companies may not possess state-of-the-art technology as their Western counterparts, but they can increase the productivity of the older Iranian fields, develop new ones, and help to facilitate Iran's gas export. Russia and Iran are estimated to hold almost 20 percent of global oil and 50 percent of the world's natural gas reserves. The cooperation of these two would create a giant twice as dominant in the international gas market as Saudi Arabia is in the global oil market (Leverett, 2006). There is also another possibility – the “axis of oil” in which, Russia plays the role of the primary producer, China represents a growing consumer with enormous demand, and Iran is the most notable among the nationalist oil-producing states. These collections would pose challenges to US hegemony on a wide range of issues globally beyond the oil front (Leverett & Noel, 2006, 68). National Iranian Oil Company's recent statement that Iran would charge oil in Euros instead of dollars “for political reasons” somehow reflects this tendency and a sign of an “uneasy truce” with the US despite the lift of its sanctions (Verma, 2016).

Another example that takes oil into analysis for a different angle of understanding might shed a different light on the sectarian divisions with international powers supporting different parties in the Syrian conflicts. In 2009, Assad's announcement of a “four seas strategy” - with the ambition of turning Syria into a regional hub for oil transportation between the Persian Gulf and the Black, Caspian and Mediterranean seas – was met with Qatar's proposal of a pipeline from the Persian Gulf via Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria and Turkey (Ahmed, 2013). However, Assad refused and agreed, in July 2011, on a 10 billion USD gas pipeline deal with Iraq and Iran that would transport gas from Iran's South Pars gas field, the world's biggest one, through Iraq to Syria, exporting directly to Europe out of the Eastern

Mediterranean Sea and the plan for construction is 2016.⁴ This sheds another light on alliances in the conflict that sectarianism failed to explain. The only option for Russia would be the Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline or no pipeline at all to make sure of its control over gas supplies to Europe. This explains even the minor Egypt's attitude of supporting Assad at the expense of tension in its relations with the Saudis (Sievers, 2015). If this pipeline is ever built, it would not only solidify a Shia axis but would also create an "Anglo-American-independent alliance" on oil and gas resources and other ensuing political aspects.

The alliances with global power are relevant in regional Sectarian Identity Politics, as these powerful states – experienced in their expedition and conquer of others' land – have long learned that grasping the weakness in indigenous identities is the most effective strategy to bend the reality of these lands according to their wish. Sectarian Identity Politics is not the card only in the hands of regional actors. The mismanagement of international powers has contributed to identity divisions and wide-scale violence, and their policy of promoting the aspect of identity in conflicts has created a sectarian narrative in which their role of democracy evangelist is just a gloss over political calculations. Those "ancient" fissures, which quickly and widely turn into conflicts, have been integrated into their strategies towards the Middle East.⁵ When they take their sides in Middle East's

⁴ This idea of Syria as a regional oil transit hub is based on its situation between Europe and major producing areas in the Persian Gulf and Caspian Sea. Syria's pipe line also includes the Arab Gas Pipeline from Egypt to Tripoli in Lebanon and the old IPC oil line from Iraq, which has been offline since US invasion in 2003. See more: Pepe Escobar, "Blood for Oil: Syria is the Ultimate Pipelineistan War (2015)", Russian Insider, Access: (22 October 2017), <http://russia-insider.com/en/politics/blood-oil-syria-ultimate-pipelineistan-war/ri11709>.

⁵ For example, RAND Corporation has suggested several approaches to America's long war in the Middle East, in which the "Divide and Rule" proposes to exploit "fault lines between the various Salafi-jihadist groups to turn them against each other and dissipate their energy on internal conflicts", and the "Inside Out" strategy

conflicts, it may be true that their roles are not defined by sectarianism, but they surely are taking part in the game of Sectarian Identity Politics and conflicts in the region.

9. Conclusion

With powerful states seeking to gain an advantage, spread their influence and weaken that of their rivals, the Middle East is becoming fractious, while the fall of states has, in effect, broken the national identities and stimulated the growth of sectarian identity as a political variable in conflicts of all ranges and levels. When the regional order is collapsing, and regional states are falling, the two-oil productive powers in the Middle East, each of which claims to be the leader of the Islamic world and a leader of the Middle East, are drawn into the vacuum, where they try to wield control as much as are controlled by the broader forces. The Middle East – with a culture of extraordinary richness, a history of deep length and exceptional intricacy, a social map of byzantine complexity, and a present of tension, conflicts and wars – has become the source for the mainstream narratives of regional violence and instability along sectarian lines and under the Sunni – Shia rivalry led by two regional powers with international-scale impacts, without much regard and thorough considerations about what lies behind these sectarian forces and what dictates the formation of sectarianism.

What matters most in the Middle East sectarian identity conflicts as well as Iran – Saudi Arabia’s rivalry is the interplay between political actors and sectarian identity, not sectarianism per se or any identity on which conflicts are based. This perception of Sectarian Identity Politics also calls into question the legality and validity of not

recommends the use of “decisive conventional military force to change the regime in certain key Muslim countries and impose democracy in its place”. See more: Christopher G. Pernin, et al. “Unfolding the Future of the Long War”, *RAND Corporation* (2008).

only Iran and Saudi Arabia's foreign policies in regional states under sectarian umbrella, but also the direct and indirect intervention of international powers into the Middle East affairs under the labels of counter-terrorism, prevention of weapons of mass destruction, or humanitarian interventions. Isn't it the same tactic of Identity Politics, be it sectarian, ethnic, or ideological when all the labels are used for the same purposes of distracting people from the core issues of politics while getting an access to the rich land and obtain political interests, just like the brandings of the civilized and the uncivilized, the privileged and the unprivileged in imperial period? The Middle East's people cannot wait for history to answer this.

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