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2019 **Zuzana Kováčiková**

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Balance of Identity and Balance of Power: The Case of Conflict Dynamics between Saudi Arabia and Iran

Master's thesis

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Declaration

1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.
2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.
3. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

In Prague on Zuzana Kováčiková

References

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Abstract

This thesis applies the concept of *religious (national) identity* to the cases of Saudi Arabia, Iran and their proxy allies – state and non-state actors – in Lebanon, Syria and Yemen. The aim was to show that in the Middle East, Sunni and Shiite affiliations matter in the relationship between the regional powers and respective proxies, as opposing to realist statement that alliances, conflicts and political developments are only governed by pragmatic power interests. Additionally, the work examines whether religious national identities have impact on the dynamics of proxy conflicts. Overall, the objective was to establish comprehensive image of how ideational/constructivist and pragmatic/realist factors work in combination to influence alliances, enmities and conflicts in the Middle East. Using qualitative methods of research, religious (national) identities of Saudi Arabia, Iran and their allies in Lebanon, Syria and Yemen were constructed so as to create ideational and realist points of departure, and then interlinked to show how convergence of religious identities helps in creating durable alliances if used in targeted manner as a strategic tool which can help safeguard national interests. The work shows notable differences in the use of this tool between Saudi Arabia and Iran, suggesting that it may influence foreign policy successes and failures. Additionally, support of religious convergence between Saudi Arabia, Iran and their respective proxies has direct impact on the dynamic of conflicts and political developments, as "sectarianization" affects formerly secular causes.

Abstrakt

Tato práce aplikuje koncept náboženské (národní) identity na případy Saúdské Arábie, Íránu a jejich spojenců – státních i nestátních aktérů v Libanonu, Sýrii a Jemenu. Cílem práce bylo poukázat na důležitost sunnitské a šíitské náboženské identity v jejich vzájemných vztazích v prostředí Blízkého východu, což je v kontrastu s realistickým tvrzením, že aliance, konflikty a politický vývoj jsou diktovány pragmatickými mocenskými zájmy. Kromě toho práce zkoumá, zda má náboženská (národní) identita dopad na dynamiku zástupných (proxy) válek. Záměrem bylo vytvoření komplexního obrazu toho, jak funguje souhra ideových/konstruktivistických a pragmatických/ realistických faktorů, která pak ovlivňuje aliance, antipatie a konflikty na Blízkém východě. Použitím kvalitativních metod výzkumu byly zkonstruovány náboženské

(národní) identity Saúdské Arábie, Íránu a jejich spojenců v Libanonu, Sýrii a Jemenu za účelem vytvoření ideových a pragmatických východisek; tyto pak byly vzájemně propojeny, aby poukázaly na to, jak konvergence náboženských identit napomáhá vytvoření stabilních aliancí v případě, že je využita cíleně jako strategický nástroj, který chrání národní zájmy. Práce poukazuje na rozdíly ve využívání tohoto nástroje Íránem a Saúdskou Arábií, které můžou souviset se zahraničně-politickými úspěchy a selháními obou států. Podpora konvergence náboženské identity mezi Saúdskou Arábií, Íránem a jejich spojenci má rovněž dopad na dynamiku konfliktu a celkový politický vývoj, protože „sektarianizace“ ovlivňuje konflikty, které měly původně sekulární příčiny.

Keywords

Saudi Arabia, Iran, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, identity, sectarianism, conflict, proxy war, Islam

Klíčová slova

Saúdská Arábie, Írán, Libanon, Sýrie, Jemen, identita, sektářství, konflikt, proxy válka, islám

Název práce

Rovnováha identity a rovnováha sil: případ dynamiky konfliktu mezi Saúdskou Arábii a Íránem

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Introduction

In today's conflict-ridden Middle East, understanding Saudi-Iranian rivalry is often the key to understanding complicated map of local alliances and enmities. Of course, I do not claim that Saudi-Iranian rivalry is the *only* factor influencing many Middle Eastern conflicts and tensions, but it is still a substantial background factor. Connected to these conflicts is the issue of religion and the role of Sunni-Shiite sectarianism in the local milieu.

In this work, I assert the relationships between Saudi Arabia, Iran and their local proxy allies in Syria, Lebanon and Yemen are influenced not only by realist notion of pragmatic interests and balance of power, but also by diverging or converging *religious identities* of all the actors. These identities serve as enabler for creating alliances and have influence on political mindsets, subsequent decision-making and dynamics of the conflicts themselves.

Namely, when it comes to rivalry between Saudi Arabia (SA) and Iran and the current tensions in the Middle East, the usual assumptions in the existing literature and in the media are twofold: they either claim everything revolves around base pragmatic interests, mentioning Sunni or Shiite affiliation just as a brief ancillary matter of fact, or they sometimes imprecisely and superficially ascribe exaggerated importance to the ages-old sectarian schism between Sunnis and Shiites. The former is partially true, while the latter omits critical details in the nature of various state and non-state actors, forgetting that modern Middle Eastern sectarianism is rather a matter of recent developments and rivalry between SA and Iran. Neither of the two statements is true only by itself: as will be shown, SA and Iran indeed have manifold realpolitik goals, but these are often achieved by using and manipulating religious and ideational affiliations; hence the importance of the religious (national) identity for the proxy conflicts. There is not much literature that comprehensively shows how religious identities influenced tensions and conflicts in the Middle East since 2015, which is why I try to add more detail into this issue to create more complex image.

Less powerful state and non-state actors are often tied to their regional patrons by ties of loyalty stemming from the common past, cultural similarity, ideational convergence and sectarian identity in addition to pragmatic goals such as financing and diplomatic support, which can altogether create exceptionally durable alliances. On the other hand, SA

and Iran as the main regional powers try to reinforce not only their own unique Sunni/Shiite identities, but also the common religious identity they share with the less powerful actors. They do so by all possible means, even if it means deepening sectarian rifts and thus aggravating the sectarian conflict. Hence, the aim in general was to choose the middle ground that links the pragmatic to the ideational; to illustrate the context and to demonstrate in the most accurate way possible that in the Middle East, religious (national) identity of the actors matters, not only because it can be a source of conflict, but because it goes hand in hand with realpolitik goals.

Because of that, the first chapter engages in discussion about theoretical framework as devised by Henry R. Nau and its application to Middle Eastern settings. Nau in his book *At Home Abroad: Identity and Power in American Politics* (2002) connects realist and constructivist traditions to create the concept of "national identity" which influences national interests. Neither realist balance of power, nor constructivism and idealism alone explain state's policy decisions, but they always work in combination. National identities can be compared to determine identitarian divergence or convergence, which has further impact on the stability of relationships between the states. Since all state and non-state actors in this thesis operate to certain degree with the issue of sect or religion, I am using slightly modified concept of *religious (national) identity* throughout the work and asserting that it in substantial way complements realpolitik interests.

The second chapter is trying to construct religious national identities of Saudi Arabia and Iran, the two most powerful regional powers. Consideration of historical, religious, cultural and political factors was necessary to create the image of the country as perceived by its own citizens as well as by outsiders from among other Middle Eastern state and non-state actors. This part is necessary because, put simply, it determines the points of departure in the way representatives of given countries think in terms of strategic interests and decision-making. Thus, it shows how Iran as a rogue state is adept in manipulation and export of the revolutionary Shiite identity and why Saudi Arabia – split between Wahhabi tradition and efforts to modernize – feels its standing of a regional status quo Sunni power is threatened, which results in aggressive assertion of Saudi interests through various Sunni actors. Also, outline of religious identities of SA and Iran is important to show how they form and interfere into relationships with actors in countries where both powers have their strategic interests.

Lastly, the third part constructs religious identities of state and non-state actors in Lebanon, Syria and Yemen and connects them to their respective regional sponsors. The aim of this chapter was to show that even though they are sometimes overlooked or even deemed non-existent, religious identities shape the relationship between the power and the less powerful state and influence local developments. The finding pertaining to this part is in accordance with Nau's theoretical assertion that in the hierarchical structure, the power always tries to project its identity on the less powerful actor because it considers it a way to strengthen mutual affinity and create durable alliance that would withstand strain in time of conflict. This aspect is especially important in those countries that are deemed strategically essential, that is, Syria and Lebanon for Iran, and Yemen for Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the chapter shows why religious identities are relevant for the conflicts in Yemen and Syria, regardless of the fact they originated in more or less secular causes.

Altogether the three chapters are trying to put together a comprehensive image of religious identity and its importance first in the rivalry between SA and Iran, and second in ongoing sectarian conflicts in Syria, Yemen and Lebanon, and thus contribute to understanding of complex map of pragmatic and ideological links shaping today's Middle East. However, at the same time it is necessary to bear in mind the constellation of cases analyzed in this work is not representative of the whole Middle East, therefore it can partially confirm Henry R. Nau's theory, but it refrains from formulating universal conclusions. Such work is beyond scope of this thesis and could be regarded as an idea for further research. Nevertheless, we can say that the application Nau's theory provides us with unique angle from which we can view how identity of a nation impacts on alliances and enmities.

Transcription note:

Throughout this work names of places, persons, Islamic concepts, etc. which do not have conventional alternative form in English were transcribed from Arabic or Persian using simplified ALA-LC standard for romanization of Arabic script.

1. Theorization

1.1 Research question

The question I'd like to answer by this work was formulated as follows: *Is the concept of religious (national) identity reflected in the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and in relationships of Saudi Arabia and Iran with their respective proxy allies in the current Middle Eastern conflicts?* Thus, the following chapters will try to prove that constructivist *religious (national) identity* in the Middle Eastern settings is a significant complement to simple realist material power, i.e. the two work in concert. Identitarian and cultural/ religious factors are often underestimated or omitted by Western observers when it comes to decision-making in the Middle East, assuming that at the end of the day, everything comes down to realist thinking. As we shall see, analysis of this issue will provide deeper understanding on how alliances are made, reinforced or dismantled between SA and Iran and their respective allies; what is their underlying idea and how they work altogether with the logic of pure realist thought. This, in turn, can help us understand strategic thought in the Middle East; how political decisions are made and how does it influence dynamics of ongoing Middle Eastern conflicts.

1.2 Theoretical framework: What is Henry Nau's concept of *balance of identity* vs. *balance of power*?

Religious affiliation and identity in the Middle East are so important they have become an integral part of both domestic affairs and foreign policy. Theoretical framework for analysis is constituted by Henry R. Nau's concept of identity and power which he describes in his book *At Home Abroad: Identity and Power in American politics* (2002). Originally, the concept was devised to explain the American foreign policy decision-making, but as McCrisken remarks in his review: "Nau's approach could be used to analyze the relative influence of both power and identity in the foreign policy of any state."[1] In his book, Nau explicitly mentions the case of Iran as a perfect example of a state

[1] MCCRISKEN, Trevor B. Reviewed Work(s): At Home Abroad: Identity and Power in American Foreign Policy by Henry R. Nau. *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)*. Oxford University Press on behalf of the Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2003, 79(1), p. 221

where his theory can be tested,[2] which was, in fact, an initial inspiration for writing this thesis. Thus, the concept is translated into Middle-Eastern settings quite easily: American and Russian or Chinese identities can be replaced by juxtaposing Saudi-Sunni and Iranian-Shiite ones, and the concept is first applied on the relationship between them. Next, it is applied on relationships between Saudi Arabian and Iranian respective proxy allies in the countries where they try to assert their interests. In this case, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen were chosen.

As for main ideas of the concept, these revolve around the question of "How relative national identities interact with relative national power?"[3] As John Ikenberry puts it, Nau's basic assertion can be summarized as "relations between states are shaped by both power *and* national identity,"[4] and "power and identity are [both] a source of national interest."[5] Nau himself says of *At Home Abroad*: "[the book] stays close to realist concerns about the use of force, but reaches out to constructivist concerns about nonmaterial factors, such as norms, cultures, and identities, that interpret and motivate the use of force."[6] Therein lies the importance of both *balance of power* and *balance of identity* and resulting *identity and power approach*. "National identity is a vital factor in the formation of nation's foreign policy, though it is often overlooked in favor of measures of national power."[7] To include both identity and power, Nau's outlooks throughout the book are based on realism and constructivism and their respective competing paradigmatic traditions.[8] Realism's material and constructivism's ideational basis make for an interesting, yet very logical combination. That is because both aspects work together, since relationships and events usually have multifactorial nature. Realist/constructivist theories alone fail to provide satisfactory explanations and applications.

If we were to translate Nau's assertion into brief practical example, we could use the case of Iran: Iran looks for alliance with Shiite proxies in the countries where it wants to gain influence and more *power* to balance Saudi Arabia, but all this does not always

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[2] NAU, Henry R. *At Home Abroad: Identity and Power in American Foreign Policy*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002. p. 5
[3] NAU, Henry R., ref. 2, book cover
[4] IKENBERRY, John. At Home Abroad: Identity and Power in American Foreign Policy by Henry R. Nau. *Foreign Affairs*. 2004, (1), p. 166
[5] MEROM, Gil. At Home Abroad: Identity and Power in American Foreign Policy. *Australian Journal of Political Science*. n.d., 39(3), p. 672
[6] NAU, Henry R., ref. 2, p. 10
[7] DUFFY, Tim. At Home Abroad: Identity and Power in American Foreign Policy (review). *SAIS Review*. 2003, 23(2), p. 243
[8] ROCK, Stephen R. At Home Abroad: Identity and Power in American Foreign Policy by Henry R. Nau. *Political Science Quarterly*. 2002, 117(3), p. 500

happen in simplistic pragmatic way. Iran is a bearer of certain Shiite-Iranian identity, and the reliable alliance is enabled by the fact that the proxies' allegiance as well originates in Shiite affiliation and identity. Identification and loyalty stems, first and foremost, from common religious background and history of good relations with Iran. Therefore, Nau's theoretical approach is unique in that it tries to account for more factors linked together which provides more accurate explanations.

1.2.1 What is (national) identity?

Indeed, Nau ascribes paramount importance to the question of *identity*. To illustrate the point, a few quotes from the book may be of help: "Converging identities safeguard national security just as surely as dominant military power."[9] "The national interest begins with what kind of society the nation is, not just what its geopolitical circumstances are."[10] "National identity organizes and motivates national economic and military power and tells us what political purposes nations legitimate and use their wealth and power."[11] For the sake of brevity, I will not delve into Nau's accounts on origins of the American identity, although he dedicates significant portion of the book to this issue. Concisely put, American identity was shaped by historical experience of wars (civil wars, world wars and the Cold war), liberalist thought and democratic tradition. The sense of exceptionalism America developed was formed by two contradictory tendencies: isolationism on one hand, and interventionism on the other.

However, regardless of such description, we still need to understand what constitutes identity according to Nau's criteria; we need to know what the essence of such an abstract category as identity is and what questions we should ask to get concrete answers delimiting it. This is extremely important because Saudi, Iranian and their allies' identities shall be constructed from the scratch based on Nau's criteria, so that it is possible to determine whether the concept religious (national) identity is applicable and whether it has impact on relationships between the countries as well as on ongoing sectarian conflicts.

[9] NAU, Henry R., ref. 2, p. 7
[10] Ibid., p. 16
[11] Ibid., p. 41-42

Thus, to begin with general definition, Nau says national identity is something like "domestic ideology"[12] and "national self-image" that (together with national power) defines national interests and influences foreign policy behavior.[13] National identity, however, cannot be equated with domestic politics and it is not a byproduct of national power, but rather a separate category. Nau also asserts that national identity matters more than material power, "because without unified and healthy self-image, a nation has no incentive to accumulate or use material power. […] The capacity to use military force *legitimately* (not just the capacity to use force) lies at the heart of national identity. […] Identity is the principal idea on which a nation accumulates and legitimates the use of lethal force. […] It may be a religious bond as in the case of contemporary Muslim State of Iran."[14] Thus, we can view national identity as something akin to *central idea* of a given state; Nau also speaks of certain "sense of shared destiny,"[15] among the citizens or members of a (religious, ethnic) group. Identity then also "defines threat and national interests."[16]

Still though, such definition is vague and unsatisfactory. Therefore, drawing on Chapter 3 of Nau's book, it is possible to outline some specifics that, if taken as a whole, constitute national identity. Among them we can find following elements: history of a country, political system/form of government, perception of legitimacy, tradition of political thought, judicial system, perception of justice and equality, grievances, foreign policy tradition, religion, cultural customs, societal norms and social mobility, economic model, geographic position and external alliances with other countries. Although such list can be considered exhaustive, I believe we could also add the element of strategic culture. Strategic culture has, again, many definitions, but when it comes to political decision-making in foreign relations, it may be useful concept that can be possibly linked to national identity.

Importantly, Nau also differentiates between the concepts of internal and external identity. Internal one "is, foremost, about how a country perceives itself. […] The self is always more than just the sum of other's perceptions."[17] Regarding external identity, it "deals with how states evaluate [their] sources of identity in their relations with other

[12] Ibid., p. 6
[13] Ibid., p. 4
[14] Ibid., p. 4-5
[15] Ibid., p. X
[16] Ibid., p. 6
[17] Ibid., p. 21

states."[18] However, "internal identities inform external behavior, but external behavior is also a function of separate and independent identity factors."[19]

1.2.2 On balance of power and national interest

It would be a mistake to omit the actual link which connects national identity to power. In this context, Nau first mentions two concepts that determine (i.e. motivate) national identity, and those are *balance of power* and *national interest*. As for balance of power,[20] each country is seeking such balance that favors their identity. Also, "balance of power is always a community of power […] which reflects relative convergence and divergence of power." For national interest, definition of Hans J. Morgenthau is used, who basically asserts that "interest [is] defined in terms of power,"[21] meaning that "the states act mainly to acquire economic and military power to ensure their national survival."[22] Nau holds that national interest is a "set of concrete material interests that must be pursued to protect […] security and […] prosperity, […] and can be calculated objectively from […] physical and geopolitical circumstances."[23] The thing with national interest is, however, that it "begins with what kind of society the nation is, not just what its geopolitical circumstances are,"[24] because "America is not just a piece of geography; it is a liberal democracy,"[25] just like Saudi Arabia and Iran also are not just Middle Eastern countries, but illiberal theocracies as well. Thus, national interest is motivated by national identity, because it is the national identity that determines and legitimizes use of power; it attaches meanings and defines constraints.[26] Therein lies keynote of Nau's argument in

[18] Ibid., p. 23
[19] Ibid.
[20] According Waltz's explanation, balance of power relies on few assumptions: first, states are unitary actors who seek at least to preserve themselves, or, at a maximum, to achieve universal dominance. Also, he distinguishes internal balancing (states rely on themselves and works on increasing military and economic strength) and external balancing (states engage in alliance in order to prevent hegemony of the other side). For this theory to be operational it is important to that two or more states exist side by side to each other in self-help system, with no superior authority over them. For more on balance of power, see WALTZ, Kenneth N. *Theory of International Politics*. Long Grove: Waveland Press, 1979.
[21] MORGENTHAU, Hans J. *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*. 6th ed. Ed. Kenneth W. Thompson. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985. p. 5
[22] NAU, Henry R., ref. 2, p. 17
[23] Ibid., p. 15
[24] Ibid., p. 16
[25] Ibid., p. 15
[26] Ibid., p. XI

connection of power and identity, and such link will also be made with regard to Saudi Arabia, Iran and their respective allies.

Notably to add, throughout the book Nau also uses notions of "relative power" and "relative national identity." These terms are constructivist in nature, i.e. they are used exactly in the sense of meaning of "relative." They imply somewhat "outside" dimension: put simply, power or identity are *relative* when they are perceived by other states, not from domestic point of view.[27]

1.2.3 Convergence and divergence of identity and power

Now that basic criteria for outlining national identity were specified, we can proceed to the central idea of balance of identity vs. balance of power. Nau says that identities can be compared, and we can determine their similarity and dissimilarity, i.e. we can see whether they converge or diverge. Material and military power also can be distributed equally or unequally, but in comparison with identity, the difference is easier to qualitatively measure. Power also has more tangible impact: "Significance [of power] depends on whether nations see one another as friends or foes. But its consequences, such as the stronger nation having more options to act unilaterally than the weaker, do not depend on […] interpretation."[28]

Convergence/divergence of power and identity then determines quality of relationships between the states; namely, "interaction of identities 'regulates' the extent to which two countries will experience peace or conflict."[29] The table below summarizes how the situation looks like when Nau's model is applied to the case of Saudi Arabia, Iran and their proxies.

[27] Ibid., p. 18-19
[28] Ibid., p. XI
[29] At home abroad: Identity and power in American foreign policy. *Virginia Quarterly Review*. 2002, 78(4), p. A132

Power → Identity ↓	Equal	Unequal
Convergent	**Security community** (stable) Countries agree on identity, i.e. on the terms that legitimate use of force → this creates predictability and moderates use of military power. (e.g. the EU)	**Hierarchy** (stable) Religious and/or national identities are similar, but power is unequal. (e.g. Saudi Arabia & Iran vs. other Middle Eastern state and non-state actors in those countries where both SA and Iran have interests – Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, Bahrain, etc.).
Divergent	**Double-track anarchy** (the most unstable) Countries have diverging identities but roughly the same amount of power. (e.g. Saudi Arabia vs. Iran)	**Hegemony** (relatively stable) One country has disproportionate amount of power to control other less powerful countries. (e.g. the US in Latin America)

Therefore, "converging identities safeguard national security just as surely as dominant military power."[30] The table shows that divergent identities contribute to instability, because all the actors included have their own terms for legitimate use of force. In hegemony, the less powerful ones constantly try to counterbalance the hegemon; sometimes they try to bandwagon, but since their power in sum is not sufficient, they remain under influence of the hegemon.

In double-track anarchy the actors try to balance each other, i.e. they constantly strive for being more and more powerful. "Relations are most dangerous when diverging identities are coupled with equal power."[31] According to Nau, "double-track" aspect refers to two intertwining factors that need to be controlled by a state engaged in such relationship: first, there is constant balancing of the enemy's power ("both states keep their military power to balance the enemy who doesn't share the same identity"[32]) and second, they try to "influence the positioning of [adversary's] national identity", i.e. to "remake"

[30] NAU, Henry R., ref. 2, p. 7
[31] DUFFY, Tim. At Home Abroad: Identity and Power in American Foreign Policy (review). *SAIS Review*. 2003, 23(2), p. 243
[32] HOLMES, James R. At Home Abroad: Identity and Power in American Foreign Policy. *Library Journal*. 2002, (6), p. 127

it so that more convergence can be achieved over time. With reference to liberalist principles, Nau believes the second point can be done through economic engagement of both sides,[33] however, this point is only applicable in Nau's case of the US and authoritarian regimes. If nations' identity is not based upon ideas of democracy and liberalism – as is the case of SA and Iran – then the idea of economic engagement as a way of converging religious (national) identities is disputable. Although it is possible to claim that in the spirit of liberalist tradition, economic ties and interdependence between any nations have a potential to improve their mutual relationship, in the case of countries whose identity is based upon religion I would rather advocate for more secularization in the public sphere, or at least moderation of conflictual religious rhetoric.

As for hierarchical distribution of power, Nau again operates with the presumption that the relationships between the states are determined by that one central idea they all share. In the case of SA and Iran and their proxy allies, democracy is not applicable, since the identity revolves around religion. The more powerful state in hierarchical structure of power is deemed to be "centralizing power" which determines the identity of the hierarchy, thus determines conditions under which use of power is legitimate.[34]

1.2.4 Caveats and limits of the theory

The first and the most obvious problem one might have with application of Nau's theory is that although he claims it can be widely applied to any state, and the general idea is indeed applicable in this way, in its particularities it is very Western-centric. Nau often operates with concepts of democracy and liberalism when constructing the identities. The problem is, these notions rarely define Middle Eastern states and they are especially distant from Iran and SA where the national identities are defined by religion. Therefore, it was necessary to adjust Nau's criteria so that they can be used to construct a religion-based identity.

Second, since Nau's concept was originally devised for explanation of relationship between the US and the rest of the world, it is also understandable that the categories he is using are convenient for a system which is strictly state-centric. However, although his theory may be generally suitable for application on the case Iran and Saudi Arabia, it does

[33] NAU, Henry R., ref. 2, p. 9
[34] Ibid., p. 29

not wholly account for the complex Middle Eastern political reality. Namely, it means that we cannot simply operate within the context of national states there. This is because many states in the Middle East were historically established in a way they now consist of factions and minorities to whom their religious or ethnic identity is more important than their national identity. This fact doesn't allow for unification of single national identity in the sense we could conclusively assert that, for example, Lebanon as a state is a Saudi or Iranian ally, because such assertion is simply not true. Lebanese government may be Saudi ally, yet Hezbollah – the most powerful Middle Eastern NSA based in Lebanon and a member of the Lebanese government – is Iranian ally. Consequently, SA and Iran are sometimes not trying to establish relationship with the state itself, but with the NSA, who in some cases wields more real power or it is viewed by certain segments of society as more legitimate. Notably, aim of the alliance with NSA is making use of the NSA-induced intrastate divisions to eventually dominate the entire state or at least gain significant decisive power (eg. Iran–Hezbollah, SA–Yemeni Salafists). This is, in fact, one of limitations which were mentioned in several reviews of Nau's book – that his theory doesn't properly cover increasingly important phenomenon of NSAs.

Indeed, such situation is a bit precarious, however, it is not insoluble: the solution lies in the approach where the theory would be applied on both state and non-state actors whose identity can be clearly outlined and analyzed as a separate unit. However, concerning the NSAs we will have to account for the fact that a few of the criteria outlined in Chapter 2.2.1. will be limited in application. NSAs discussed in this thesis sometimes do not have clearly delimited geographic position and boundaries; their economic models may not always be entirely legal and transparent, and it would be a bit of overestimation to call their system of alliances with external actors "foreign policy." Nevertheless, all these actors have something that works in a way similar to "national interest," i.e. a set of realpolitik goals aimed at preserving their existence and expanding their power within their respective states,[35] and together with their patrons they successfully participate in influencing the balance of power to reach favorable configuration of power. Also, the NSAs which will be discussed here had or still have the ability to successfully create state within a state, where the legitimate state institutions had very limited scope of action. Thus, because of inclusion of NSAs into the analysis of relationships, the term *religious*

[35] GAUSE III., F. Gregory. Ideologies, alliances and underbalancing in the new Middle East Cold War (memo for the International Relations and a new Middle East symposium). *Project on Middle East Political Science* [online]. August 26, 2015.

(national) identity with brackets is used throughout the work, because the national aspect hardly applies to NSAs.

Third, what could also be viewed as problematic is the notion of *legitimacy*. Nau asserts that national identity enables the nation to use force legitimately.[36] The problem here is twofold: concerning NSAs, we cannot really speak about unified *nations* who use the material power *legitimately*, since the NSAs are often insurgent or militia groups and their use of force may be questionable. However, we see that Nau's central idea of "national identity as an enabler of legitimate use of force" can as well be viewed in more general terms. When we abstract from the clear-cut notions of "nation" and "legitimacy," we get widely applicable statement that is summarized as follows: The most important is the NSA's (or nation's) *belief* that they are using the force legitimately.[37] This *belief* unifies said group or nation and creates motivation to defend its interest.[38] Therefore – and that is the case of states as well as NSAs – legitimacy is not just given, it is *perceived*. Then there is the question of states where legitimacy of the state is in crisis, i.e. significant portions of population do not believe the state is using its power legitimately, and instead they bestow legitimacy on a NSA. This is the case of many Middle Eastern states, including Lebanon, Syria and Yemen discussed here. Nau also mentions – although unfortunately without dedicating more space to the idea – that "most nations define their identity and […] legitimate the use of force on the basis of protecting and serving an *ethnic* or *traditional* community that shares common linguistic, cultural, racial or religious characteristics; or […] *ideological* community composed of a variety of ethnic groups that unite around a set of common beliefs."[39] If the idea of ethnic/traditional/ideological community was to be used as one of essential criteria when constructing identity of an actor, it would be widely applicable also to NSAs.

Lastly, also important is to emphasize that although we find generalizable traits of such hierarchical power- and identity-based relationships in all the cases that will be included in this work, each of them needs to be analyzed individually, since quality of the relationship may differ in many aspects – be it in affinity to either Saudis or Iran, or in

[36] NAU, Henry R., ref. 2, p. 4
[37] Legitimacy is 'the capacity of the system to engender and maintain belief that the existing political institutions are the most appropriate ones for the society'. In LIPSET, Seymour. *Political Man*. New York: Doubleday, 1960. p. 77
[38] NAU, Henry R., ref. 2, p. 4
[39] Ibid., p. 20

intensity, strength and fluidity. Thus, we just need to bear in mind that it is not possible to make as clear-cut categorizations as Nau often makes in his book.

1.3 Methodology

This work was intended to be a case study of proxy conflicts between SA and Iran, viewed through the lens of Henry R. Nau's theory of balance of identity. As for case study classification, it has elements of both disciplined interpretative case study and instrumental case study, i.e. it is like a two-way road: the theory is applied on a case for which it has not yet been used, but at the same time, the case can also test the theory and versatility of its application (as Nau claims it shall be applicable to any country). However, research of this single Middle Eastern problem does not aim to draw any universal conclusions; it is rather only a study of certain specific settings. The proxy conflict between SA and Iran was chosen as a case because it can be characterized as "closed system with an inherent logic and clear boundaries," and it is as well "sufficiently delimited part of a historical episode."[40] Concerning time span, I am focusing mainly on the most recent developments since 2015 to bring perspectives of constantly changing environments, although short historical detours are needed for tracing roots of relationships between regional powers and proxies. In addition, SA and Iran are the two countries whose national identities can be relatively easily defined according to Nau's criteria, yet they are very intriguing in that they are alien to Western context, which also opens new possibilities for new theory applications.

Since this work is qualitative in its nature, it is using qualitative methods of research. Substantial part of empirical work constructs Saudi and Iranian national identities, and then subsequently tries to connect them to relationships these regional powers have with their regional allies (state and non-state actors in Lebanon, Syria and Yemen) to reveal whether and how the religious (national) identity influences the conflicts. The religious identity of proxies is also explored, which enables the link to their respective patrons. Therefore, since variables such as "identity" or "quality of relationship" cannot be measured quantitatively, in-depth research was conducted. Its aim was to evaluate and characterize both identities and relationships, because, as Nau says, "We can measure the

[40] KARÁSEK, Tomáš. *Case study*. Charles University. Lecture on case study methodology given on March 13, 2018.

similarity and dissimilarity of these ideas, and so track relative national identities just as we track relative national power."[41] Regarding the relationships, important questions to ask include how the relationship was established and what are the influential components within (financial support, religious leadership, sense of common grievance, common history, etc.). Regarding the identities, their construction is dependent on putting together a coherent image resultant from the elements mentioned in Chapter 1.2.1.

Regarding choice of cases where relationship between SA and Iran and their allies is demonstrated, the examples of Syria, Lebanon and Yemen were chosen. This sample is not representative of the whole Middle East – the work of such ambition is far beyond the scope of this master thesis – but the countries chosen are fractured weak states with hybrid sovereignties which are currently also the battlefields od Saudi-Iranian proxy wars. Besides, they provide wide range of state and non-state actors with varied backgrounds and motivations worth exploring. Obviously, it would be (too) easy to link Saudi Arabia to Kuwait or United Arab Emirates and claim that the age-long allies share similar identity which formed their alliance, but there is hardly any challenge in such statement. Therefore, following table provides an overview of actors that will be discussed in following chapters:

	Saudi ally/proxy	**Iranian ally/proxy**
Lebanon	Lebanese government of Saad Hariri, Sunni minority and Lebanese Salafists	Hezbollah and Shiite minority
Syria	Salafi Islamist groups and Sunni Muslims	Syrian government, Alawites and Shiite minority
Yemen	Yemeni government, Yemeni Salafi groups and Sunni majority	Houthi insurgents

In result, analysis of relationships between these actors viewed from the identitarian angle shall provide a bit more insight into tangled web of Middle Eastern alliances and interests, in addition to exploring motivation and durability behind the ties.

Notably to add, I'm aware of certain limitations of this work, among them the fact that there are many more examples worth researching to add more nuance to analysis and argument; e.g. relationship between Iran and Palestinian Hamas or Afghan Taliban – both Sunni NSAs, or the (anomalous) case of Qatar, the country very similar by its cultural and

[41] NAU, Henry R., ref. 2, p. 5

religious identity to other Gulf states, yet strongly ostracized by all of them because of its ties with Iran. Consideration of Israel would be needed as well, especially when it comes to political decision-making and strategic military priorities of Iran. Analysis of Iraqi Shiite military and political movements would definitely be very useful, as Iranian influence in Iraq is as strong and significant as it is in Syria and Lebanon.[42] Apart from that and regarding parts that pertain to Sunni and Shia Islamic theologies, this work is not from the realm of Islamic studies; its aim is not to discuss specificities of religious discourse and therefore some of the concepts have been deliberately simplified for brevity.

1.3.1 Literature review

This work is first and foremost using secondary sources – monographies, analytical papers, journal articles and media outputs. Some of the primary sources include government documents and official statements. In the parts pertaining to Salafi movements in Yemen, Shiite repopulation of Syria and other minor parts where information in English was not available, Arabic sources were used. Since I'm tracking relatively recent events from 2015 onwards, I try to incorporate into the research impact of some of the latest developments, e.g. trends in Lebanese general elections, Syrian regime offensive against the opposition groups or impact of JCPOA on Iran. Reflections of this events was not yet sufficiently analyzed in scholarly monographies and articles, which is why policy reports along with reliable media outputs were used quite often. Notably to add, in the chapter on Lebanese Sunnis and Hezbollah, findings from a few personal interviews with pious Lebanese Sunni and Shia Muslims on their religious identity were used as a source material.

Obviously, the most important source in theoretical part of this work is Henry Nau's book *At Home Abroad: Identity and Power in American Foreign Policy* (2002), namely its introductory part and three other theoretical chapters on definition of identity, power and the concepts of their balance. The empirical chapters explain relationship between the US and the rest of the world, but since application of Nau's theory in such constellation of relationships is highly Western-centric and unsuitable for Middle East, the

[42] "Iraq has an outright Shia majority that feels a gravitational pull toward their fellow Shias in Iran and a revulsion for the Sunni minority that backed Hussein's brutal totalitarianism and today tolerates the even more deranged occupation by the Islamic State, also known as ISIS." In TOTTEN, Michael J. The Iran Delusion: A Primer for the Perplexed. *World Affairs Journal* [online]. Summer 2015.

relevance of these chapters for this research is quite limited (see Chapter 1.2.1. on limits of the theory). Importantly, since this theoretical work of Nau is not widely known – he earned his reputation rather by other monographies on American foreign policy – there are only a few reviews available. All of them have been used in this research and all the criticisms have been carefully considered.

Regarding question of national identity in the Middle East, review of available sources shows that Henry Nau's approach is unique in how it views, defines and uses the concept of identity, since, put simply, it is a mild crossover between the realms of international relations and anthropological studies. Usually, overwhelming majority of sources more or less equate national identity with *nationalism* and use this concept in anthropologic or cultural contexts (often referring to linguistic issues), which is not enough for purposes of this work. Sources discussing national identity/nationalism specifically in the Middle East usually include case studies of nations and ethnic groups which either developed very strong sense of national identity (Kurds, Turks, Egyptians) or the exact opposite, i.e. their national identity is weak or fractured (Saudi Arabia, Libya – the identity is rather based on tribal loyalties). Further, when national identity is defined only as nationalism – a category delimited to single nation – its impact cannot be studied in wider regional perspective.

Thus, incorporation of religion and national identity into *religious (national) identity* as devised by Nau's criteria is much more useful concept, not only because religion can be projected on other state and non-state actors, but also because in Saudi Arabia and Iran it is a basic constituting element of national identity. Regarding this issue, i.e. the role of religion in national identity of SA and Iran, a few sources were available that reflect the state of current research.

Generally, number of relevant sources pertaining to Iran is higher. *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Friends or Foes?* (2016) by Banafsheh Keynoush provides synthetic historical overview of Saudi-Iranian relationship, arguing that mutual enmity does not have historical roots in religious causes, and it is only a matter of 20th and 21st century. In later chapters, recent clashes of SA and Iran in the Levant and Gulf are summarized, but they are rather just a chronological account of events without deeper analytical connection to sectarian issues. *Iran in the world: President Rouhani's Foreign Policy* (2016) by Shahram Akbarzadeh and Dara Conduit (eds.) not only provide overview of current Iranian foreign policy towards the West and all the Caucasian and Middle Eastern neighbors, but

especially the chapter on Iranian *bonyads* (religious charity organizations) is very useful when tracking influence of Shiite identity over state and non-state actors. *Security and Bilateral Issues between Iran and Its Arab Neighbors* (2017) by Gawdat Baghat, Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Neil Quilliam is largely realpolitik-based publication on historical and current ties of Iran with its Arab neighbors. *Constructivism, National Identity and Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran* (2012) by Hossein Karimifard is one of two journal articles on constructing Iranian national identity using simple constructivist framework to incorporate Shiite revolutionary rhetoric as well as Persian nationalism, but the article does not connect the findings to wider Middle Eastern context. The same goes for *Between Darius and Khomeini: Exploring Iran's National Identity Problematique* (2015) by Alam Saleh and James Worrall. The article argues that divide exists between Shiite and Persian identity, which creates tensions, but in the end, there was no other option for Iranian regime but to incorporate both. The most important primary source is Ayatullah Ruhollah Khomeini's *Islamic government: Governance of the Jurist (Velāyat-e faqīh)* (1970) as a cornerstone of Iranian government and political thought.

When speaking of Saudi Arabia, the sources are significantly less numerous and overwhelming majority of them deals with the issue of Wahhabism and its link to Jihad and Saudi sponsorship of religious extremism. *Wahhábismus, tribalismus a rentiérismus: přetrvávající principy Saúdského státu?*, a very useful analytic chapter by Anna Vidén in *Význam kmenové společnosti v 21. století* (2015) links Wahhabism to rentierism and tribalism, creating the basis of Saudi religious national identity. *Religion and National Identity in Saudi Arabia* (1998) by Joseph Nevo would be an excellent study for purposes of this work; however, it is very outdated and does not reflect important changes within Saudi society and the wider Middle East that came after 9/11 and the Arab Spring, which makes its use limited. David Commins in *Islam in Saudi Arabia* (2015) elaborates on birth of Wahhabism and its impact on current Saudi state and foreign policy including sponsorship of religious extremism. *Saudi Arabia: Power, Legitimacy and Survival* (2006) by Tim Niblock gives chronological account of the birth of Saudi state, but while Commins dedicates more space to the role of Wahhabism, Niblock focuses on political developments and pragmatic political issues. *Muted Modernists: Struggle over Divine Politics in Saudi Arabia (2016)* by Rasheed Al-Madawi brings forward the very actual question of current struggle between Wahhabism and the need to democratize and modernize the country as well as Saudi religious discourse, which makes this book

particularly interesting in the context of reformist ideas of current Saudi leadership. The primary sources important for understanding current Saudi thought are government documents *Vision 2030* (2016) and *White Paper: Saudi Arabia and the Yemen Conflict* (2017), as they tell us what Saudi Arabia considers a strategic priority and how it wants to be seen in the world.

For three countries considered in this thesis – Lebanon, Syria and Yemen – and the respective state and non-state actors within them, substantial volume of sources had to be searched and filtered to find those few that are relevant for construction of religious identities and their connection to either SA or Iran to see how the identities influence the mutual relationship. From among them, several were especially helpful. *Lebanese Salafis between the Gulf and Europe* (2013) by Zoltan Pall is one of the very few sources on links of Lebanese Salafists to both the Gulf and the Lebanese Sunni political spectrum. The insightful monography is based on the author's field research among Lebanese Salafists. *The Shifts in Hizbullah's Ideology: Religious Ideology, Political Ideology and Political Program* (2006) by Joseph Elie Alagha along with *Identity, War, and Just Cause for War: Hezbollah and Its Use of Force* (2017) by Zafer Kizilkaya explain how Shiite revolutionary identity is important in Hezbollah's role of Iranian proxy in the Levant and how does it contribute to durability of the relationship. The sources on Syria are probably the most numerous, although many are just popularization-based journalistic accounts on the current situation. From among them, *Burning Country: Syrians in the Revolution and War* (2018) by Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila Al-Shami stands out due to its complexity and rich source base including field research, in-depth interviews and Arabic newspaper articles. *Cash is King: Financial Sponsorship and Changing Priorities in the Syrian Civil War* (2017) by Anne Marie Baylouny and Creighton A. Mullins is (despite its somewhat counter-intuitive title) dealing with Saudi financing of Salafist groups in the Syrian Civil War, providing insight into how Salafi religious affiliation can be instrumentalized and how did it contribute to aggravation of the conflict. *The Syrian Muslim Brothers and the Syrian-Iranian Relationship* (2009) by Yvette Talhany is mostly historical account not only on the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, but also on Syrian Alawites and their relationship to Iran and Shia Islam in general; however, it does not take into account events of the Syrian Civil War due to its age. Nadia von Maltzahn's monography *The Syria-Iran Axis: Cultural Diplomacy and International Relations in the Middle East* (2013) provides interesting overview of Iranian religious soft power in Syria, showing how Iran is

exporting its religious identity and manipulating it to attract Sunni and Alawite believers. Finally, sources on Yemen are the least numerous, which also concurs with the commonly held view of Yemeni war being the "forgotten proxy conflict." *Iran's Policy towards the Houthis in Yemen: A Limited Return on a Modest Investment* (2016) by Thomas Juneau is so far the most accurate and complex article on war in Yemen from both Saudi and Iranian perspective, however, it does not dedicate much space to religious identities of all the actors, especially bonds between Yemeni Salafists and SA. *Iran's Political Stance toward Yemen's Ansar Allah Movement: A Constructivist-Based Study* (2016) by Keyhan Barzegar and Seyyed Morteza Kazemi Dinan is useful synthetic account illustrating Iranian position towards the Houthis, however, it is slightly biased towards justification of Iranian action in Yemen. *Salafism in Yemen: Transnationalism and Religious Identity* (2011) by Laurent Bonnefoy is the only book on Yemeni Salafism and its connection to Saudi Arabia available. Largely based on historical accounts and field research, it shows how SA shaped local Salafist movements and thus influenced the functioning of Yemeni state. Importantly, Bonnefoy shows how SA in Yemen acts through informal channels and simple day-to-day interactions.

Lastly, when searching for sources on impact of sectarianism on current geopolitics of the Middle East, three articles provided some inspiration: *Weaponizing Sectarianism in Iraq and Syria* (2017) by Uzi Rabi, *The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry: A Foreign Policy Analysis Approach* (2017) by Usjid U. Hameed and *Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Middle East: Leadership and Sectarianism* (2018) by Diansaei Behzad. Each of them is based upon different theoretical backgrounds and thus provides different points of view, but all of them deal with similar problematique of religion and its role in the conflict and foreign policy using various multifactorial approaches. Therefore, this thesis is similar to these three works in that it tries to connect realist and constructivist factors and apply new prisms through which the system of alliances and enmities can be viewed.

2. Saudi Arabia and Iran – constructing identities

Drawing on Nau's concept of the *American exceptionalism*, which is the one specific feature to which he ascribed importance when forming identity and foreign policy,[43] this chapter shows how identities of both Iran and Saudi Arabia can be constructed with regard to their uniqueness within Middle Eastern space and wide variety of factors influencing identity. Importantly, it is distinguished between national identity in its *inward* and *outward* dimension, because the former is a factor influencing domestic matters and the citizens themselves, while the latter is linked to connection with the Middle East and wider Muslim population. At the same time, the former has direct impact onto the latter; meaning that how the country, its citizens and policymakers view themselves reflects in the way they relate to their neighbors, allies and enemies.

Both countries were founded on the basis of Islamic religious and cultural uniqueness which is used as a source of legitimacy by ruling classes of both countries. Religion is integral and the most important part of national identity in Saudi Arabia and Iran alike. Following chapters explain how political systems incorporate religion to legitimize ruling figures. Sunni and Shia Islam, as they are viewed by fundamentalist clerics of both countries, are in their essence universalist concepts difficult to reconcile with each other. This brings us to the very tricky issue of Sunni and Shia divide. The two branches of Islam have been irreconcilable since the 7th century and it is not uncommon for representatives of both to accuse the other one from heresy and apostasy. However, as Banafsheh Keynoush shows in *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Friends or Foes?* (2016), current rise of sectarianism is not that much a matter of historical issues, but rather the current rivalry. Saudi and Iranian religious national identities are shaped by the fact that both view themselves as regional centers of power, highest religious authorities and supporters of Muslims worldwide.

2.1 Origins of mutual rivalry

First, it is useful to introduce basic factual background of the origins of rivalry between SA and Iran, namely, why is the year 2015 considered a breaking point in some

[43] ROCK, Stephen R. At Home Abroad: Identity and Power in American Foreign Policy by Henry R. Nau. *Political Science Quarterly*. 2002, 117(3), p. 499

respects. Also important is to briefly mention the pragmatic and realpolitik factors that make SA and Iran rivals, which have to do with the concept of balance of power.

Regarding Saudi Arabia, matters in the country took a different direction after 2015 when Muhammad bin Salman (often abbreviated as MBS), son of King Salman ibn Abdulaziz, became the new Minister of Defense and Deputy Crown Prince. MBS became the Crown Prince in 2017, replacing King Salman's brother, Prince Muqrin. Soon he was dubbed the one who holds real power – "iron-fisted regent of his ailing 82-year-old father."[44] This was considered a groundbreaking change in (as Jeffrey Goldberg euphemistically named it) "functionally comatose model of authoritarian monarchism."[45] MBS, who is 33 years old and already in 2015 managed to drag SA into the war in Yemen, would like to be seen as a reformer and in the early beginnings he indeed raised high hopes for change.[46] From the Western perspective, his model of reforms resembles the one of Peter the Great of Russia – the reforms are dictated in top-down manner, the reason of which being conservativeness of the Saudi society. Such reformation is accompanied by imprisonment and persecution of political activists, women's rights advocates, journalists, religious figures and even corrupt members of Saudi royal family.[47] This is somewhat paradoxical, because MBS himself has (in Saudi context) indeed revolutionary views about matters such as women's rights, liberalization of Saudi religious norms and development of education and business projects to reduce Saudi dependence on oil. But, as recent case of murdered journalist Jamal Khashoggi (and many other examples) show, regardless of reformist image, the absolutist nature of the state is not meant to change – at least not anytime soon. Also important are the Crown Prince's ideas on regional politics – the staunch, almost irrational, antagonism towards Iran and its proxies, together with moderately ambivalent stance towards Israel. As Goldberg notes, "if Prince Mohammed actually achieves what he says he wants to achieve, the Middle East will be a changed place."[48] The gravest concerns rest upon lack of Crown Prince's experience and circumspection in relation to war in Yemen as well as to Saudi allies and proxies in the

[44] VICK, Karl. The Saudi Crown Prince Thinks He Can Transform the Middle East. Should We Believe Him?. *TIME* [online]. April 5, 2018.
[45] GOLDBERG, Jeffrey. Saudi Crown Prince: Iran's Supreme Leader 'Makes Hitler Look Good'. *The Atlantic* [online]. April 2, 2018.
[46] MBS even appeared on the cover of TIME magazine, under the title reading "Charm offensive: Should the world buy what the Prince is selling?" in VICK, Karl, ref. 44
[47] EL YAAKOUBI, Aziz. Saudi Arabia arrests two more women's rights activists: rights group. *Reuters* [online]. August 1, 2018; and CHULOV, Martin. How Saudi elite became five-star prisoners at the Riyadh Ritz-Carlton. *The Guardian* [online]. November 6, 2017.
[48] GOLDBERG, Jeffrey, ref. 45

Middle East, as we shall see in later chapters. Long-term planning and strategic vision have never been Saudi strengths.[49] MBS, however, is not the only "hawk" in current Saudi administration – former Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef and Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir strongly endorsed the war in Yemen and advocated for hardline approach against Iran as well.[50]

SA, although being economically much better off than Iran, suffers manifold problems such as budget deficit, dependency on oil industry (the rentier economy), underdevelopment of other sectors, widespread youth unemployment, poor work ethic and, importantly, religious extremism.[51] MBS's reform plan, widely known as *Vision 2030*, is meant to be a blueprint of remedies to all the mentioned problems, although it remains questionable whether the reforms will be successful. Another important feature of SA since 2015 is renewed armament. According to Global Firepower Index, Saudi number of weaponry is currently comparable to Iran, while Saudi manpower and overall population reaches only 1/3 of that of Iran.[52] Additionally, Saudi defense budget is the third biggest in the world, right after the US and China, spending 10% of GDP on military expenditure which is more than allocation for any other government segment.[53] SA, just like Iran, also has ballistic missile program designed to deter regional adversaries; its intermediate range ballistic missiles target primarily Iran and since 2015 also Yemen.[54]

Iranian leadership, on the other hand, consists of politicians relatively well used to Iranian position of a rogue state, which includes maneuvering in proxy conflicts, difficult economic conditions stemming from sanctions-burdened economy and persistently dissatisfied young population. Iranian decision-making is often hindered by split of politicians into factions of conservative hardliners and reformists, which sometimes renders any compromise impossible, or at least very difficult. This began to change – albeit very slowly – during presidency of Hasan Rouhani (2013 – present). One of the greatest accomplishments of Rouhani's administration, widely celebrated by Iranians, was

[49] YEE, Danny. Saudi Arabia: Power, Legitimacy and Survival - Tim Niblock. *Danny Yee's Book Reviews* [online]. February 2008.
[50] ROOPRA, Simrat. Saudi Fears Spur Aggressive New Doctrine. *The Century Foundation* [online]. August 31, 2017.
[51] AL-KHATTEEB, Luay. Saudi Arabia's economic time bomb. *Brookings* [online]. December 30, 2015.
[52] Military power comparison results for the nations of Iran and Saudi Arabia. *Global Firepower Index* [online].
[53] MCCARTHY, Niall. Military Spending Dominates Saudi Arabia's Budget [Infographic]. *Forbes*[online]. October 17, 2018.
[54] COLLINS, Keith and Sergio PEÇANHA. *Only 5 Nations Can Hit Any Place on Earth With a Missile. For Now.* [online]. February 7, 2018.

signature of Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in July 2015.[55] As a result, some of Western economic sanctions were lifted in exchange for suspension and control by IAEA of some of the activities pertaining to Iranian nuclear program, including uranium enrichment and stockpiling. However, already in May 2018, President Trump announced US withdrawal from the deal, sabotaging much of the slight progress that had been achieved so far and citing Iranian meddling into Middle Eastern conflicts as the main reason of withdrawal. As Wendy Sherman of the US negotiating team writes: "The nuclear agreement didn't cover Iran's behavior outside its borders, but the administration was nonetheless making Iran's attempts to disrupt and control the Middle East a phantom term of the deal. […] As bad as Iran's current behavior in the region is, a nuclear-armed Iran would be much worse, since it would be able to act more aggressively and deter the United States and its allies from pushing back."[56] JCPOA indeed helped Iran a lot, but the progress was not reflected on people's stagnant living standards as much as originally promised. High levels of corruption and persisting economic stagnation now cause public unease because it was believed by many that sanctions removal would eliminate the problems.[57] Overall economic markers (and thus living standards) are below those of Saudi Arabia.[58] Such situation is reinforcing general mistrust towards the West. One of the greatest fears is that by abandonment of the deal, Rouhani and the reformist administration will be after the next elections replaced by Ahmadinejad-style political and religious hardliners with uncompromising attitudes in both domestic and foreign matters.

Finally, it is important to remember that from the security point of view, SA is considered a status quo power, whereas Iran is the one trying to revert the existing balance. The defensiveness – and the consequent aggressive policies – stem both from the Saudi need to maintain its position, as well as from Iranian effort to gain better foothold in the region and the tradition of being an outcast of the international politics. The Middle Eastern status quo was interrupted by Iran several times in history: first major change was the Islamic revolution of 1979; then in 2003, pro-Shia government was installed in Iraq and Iran gained potential ideological ally. After 2011 the Arab Spring came and brought power vacuum into the Middle East, in which Iran participated by covert support of Shiite

[55] SHERMAN, Wendy. How We Got the Iran Deal And Why We'll Miss It. *Foreign Affairs* [online]. August 13, 2018.
[56] Ibid.
[57] LAUB, Zachary. The Impact of the Iran Nuclear Agreement. *Council on Foreign Relations* [online]. May 8, 2018.
[58] Islamic Republic of Iran - Overview. *The World Bank* [online]. October 11, 2018.

groups, as in the case of Bahrain or Syria.[59] Finally in 2015, JCPOA provided the much needed economic and political boost for Iranian leadership and marked a new episode in Middle Eastern balance of power. Many analysts agree that as of now, Iran doesn't have the capacity to replace Saudi Arabia as regional power, because it lacks funds and support of global superpowers. There has been a lot of talk about the "Shia Crescent" consisting of states loyal to Iran, although it is still disputable whether Iran can do more than just establish limited influence in countries like Syria, Lebanon or Iraq. Nevertheless, what Iran definitely can do with its limited capacities, is to simply act as a disruptor of Saudi influence in the Middle East via support of proxies, NSAs and various "fifth columns." Notably, the problem of Saudi-Iranian relationship lies in that they both see the situation as a zero-sum game, where gains of the one inevitably mean loss of the other. This implies that if compromise is not reached, both sides will try to balance each other, and as recent developments show, they would not hesitate to drag the entire Middle East into turmoil in the process.[60]

2.2 Saudi religious national identity

When speaking of Saudi national identity, analysis of several elements linked together is needed: first, there is Wahhabism, closely followed by theocracy, absolutism, tribalism and rentier state. Maria Vidén in her article says that Wahhabism, tribalism and rentierism are three basic principles of Saudi state.[61] Altogether, these elements make up Saudi exceptionalism that is manifested in domestic as well as in foreign policy. Religious and tribal identity of the Kingdom is reflected in official titles of the Saudi King: except for being prime minister, he is also *khādim al-haramayn al-sharīfayn* (Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques – Mecca and Medina), *imām al-wahhābīya* (Imam of Wahhabi branch of Islam) and *shaykh al-mashāyikh* (Chief of the tribal chiefs).[62] However, as we shall see in chapter 2.2.1., formulation of Saudi identity is not without problems, especially after 2015

[59] BEAUCHAMP, Zack. Iran and Saudi Arabia's cold war is making the Middle East even more dangerous. *Vox* [online]. March 30, 2015; AL-RASHEED, Madawi. *Muted Modernists: The Struggle Over Divine Politics in Saudi Arabia*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. p. 3
[60] BEAUCHAMP, Zack, ref. 59
[61] VIDÉN, Anna. Wahhábismus, tribalismus a rentiérství: Přetrvávající princípy saúdského státu?. ČERNÝ, Karel, Břetislav TUREČEK a kol. *Význam kmenové společnosti v 21. století*. Praha: NLN a Metropolitan University in Prague Press, 2015. p. 88
[62] NEVO, Joseph. Religion and national identity in Saudi Arabia. *Middle Eastern Studies*. 1998, 34(3), p. 45

and accession of MBS. This is because he is advocating for contradictory trends that are extremely difficult to reconcile.

With small detour to historical background, we can say that Saudi Arabia is a young state – it was created by unification of Arab tribes by later King Abdulaziz ibn Saud only in 1932. Foundations of the Kingdom were laid by offensive raids led by the most powerful tribe of Al Saud – today's ruling dynasty. In principle, to gain ideological backing and to create unifying ideology, Al Saud allied with the tribe of Al Sheikh, who were the descendants of Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab, the founder of Wahhabism. "The uniqueness of the Saudi case relates, *inter alia*, to the fact that the dogmatic background to the Saudi expansion was not some heretical activism, Shiite or Kharijite, but a doctrine stemming from orthodox Sunni Islam."[63] Wahhabi religious philosophy effectively "converted political loyalty into a religious obligation."[64] A Muslim is obliged to swear *bay'a* – an oath of allegiance – to a Muslim ruler, so that he can be redeemed after death. The ruler is then owed unconditional allegiance as long as he rules in agreement with shari'a.[65] "According to the Constitution, the King's authority is derived from the Quran and the Prophet's traditions. Hence, no one can dispute the King's authority."[66]

Up to these days, the legitimacy of Al Saud derives from their promise to rule in accordance with shari'a, but he ruler is only entitled to rule if he upholds Islamic laws and moral principles. The division of power was supposed to work as follows: while Al Saud ruled over the country (as an equivalent of secular power, e.g. various practical administrative and military affairs), they had to do so in agreement with 'ulamā' (religious scholars) of Al Sheikh who were responsible for concordance between King's power and shari'a. Saudi royal family is using Islam as a source of legitimacy; their power is shared with Islamic scholars. "Islam serves as unifying, legitimizing and disciplinary factor."[67]

Under ideal circumstances, such model of government can guarantee continuous and solid basis for absolutist power, but the unconsidered limitations are twofold: first,

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[63] COOK, Michael. The Expansion of the First Saudi State: The Case of Washm. BOSWORTH, Clifford Edmund, Charles ISSAWI, Roger SAVORY a A. L. UDOVITCH, ed. *The Islamic World from Classical to Modern Times: Essays in Honor of Bernard Lewis*. 3rd ed. Princeton: Darwin Press, 1989. p. 661

[64] DOUMATO, Eleanor A. Gender, Monarchy, and National Identity in Saudi Arabia. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*. 1992, 19(1), p. 37

[65] Ibid.

[66] Al Hajjaji dubs the Saudi concept of government "totalitarian Islamic ideology" and asserts that SA is first and foremost absolutist monarchy. In AL HAJJAJI, Shams al Din. Government by Judiciary in Islam: Islamic Theory of Government and Mal/practice of Muslim Governments (Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Morocco). *California Western International Law Journal*. 2018, 48(2), p. 321-322

[67] VIDÉN, Anna, ref. 61, p. 89

what should Saudi dynasty do if opposition arises which is strongly convinced that their rule is *not* in accordance with shari'a? Second, what is the solution to a situation when distancing from religion is the only way that can guarantee economic, social or political progress of the country? Regarding the first problem, Saudis were caught unawares first in 1979, when Juhayman al-'Utaybi seized the the Grand Mosque in Mecca; then also after 9/11 in 2001 and after Riyadh compound bombings in 2003. All these terrorist acts were led and executed by Saudi Islamic extremists convinced that Saudi royal family are, in fact, unjust and hypocrite enemies of Islam.[68] Only after these incidents did Saudi leadership recognize the scope of homegrown Jihadism whose primary target was Saudi government itself. Regarding the second problem, it is in detail discussed in Chapter 2.2.2.

Wahhabism, a sub-branch of Salafism,[69] is a product of austere and primitive settings of Arabian Peninsula deserts where only little education, culture and wealth flourished back in 18th century and long afterwards. These conditions gave birth to retrograde, rigid, purist and (as deemed by Islamic theologians up to these days) intellectually thrifty branch of Islam which is unproductive of sophisticated philosophical thinking, as it is based upon then Bedouin lifestyle.[70] Wahhabism is both a state religion and an essential attribute of Saudi religious national identity.[71] Unfortunately, its dependency on literal interpretations of Sunna and Qur'an, together with the practice of *taqlīd*[72] are irreconcilable with ideas of equality, modernity and progress. Notably, "Al Saud have good reason to retain Wahhabism as the base of their political control as it prevents the development of independent thinking, dangerous to their rule, and has given them the opportunity to develop their ascendancy in the Muslim world. Here Wahhabism has been the product, and financial power the means."[73] Especially in the context of

[68] MEIJER, Roel, ed. *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. p. 10-11

[69] Notably, Salafism and Wahhabism are two different branches of Islam that cannot be equated. Wahhabism is generally considered a "sub-branch" of Salafism and a Saudi state ideology. Both terms are often used in this work, although not interchangeably, because "[Salafi] reformism [was adopted] in Saudi Arabia as Wahhabism and [its importance lies] in the way it has influenced the dissemination of Salafism elsewhere in the world." In MEIJER, Roel, ref. 68, p. 3

[70] ŤUPEK, Pavel. *Salafitský islám*. Praha: Academia, 2015. p. 69-70

[71] NEVO, Joseph, ref. 62, p. 41

[72] *Taqlīd* is an "imitation of the founders of schools of [Islamic] law [*madhabs*]." When used as a way of interpretation of Islamic law, it inherently "does not leave much room for change." In CAVENDISH, Marshall. *Modern Muslim Societies*. Singapore: Cavendish Square, 2011. p. 114

[73] LACKNER, Helen. *A House Built on Sand: A Political Economy of Saudi Arabia*. Reading: Ithaca Press, 1978, p. 217

religious radicalism, "the hegemony of Wahhabiyya is considered conducive to further radicalisation and dogma."[74]

Despite all its shortcomings, Saudi concept of Islamic government and the perceived purity of Islam promoted by Saudis became one of its main assets. With birth of SA, two holiest places of Islam – Mecca and Medina – were suddenly found on Saudi territory. Just as it was in the times of Ottoman caliphs, this official status boosted Saudi position among other Arab and Muslim nations, as SA became the heart of Islam.[75] As Commins accurately notes: "Saudi Arabia holds a special place in the Muslim world, amplified by modern communications [television, the Internet], fostering the identification of Islam's cradle and symbolic spiritual center with the solicitude of Al Saud and the rectitude of Wahhabi clerics."[76] Thus, SA is considered by other as a lighthouse of Islam as practiced by Prophet Muhammad in the 7th century, protector of its purity, center of the most authentic Islamic learning and example to be followed and respected by all Muslim nations.

Islamic identity of the Kingdom is reflected in state administration, judicial system, education, role of women in the society and everyday life.[77] Joseph Nevo in his article says that "[national flag, anthem, state holidays, postage stamps, banknotes, etc.] are [beside cultivating a sense of collectiveness and unification] also designed to preserve and promote Islamic values together with loyalty to the reigning dynasty. They indeed emphasize more the country's association with Islam than its narrow 'national' character."[78] In this context, Commins also notes that important feature of Wahhabism is "how it makes public observance of religious norms a matter of government enforcement rather than individual disposition."[79]

Besides religious dimension, importance of tribalism shouldn't be neglected in the context of Saudi identity. Al Saud are manipulating and diminishing some aspects of tribalism in the name of national unity,[80] but at the same time, their tribal *'asabīyah*[81]

[74] AL-RASHEED, Madawi, ref. 59, p. 2
[75] VIDÉN, Anna, ref. 61, p. 97
[76] COMMINS, David. *Islam in Saudi Arabia*. London: I.B. Tauris & Co., 2015. p. 7
[77] One third of university students allegedly study Islamic sciences. In NEVO, Joseph, ref. 62, p. 36
[78] NEVO, Joseph, ref. 62, p. 48-49
[79] COMMINS, David, ref. 76, p. 2
[80] VIDÉN, Anna, ref. 61, p. 89
[81] Vidén is referring to *'asabīyah* as to "tribal cohesion" and "group solidarity". In more general meaning, it can also mean "social cohesion." In TAUSCH, Arno a Almas HESHMATI. *Asabiyya: Re-Interpreting Value Change in Globalized Societies - Discussion Paper No. 4459*. Bonn: Institute for the Study of Labor, 2009. p. 2; VIDÉN, Anna, ref. 61, p. 89

serves as unifying factor and enabler of Saudi rule, since "tribalism created settings which enabled Al Saud to establish their power."[82] Fast forward to 21st century, we can see that tribalism now doesn't refer to nomadic lifestyle, but it is considered to be a social network of affinity, loyalty and identity[83] that still keeps Saudi tribes interconnected and relatively unified. Besides that, "there is the idea that the Al Su'ud still provides the common element which keeps the country together. The Al Su'ud are portrayed as adept in weaving the different strands of the country together, preventing it from disintegrating."[84] Such image is essential for maintaining loyalty of the citizens.

Another dimension is the economic one, which is important in establishing both inward and outward Saudi identity. It was immense wealth acquired through oil production that enabled Saudi dynasty to coopt Saudi society, re-distribute oil wealth, provide social services, strengthen legitimacy and propagate Wahhabism and Salafism all over the world as a form of religious foreign policy (discussed in Chapter 2.2.1). Rentier state is, by definition, dependent upon oil production and oil export and it is the main source of wealth in the state. "The state is institutionalized as a 'provider of generosity' and motor of national economy,"[85] which essentially means that the state is buying consent of the citizens – a phenomenon known as "rentier social contract."[86] With reference to previous paragraph, it is also possible to talk about *asabiya capitalism*, which is an economic model where "family, kin and tribe [are] bases of key business relationships."[87] Oil is also the "reason for Western interest in the kingdom and the foundation for commercial, diplomatic and strategic relations."[88] Thanks to this, SA never faced worldwide ostracization or burden of heavy sanctions, which enabled it to establish itself in solid position and gain confidence of status quo power.

2.2.1 Saudi Arabia as the global Sunni powerhouse

Now that it's clear what Saudi internal sources of legitimacy and national identity are, we can turn attention on how these elements are reflected in formation of outside

[82] VIDÉN, Anna, ref. 61, p. 91 and 111
[83] Ibid., p. 95
[84] NIBLOCK, Tim. *Saudi Arabia: Power, Legitimacy and Survival*. New York: Routledge, 2006. p. 9
[85] VIDÉN, Anna, ref. 61, p. 98
[86] A Rentier Social Contract: The Saudi Political Economy since 1979. *Middle East Institute* [online]. 2009.
[87] NIBLOCK, Tim and Monica MALIK. *The Political Economy of Saudi Arabia*. New York: Routledge, 2007. p. 152
[88] COMMINS, David, ref. 76, p. 1

Sunni identity. In order to do that, it is needed to focus on what is the position of SA in relation to other Muslim nations and how is such outward image achieved through channels that could be considered "soft power." The central element defining this outward perception is Saudi religious activism. As for the Western perceptions, these are from the realm of much more pragmatic: "The fight against international terrorism, the security of the Gulf region and the crucial pricing of oil are all issues where Saudi Arabia stands at the center of the world stage."[89]

First, Saudis are using strong media presence to amplify their standing as a Sunni regional power. In comparison with Iran, Saudi media empire is huge, controlling influential pan-Arab newspapers, radio stations and TV channels (eg. Al-Hayat, Al Arabiya, Rotana and many more) and having notable impact on Arab audiences. Paul Cochrane sums it up very well: "Saudi establishment has used its deep pockets to influence the region's media and minds. [...] To Saudi Arabia, control is paramount in an era when the media is increasingly pervasive, because Riyadh's political and economic clout – and the survival of the Royal family – depends on the kingdom retaining its position as a leading player in the region's power politics. To retain this balance of power – [...] against an ascendant Iran and non-governmental actors – [...] potentially damning news on the kingdom need to be squashed."[90] This aspect of Saudi power in the Middle East should not be neglected, because first, it helps SA to propagate its position of status quo regional power, and second, it enables the kingdom to work against Iran and its proxies while slanting the public view towards the Saudi ones. Such influence is very useful in shaping public opinion when it comes to Middle Eastern conflicts and overall political situation.

Most importantly though, as will be seen in the chapters pertaining to Saudi proxy allies, Saudi religious national identity is strongly reflected on the outside through *da'wa* – Islamic missionary and proselytizing work, which in the case of SA aims at spreading Wahhabism and Salafism abroad. As Commins notes, "Wahhabism's own roots [are found] in a preaching mission that targeted people it regarded as lapsed believers,"[91] but in general sense, strong proselytizing aspect of Islam is reflected in one of the most important commandments to "enjoin good and forbid evil."[92] Salafi-Wahhabi teachings got radically activist twist especially after 1960, when exiled members of Egyptian and Syrian Muslim

[89] NIBLOCK, Tim, ref. 84, p. i (annotation)
[90] COCHRANE, Paul. *Saudi Arabia's media influence*. Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich, Center for Security Studies, 2018.
[91] COMMINS, David, ref. 76, p. 158
[92] MEIJER, Roel, ref. 68, p. 11-12

Brotherhood were invited to the kingdom to teach at newly established universities.[93] All this was enabled, first and foremost, by oil money. Saudi establishment dedicates enormous sums to Wahhabi da'wa and missionary work on local, regional and global levels, which contributes to radicalization of Saudi society and the entire Middle East as well.[94] Commins writes that "were the perpetuation of Wahhabi authority purely [Saudi] domestic affair, it would matter little to outsiders. But since 1960s the kingdom's rulers have used Wahhabism as an instrument of foreign policy, working through transnational Islamic institutions, private charities and Saudi embassies."[95] Such foreign policy manifested itself as lavish spending on Islamic education, scholarships awarded to foreign students, humanitarian work in conflict areas, charity for poor Muslims, building schools and mosques abroad and, most importantly, support of Islamist and Jihadist activists and militias all around the world. These activities – although many of them laudable and helpful – became extremely problematic, because they often interfered into precarious political causes[96] and often had negative impact on reconciliation efforts. Their influence is often destabilizing, creating tension and insecurity, as "Wahhabism has a long record as a controversial claim to know God's will."[97]

Further, as Joseph Nevo mentions, the idea of *umma* – the panislamist vision of Muslim nation – is notable in Saudi context as well. This is because SA "is a state but not a nation. Using Islam as its source of legitimacy, the nation [umma] is more outside [Saudi] boundaries than inside it'. This concept that Saudi Arabia […] is part of the umma is frequently […] underlined by the regime's spokesmen."[98] Further, Nevo asserts that SA is a "local segment of the greater Islamic umma: 'the private homeland' within the 'wide Islamic homeland'."[99] Such presentation of umma by SA is very useful in relation to the rest of Muslim world, enhancing the idea of SA as a "glue" that holds together all the Sunni Muslims anywhere in the world – be it Egypt, Iraq or Indonesia – giving to Saudis unique position among Muslim countries.

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[93] These personas include Salafist 'ulamā' such as Sheikh Abdulaziz ibn Baz, "Blind Sheikh" Abdurrahman, or Sheikh Nasiruddin al-Albani. Muslim Brotherhood was known for its activist position regarding participation in political life and shaping the society according to the model of shari'a and Islamic morals.
[94] VIDÉN, Anna, ref. 61, p. 99
[95] COMMINS, David, ref. 76, p. 6
[96] The best example of which is Saudi funding of Afghan *mujāhidūn* in the Soviet-Afghan War, and consequent establishment of Al-Qa'ida.
[97] COMMINS, David, ref. 76, p. 159
[98] NEVO, Joseph, ref. 62, p. 35
[99] Ibid., p. 48

Finally, to sum up Saudi identity in relation to the outside world, Saudi Arabia behaves like a self-confident long-standing regional power, leader of the Sunni Muslim world and guarantor of regional stability that is now being threatened by its potentially dangerous neighbor growing stronger. It seems like the Iranian threat has been somehow present in the kingdom already since 1979, but it was only after 2015 its foreign policy decisions started to be more assertive and aggressive; determined to use all available means – be it both hard and soft power – to keep its position in the Middle East vis à vis Iran. Saudi Vision 2030 in its very introduction reads: "The first pillar of our vision is our status as the heart of the Arab and Islamic worlds. We recognize that Allah the Almighty has bestowed on our lands a gift more precious than oil. Our Kingdom is the Land of the Two Holy Mosques, the most sacred sites on earth, and the direction of the Kaaba (Qibla) to which more than a billion Muslims turn at prayer."[100] Saudi religious national identity is reflected to its outward dimension through pan-Islamic ideas of umma and activist da'wa which serve as tools of inspiration and connection with other Sunni nations and NSAs across the Middle East. However, as we shall see, it is not without complications.

2.2.2 Reformulation of religious national identity by Muhammad bin Salman

After 2015, MBS set out to introduce set of reforms known as Vision 2030, part of which is also the "national identity program." This program is supposed to "enhance individuals' national identity on the basis of Islamic and national values,"[101] however, no specifications were given about methods of how to achieve concrete goals. MBS in an interview for *The Atlantic* said that "Saudis don't want to lose their identity, but we want to be part of the global culture. We want to merge our culture with global identity."[102] However, the Crown Prince has chaotic ideas about how to do this: he says that "without establishing a new social contract between citizen and state, economic rehabilitation would fail,"[103] clearly implying that the legitimacy of Al Saud is not anchored in social contract with the citizens, and additional sources of legitimacy are urgently needed apart from

[100] *Vision 2030*. Government of Saudi Arabia, 2016. p. 6
[101] Know the aims of Saudi Arabia's national identity program. *Al Arabiya* [online]. May 1, 2017; A detailed look at Saudi Arabia's 10 programs to achieve Vision 2030. *Al Arabiya* [online]. May 1, 2017.
[102] GOLDBERG, Jeffrey, ref. 45
[103] DOCKX, Pieter-Jan. Saudi foreign policy: emphasising the Arab identity. *The Independent* [online]. March 7, 2018.

religion. Famous reformist Saudi cleric Salman al-'Awda concurred to this view, saying that "The Islamic state is a contractual project between people on the basis of a civil contract (*madani*). The worst repression occurs when authoritarian rulers instrumentalise religion to cover or justify their oppression."[104] Consequently, he was imprisoned by Saudi regime in September 2017.[105]

Yet, to redefine social contract, religious fundamentalism as well as absolutist rule need to be at least partially dismantled, which would place Saudi royal family's power in jeopardy. Especially as for relationship between the Saudi state and Islam, "discredit of one involves delegitimation of the other. Promoting religious faith (or at least outward adherence to its precepts) by the regime is, therefore, a simultaneous self-fostering of its own right to rule."[106] Also, "without the coercive power of the state, religion is in danger, and on the other hand, without the shari'a the state becomes a tyrannical organization."[107] Thus, although MBS claims that "Saudi Arabia is the biggest victim of extremist ideology" and "the practice today [Wahhabism] in a few countries, among them Saudi Arabia, is not the practice of Islam [but] of people who have hijacked Islam after 1979,"[108] liberalization of religious norms would inevitably mean weakening of Al Saud legitimacy to rule, because their rule would no longer be perceived as based on shari'a.

Further, as a reasoning to liberalization of religious policies, MBS offers somewhat distorted interpretation of Saudi history, asserting that the Kingdom was more liberal and the 'ulamā' less rigid back in 1960s and 1970s, but this progress was halted by Juhayman al-'Utaybi incident and Iranian Islamic revolution in 1979, after which the kingdom was radicalized by its own Wahhabi clerics.[109] This is, in fact, far from the truth – it is enough to mention the rebellion of the extremely conservative Ikhwan (Brethren) movement against King Abdulaziz in 1927. It is common though that when advocating for a change, "authoritarian regimes deliberately alter the historical identity of their constituency to cause a break from its own heritage."[110]

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[104] AL-RASHEED, Madawi, ref. 59, p. 83
[105] Al-Awda was recently imprisoned; Saudi public prosecutor is demanding death penalty for "spreading public discord" and "incitement against the ruler." In Saudi 'seeks death penalty' for Muslim scholar Salman al-Awdah. *Al Jazeera* [online]. September 5, 2018.
[106] NEVO, Joseph, ref. 62, p. 46
[107] LAYISH, Aharon. Ulama and Politics in Saudi Arabia. HEPER, Metin a Raphael ISRAELI. *Islam and Politics in the Modem Middle East*. London: Croom Helm, 1984. p. 56
[108] VICK, Karl, ref. 44
[109] WEINSTEIN, Adam. Mohammed bin Salman Isn't Saudi Arabia's First Fake Reformer. *Foreign Policy* [online]. November 1, 2018.
[110] AL-RASHEED, Madawi, ref. 59, p. 81

Finally, the most serious problem is that the logic of MBS is kind of a vicious circle. Simply put, he set out to redefine Saudi national identity, so that it is not dependent solely on religion and provides additional sources of legitimacy. However, the new redefined identity is supposed to be strengthened – again – by *adherence to religion*. Another source of legitimacy is supposed to be somewhat vague "Saudi national identity," but no specifications are given what constitutes such identity. We can only guess whether it is adherence to tribalism, Arabism or allegiance to House of Saud. Also, what is supposed to be the "new and reformed" Islam? Since MBS had many influential reformist Saudi clerics imprisoned[111] and relies on pro-regime Wahhabi ones who uphold the absolutist rule, it is indeed questionable how such a change will come about and how it will be implemented. "The promotion of religion as part of Saudi national values is, *inter alia*, the response by the regime to dangers and challenges of Islamic and non-Islamic factors.[112]

Therefore, the questions to ask are: Will Saudi royal family be able to hold on its power and legitimacy of Sunni global powerhouse if their ties to Islam weaken and political participation of the citizens in political life will still be practically non-existent? In the situation when getting rid of religion means getting rid of one's own identity, how will the new Saudi national identity look like? How it will be perceived by the rest of the Muslim world? How it will be used by SA when fostering relationships with allies that share the same religious identity? In 2005, Doumato and Kéchichian wrote that "The challenge to Saudi rulers in the twenty-first century is to maintain their Islamic identity in the eyes of Saudi Arabia's conservative society, while satisfying a younger population's growing desire for economic and social justice."[113] However, we see that this challenge is alive and unresolved also in 2018, and that more than ever before, because the kingdom now stands on crossroads, facing serious global challenges.

In short, this chapter shows us two essential trends in the way we can view Saudi identity: the first is the traditional narrative of Sunni regional power that is inspiring masses and leading Sunni Muslims everywhere in the world. The second image is the one

[111] Madawi al-Rasheed writes in Introduction of her book *The Muted Modernists* that out of fear from the Saudi regime she had to protect the identity of many Islamic scholars who consented to have their opinions published. "Modernist intellectual trend that promises to deconstruct the religious roots of authoritarian rule is challenging, subversive, and dangerous in the Saudi context." In AL-RASHEED, Madawi, ref. 59, p. 3
[112] NEVO, Joseph, ref. 62, p. 49
[113] DOUMATO, Eleanor A. and Joseph A. KÉCHICHIAN. Saudi Arabia. *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World. Oxford Islamic Studies Online* [online].

of powerful, yet internally conflicted country which is not battling just the "typical" woes of Middle Eastern states – corruption, unemployment, fundamentalism or inequality on all levels – but since ascend of MBS it is essentially struggling to redefine its own identity so that it keeps its image of global Sunni powerhouse, but at the same time keeps pace with the rest of the globalized world. That is difficult because the inherent disposition of Saudi clerical establishment is retrograde and rigid; asserting that the modern world should adapt to Islam, while MBS has in mind the exact opposite. To this we can add domestic and foreign Muslim opposition which claims that Saudi rule is far from Islamic ideal, being just an absolutist monarchy instrumentalizing Islam for worldly purposes. The relevance of all this in the argument is that as we shall see in further chapters, the conflicting views erode traditional narrative of the Sunni powerhouse. Moreover, when Saudis project their religious identity on proxy allies in the Middle East, they do so in haphazard way, without providing unified and unifying narrative, creating chaos and producing unpredictable outcomes. This in turn means that it is difficult (albeit not impossible) to use projection of Saudi religious national identity as a strategic tool to strengthen alliances.

2.3 Iranian identity

Compared to Saudi Arabia, Iran is almost like an embodiment of complete opposite in many aspects. Although Iranian national identity also revolves around religion as legitimizing aspect for state leadership, it is not a tribal society, nor does Iran have Gulf-style rentier model of economy. Pivotal elements of identity in Iran are *velāyat-e faqīh* (the rule of religious clerics as a system of state administration), Iranian nationalism, revolutionary rhetoric and grievance of Shia Muslims toward Sunnis and the West. Although velāyat-e faqīh is a mixed system of governance and it is nowhere near absolutist monarchy, Islamic rules are implemented in totalitarian manner so as to guide and interfere into every aspect of life. With Iranian human rights record and history of botched elections, the country is neither free nor democratic.[114] Alam Saleh defines Iranian/Persian nationalism and Islamist ideology as two main trends within Iranian society,[115] however, it is important to remember that only the latter is reflected on the outside, towards Shiite

[114] SADJADPOUR, Karim. Tracking Iran's Presidential Election. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* [online]. May 8, 2017.
[115] SALEH, Alam and James WORRALL. Between Darius and Khomeini: exploring Iran's national identity problematique. *National Identities*. 2015, 17(1), p. 74

allies and proxies, and it also guides Iranian foreign policy. Iranian economy and political administration are strongly influenced by heavy sanctions and position of Iran as an outcast on the global scene as well as among Sunni Muslim countries. Notably, Iranian national identity in its internal and external dimension is way more unambiguous and consistent compared to the Saudi one, namely in that the Iranian administration is not undercutting basis of its legitimacy – Islam – in the way MBS does so in Saudi Arabia. The clerical establishment apparently understands the need for change, modernization and reconciliation of competing trends, if Iran is to keep its position in the Middle East. As shall be explained, this is possibly also because Shia Islam though in its essence is better suited for reformation towards modernity even if it is conservative.

Shiite historical experience can be characterized as always being on defensive. Historically speaking, since the 7th century, Shia Muslims have always been blamed for divisions in Islamic *umma*, persecuted, dubbed sectarians and accused of worshipping un-Islamic heresy, even more so if they were a minority in Sunni Muslim state where they often suffered pogroms and discrimination.[116] Oftentimes throughout the history, Shia Islam became something akin to "protest ideology" of various dissident movements on peripheries of the Islamic world. For the sake of brevity, I will not delve into details of Shiite dogma and theology, but at least some basic tenets need to be pinpointed in order to explain Sunni antagonism, velāyat-e faqīh as a system of government, and the historical memory of Shiite oppression.

The most important difference between Sunna and Shia lies in year 632, when succession of dying Prophet Muhammad was to be resolved. While Sunnis claimed the Prophet's successor shall be elected from among the Muslim believers, Shiites maintained the successor should be a person from the Prophet's family – *ahl al-bayt*. Religious schism culminated in 680, when Muhammad's grandson Husayn ibn 'Ali was murdered during battle of Karbala. This point is regarded as definitive split between Sunna and Shia, and Shiites consider the battle to be a milestone when their history as a persecuted sect began. Since this point, independent Shiite theological sources, dogmatic teachings and their respective readings were established.[117] Thus, development of Shiite religious thinking and philosophy took different trajectory in comparison with Sunnis. The difference between

[116] TYLER, Mackenzie and Anthony M. BOONE, eds. *Rivalry in the Middle East: Saudi Arabia and Iran*. New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2012. p. vii

[117] For example, Shia Muslims use different collections of hadith and different methodologies for Quranic exegesis that give preference to esoteric interpretations over literal ones.

Shiite and Sunni religious thought is very important, because Shiite doctrines are essential for reasoning of later clerical establishment and political administration. The very first officially Shiite rulers of Persia were Safavids (16th – 18th century), but the lands east of Iraq and Saudi Arabia had been Shiite sanctuary long time before, due to its distance from Sunni centers of power. Safavids empowered the Shiite narratives by force and entrenched them in Persian-Shiite society.[118]

It is not purpose of this work to scrutinize nuances of Islamic jurisprudence, but I will allow myself to pinpoint at least one detail that is very characteristic of the difference between Saudi and Iranian religious thought. As was mentioned in Chapter 2.2 on Saudi identity, Wahhabism has always been extremely conservative in that, basically, to find solutions for modern problems, it always turns to the past, to the times of the Prophet and his companions. Wahhabism encourages *taqlīd*[119] – the practice of literal "imitation of the founders of schools of [Islamic] law [*madhabs*]", which is a method that inherently "does not leave much room for change."[120] Iranian jurisdiction, on the other hand, encourages use of *ijtihād* – a completely opposite approach. Ijtihād mainly refers to use of reason and logic when interpreting sources of Islamic law, and in the Shiite context it denotes a practice of "applying the unchanging general [Islamic] principles to emergent, changing particulars."[121] Iranian clerics also operate within the principle of *maslaha* – i.e. the best public interest of Muslim umma, – when need arises to solve contemporary issues.[122] Therefore, it is quite clear to see that despite both countries are conservative Islamic theocracies, Iran has in theory much more maneuvering space when it comes to modernization, religious-secular compromises and moderation of religious discourse; all that without jeopardizing political power of the religious establishment. Moreover, this means that in the case Iranian leadership decides for liberalization of Islamic rules – as was the trend of recent years during the presidency of Hasan Rouhani, although very slow and careful – it does not undercut roots of its own legitimacy, as it is the case of SA.

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[118] KEYNOUSH, Banafsheh. *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Friends or Foes?*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. p. 3

[119] PELLEGRINO, Chiara. Mohammad Bin Salman and the Invention of Tradition. *Oasis Center*[online]. June 19, 2018.

[120] CAVENDISH, Marshall, ref. 72, p. 114

[121] JANNATI, Muhammad Ibrahim. Ijtihad: Its Meaning, Sources, Beginnings and the Practice of Ra'y. *Al Tawhid Islamic Journal*. Qom, 2003, 5, 6, 7(2-3, 1, 3), p. 77

[122] SOBOTKOVÁ, Veronika. *Velmi moderní Írán: reprodukční technologie a současné islámské právo*. Západočeská univerzita, Plzeň, December 8, 2016. Public lecture on modern medical treatments and biotechnology in Islamic theocracy.

According to Shiite cleric Muhammad Ali Shomali, there are eight Shiite doctrines that are to be observed by Shia Muslims.[123] Two (and the most important in this case) are doctrines of *the imamate* and the doctrine of *al-mahdi*. Put simply, the institution of imamate is a Shiite obligation to maintain society guided by shari'a and Islamic morals after the Prophet's death.[124] This society is to be led by the Imam, who disappeared, but is still alive. Further, doctrine of al-mahdi – the eschatological redeemer – states that the last disappeared Imam will return before the Judgment day to spread justice and Islam to the entire world. In Twelver Shia Islam (*ithnā'asharīya*), which is the most popular in Iran, the twelfth Imam Muhammad al-Mahdi disappeared in 868; since then he is believed to be living in hiding and will only return before the Judgment Day. This period of hiding, which lasts until today, is for Shiites known as the Major occultation.

The importance of the Major occultation, al-mahdi and the imamate leads us to the basic tenet of Velāyat-e faqīh – short political, religious and philosophical treatise (indeed it only has some 100 pages) presented by Ayatullah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1970. Velāyat-e faqīh, often translated as "Governance of Jurist" or "Guardianship of Jurist" laid base for Iranian Islamic revolution and Islamic political order that was established after 1979. The main idea of Khomeini's treatise is that during the period of Major occultation (until return of al-mahdi), the imamate should be guided by Islamic jurists (ar. faqīh, pl. fuqahā') who have such a high degree of knowledge of shari'a and such personal moral integrity they can be considered *mujtahidūn*[125] – the Islamic scholars who are qualified to interpret Qur'an and sunna, and thus propose legislation and guidance for Muslims.[126] "In other words, a strict theocracy was needed in order to create pious individuals ready to live according to the moral code of the Quran."[127]

Khomeini's system is mixed, which means the places are reserved for clerics as well as for secular politicians who are elected by the citizens, but majority of relevant posts wielding real power belongs to religious figures.[128] "Iran exhibits authoritarian characteristics but is in fact a hybrid regime containing both democratic republican and

[123] SHOMALI, Mohammad Ali. *Shi'i Islam: Origins, Faith and Practices*. 2nd ed. London/Qum: ICAS & International Institute for Islamic Studies, 2010. p. 93 and 106
[124] Sunni counterpart to the imamate is the caliphate.
[125] Note that the root basis of Arabic word *mujtahid* is the same as in the word *ijtihād*, clearly denoting their function in leading the state.
[126] IMAM KHOMEINI and Hamid ALGAR. *Governance of the Jurist (Velayat-e Faqeeh): Islamic Government*. Tehran: The Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini's Works. p. 30-35
[127] COHEN, Ronen A., ed. *Identities in Crisis in Iran: Politics, Culture, and Religion*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015. p. 41
[128] AFARY, Janet and Khosrow MOSTOFI. Iran. *Encyclopædia Britannica* [online].

authoritarian features deeply rooted in the particular Iranian polity."[129] While the president is elected and has executive powers (i.e. responsibility for implementation of the Islamic legislation), the most important post of *rahbar-e enqelāb* – leader of the Revolution or the Supreme Leader – is reserved solely for religious figures. Current rahbar Ayatullah Ali Khamenei has extensive powers and strong influence over the military (especially Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corp, IRGC) and the judiciary.[130] Notably, as Saleh writes, "Velayat-e Fagheh [...] has created a legal justification for the current regime, while also providing it with much of its political legitimisation."[131] Importantly, over the years, the system became somewhat "secularized" and more pluralistic in that it is still using strong religious rhetoric, but became more pragmatic in political matters. "Velayat-e Fagheh legality […] slowly distance [sic] itself from its Islamic identity discourse and move [sic] towards gradual reform and institutional change."[132] Such change was necessary for the Iranian leadership in order to stay in power.

That is not only because Iranian population is young and demands reforms, but also because of important role Iranian nationalism plays in the country. As it turned out, social engineering and coercion were "uphill battle" for the regime.[133] Iranian nationalism is the second part of Iranian identity and it something we do not find in SA. Ancient Persian culture based on Zoroastianism pre-dated Islam and shaped Persian society long before and long after Islamic conquests.[134] Important difference also lies in that ancient Persians were living as highly urbanized sedentary society, which gave birth to sophisticated art, science, religious and cultural practices. This gave Iranians sense of belonging to certain sets of ideas and united them as a Persian nation long before the idea of nationalism was brought to the Middle East by Europeans.[135] The ancient heritage survived throughout the ages and it was enthusiastically supported by Pahlavi dynasty who saw in this legacy uniqueness of Iranian nation. Thus, after 1979, even though Khomeini first set out to enforce strictly pan-Islamic rhetoric (including the ideas of umma),[136] the clerical establishment learned soon

[129] BEHNAM, M. Reza. *Cultural Foundations of Iranian Politics*. University of Utah Press: University of Utah Press, 1986. p. 9-13
[130] AFARY, Janet and Khosrow MOSTOFI, ref. 128
[131] SALEH, Alam and James WORRALL, ref. 115, p. 89
[132] Ibid.
[133] COHEN, Ronen A., ref. 127, p. 68
[134] KARIMIFARD, Hossein. Constructivism, National Identity and Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. *Asian Social Science*. Canadian Center of Science and Education, 2012, 8(2), p. 240
[135] TYLER, Mackenzie and Anthony M. BOONE, ref. 116, p. 75
[136] ELHAN, Nail. Banal Nationalism in Iran: Daily Re-Production of National and Religious Identity. *İnsan ve Toplum [Humanity & Society]*. 2016, 6(1), p. 123-4

enough that it was simply not feasible to discourage or even banish pagan, but widely popular Zoroastrian practices such as *Nowruz* (celebration of Persian New Year). Finally, post-revolutionary leadership (especially under Presidents Khatami and Rouhani) managed to merge Iranian nationalism and Islamic identity together, albeit it was not without problems.[137]

Nevertheless, it is still religious Shiite rhetoric that dominates discourse of Iranian national identity in its inward and outward dimension.[138] After the Islamic revolution, "values based on Islamic Shiism became the most important source for creating unity in Iranian society. Therefore, accepted values of the previous regime were constrained or totally rejected. […] during the first decade after the victory of the Islamic Revolution, religious approach became so prevalent that national identity was considered synonymous and equal to religious identity and other aspects of identity were marginalized. […] Establishment of a religious society based on timeless and placeless principles and values of Islamic Sharia is the center of gravity of this discourse."[139] Later, this became especially pronounced during the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013), when "Islamic-Revolutionary nature and identity of the Islamic Republic of Iran determined and defined the meaning of national interests."[140] President Rouhani, on the other hand, has more moderate approach, whereby "realism and preference of national interests over Islamic expediencies should be described as the prevalent discourse"[141] and "according to this view, national identity is a combination of Iranian nationalism and Islamic beliefs."[142] Nail Elhan also speaks of "Iranian Shiism", because the "new policies combined Persian identity and Shiism in a way that made nationalism subservient to the now-dominant Islamic narrative."[143] Such examples also show how important is the role of the President and his position towards religion in determination of Iranian national interests, foreign policy and political climate in the country. That doesn't mean, however, that the President is free to follow the course of his own liking – "like Khatami, the new president [Rouhani] quickly found that there were serious limitations to his power," especially from the

[137] SALEH, Alam and James WORRALL, ref. 115, p. 88
[138] KARIMIFARD, Hossein, ref. 134, p. 245
[139] HAGHGOO, Javad, Zahed GHAFFARI HASHJIN and Mohammad AGHAEI. A Review of the Turnaround in Iranian Foreign Policy during President Hassan Rohani's Administration. *Journal of History, Culture and Art Research*. 2017, 6(3), p. 254
[140] Ibid.
[141] Ibid., p. 255
[142] Ibid., p. 256
[143] ELHAN, Nail, ref. 136, p. 120

conservative members of judiciary.[144] Thus, the discourse is after all still created and dominated by the Shia clerical establishment.[145]

Such religious identity is manifested in similar ways as in the case of SA – not only is the official country name "Islamic republic of Iran", but the Islamic motives are reflected in national anthem, flag bearing the calligraphic inscription "Allah", banknotes and postage stamps decorated by pictures of Khomeini, Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, Palestinian struggle, Mecca and Medina, but also natural sceneries, cultural heritage, martyrs and famous Iranian personalities.[146] Friedland asserts that "religion provides models of authority and imaginations of an ordering power […] When it successfully merges with nationalism within the framework of the nation-state, politics becomes a religion, religion is politicized."[147] All in all, we see that although the idea of nationalism is alien to Islamic mode of governance according to shari'a (as well as tribalism in the case of SA), both can be harnessed for the interests of the proposed Islamic order that legitimizes both Iranian or Saudi clerical establishment and political administration.

As for the state economy, just like SA, Iran is as well dependent on oil exports and the rentier economic model, although to lesser extent. The beneficiaries of the rent mostly include upper political echelons and the military (especially IRGC).[148] In comparison with SA, the rentier social contract and redistribution policies are also present, albeit to lesser degree, including e.g. subsidies on various commodities and food and populist social policies intended to "buy" public benevolence.[149] The leadership often operates within the rhetoric of religious justice and egalitarianism, as it was one of the main *leitmotifs* of the Islamic revolution.[150] All of this created (unfulfilled) expectations of welfare and economic growth within the Iranian society. Since Iranian economy has to face pressures resulting from international isolation, sanctions and widespread corruption, it is often subject to societal unrests and public dissatisfaction to much larger extent than SA. Also, Suzanne Maloney sums it up: "A government whose legitimacy is increasingly contingent upon satisfying popular expectations of development is correspondingly more vulnerable to

[144] COHEN, Ronen A., ref. 127, p. 56
[145] Ibid., p. 43
[146] ELHAN, Nail, ref. 136, p. 129-134
[147] FRIEDLAND, Roger. Money, Sex, and God: The Erotic Logic of Religious Nationalism. *Sociological Theory*. 2002, 20(3), p. 390
[148] JUNEAU, Thomas. Insights into the Future of Iran as a Regional Power. Highlights from the conference of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service. *Government of Canada* [online]. May 4, 2018.
[149] MALONEY, Suzanne. *Iran's Political Economy since the Revolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. p. 7-8
[150] MALONEY, Suzanne, ref. 149, p. 8

economic pressures."[151] Interestingly, in the context of Iranian national identity it is also notable to mention role of the Iranian nuclear program. National economy has been for a long time burdened by sanctions which is why the regime has been trying to build the image of Iran as an autarkic and self-sufficient nation that can survive against all odds. Nuclear technology – a benchmark of global progress – was then meant to represent "the 'excellence' of Iranian scientists' and engineers' competence."[152] Thus, nuclear program acquired strong ideological connotations, since it became a symbol of national progress.

2.3.1 Iran as a global Shiite powerhouse

When it comes to formation of Iranian identity in its outward dimension, just like it was the case of SA, we shall focus on what is the position of Iran in relation to other Middle Eastern states and what are its channels of soft power. Again, the most important element is the Shiite religious activism often paired with various other activist ideologies, such as anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, anti-Sionism and revolutionary zeal. This is done through Iranian Shiite charities, known as *bonyads* (*bonyād* is translated simply as "foundation"). Importantly, we shall not forget the elements of isolation and grievance which are characteristic features as well. Being a long-term outcast of the Middle Eastern politics and the global world order, together with labels such as "arch enemy" and member of the "axis of evil" are not to be neglected when considering formative influences of the national identity.

First and foremost, there is the crucial role of bonyads. Bonyads – just like da'wa missions in SA – are Iranian charities that serve as extremely important tools of Iranian foreign policy and influence; they are a part of Iranian regional strategy in the Middle East. In principle, bonyads are parastatal actors that are financially self-sufficient and partially independent from the state.[153] In the very beginnings they only included religious *awqāf* (ar. sg. *waqf*), i.e. Islamic charity endowments administered by religious institutions that were supposed to finance the poor, religious education, mosques, etc. Over time, they multiplied their assets by seizure of property belonging to "enemies of the Revolution" and

[151] Ibid.
[152] SANADJIAN, Manuchehr. Nuclear fetishism, the fear of the 'Islamic' bomb and national identity in Iran. *Social Identities*. 2008, 14(1), p. 77
[153] JENKINS, William B. Bonyads as Agents and Vehicles of the Islamic Republic's Soft Power. AKBARZADEH, Shahram and Dara CONDUIT. *Iran in the World: President Rouhani's Foreign Policy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 156, 158

began earning profits by investment and establishment of factories and businesses in Iran and abroad.[154] For example, establishment of Hezbollah is a direct result of bonyads' activities in Lebanon. *Bonyād-e Mostaz'afān* (Foundation of the Oppressed) – the most (in)famous and the biggest Iranian bonyad – established itself in production of chemicals (among other things) and later it used these activities as a cover for funding and development of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons.[155]

Bonyads as actors of Iranian influence in the Middle East are, first and foremost, based on common Shiite identity and sense of affinity to oppressed Shia communities, which are "ideationally receptive, 'alike' [and they] identify with Iran."[156] "The Shi'i ideological doctrine prevail [sic] among some elements of the Iranian political elite, particularly religious supervisory bodies and bonyads, and continues as a defining narrative of Iranian foreign policy."[157] Bonyads play extremely important role in those states where Iran wants to gain strategic advantage and their mission there is twofold: their functioning is on one hand similar to the model of Western NGOs (i.e. the main task is to help to the impoverished and oppressed), but they also serve as a soft power support for Iranian hard power in the local conflicts.[158] Notable detail is that, in comparison with SA, their development and funding has strategic systematic long-term vision.[159] This is extremely important, because lack of oversight especially over the endpoint beneficiaries together with lack of long-term strategy and concept for Saudi da'wa missions abroad in the past produced unexpected results which over time got out of control, as spread of terrorism and extremism turned against Saudi patrons and their allies.[160] Interestingly, bonyads have at their disposal less funds than Saudi da'wa missions, but they use this money more efficiently (e.g. provision of microloans for small businesses, capacity building, etc.); thus, their impact on public welfare is greater and so increases also Iranian soft power. William B. Jenkins calls this phenomenon "reputational multiplier effect."[161]

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[154] BERÁNEK, Ondřej a Pavel ŤUPEK. *Dvojí tvář islámské charity*. Brno: Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury, 2008. p. 155-6
[155] Ibid.
[156] JENKINS, William B., ref. 153, p. 161
[157] RAKEL, Eva. Iranian Foreign Policy since the Iranian Islamic Revolution: 1979–2006. PARVIZI AMINEH, Mehdi. *The Greater Middle East in Global Politics: Social Science Perspectives on the Changing Geography of the World Politics*. Leiden: Brill, 2007, p. 149
[158] JENKINS, William B., ref. 153, p. 164, 167
[159] Ibid., p. 155-6
[160] HOKAYEM, Emile. "Assad or we burn the country": Misreading sectarianism and the regime in Syria. *War on the Rocks* [online]. August 24, 2016.
[161] JENKINS, William B., ref. 153, p. 165

Officially, the main objective of bonyads is "export of the Islamic revolution" and help for the oppressed.[162] As for the former, the revolutionary Islamic message is often linked to the hard power activities of IRGC in the conflicts, which are not only financed by the bonyad revenue, but the bonyads themselves are often headed by former military persons.[163] As for the latter, helping the oppressed is a grassroot subject anchored in the Iranian constitution. Article 154 states that "the Islamic Republic of Iran supports the rightful struggle of oppressed people against their oppressors anywhere in the world while completely refraining from any interference in the internal affairs of other nations,"[164] while Article 152 says that "Iran's foreign policy is based on negating any hegemonism and subjugation, preserving full independency and country's territorial integrity, defending rights of all Muslims, lacking of commitment in the face of domineering powers, having peaceful relations with non-combatant states."[165] This is the legal reasoning behind activities of Iran in the Middle East that include not only support for Shiite militias, Hezbollah or Houthis, but also support for Hamas or other anti-western groups. "The Islamic Republic's 'resistance' is anti-imperialist, anti-American, and anti-Zionist."[166] Moreover, such orientation points to the fact that Iran, just like SA is in its foreign policy a proponent of pan-Islamic idea of umma as described by Khomeini, calling for unity of all (but especially the oppressed) Muslims in the entire world and refusing the international order based on nation-states.[167] Such idea is however manifested rather on the outside, since it is in part mutually exclusive with Iranian nationalism.

Being the only Shia Muslim state in the Middle East gave Iran a sense of uniqueness, but such uniqueness can also bear isolation which, as in a vicious circle, brings us again to defensiveness and grievance. This became especially important after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, when the notion of threat was often abused by Ayatollah Khomeini to push forward revolutionary politics, appeals to Shiite unity and the idea that Iran stands alone against many enemies. Until now, Iranian "society [is] confronted with hostile and fearful neighbors and a permanently belligerent relationship with a superpower."[168] Thus, such geopolitical realities are necessarily reflected both on the national identity and

[162] JENKINS, William B., ref. 153, p. 160
[163] BERÁNEK, Ondřej a Pavel ŤUPEK, ref. 154, p. 156
[164] KARIMIFARD, Hossein, ref. 134, p. 243
[165] Ibid., p. 244
[166] JENKINS, William B., ref. 153, p. 160
[167] KARIMIFARD, Hossein, ref. 134, p. 242-3
[168] SALEH, Alam and James WORRALL, ref. 115, p. 74

mindsets that create foreign and domestic policy. From this point of view, it is understandable that Iran has always been trying to strengthen its foothold in the Middle East and to subvert Saudi Arabia as a regional status quo power, which became especially pronounced after beginning of the war in Syria and after signature of JCPOA in 2015. As Haghoo sums it up, "Iran's foreign policy has been fluctuating between two paradigms: first, active isolationism; and second, paradigm of national-interest-based internationalism."[169] All in all, Iranian religious national identity in its outside dimension bears the revolutionary-Islamist hallmark with emphasis on the oppression of (especially) Shiite Muslims and pan-Islamic unity. Such ideological image is a logical result of developments in Iran since 1979, but it is as well deliberately constructed so as to connect with Shiite and anti-Western elements in the Middle East, who, in turn become tools of Iranian foreign policy and security interests.

2.4 Conclusion of Chapter 2

Previous chapters show what are the cornerstones of Iranian and Saudi identities and what makes them different. Religion is the most important part of identity in both countries, and religious differences had been used to foster rivalry, hatred and conflict between SA and Iran themselves as well as between their allies to the point of irreconcilability. But it is not only religion that matters; at a closer look, also historical experience, present status, socio-economic factors and political mindsets differ as well, laying basis to Nau's divergence of identities.

However, one cannot escape the impression that the identities *could* be reconcilable and at least some convergence could be achieved, if the good will existed, as national identity is a constructivist issue. In other words, those matters that now breed competition and rivalry could be used as a basis for cooperation in the case both sides were willing to compromise. Regardless of any other factors, religion is now the biggest source of divergence and contention, but it could be used as a source of convergence. This is because the underlying idea of both Saudi and Iranian national identities lies in that religion is regarded as a source of *legitimacy* as well as source of *values* such as help to Muslims, pan-Islamic solidarity (umma) and theocracy as mode of government. These common

[169] HAGHGOO, Javad, Zahed GHAFFARI HASHJIN and Mohammad AGHAEI, ref. 139, p. 255

points could be used as building blocks of convergence. Also, as Ehteshami notes, "improving the relationship is always possible whenever state's interests prevail over ideological considerations. […] Iran and Saudi Arabia are centers of power in the region, and they represent the sectarian divide in the Islamic world. It is thus their responsibility to find a way out of the deadlock."[170]

Regarding the national identity, there is also one more subject that stands out quite clearly: Iranian identity in its internal and external dimension is more coherent, unambiguous and conceptual in the sense that one does not find in it blatant discrepancies. Clerical establishment managed to integrate Iranian nationalism as a part of national identity, and it does not undermine religion as a source of legitimacy. As shall be seen in the next chapters, this is relevant because, put simply, unambiguous religious national identity – when projected on state and non-state actors – generally outlines strategic goals and provides course of action aimed at achieving them. Saudis, on the other hand, are struggling with this very same issue, which influences relationships with their allies.

This could possibly imply that when looking at identitarian basis of relationships between Iran and its proxies, they will indeed prove to be more durable; thus, more reliable, stable and strategically important. It also implies the opposite, i.e. if the relationships are based on pragmatic interest with only superficial convergence of identities, they would probably erode as soon as realpolitik interests disappear. As a result, such relationships hardly allow for strategic long-term planning, because they lack stability and perspective, but without long-term vision it is difficult to create solid strategic ties. Thus, if identitarian convergence really has such effect on relationship with proxies, it could explain why Saudi Arabia faces problems in maintaining alliances across the Middle East. These suggestions will be explored in Chapter 3.

[170] AL-BADI, Awadh. Saudi-Iranian Relations: A Troubled Trajectory. BAGHAT, Gawdat, Anoushiravan EHTESHAMI a Neil QUILLIAM. *Security and Bilateral Issues between Iran and its Arab Neighbours*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p. 203

3. Saudi Arabia, Iran and their proxies

This part of the work is aiming to review relationships of SA and Iran with six state and non-state actors in three countries that are now considered battlefields of both proxy and conventional wars – Syria, Yemen and Lebanon – in the context of Saudi and Iranian religious national identity as constructed in the previous chapter. Except for being battlefields, these countries share some other characteristics. First, all of them are failed or weak states where central governments do not exercise control over the state territory. Second, the states are divided according to sectarian affiliation, whereby disproportionate amount of power is held by one of the sects. The sect is then abusing its position in various ways, such as personal enrichment, preference of their own sect in certain posts, deliberate neglect and repression of other sects, etc. As a result, characteristic features of all three countries are inequality, grievance and permanent state of unstable peace even if the actual war is absent. In other words, socio-political environment exists that is ideal for spread of discontent and interference of foreign or domestic actors claiming to provide remedy for current situation.

According to Henry Nau's theory, Saudi and Iranian relationship with foreign allied NSAs and governments is hierarchical, that is, they are unequal in power, but converge in identity. Nau also says that the more powerful player is a "centralizing power," i.e. it projects its identity onto less powerful actors to strengthen their mutual relationship. Generally, both SA and Iran do that, albeit in somewhat different ways.

Therefore, the aim of this part is twofold: first, define prevalent religious identities of individual actors, connect them to their sponsor and then explore both their impact on relationship with given regional power as well as on the dynamics of the ongoing conflict. As we shall see, the ways in which Iran and Saudi Arabia use their religious identities to influence foreign actors differ substantially, which subsequently yields distinctive impact on their engagement in the conflict: while Iran is deliberately using its religious identity as a strategic tool to achieve certain (more or less) expectable results, SA is doing so in much more uncontrolled and unpredictable way where complex strategy seems to be insufficient or even lacking altogether, likely producing uncertainty in the future.

3.1 Lebanon

3.1.1 Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah

Hezbollah is by many analysts considered the most powerful non-state actor in the Middle East whose main purpose has been assertion of Iranian interests against Israel. Iranian influence on religious identity of Hezbollah is unquestionable, since Iranian bonyads helped establish the movement and are keeping it alive until now. "Hezbollah today is the crown jewel of the resistance bloc."[171] This statement is no exaggeration. Hezbollah has since its establishment in 1982 evolved from modest guerrilla militia reliant on terrorist tactics into political party consisting of military and civilian wing, which won 15 seats in the latest Lebanese general election (May 2018). Hezbollah in Lebanon operates businesses, owns media, provides schooling and healthcare.[172] Additionally, it conducts military trainings and guarantees safety in some areas where Lebanese armed forces have limited presence. In southern suburbs of Beirut, in Beqa'a valley and in southern Lebanon, yellow posters of Hezbollah martyrs mix with portraits of Khomeini, Khamenei and Iranian flags. In the entire Middle East, there is probably no other proxy NSA that would have such organic and strong link to its patron, both politically and ideologically.[173] Importantly, although there is not much space for elaboration, three important factors influence Hezbollah's actions: first, Hezbollah has always been tied to Syrian regime which serves as a connector and a transfer hub between Iran and Lebanon.[174] "[Hezbollah] wouldn't exist without Iranian money and weapons, nor would it exist without Damascus as the logistics hub that connects them."[175] Second, Israel plays important role as the arch enemy of both Iran and Hezbollah; Iran has financed Hezbollah in all the Lebanese-Israeli wars and conflicts. Hezbollah, on the other hand, often cites Israel as a reason why it will not disarm its military wing. Third, Hezbollah is not the only movement representing Shia Muslims in Lebanon. The other one is more moderate Amal movement (*Harakat Amal*) headed by Speaker of Parliament, Nabih Berri.

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[171] HASHEM, Ali. Iran's Ties to Hezbollah Unchanged. *Al-Monitor* [online]. August 10, 2013.
[172] Hay'at da'm al-muqāwamah al-islāmīyah [Committe for support of the Islamic Resistance]. *Al-muqāwamah al-islāmīyah – Lubnān [the Islamic resistance – Lebanon]* [online].
Hezbollah even operates a military museum and provides western-style internships for volunteers willing to support *muqāwamah* – the Resistance movement.
[173] HOKAYEM, Emile, ref. 160
[174] Together, Iran, Syria and Hezbollah form the so-called "Axis of the Resistance."
[175] TOTTEN, Michael J., ref. 42

The Shiites of Lebanon have traditionally been the most underrepresented, neglected, poorest and the least educated, although they made up about one third of Lebanese population. Before Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), the government was split between Maronite Christians and Sunnis, who prioritized their own sects in all aspects of decision-making.[176] Only after Ta'if agreement of 1989 complicated confessional system of government was established which stipulates that every sect must be represented equally.[177] It was future Amal's leader – Iranian Shiite cleric Musa Sadr – who in the 1960s realized the potential of Lebanese Shiites and emigrated from Iranian city of Qom to southern Lebanon to establish their political and religious representation.[178] Indeed, "what historically [was] a prominent division in Islam has, through political actors in the Shi'a community, awakened a significant polity."[179] After 1975, Sadr was looking for a foreign sponsor who would support Shiite Amal movement in the civil war. Temporarily, he found a helping hand in Iran. However, in 1979 the Islamic Revolution came, and the new Iranian leadership deemed Amal too moderate.[180] That is why Iranians decided to support radical splinter group of Amal, which was later named "Hezbollah" – party of God. Hezbollah was initially funded and trained by 1500 IRGC members dispatched to Beqa'a with the help of Iranian ambassador to Damascus, Ali Akbar Mohtashemi-Pur[181] and IRGC General Hossein Deghgan.[182] Jonathan Matusitz asserts that "Hezbollah's brand is a tool that serves to accomplish the Shia battle plan designed by the government of Iran and [IRGC] since 1979: global Islamic conquest,"[183] thus saying that in essence, religious identity of Hezbollah and its patron is the same.

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[176] MATAR, Dina a Farah DAKHLALLAH. What It Means to Be Shiite in Lebanon: Al Manar and the Imagined Community of Resistance. *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*. 2006, 3(2), p. 23

[177] According to educated guesses, each sect now constitutes approximately 1/3 of Lebanese population. This statement cannot be backed by evidence because the last census was conducted in 1932. It is mostly Christians who are afraid that the census might reveal their numbers are in fact lower, which could limit their power – Christians are currently allocated half of the seats in the parliament. In Lebanon's political system leads to paralysis and corruption. *The Economist* [online]. August 19, 2018.

[178] MATAR, Dina a Farah DAKHLALLAH, ref. 176, p. 23

[179] CHILDS, Steven. From Identity to Militancy: The Shi'a of Hezbollah. *Comparative Strategy*. 2011, 30(4), p. 369

[180] KRÁTKÝ, Ondřej. *Blízkovýchodní internacionála: Milníky šíitské aktivizace ve 20. století*. Brno: Václav Klemm, 2013. p. 199

[181] HAMZEH, Ahmad Nizar. Lebanon's Hizbullah: From Islamic Revolution to Parliamentary Acommodation. *Third World Quarterly*. 1993, 14(2), p. 322

[182] AKBARZADEH, Shahram and Dara CONDUIT. Charting a New Course? Testing Rouhani's Foreign Policy Agency in the Iran–Syria Relationship. AKBARZADEH, Shahram and Dara CONDUIT, ed. *Iran in the World: President Rouhani's Foreign Policy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 141

[183] MATUSITZ, Jonathan. Brand management in terrorism: the case of Hezbollah. *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism*. 2018, 13(1), p. 1-2 and 13. For example, Hezbollah's logo is identical to the one of IRGC – a raised hand with AK-47.

Hezbollah had its initial religious ideology drafted by Sheikh Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah and in its very beginnings, it endorsed Iranian revolutionary rhetoric in almost all its aspects: appeal to fight the "Sionist entity", the West and its allies, commitment to stand for the poor and the oppressed, adherence to pious and difficult life of a guerrilla *mujāhid*, and, necessarily, promotion of the Revolution, including *velāyat-e faqīh*, need to implement Islam into all aspects of life and rejection of the Lebanese state.[184] Iranian culture of jihad and martyrdom became popular[185] in the context or armed fight against Israel and Christian militias; namely, this culture is rooted in the Shia Islam and the stories of battle at Karbala. However, in 1990s, when Hasan Nasrallah became Secretary General of the party, the question arose whether Hezbollah as a religious-military resistance movement should participate in politics in accordance with the Ta'if agreement and what should be its future strategy.[186]

Therefore, to succeed, Hezbollah had to redirect its rhetoric from Israel as the foreign arch enemy to domestic political scene. In 2006, after Israel formally ended occupation of Lebanon, Hasan Nasrallah called for *mumāna'ah* – non-military resistance at the political level.[187] "The State of Resistance" became the new political program of Hezbollah.[188] Further, to attract supporters, Hezbollah's rhetoric had to change to accommodate needs of Lebanese Shiite electorate who are due to historical developments and European influence much less conservative and much more cosmopolitan than Iranians. Gradually, emphasis on the Islamic revolution faded, as did calls for establishment of *velayāt-e faqīh* and the Islamic state. Hezbollah – just like Lebanese Salafists – realized that Shiites in Lebanon are but one of three most important minorities, and thus any such visions were simply unfeasible and utopian. In 2009, *al-wathīqah al-siyāsīyah* – "The Political Document" – was issued. This document is the current official political program of the party, in which Hasan Nasrallah explains why Hezbollah advocates for consensus democracy.[189] He states that the movement shall now assume the

[184] ALAGHA, Joseph Elie. *The Shifts in Hizbullah's Ideology: Religious Ideology, Political Ideology and Political Program*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press / ISIM dissertations, 2006. p. 112-114; HAMZEH, Ahmad Nizar, ref. 8, p. 323; MEIER, Daniel. (B)ordering South of Lebanon: Hizbullah's Identity Building Strategy. *Journal of Borderlands Studies*. 2015, 30(1), p. 99
[185] ALAGHA, Joseph Elie, ref. 184, p. 105-107; MEIER, Daniel, ref. 184, p. 104
[186] HAMZEH, Ahmad Nizar, ref. 8, p. 321
[187] Arabic word *muqāwamah* refers to armed resistance, while *mumāna'ah* literally means "being in opposition."
[188] MEIER, Daniel, ref. 184, p. 105
[189] Naṣr Allāh yu'linu al-wathīqah al-siyāsīyah al-jadīdah li-Hizb Allāh [Nasrallah announces the new political document of Hezbollah]. *BBC Arabic* [online]. November 30, 2009

role of "defensive and deterrent force."[190] Hezbollah is not a group of religious fanatics as some assume; it is, in fact, very pragmatic force, its realpolitik and political expediency being based on the Islamic principle of *maslaha* (common interest or public good), just like it is practiced in Iran.[191]

Over the course of Hezbollah's existence, the position of Shiites within Lebanese politics and public spaces has played an important role. Dina Matar in her study explores that existence of Hezbollah gave them voice – finally, after decades of Sunni and Maronite hegemony. Shiite religious festivals, such as 'Ashūrā'[192], became visible by broadcasting on Al Manar TV owned by Hezbollah. Shiites were also given unified identity of the resistance against "the other" which merged with religious identity and became inseparable.[193] "To adhere to the resistance cause is a personal choice and a religious duty (*fard*) that a Shi'i Muslim should do, as long as he acknowledges the guidance of the jurisprudent [velāyat-e faqīh]." Shia Islam as propagated by Hezbollah called everybody to join the resistance; thus, religious collective consciousness (*al-hāla al-islāmīya*) was created.[194] Such rhetoric is why Hezbollah, its members and supporters until today call themselves simply *al-muqāwama* – the Resistance. All this undeniably helped Shiite communities to organize and establish themselves in assertive way, and it has also helped Hezbollah increase its influence.

The problem is, however, that such policies deepen sectarian rifts; a trend that is always dangerous in Lebanon.[195] Although Hezbollah claims it is a party for all the Lebanese – and indeed, Maronites, including President Michel Aoun, are Hezbollah's allies – it is not really reflected in practical life. This is because historically, Hezbollah is inseparably tied to Shiite religious identity. For example, after 2006 war with Israel, the heavily politicized post-war reconstruction was funded mainly by the Gulf states and Iran. Hezbollah's NGO called *Jihād al-binā'* ("Construction effort") rebuilt southern suburbs of Beirut and the south of the country, while Saudi companies erected skyscrapers in business

[190] MEIER, Daniel, ref. 184, p. 105
[191] ALAGHA, Joseph Elie, ref. 184, p. 187-188
[192] Shiite religious festival commemorating death of Husayn ibn 'Ali, grandson of Prophet Muhammad, who was killed at Karbala.
[193] MATAR, Dina a Farah DAKHLALLAH, ref. 176, p. 38-39
[194] MEIER, Daniel, ref. 184, p. 101
[195] One of fellow Lebanese students of political science put it very pertinently: "The biggest problem with Hezbollah is that they are neither trying to build the state, nor promote unity. They are only working for their own people because as their philosophy goes, nobody [neither Christians, nor Sunnis] helped them in the time of need, so why should they care now?"

heart of Lebanon – Beirut's Downtown, and reconstructed mostly Sunni areas.[196] Although Hezbollah's schools, hospitals and social services are open to everybody, and indeed many impoverished Sunnis and Christians live in Shiite areas because the cost of living is cheaper, all the Sunni and Maronite Lebanese I interviewed on this topic said that Hezbollah, just like any other party or sect in Lebanon, "naturally, prioritizes their own." Joseph Alagha in his book conducts brilliant analysis of the political program of Hezbollah, which includes the policy of *infitāh* – "opening oneself" to other sects through dialogue and tolerance,[197] "lebanonisation" of the party and socio-economic charitable activities,[198] but in Lebanon, old sectarian habits die hard. Notably, as Simon Haddad shows in his study of Hezbollah electorate, its supporters are almost exclusively highly religious, educated middle-class Shia Muslims, who approve of Hezbollah's armed action.[199] This means that attempts to attract other constituents and so gain more legitimacy might be difficult in the future.[200]

This brings us to another issue, and that is the conflict between the role of Hezbollah as a national agent versus the one of Iranian proxy. Namely, as President Bush noted, "Hezbollah is often more responsive to the needs of its foreign patrons than to those of its Lebanese supporters [on which it depends just like on Iran]."[201] "[Hezbollah has] conflicting roles as Iran's surrogate and, at the same time, the chief representative of Lebanon's Shiites."[202] The problems appeared especially after Iranian involvement in the Syrian Civil War, as the military deployment is extremely costly and Iranian-Hezbollah funds are being redirected from their Lebanese support base to upholding al-Assad's regime. Of course, Hezbollah was over time able to establish international financial networks and schemes, in addition to its domestic businesses, but the sources are not

[196] HAMIEH, Christine S. and Roger MACGINTY. A very political reconstruction: governance and reconstruction in Lebanon after the 2006 war. *Disasters*. 2010, 34(S1), p. 106-109
[197] ALAGHA, Joseph Elie, ref. 184, p. 157-159
[198] Ibid., p. 165-171
[199] HADDAD, Simon. The Origins of Popular Support for Lebanon's Hezbollah. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*. 2006, 29(1), p. 22 and 31-32
[200] "Beirut's archbishop, Paul Matar, received [Hezbollah delegation] over the Christmas holiday. He described the meeting as polite and formal, much like any of the other meetings he regularly holds with Hezbollah leaders. 'It's all just to have a better image.'" In GEORGE, Susannah. This Is Not Your Father's Hezbollah. *Foreign Policy* [online]. January 15, 2015.
[201] BYMAN, Daniel L. Syria and Iran: What's Behind the Enduring Alliance?. *The Brookings Institution* [online]. July 19, 2006.
[202] BLANFORD, Nicholas. Lebanon: The Shiite Dimension. *Wilson Center* [online]. August 27, 2015.

unlimited, and the financing is constrained by sanctions. Besides, just like any other party in Lebanon, Hezbollah is not immune to corruption within their own ranks.[203]

As for Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian Civil War, the most significant losses were not counted in money, but in the number of casualties (currently around 1200-1400 fatalities[204]). Although Iran has sent to Syria IRGC forces, *Artesh* (regular army) and *Basīj* (army volunteers), the brunt of fighting was born by Hezbollah.[205] By 2015, urgent need arose to recruit new fighters from among Lebanese Shiites. Various incentives – such as $2000 salary and free education for children – meant there was no shortage of volunteers.[206] The war was by Hasan Nasrallah framed as "existential threat" for Shiites by Sunni extremists (ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra), as Lebanese Shiite areas experienced surge in terrorist activity between 2014-2016.[207] As the narrative went, Hezbollah is protecting Lebanon from spillover of Sunni extremism, which is why it was "preemptively" deployed in Syria as well as on the north-eastern Lebanese border.[208] Hezbollah did not deliberately seek to spark sectarian tensions, but it aggravated the situation anyway, as it appealed on Shiite religious identity and Lebanese security in the context of Sunni extremism as a way of recruitment as well as justification for military action and high number of casualties.[209] This, however, did not erase the bitter feeling of many Lebanese, namely that they are being exploited to fight someone else's war.[210] However, in the Syrian Civil War Hezbollah not only managed to spread Shiite identity abroad, but also gained valuable new military skills. As a force previously trained only in guerrilla tactics, Hezbollah has now learned how to fight urban warfare, use heavy artillery, cooperate with Russian air force and with other Shiite militias.[211]

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[203] GEORGE, Susannah, ref. 200

[204] ALFONEH, Ali. The Heavy Price of Lebanese Hezbollah's Military Engagement in Syria. *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington* [online]. October 11, 2018; TAHERI, Amir. Exclusive: Why Iran's Intervention in Syria Proved so Costly. *ALSHARQ AL-AWSAT* [online]. March 14, 2018.

[205] KAM, Ephraim. Iranian Military Intervention in Syria: A New Approach. *Strategic Assessment*. 2017, 20(2), p. 11

[206] Suffering Heavy Losses in Syria, Hezbollah Entices New Recruits With Money and Perks. *Haaretz* [online]. The Associated Press. December 19, 2015.

[207] Ibid.; SHERLOCK, Ruth. Syria: Hizbollah recruitment surge as sectarian conflict spreads. *The Telegraph* [online]. March 2, 2014.
Members of Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS set up bases in the northeast of Lebanon, at Arsal and Hermel. Joint operations of the Lebanese Armed Forces and Hezbollah swept them out only in 2017.

[208] SHERLOCK, Ruth, ref. 207; KIZILKAYA, Zafer. Identity, War, and Just Cause for War: Hezbollah and Its Use of Force. *Mediterranean Quarterly*. 2017, 28(2), p. 103

[209] KIZILKAYA, Zafer, ref. 208, p. 95-6

[210] KAM, Ephraim, ref. 205, p. 11

[211] BYMAN, Daniel L. Another war in Lebanon?. *The Brookings Institution* [online]. September 7, 2018.

Interestingly, Hezbollah possesses high degree of autonomy, when it comes to its local administration and decision-making in Lebanon, although the expectation would be the opposite, as Hasan Nasrallah was appointed to his post directly by Ali Khamenei and Hezbollah is known to coordinate its actions with Iran. "Hizbullah's relations with Iran do not dictate limitations on its domestic, regional, and international agendas and policies. Domestically this commitment does not hinder Hizbullah's *infitah* […]"[212] Hezbollah also does not interfere into Iranian domestic affairs. Thus, the relationship is – except for being ideological and strategic[213] – also quite flexible.

To conclude, Hezbollah indeed may be considered the crown jewel of the Resistance. First, the movement under Hasan Nasrallah proved remarkable ability to manipulate and transform its core religious ideology depending on changing circumstances so as to garner as much support as possible. It is not unusual that resistance movements (e.g. in Palestine) fail in transition from militia group to legitimate political subject, but that is not the case of Hezbollah. Second, Hezbollah proved to be indispensable and capable military force able to push forward Iranian agenda in Lebanese conflict with Israel and in the Syrian civil war. For this purpose, it used the Shiite religious identity to create powerful mobilizing narratives. Third, Hezbollah is not just a pragmatic proxy and sympathetic ally, it is first and foremost Iranian ideological creation in Lebanon. This ensures extremely high degrees of religious and identitarian convergence, resulting in almost absolute ideological compatibility and shared goals, although interestingly, Lebanese Shiites are different from the Iranian ones. Such identity is, however, also a limiting factor – namely, it will take a lot of time and effort to garner support of non-Shia Lebanese. Anyhow, Hezbollah and Iran are now interdependent – the former needs funding and support, while the latter needs a reliable proxy agent that would effectively fortify Iranian influence in the Levant and advocate for Iranian foreign policy agenda.

3.1.2 Saudi Arabia, Saad Hariri and Lebanese Salafists

The issue of Sunni Muslims in Lebanon and their links to Saudi Arabia is very intriguing, because they are usually overshadowed by (much more sensational) Hezbollah and its brotherly ties with Iran. Indeed, there is not really much talk in the Western media

[212] ALAGHA, Joseph Elie, ref. 184, p. 175
[213] Ibid., p. 174

about currently complicated relationship between Saudis and the Sunni part of the Lebanese government represented by the persona of Prime Minister Saad Hariri. First and foremost, the usual assumption is that religious identity has very little impact on decision-making of the Hariri clan, because their ties to Saudis are historically mostly economic and pragmatic. Since Lebanon has a confessional system of government,[214] we indeed find only superficial identitarian convergence between SA on one hand and the Hariri clan and secular Sunni Muslims on the other. However, Saudis still found in Lebanon their target group, namely Lebanese Salafists and official Lebanese Sunni institutions, such as Dar al-fatwa. Thus, Saudi export of Salafism may not have direct impact on the state policies and decision-making, but Saudi informal relations and religious soft power in Lebanon is not negligible, which in turn influences dynamism of the sectarian conflicts in Lebanon and Syria. In addition, this topic remains largely understudied because of general lack of attention and scarcity of sources.

Historically speaking, Saudi influence in Lebanon can be traced back to 1950s, however, it became truly prominent only during and after the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990). Saudis played important role of a mediator in the conflict, which is why the famous Ta'if accords took its name from Saudi city of Ta'if.[215] Rafiq Hariri, then-rising Lebanese Sunni politician and later Prime Minister, was known for his familial ties to Saudi royal family. As a Saudi protégé, he gained unique economic advantages and created business bonds between Lebanese Sunni elite and Saudi Arabia.[216] Lively trade and investment exchange ensued which gave him and his Sunni supporters even more economic and political power. This came to halt in February 2005 after Rafiq's assassination, allegedly by Hezbollah.[217] Until 2005, Saudis enjoyed unparalleled influence in Lebanon but after Hariri's death, their domination began to dwindle, although they had been investing enormous sums of money to support Rafiq's son, Saad, to keep him at power as a Prime Minister and Saudi ally.[218] For Saudis, the matters only got worse after the 2006 war with Israel when Hezbollah was able to effectively solidify its position in Lebanon and since

[214] Ta'if accords stipulate that in the confessional system, the President must be Maronite Christian, the Prime Minister Sunni Muslim and the Speaker of Parliament Shia Muslim. Seats are then allocated according to sectarian quotas; half of them belongs to Christians and the other half to Muslims.
[215] JABBOUR, Ramy. Saudi Policy in Lebanon in Review. *Middle Eastern Institute for Research & Strategic Studies (MEIRSS)* [online]. November 15, 2016.
[216] Ibid.
[217] FATTAH, Hassan M. Beirut Car Bomb Kills Ex-Premier; Stability at Risk. *The New York Times*[online]. February 15, 2005.
[218] GADE, Tine. *Lebanon: Political leadership confronted by Salafist ideology*. Paris: Fondation pour la recherche stratégique, 2017. p. 6-7

then it only grew stronger. 2006 was a major breaking point for Lebanese Sunnis, especially Salafists, because they started to feel threatened by the Shiite "conspiracy" to dominate Lebanon and sectarian rifts between both sides deepened.[219]

Until 2015, Saad Hariri was able to become prime minister only once, which obviously did not make his Saudi patrons happy, especially in the light of their huge financial support. Hariri spent several years in exile in Paris and he was gradually losing support while the rest of Lebanese government was mired in chaos and repeated crises.[220] However, the most important breaking point came in 2015. The new Saudi leadership decided their Lebanese Sunni proxies were not doing their job – i.e. confronting Hezbollah on behalf of SA – and Saudi money are being wasted. It was announced that the "Kingdom conducted a full review of its relationship with the Republic of Lebanon in a manner that correlates to its stances and safeguards its interests."[221] The first warning step towards Saudi policy change was cancellation in 2016 of $4 billion grant in equipment and money to Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and Internal Security Forces (ISF), since suspicions kept mounting about tacit cooperation between LAF and Hezbollah.[222] Further, Saudi leadership demanded that Gebran Bassil – the head of Maronite Christian Free Patriotic Movement party and current Foreign Minister – publicly endorses Saudi statement

[219] PALL, Zoltan. *Lebanese Salafis between the Gulf and Europe: Development, Fractionalization and Transnational Networks of Salafism in Lebanon*. Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam / Forum, 2013. p. 55

[220] Lebanese confessional system, often described as "consensus democracy," is dependent on consensus of all the government parties. However, due to high number of actors with vested interests, foreign influence, sectarianism and corruption it is often not possible to reach the consensus, which is why the Lebanese government is often dysfunctional, unable to govern the country and functioning in somewhat provisional *ad hoc* arrangements. There is no space to elaborate on countless complicated government crises and disputes since 2006, but among many the most notable are tenure of Fouad Siniora (2005-2009) who for the first time included Hezbollah in the government; the signature of the memorandum of understanding between Maronite Free Patriotic Movement and Hezbollah (2006); occupation of West Beirut by Hezbollah and Sunni Mustaqbal militia (2008); election of Hezbollah-backed Najib Miqati as a Prime Minister (2009-2011); 2-year crisis preceding election of Michel Aoun for President (2014-2016); non-existence of state budget and current inability to form the government since May 2018, when the last general elections were held. In Hezbollah-backed Najib Mikati appointed Lebanese PM. *BBC* [online]. January 25, 2011; Lebanon's political system leads to paralysis and corruption. *The Economist* [online]. August 19, 2018; Why Lebanon has not passed a budget for 12 years. *The Economist* [online]. March 28, 2017.

[221] KHALED, Hanan. Saudi Arabia halts $4B in Lebanon security grants. *The Daily Star Lebanon* [online]. February 19, 2016.

[222] There is no direct proof of cooperation between LAF and Hezbollah, but indications exist that at tactical level – such as during counter-terrorist sweep in the town of Arsal in summer 2017 – coordination and intelligence-sharing was necessary for success of the operation. With the threat of spillover of the Syrian Civil War, poorly equipped and underfunded LAF found themselves stretched so thin that assistance of Hezbollah was crucial for securing Lebanese borders. In BEN SOLOMON, Ariel. Saudis pulling money from Lebanon is a sign country is lost to Hezbollah. *Jerusalem Post* [online]. February 25, 2016; WILLIAMS, Lauren. Lebanon's Sunnis alienated by army actions. *Al Jazeera* [online]. March 19, 2014; Targeting Hezbollah, Saudi Arabia Suspends Lebanon Military Aid. *Middle East Policy Council* [online].

accusing Iran of sponsoring terrorism and ends all dialogue with Hezbollah in order to stop its engagement in the Syrian Civil War.[223]

Then, in the infamous incident in November 2017, Saad Hariri was summoned to Riyadh for "consultations." Soon afterwards, he announced his resignation on the Saudi-sponsored Al Arabiya TV, citing fear for his life and Iranian meddling in Lebanese affairs.[224] Unofficially though, many observers agree that the new Saudi leadership was not satisfied with Hariri's performance as a Prime Minister, as Saudi Arabia was by that time increasingly losing ground to Iran in Yemen and Syria. Therefore, Hariri was to be replaced, yet nobody knows how and what should have been the result.[225] Finally, after Hariri's return to Beirut, he agreed that Lebanon will officially endorse policy of dissociation from any local conflicts. In February 2018 Hariri met with Saudi envoy Nizar al-Alula in apparently friendly atmosphere and spoke of "fostering fraternity and brotherly relations" and "liberation of Lebanon and the region from Iranian hegemony."[226] Despite that, there had been also other statements indicating that for Saudis, Lebanon is already considered lost to Iran.[227] Saudi minister Thamer al-Sabhan said that he "no longer distinguishes between the group [Hezbollah] and Lebanese government."[228] Saudi position however omits two essential details, namely that Hezbollah has in the meantime grown so politically and militarily influential that it is no longer possible to simply ignore it, and that Hariri's government has zero influence on Hezbollah's actions abroad.

Regarding Sunni religious identity in Lebanon, we need to remember that Lebanese Muslims are the most secular-minded in the entire Middle East, which is given by the colonial history and tradition of coexistence with other sects.[229] Although sectarianism is rife, when it comes to confessional system of government, it is not possible to draft policies that would give in to religious considerations of any of the sects. Historically, Lebanese Sunnis have always been proponents of Arab nationalism, thus staying distant

[223] KHALED, Hanan, ref. 221
[224] Lebanese PM Hariri resigns, stresses 'Iran's hands will be cut off'. In: *YouTube* [online]. Al Arabiya English. November 4, 2017.
[225] Interestingly, the precariousness of such situation was recognized by Iran, Hezbollah and its Lebanese Christian allies, namely President Michel Aoun, who decided not to accept Hariri's resignation. Iranians harshly criticized Saudi actions and refused the resignation as well, as they had no interest in escalating the situation. In Lebanese PM Saad Hariri resigns citing Iranian meddling. *Al Jazeera* [online]. November 4, 2017.
[226] AL JASHI, Mohammad. Saudi-Lebanese ties, Palestine in focus. *Gulf News* [online]. March 7, 2018.
[227] BEN SOLOMON, Ariel, ref. 222
[228] KHASHOGGI, Jamal. Saudi Arabia is creating a total mess in Lebanon. *The Washington Post*[online]. November 13, 2017.
[229] WIKE, Richard a Juliana MENASCE HOROWITZ. Lebanon's Muslims: Relatively Secular and Pro-Christian. *Pew Research Center* [online]. July 26, 2006.

from Salafi pan-Islamist movement which only appeared in Lebanon in 1990s. The most religious Sunnis, among them many quietist and Jihadi Salafists, live especially in Tripoli and Sidon, the birthplace of Saad Hariri, where many Palestinian refugee camps are located (currently inhabited not only by Palestinians, but also Syrians and the Lebanese). Another point which distinguishes Lebanon from other Muslim countries is that Sunni Islam has rather communal than institutionalized nature. This means that although (often dysfunctional) Dar al-fatwa[230] – official state body for administration of Sunni legal affairs[231] – exists under auspices of Sunni *'ulamā'* and Sunni political leaders (*zu'amā'*), networks of influence and financing are largely informal. Lebanese newspaper al-Nahar asserts that 90% of Lebanese mosques are registered with the state,[232] but according to interviews with a few Lebanese Sunnis, they are still financed and run independently. Many are managed by local Sheikhs, some of them Salafi and some Sufi, who have their own sources of financing.[233] Often, they administer religious endowments (*awqāf*) and are given *zakāt* and *sadaqa* charity money by local communities, especially by local *zu'amā*' whom they support in return. They usually have personal contacts to charities in Saudi Arabia or elsewhere in the Gulf. The same goes for Quranic schools and Islamic education.

When speaking about Saudi influence in partisan politics, important thing to keep in mind is the actual functioning of Lebanese political system, whereby various sects are supported mostly by respective sectarian constituency and corresponding foreign sponsor.[234] As Ben Hubbard writes, "in the country's sect-based political system, most major parties rely on foreign powers for funding, with the expectation that the parties will then advance the interests of their international backers."[235] This holds for Hezbollah and Iran, as well as for SA and Saad Hariri's party *Mustaqbal* ("Future"). Mustaqbal party has been for long time financed by Saudis, and it is loosely connected to Lebanese Sunni

[230] LEFÈVRE, Raphaël. The Sociopolitical Undercurrent of Lebanon's Salafi Militancy. *Carnegie Middle East Center* [online]. March 27, 2018.
[231] "Dar al-Fatwa is a government institution that was created in 1922 and charged with issuing legal rulings specific to the Sunni community, administering religious schools, and overseeing mosques." In LEFÈVRE, Raphaël. Lebanon's Dar al-Fatwa and the Search for Moderation. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* [online]. January 5, 2015.
[232] Tasā'ulāt 'amlāhā ikhtilāt al-dīnī bi-l-siyāsī man hiya al-jihat al-latī tushrifu 'alā binā' al-masājid wa ri'āyatihā? [Questions coming with mixing of the religious and the political – who is the authority which oversees building and maintenance of the mosques?]. *Al-nahar* [online]. July 26, 2013.
[233] One of the informants said "the Sheikhs always drive the best cars," implying that although they are not financed by the state, they are not poor.
[234] CAMMET, Melani and Sukriti ISSAR. Bricks and Mortar Clientelism: Sectarianism and the Logics of Welfare Allocation in Lebanon. *World Politics*. 2010, 62(3), p. 382-383,
[235] HUBBARD, Ben and Hwaida SAAD. Lebanese Premier's Return Does Little to Resolve Issues That Set Off a Crisis. *The New York Times* [online]. November 26, 2017.

clerical establishment – such as Dar al-fatwa – which is also partially funded by Saudis.[236] Therefore, although upper Sunni echelons of the Lebanese government are secular and religious identity plays almost no role in their decision-making, they are connected via Saudi-funded institutions and individuals to Sunni electorate. "The religious domain of the Sunni community [is] dominated by the 'ulama, who belonged to Dar al-fatwa, which in turn was mostly subservient to powerful Sunni political masters."[237] These institutions and individual religious persons are then via their religious authority encouraging Sunnis to support Mustaqbal, especially before elections.[238]

Obviously, it would be a mistake to omit the issue of Lebanese Salafists who are concentrated mainly in the north and in the Palestinian refugee camps, where Lebanese security forces have no access and jurisdiction.[239] Salafists can be viewed as an entity completely (financially and ideologically) separated from state religious establishment of Dar al-fatwa,[240] functioning upon largely informal and personal ties, which is the point where unofficial Saudi support gets into play. Salafism is not native to Lebanon; it was imported by Lebanese Salafi 'ulamā' who attended the Islamic University of Medina in 1980s.[241] These scholars then established various shari'a institutes especially in northern Lebanon. Generally speaking, history and present of Salafists in Lebanon is shaped by the fact that Sunnis are but one of three biggest minorities. Salafists had to adjust to such conditions in which they face repression from the state security forces as well as from Hezbollah, whom they dub "Party of Satan."[242] The crackdown on Salafists has been especially harsh since the beginning of Syrian civil war due to fear of homegrown terrorism.[243] It is true that as of 2017, only about 900 Lebanese joined the ranks of Salafi

[236] LEFÈVRE, Raphaël, ref. 231
[237] PALL, Zoltan, ref. 219, p. 41
[238] MONIQUET, Claude. *The Involvement of Salafism/Wahhabism in the Support and Supply of Arms to Rebel Groups Around the World - Study*. Brussels: European Parliament - Directorate-General for External Policies of the Union, 2013, p. 12; Saida's Salafist strongman. *NOW* [online]. March 13, 2012.
[239] Therefore, the Palestinian camps are often used as a refuge by Lebanese criminals and religious extremists, which makes them especially dangerous to enter. In GADE, Tine, ref. 218, p. 12; MERHEJ, Sandrella. Na'm Dā'ish qādimah ilā Lubnān [Yes, Daesh is coming to Lebanon]. *ELNASHRA* [online]. March 29, 2017.
[240] Al-Salafīyūn, kayfa wa limādhā wafada fikruhum ilā Lubnān? [The Salafists, why and how arrived their ideas to Lebanon?]. *Al Mayadeen* [online]. September 1, 2015.
[241] GADE, Tine, ref. 218, p. 4
[242] RABIL, Robert G. *Salafism in Lebanon: From Apoliticism to Transnational Jihadism*. Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2014. p. 225-6
[243] BROWN, L. Carl. Kingdom Without Borders: Saudi Arabia's Political, Religious, and Media Frontiers; Religion and Politics in Saudi Arabia: Wahhabism and the State by Madawi Al-Rasheed, ed., Mohammed Ayoob and Hasan Kosebalaban, eds. - Reviews. *Foreign Affairs* [online]. May/June 2009; WILLIAMS, Lauren, ref. 222

Jihadist organizations in Iraq or Syria, which is less than some European countries of similar population size;[244] however, this may be caused by the Jihadists' intent to use Lebanon only as a transit area and "training ground for international jihad" due to local operational constraints.[245] There are also claims according to which Hariri's Mustaqbal with Saudi backing facilitated support of Syrian opposition and provided tacit political and security cover especially for anti-Asad Salafists.[246]

Saad Hariri and his Sunni supporters have never been particularly eager to overtly establish close and ties with Salafists[247] and their relationship could be regarded just as "marriage of convenience."[248] However, since the financial links are decentralized and informal, many Salafi sheikhs and local *'ulamā'* endorsed Hariri in the elections anyway, either because they are on the paycheck of the local Mustaqbal *zu'amā'*, or because of their positive stance towards participation in politics. Many Salafists (both quietist and *harakī* – activist ones) advocate for religious opinion that Lebanon is a country where the Islamic state cannot be established just yet because Sunnis do not constitute majority of population, which is why every Sunni should support the lesser evil – that is, Mustaqbal and the Hariri family – who at least represent Sunnis in the government and lobby for their interests.[249] However, many are still disillusioned by Hariri's neglect and call for individual action; as Robert Rabil sums it up, "Salafists […] resent the present political and military balance of power in Lebanon, which they consider favors Hezbollah and its allies, thanks no less to Hezbollah's weapons than to Hariri's weakness as a political leader. Sheikh Salem al-Rafi'i asserted, 'Hariri does not really act to check the power of Hezbollah, and he does not allow us to do so, but we will soon act regardless of Hariri and his party's position.'"[250]

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[244] GADE, Tine, ref. 218, p. 8

[245] Allegedly, fighters of Jabhat al-Nusra were being trained in Palestinian refugee camp 'Ayn al-hilwe, which is a centre of Lebanese Salafi Jihadists. In GADE, Tine, ref. 218, p. 5-6; MERHEJ, Sandrella, ref. 239; RABĪ', 'Abd al-Hādī. «Al-salafīyah» fī Lubnān, mawlūd mushawwah min rahim al-inkisārāt al-'arabīyah [Salafism in Lebanon, an offspring borne by Arab fractionalism]. *Al-marji' [The Resource]* [online]. August 25, 2018.

[246] This wouldn't be the first time when secular Mustaqbal supported armed Jihadi-Salafi groups. In 2008, during Hezbollah's occupation of West Beirut, "Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia, played a significant role in encouraging Hariri and his Future Movement to allow Salafists to regroup into armed units as a counterweight to [Hezbollah]." In RABIL, Robert G., ref. 242, p. 204-205 and 218-219

[247] RABIL, Robert. Salafism in Lebanon. *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy* [online]. February 20, 2015.

[248] RABIL, Robert G., ref. 242, p. 198-199

[249] "If we don't participate in the [electoral] campaign and the voting, we open the door to the enemies of Islam." In PALL, Zoltan, ref. 219, p. 36, 58-59, 60

[250] RABIL, Robert G., ref. 242, p. 222

Thus, this is in line with the fact that in Lebanon, "Salafist ideology can be largely credited to the absence of the State."[251]

As for the Salafi financing, it increased rapidly after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, so as to counter the influence of Hezbollah. One of the most important sponsors used to be Saudi *Mu'assassat al-haramayn*, later infamously linked to financing of terrorism.[252] "Salafi preachers are often associated with Saudi Arabia and are even regarded as the country's agents (which is often true, since many of them receive material support from the kingdom)."[253] Salafi mosques are mostly funded by wealthy individuals or by independent charities with unclear sponsorship;[254] since recently, Salafi Saudi-backed charity NGOs began to provide support to Syrian refugees in the north, which they consider a form of proselytization.[255] Informal networks are based on personal connections of those Lebanese Salafists who studied in SA or went there for pilgrimage, and were able to establish friendly relations with local donors and state-financed clerical establishment.[256]

Apparently, as media outlet Al-Monitor implied in the article written in 2016, also some semi-official links between Salafists and Saudis do exist: "Saudi ambassador [to Lebanon] Asiri called on Sunni cells to organize meetings in the Palestinian camps, […] where Palestinian factions announced a state of alert in southern Lebanon, Beirut and the north, to prepare for any action that may be required of them against the Lebanese government's policy and any potential armed deployment of Hezbollah."[257] Raphael Lefevre also mentions Saudis as the "main funder" of unspecified Salafi militias as a part of proxy war against Iran."[258] There is no detailed information on cooperation of any Saudi officials and Lebanese-Palestinian militia, however, it is very improbable the relationship between them would be similar in quality to the one between Iran and Hezbollah.

In short, we can see that Saudi support to Lebanese Sunni proxies is both formal and informal. While the formal one is based on ties with Sunni part of the government and it deals almost solely with pragmatic and economic interests, the informal is based on support of ideologically affiliated moderate and radical Sunni Salafi groups, and thus on

[251] GADE, Tine, ref. 218, p. 5
[252] PALL, Zoltan, ref. 219, p. 44 and 51
[253] Ibid., p. 43
[254] There are about 6000 independent Islamic charities in Lebanon. In PALL, Zoltan, ref. 219, p. 32
[255] LEFÈVRE, Raphaël, ref. 230
[256] PALL, Zoltan, ref. 219, p. 52-54 and 67
[257] GHANEM, Esperance. Is the Saudi, Lebanese Relationship Gone for Good?. *Al-Monitor* [online]. March 3, 2016.
[258] LEFÈVRE, Raphaël, ref. 230

strong convergence of religious identity. These groups, financed largely by Saudi and Gulf donors, have notable ability to influence their followers' support for pro-Saudi policies of Saad Hariri. However, such form of support is by Saudis not used in a targeted manner; it is rather just an uncontrolled informal network, although it has a big potential due to ability of Salafists to reach extended base of Sunni followers in Lebanon[259] and due to such conditions of many local Sunnis (impoverished locals and refugees living in the camps and in neglected areas such as Tripoli) that create favorable environments for proselytizing work. Lebanese Salafists are since beginning of the Syrian Civil War framing the conflict as an attack of Shiites on Sunnis, saying that "Saudi Arabia is the last standing wall against the expansion of the Iranian project."[260] Thus, their radicalization is visible and their role of opposition against Hezbollah's actions is not negligible. In other words, if SA wanted to assert their interests in Lebanon in systematic manner, Salafi organizations could act as a backbone for mobilization. However, for now it seems like this opportunity remains sidelined and Saad Hariri did not meet Saudi expectations with regard to forwarding Saudi interests in Lebanon, which is why the kingdom considers Lebanon lost to Iran.

3.2 Syria

3.2.1 Iran and Bashar al-Assad's regime

Syria is the only state ally of Iran in the Middle East and at the same time it is a country where crucial strategic interests of Iran lie due to its closeness to Lebanese Hezbollah. Interestingly, we can observe here strong convergence of identity – only not that much of the religious one, because Syria is a secular state. However, as we shall see, that doesn't mean religious identity is not important in the Iranian involvement with Syria. The strategic partnership of both governments has been for long based on "Neither East, nor West" philosophy, anti-Sionist, anti-Western and anti-Saudi sentiments, as both countries form the "Axis of Resistance" against Israel.

The partnership between Syria and Iran began after ascension to power of Hafez al-Asad and grew much stronger after the Islamic Revolution. Syria stood by Iran in the war

[259] PALL, Zoltan, ref. 219, p. 99
[260] AL-DUHAYBĪ, Janā. Sunnah Lubnān bi-mīzān al-quwwa wa al-du'f wa al-'atab 'alā al-Su'ūdīyah [Lebanese Sunni Islam in the balance of power and weakness, and the reproach to Saudi Arabia]. *Al Modon Online* [online]. November 2, 2018.

with Iraq (1980-88), during the period of President Khatami's détente, after 2003 US invasion to Iraq and the subsequent nuclear dispute. The partnership was sometimes instrumental, but the strategic importance of Syria for Iran lies in its closeness to Hezbollah, the most important Iranian proxy. Mutual closeness is reinforced by the fact that both countries do not have many friends on the international stage, which means their alliance is primarily defensive, and, as Goodarzi notes, defensive alliances with limited objectives are in general more durable.[261] Notably, foreign relations towards Syria are since 2014 largely controlled by IRGC, not by President Rouhani, which is why IRGC's involvement in Syria increased after 2015.[262] As for the Syrian Civil War, it is now generally acknowledged fact that Iran and Russia have kept al-Assad's regime alive since 2015 when his defeat seemed imminent.

As for the religious identity of the Syrian Alawites, Syrian leadership is known to belong to Alawite sect which is now considered a part of Shia Islam. "The alliance [between Shiites and Alawites] has been cemented with a measure of religious and ideological affinity: Syria's Alawite leadership was acknowledged as Shia by the Lebanese-Iranian Shiite cleric Musa Sadr in the 1970s, and important Shia shrines and memorials are located in Damascus."[263] As their name indicates, Alawites derive their religious practices from exaggerated veneration of Ali ibn Abi Talib, the son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad, and the very first imam from among the twelve recognized by Twelver Shia Islam. Alawites are endogamous community and they are every secretive of their teachings and beliefs which they do not reveal due to fear of persecution (the practice known as *taqīya*).[264] Alawite faith allegedly incorporates elements from gnostic, Christian and Druze religious practices,[265] for which they were often dubbed "heretic Nusayris," *ghulāt* (religious extremists) and were said to not belong neither to Sunna nor Shia.[266]

One is inclined to say that acceptance of Alawites by "mainstream" Twelver Shiites just served Iranian interests in Syria in hope to create something along the lines of common

[261] GOODARZI, Jubin M. Syria and Iran: Alliance Cooperation in a Changing Regional Environment. *Ortadoğu Etütleri [Middle Eastern Studies]*. 2013, 4(2), p. 35
[262] AKBARZADEH, Shahram and Dara CONDUIT, ref. 182, p. 134
[263] The History of Iran in Syria. *Israel Defence Forces* [online]; BATATU, Hanna. Syria's Muslim Brethren. *Middle East Research & Information Project (MERIP)*. 1982, 12(110), p. 20
[264] TALHAMY, Yvette. The Syrian Muslim Brothers and the Syrian-Iranian Relationship. *The Middle East Journal*. 2009, 63(4), p. 562
[265] ARAKELOVA, Victoria. Book Reviews: Yaron Friedman, The Nuṣayrī-'Alawī Religion: An Introduction to the Religion, History and Identity of the Leading Minority in Syria. *Iran and the Caucasus*. 2011, (15), p. 319
[266] TALHAMY, Yvette, ref. 264, p. 561-2

Shiite identity and bringing both countries closer, because Alawites were recognized as Shiite by Iranian cleric Musa Sadr only in 1970.[267] Around this year, Iranian Shiite clerics began to establish Iranian influence in the Levant as leaders of local Shiite communities.[268] This claim could be supported by "declaration of identity reform" in 2016 by Syrian Alawite religious leadership in which they distance themselves from Shia Islam and demand to be recognized as separate sect,[269] indicating that they do not consider themselves an organic part of Shia Islam. Also, Daniel L. Byman asserts that "some Shiite religious leaders have bolstered the Damascus regime by claiming that the Alawites are simply part of the larger Shiite family."[270]

Indeed, neither members of the Syrian regime nor mainstream Alawites are not known for ostentatious public displays of faith, nor they were accepted by some mainstream (Iranian, Lebanese) Shiites as Muslims. Besides, Syria has always been proponent of Arab nationalism and secularism; ideologically, it is miles away from Iranian Islamic theocracy. Therefore, it seems like Iran did what it could to integrate Syrian Alawites into the wider Shia "family" to create a kind of ideological backing and the sense of common belonging, and the Alawite regime complied actively. However, Nadia von Maltzahn's study on cultural diplomacy and soft power in relationship between Iran and Syria shows that Syria has since ever remained rather indifferent to building of religious ties. Iran, on the other hand was very active, building cultural and Islamic centers in Syria.[271] "Iran considers its cultural diplomacy work successful since it emphasised precisely the identity the Islamic Republic wanted to construct."[272] This, again, concurs to the view that it is mainly the patron that tries to project its identity on less powerful proxies and so entrench its power in the country.

Alawites only make up about 12% of Syrian population, which is why the regime has always endorsed secularism; however, regardless of proclaimed secularism of the regime, the most important positions of power have always been reserved for Alawites. This especially pertains to Syrian military: "Although they are a minority, Alawites hold most political positions and disproportionately fill the ranks of military commanders and

[267] The History of Iran in Syria. *Israel Defence Forces* [online].
[268] KRÁTKÝ, Ondřej, ref. 180, p. 185-193
[269] WYATT, Caroline. Syrian Alawites distance themselves from Assad. *BBC* [online]. April 3, 2016
[270] BYMAN, Daniel L., ref. 201
[271] VON MALTZAHN, Nadia. *The Syria-Iran Axis: Cultural Diplomacy and International Relations in the Middle East*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2013. p. 210
[272] Ibid., p. 211

security chiefs. […] Over 90% of Syria's military officers are Alawite. [...] In contrast, military rank-and-file are largely Sunni conscripts."[273] "As the rank-and-file of the army crumbled because of defections, Alawites rushed to join newly created sectarian militias."[274] Syrian minister of defense Ali Abdullah Ayyoub, all of the elite units and most of diplomatic corps of the Foreign Ministry are Alawite as well.[275] "Though the Alawites represent a small proportion of the country overall, they hold key regime positions, dominate the police, and supply the main fighting forces who have been defending the regime since 2011."[276] Thus, although many researchers claim that the conflict cannot be sectarian, because the regime is secular, it is in fact the very opposite. Emile Hokayem, a senior scholar of Levantine and Gulf affairs says it is wrong to mistake "cross-confessionalism for non-sectarianism and secularism. […] Cross-confessionalism is the overt, sophisticated display of religious tolerance even as political structures are sectarianized, [which] serves the purpose of obfuscating the underlying issues."[277] Similar phenomenon can be observed also in Lebanon and to some degree in Yemen.

According to recent information, it would be a bit superficial to claim that the Iranian ties to Syria are now just about the anti-Western and anti-Sionist alliance in addition to loose connections with Alawite religious leadership. It was in the beginning of 2017 when information appeared that Syrian government together with Iran is trying to repopulate formerly Sunni territories by Shiite Muslims from Iran and Iraq.[278] Similarly, the notorious Law No. 10 (passed in May 2018) will lead to confiscation of property mostly in former Sunni opposition areas; these will be then most probably repopulated by regime loyalists, that is, mostly Alawites and Shia Muslims.[279] "Iran is now installing

[273] ERICKSON NEPSTAD, Sharon. Mutiny and nonviolence in the Arab Spring: Exploring military defections and loyalty in Egypt, Bahrain, and Syria. *Journal of Peace Research*. 2013, 50(3), p. 344
[274] DAGHER, Sam. The Families Who Sacrificed Everything for Assad. *The Atlantic* [online]. April 12, 2018.
[275] LISTER, Charles and Dominic NELSON. All the President's Militias: Assad's Militiafication of Syria. *Middle East Institute* [online]. December 14, 2017; LANDIS, Joshua. The Syrian Uprising of 2011: Why the Asad Regime Is Likely to Survive to 2013. *Middle East Policy*. 2012, 29(1), p. 93
[276] DAGHER, Sam, ref. 274
[277] HOKAYEM, Emile, ref. 160
[278] CHULOV, Martin. Iran repopulates Syria with Shia Muslims to help tighten regime's control. *The Guardian* [online]. January 14, 2017.
[279] Law No. 10 stipulates that refugees and IDPs must come back to Syria to claim their property and provide proof of ownership. The problem is, opposition members cannot come back due to persecution, and many property registries have been destroyed either on purpose by the regime or during the war, rendering identification impossible. In HAUGBOLLE, Sune. Law No. 10: Property, Lawfare, and New Social Order in Syria. *Syria Untold* [online]. July 28, 2018; FISK, Robert. Syria's new housing law is a veiled attempt to displace tens of thousands of refugees – but even that won't help the regime win the war. *The Independent* [online]. May 31, 2018.

loyalist Shia in areas around Shia shrines and surrounding Damascus, mainly the areas leading to Lebanon, so that Iran can secure a contiguous route for Hezbollah. Residents of Damascus are speaking more and more about wealthy Shia buying properties in the city."[280] Arabic sources confirm that Shiite repopulation is happening in the strip of territory from Damascus to Homs; Sunnis are evicted by Shiite militias and replaced by Iranians, mostly IRGC relatives and supporters.[281] All this is happening with approval of the regime, the official reasoning being "protection of holy Shiite shrines."[282] Thus, it seems like post-war reconstruction in Syria has except economic and political dimensions also the sectarian one, namely, that via social engineering, large numbers of Shiite settlers will buttress Syrian regime and its allies, in this case Iranian-backed militias and Hezbollah. Such repopulating schemes were initially proposed by Iranian leadership in order to gain more direct control in Syria and to enhance stability of al-Assad's regime in those territories Iran deems important for its foreign interests.[283]

Such actions tell volumes about how religious identity is by Iran considered integral part of loyalty and alliance. Labib al-Nahas, the chief of foreign relations of Ahrar al-Sham (one of Islamist opposition groups) claims that "Full sectarian segregation is at the heart of the Iranian project in Syria. They are looking for geographical zones that they can fully dominate and influence. [...] This is not just altering the demographic balance. This is altering the balance of influence in all of these areas and across Syria itself. […] War with Iran is becoming an identity war. They [Iran] want a country in their likeness, serving their interests." Emile Hokayem also notes that "Iran and Hezbollah are not in Syria purely because of power politics: Both are drivers of sectarianism, not of the genocidal type as ISIL, but of the hegemonic one."[284]

This also pertains to the military affairs: while domestic Syrian Shiite militias only count as many as 10 thousand fighters, Iran-backed Shiite militias, such as Liwa al-Baqir, Liwa Dhulfiqar or Badr Organization in Syria are a force counting from 30 to 70 thousand

[280] SINJAB, Lina. Iran Is Building a New Source of Shia Influence Inside Syria. *Chatham House - The Royal Institute of International Affairs* [online]. November 2017.
[281] Khāss "Īlāf": bi-l-asmā' – tawtīn īrānīyīn shī'ah fī manātiq sunnah fī Sūriyā [Only in Elaph: with names – settlement of Shiite Iranians on Sunni territories in Syria]. *Elaph* [online]. November 18, 2018.
[282] ASADZADE, Peyman. Iran's involvement in Syria is costly. Here's why most Iranians still support it. *The Washington Post* [online]. October 19, 2017; AL-FURĀTĪ, Amīn. Baldah Sayyidah Zaynab – hal bātat mustawtanah īrānīyah? [The village of Sayyeda Zeinab – did it become an Iranian settlement?]. *Al Jazeera* [online]. February 2, 2016.
[283] CHULOV, Martin, ref. 278
[284] HOKAYEM, Emile, ref. 160

troops, incorporating Shiite foreign fighters from Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and Afghanistan.[285] They are organized according to the model of Lebanese Hezbollah and are taking orders solely from IRGC and Hezbollah commanders.[286] Importantly, these militias also have ideological agenda, since Iranian Shiite clerics are dispatched along with them, and they "demonstrate wide-ranging interests in transnational Shia ideology, economic activities, diplomacy, and politics. In particular, they indoctrinate recruits into the Iranian regime's ideology of *velayat-e faqih*, [...] often repeat propaganda straight from Tehran."[287] Since Iran-backed militias (along with Russian forces) became indispensable part of the decimated Syrian army, they now possess significant influence over its decision-making and actions.[288] Already in 2015, the famous Iranian general Qasem Soleimani proclaimed that "we are witnessing export of the Islamic revolution throughout the region."[289] In the long run, these militias may threaten Syrian stability, as they will most probably not yield their power willingly.

Therefore, it seems like even though the convergence of identities between Iran and Syria is based on anti-Western and anti-Sionist tendencies, with Iranian active involvement since 2015 the Shiite religious element became much more pronounced through presence of Hezbollah and Iran-backed "ideologically like-minded militias"[290] who significantly altered course of the war and are until now keeping the regime afloat. It is evident that for Iran, Syria is crucial strategic partner, while at the same time Syrian regime is not able to survive without Iranian and Russian support. Iranian actions – both in the past and now – demonstrate that Iran is not planning to leave Syria anytime soon. Iranians apparently understand very well that the key to long-lasting, reliable alliance lies not only in pragmatic considerations, but also in common religious identity and natural mutual affinity. Because of that, they simply decided to *create* and *import* the desired religious identity so as to create at least partial identitarian convergence. This was visible first in the acceptance of secular Alawites by Iranian Shia already in 1970, and then in current

[285] RAFIZADEH, Majid. Iran's Forces Outnumber Assad's in Syria. *Gatestone Institute - International Policy Council* [online]. November 24, 2016.
[286] SMYTH, Philip. How Iran Is Building Its Syrian Hezbollah. *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy* [online]. March 8, 2016.
[287] SMYTH, Philip. Iran Is Outpacing Assad for Control of Syria's Shia Militias. *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy* [online]. April 12, 2018; RAFIZADEH, Majid, ref. 285
[288] BĀKĪR, ʻAlī Husayn. Tawtīn nufūdh Īrān dākhila jaysh al-Asad [Establishment of Iranian influence in the Asad army]. *SyriaTV* [online]. September 4, 2018; RAFIZADEH, Majid, ref. 285
[289] AKBARZADEH, Shahram and Dara CONDUIT, ref. 182, p. 147
[290] SOLOMON, Erika a Najmeh BOZORGMEHR. Iran faces uphill battle to profit from its role in Syria war. *Financial Times* [online]. February 13, 2018.

ongoing inconspicuous settlement of Shia Muslims – be it civilians or militants – into strategic locations. It remains to be seen what such demographic change will bring in the future, but for Iran it is certainly a good way of cementing its influence in Syria.

3.2.2 Saudi Arabia and Syrian Islamist opposition groups

The analysis of relationship between SA and proxy groups in Syria is complicated by the fact that the Syrian opposition is neither homogenous, nor unified, and so is its religious identity. The opposition consists of numerous groups; some of them are just small local militias; some are bigger and better established; some are radical Islamist and some rather pro-democracy. For Saudis, Syria is already considered a lost cause – their financial and military support for the opposition is supposed to cease gradually.[291] The opposition groups, including the Islamist ones, are currently financed and supported largely by Turkey and Qatar.[292]

In time of writing this thesis (November 2018), there is one unified opposition group known as National Front for Liberation (*Jabhat al-watanīya li-l-tahrīr*) based in the remaining opposition territory in the northwest around Idlib up to Turkish border. It was founded in May 2018 in the face of impending regime offensive. The Front consists of tens of small groupings, but the two biggest and most influential are *Ahrar al-Sham* and radically Islamist *Hay'at tahrir al-Sham* (HTS, formerly *Jabhat al-nusra*). Remains of the Free Syrian Army will not be regarded in this chapter, because they are currently only fractured remnants of more or less secular militias. Nor will be regarded the Islamic State terrorist organization (ISIS), not only because it does not possess significant influence in Syria anymore, but also because SA has never endorsed the group officially and did not consider it "rightful" opposition, although there were numerous records of ISIS fighters getting hands on Saudi weapons, and, as Thomas Hegghammer writes, Saudi Wahhabism in its core is not at all that much different from ISIS takfiri ideology.[293] Thus, when referring to "Syrian Islamist opposition" supported by SA, I mean Ahrar al-Sham, HTS

[291] CHULOV, Martin. Victory for Assad looks increasingly likely as world loses interest in Syria. *The Guardian* [online]. August 31, 2017.
[292] Ibid.
[293] Ironically, IS was for Saudis one of the biggest security threats as well, and from the religious standpoint, Saudi clerics consider them *khawārij* – extremist secessionists from Islam. In BUNZEL, Cole. *The Kingdom and the Caliphate: Duel of the Islamic States*. Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016, p. 4 and 23-25

and their affiliates (among them Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement, Jaysh al-Islam, Liwa al-Tawhid, Ajnad al-Sham, etc.).

First, as Emile Hokayem notes, it is important to distinguish between Western and Middle Eastern understanding of what is "Islamist".[294] The thing is, groups labeled as "moderate" or "mainstream" Islamist are usually Muslim-Brotherhood-style activist parties that are, in fact, widespread in the Middle East, their umbrella ideology being just governance based on Islamic law, often with democratic elements[295] and definitely excluding cutting off limbs or takfiri ideologies of Jihadi extremists. Such parties often garner a lot of support from mainstream Muslims for whom shari'a is equated with just and uncorrupted government.[296] Thus, the view that moderate Islamists and Jihadists are the same is very distorted. Important role in this aspect was played by the Syrian regime, Iran and Russia who did their best to portray the opposition as homogenous group of extremist thugs to decrease popular support at home and abroad and to delegitimize the opposition's cause.[297] President Putin said in his speech that "'there's no need to play with words and split terrorists into moderate and not moderate.'"[298] The problem is, however, that the opposition groups themselves are indeed difficult to distinguish, because all of them now publicly proclaim being just "moderately" Islamist to garner public support. For example, HTS says it cut its ties to al-Qaeda (AQ), but its new leadership is still endorsing figures known to be connected to AQ in the past.[299] At the same time, this can be caused simply by lack of competent cadres. It is also notable to mention Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (SMB) members who were at first quite secular-minded and pro-democratic. Although they were engaged in the conflict mostly politically,[300] usually by participation in various

[294] HOKAYEM, Emile, ref. 160
[295] It is not unusual that many Muslim countries (e.g. Egypt, Libya, Jordan, Algeria) until today derive parts of their legislation (especially on family and personal status) from shari'a and Islamist parties participate in politics.
[296] YASSIN-KASSAB, Robin and Leila AL-SHAMI. *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War*. 2nd ed. London: Pluto Press, 2018. p. 121
[297] Russia finds new jihadist coalition in Syria 'worrisome': Foreign Ministry. *Al Masdar News*[online]. TASS. February 22, 2017; RICH, Ben a Dara CONDUIT. The Impact of Jihadist Foreign Fighters on Indigenous Secular-Nationalist Causes: Contrasting Chechnya and Syria. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*. 2015, 38(2), p. 124
[298] HERSH, Seymour M. Military to Military: Seymour M. Hersh on US intelligence sharing in the Syrian war. *London Review of Books*. 2016, 38(1), p. 13
[299] Tahrir al-Sham: Al-Qaeda's latest incarnation in Syria. *BBC* [online]. February 28, 2017.
[300] SMB actively participated in Syrian National Council initiative.

anti-regime administrative committees, they gradually began to express hesitant support for militants of Ahrar al-Sham and HTS.[301]

Thus, the question of these Islamist groups' ideology, motivation and identity is indeed extremely tricky. Robin Yasin-Kassab writes in the chapter "Scorched Earth: Rise of Islamisms" that first, we need to differentiate between Syrian civilians/anti-regime activists and Syrian militant opposition groups, because the latter were getting Saudi and Qatari support that was contingent on their public endorsement of Islamist ideology.[302] Further, al-Assad used sectarianism as a weapon to bind to himself Alawites, antagonize Sunnis, get rid of the secular opposition and frame the war as a fight against Jihadi terrorism. The situation deteriorated after Iran and Hezbollah joined the conflict around 2015 in full force. As a result, formerly non-religious Sunnis radicalized and embraced the religion as their social identity rather than out of pure devoutness[303] in the process of "Islamization of the insurgency."[304] As Naomí Ramírez Díaz shows, al-Assad's general amnesty of 2011 was very clever tactic in regard to inciting extremism and sectarian hatred against Sunnis: "Most of the inmates who benefited from […] amnesty were in fact members or supporters of Al-Qaida, who had participated in the armed struggle in Iraq or were known for their militant Salafism. […] they would later become the founders of the most radical (and eventually the strongest) brigades in Syria, such as the Nusra Front – the Syrian Al-Qaida branch which in late July 2016 claimed to have severed ties with this international terrorist organization and changed its name to Jabhat Fath al-Sham, only to merge with other brigades in Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham in early 2017 […]. In this sense, the regime copied the modus operandi of the seventies and eighties: setting radical elements loose and forcing moderate ones to act under cover."[305] For example, Zahran Alloush, a radical Salafi with personal ties to Saudi clerics and iron-fisted former commander of Jaysh al-Islam in besieged Eastern Ghouta was also one of former inmates.[306]

Further, we need to remember that especially HTS accommodates many foreign fighters (allegedly around 30%) who flocked to Syria from Europe, Russia and Central

[301] RAMÍREZ DÍAZ, Naomí. *The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria: The Democratic Option of Islamism*. New York: Routledge, 2018. p. 113-119
[302] YASSIN-KASSAB, Robin and Leila AL-SHAMI, ref. 296, p. 122
[303] YASSIN-KASSAB, Robin and Leila AL-SHAMI, ref. 296, p. 110
[304] LUND, Aron. Aleppo and the Battle for the Syrian Revolution's Soul. *Carnegie Middle East Center* [online]. December 4, 2012.
[305] RAMÍREZ DÍAZ, Naomí, ref. 301, p. 105
[306] LUND, Aron. The Syrian Rebel Who Tried to Build an Islamist Paradise. *Politico* [online]. March 31, 2017.

Asia.[307] Their ideological motivation is often extremist, and the national and religious identity is different from that of native Syrians. They don't have vested interest in building a new secular and democratic Syria but rather advocate for Islamist theocracy.[308] As Conduit and Rich conclude, foreign fighters "overwhelmingly damaged opposition in Syria" and "weakened the chances of successful realization of the original objectives" of the Syrian opposition,[309] not even speaking of how seriously they damaged the public image of moderate movements.

Thus, knowing this, what can be said about religious identity of Syrian Islamist opposition groups? First, all of them were united in that al-Assad and his un-Islamic regime must go and must be replaced by just and moral government. Second, all of them were united in that the government should be Islamic, i.e. it should be some kind of the Islamic state based on Islamic values and shari'a. As Liwa al-tawhid commander Abdel Qader Saleh put it, "We confirm that Free Syria is a civil state where the basis of legislation is the Islamic faith, with consideration for all the [minority] groups of Syria."[310] However, as Naomí Ramírez Díaz shows in her analysis of official common statement by Islamist Ahrar al-Sham and pro-democracy members of SMB, the Islamists' ideas were so vague, ambiguous and unspecified it gave zero indication of what Syria's future should look like. "The document claims that the aim of the Syrian revolution is the creation of a "State of justice, law and freedom", without specifying any system of government, or mentioning aspects […] of a new Constitution […]."[311] The apple of contention between various Islamist groups usually lies in the degree to which shari'a shall be implemented, whether democracy is permissible in Islam, whether the Islamic state shall be established by force in top-down manner or by bottom-up persuasion; what is the relationship towards religious minorities and huge number of other issues. Especially problematic was the fact that Salafi-Jihadi tenets of HTS strictly exclude democracy as a form of government and acknowledge religious minorities as legally inferior. It is very improbable such differences could one day lead to compromise, as the moderate opposition categorically rejected such radical views.[312]

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[307] KUMAR PRADHAN, Prasanta. *Arab Spring and Sectarian Faultlines in West Asia Bahrain, Yemen and Syria*. New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2017. p. 105
[308] RICH, Ben and Dara CONDUIT, ref. 297, p. 122
[309] Ibid., p. 113-114
[310] LUND, Aron, ref. 304
[311] RAMÍREZ DÍAZ, Naomí, ref. 301, p. 118
[312] RICH, Ben a Dara CONDUIT, ref. 297, p. 122

On the other hand, probably none of them was interested in establishment of Saudi Wahhabi-style theocracy either. Even HTS was not interested in enforcing shari'a on the citizens in the ISIS-like manner, and thus antagonizing them.[313] Not only would Syrian citizens refuse such arrangement, but it would be unacceptable to the West and Turkey, as well as to Russia and Iran. The fluidity and uncertainty regarding the religious identity of the groups was then reflected in their lack of cooperation, unity and vision for Syrian future, although this was also caused by disunity in the ranks of Gulf sponsors (mainly SA and Qatar).[314] Nobody knew what to expect if the Islamist opposition deposed al-Assad: "Though some rebels made a point of promising democracy and minority rights, the largest groups were nearly all Islamists […]. Many had to be constantly […] pressured by their foreign funders to steer clear of extremist dalliances, and some were full-blown salafi-jihadis [sic], as hostile to all other governments as to Assad's."[315] Thus, the hallmark of opposition's Sunni identity in Syria is that it was often adjusted and manipulated as an instrumental tool to gain resources either from the Gulf or from Western sponsors.

Importantly, support for Syrian Islamist opposition increased rapidly after 2015 and accession of Saudi King Salman to the throne. This has to do with aggressive foreign policy of the new Saudi leadership, as well as JCPOA and impending Western rapprochement with Iran. It seems like Saudis believed that if they arm and train the opposition with the US help, they still stand a chance against the regime supported by Russia and Iran.[316] However, the problem was that Saudis had way much higher tolerance (or ignorance?) for religious extremism than the West and "Riyadh's capacity to ensure that Saudi money ends up in the hands of intended recipients is limited."[317] Indeed, unlike Iran, SA relied on middlemen and did not have any presence on the battlefield to control day-to-day operations, which resulted in chaos, lack of accountability and privatization of funds by Salafi-Jihadi warlords.[318] Lack of oversight applies not only to official state funds, but even more to contributions of individual persons (such as wealthy Gulf

[313] YASSIN-KASSAB, Robin and Leila AL-SHAMI, ref. 296, p. 123 and 127
[314] LUND, Aron. How Assad's Enemies Gave Up on the Syrian Opposition. *The Century Foundation* [online]. October 17, 2017.
[315] Ibid.
[316] MAZZETTI, Mark and Matt APUZZO. U.S. Relies Heavily on Saudi Money to Support Syrian Rebels. *The New York Times* [online]. January 23, 2016.
[317] WAGNER, Daniel and Giorgio CAFIERO. Saudi Arabia's Dark Role in the Syria Conflict. *Huffington Post* [online]. August 7, 2013.
[318] Lack of oversight applies not only to official state funds, but even more to contributions of individual persons (such as wealthy Gulf businessmen) and charitable donations of fellow Muslims. In BAYLOUNY, Anne Marie a Creighton MULLINS. Cash is King: Financial Sponsorship and Changing Priorities in the Syrian Civil War. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*. 2017, online, 1-21. p. 4

businessmen) and charitable donations of fellow Muslims. Derek Chollet, President Obama's defense adviser recalls Saudi irresponsibility and lack of strategy: "We had partners who were just throwing all sorts of resources at the conflict, [and these later] ended up in the wrong hands. It was very much in the spirit of 'the enemy of my enemy,' and to some of our partners it didn't matter if their support ended up with […] Jabhat al-Nusra or other groups.[319] Such views of Syrian Islamists were shared also by other US officials.[320] As Baylouny and Mullins write in their article on sponsorship of Syrian opposition, Saudis not only exacerbated fracturing of Syrian opposition by purposeful selection of groups supportive of Wahhabism, but also contributed to radicalization of moderate Islamist opposition groups – just like al-Assad hoped for. "Groups were incentivized to adopt the Saudi agenda in order to obtain funding and began to display outward Islamist tendencies in hopes of attracting support."[321]

From Saudi political perspective, the kingdom was hoping for installment of "friendly Sunni-dominated government" which would sideline Iran and guarantee Saudis access to Lebanon.[322] For this purpose, they were supporting selected groups financially, but also ideologically. Just like Iran, SA did not hesitate to export their views of Sunni Islam, so as to create identitarian convergence. Religious opinions of Saudi and Syrian clerics unaffiliated to Saudi regime were often based on the shari'a requirement to oppose unjust ruler.[323] As for Saudi official clerical establishment (allied under Council of Senior Scholars), the 'ulamā' were careful to tailor the support accordingly, creating curious contradictions: "Demands […] were very specific: endorse Saudi Arabia's policy against Assad, but discourage jihad;"[324] however, "not surprisingly, a handful of ulema [for example, Abdallah al-Muhaysini of HTS[325]] were unwilling to be so proscribed and urged congregations to donate to militants and even travel to Syria to fight."[326] Joint statement of various Saudi clerics also reads that "The Western-Russian coalition with the Safavids [Iranians] and the Nusairis [Alawites] are making a real war against the Sunni people

[319] LUND, Aron, ref. 314
[320] HERSH, Seymour M., ref. 298, p. 11
[321] BAYLOUNY, Anne Marie a Creighton MULLINS, ref. 318, p. 6
[322] PHILLIPS, Christpher. *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016. p. 118
[323] ZULFIQAR, Adnan A. Revolutionary Islamic Jurisprudence: A Restatement of the Arab Spring. *New York University Journal of International Law and Politics*. 2017, (43), p. 487
[324] PHILLIPS, Christpher, ref. 322, p. 120
[325] Man huwa al-Muhaysinī al-mudraj bi-l-qā'imah al-irhāb? [Who is al-Muhaysini, who was designated as a terrorist?]. *Al Arabiya* [online]. June 9, 2017.
[326] PHILLIPS, Christpher, ref. 322, p. 120

and their countries."[327] Overall, Saudi clerics stood firmly behind Syrian people, labeling Asad *kāfir* (unbeliever), appealing for unity of Muslim *umma* to help Syrians[328] and calling for action against "detestable sectarian party, which goes under name 'Hezbollah', and those who stand behind it."[329] Saudi clerics also played important role in collection of charitable donations for unspecified beneficiaries in Syria.[330]

Finally, it is possible to conclude that SA in the case of Syrian Islamist opposition did a lot to appeal to shared Salafi religious identity, as proven by the accounts of Saudi political leadership and clerical establishment. Just like Iran, they tried to export, create, inspire and reinforce the Sunni religious identity in Syrians by all possible means to create friendly ally for the future. Indeed, the support of Islamist element altered the dynamic of Syrian conflict in substantial way: the Islamist opposition groups were receptive and complied to Saudi condition of devout adherence to Salafism in exchange for resources. This altered their public image and enhanced their fight capabilities significantly. However, unlike Iran, SA did not have solid plan for promotion of its religious identity and neither it had influence and control on the ground. As a consequence, the developments in the ranks of Islamists resulted in chaos, factionalism, support of Jihadi extremism and war profiteering, which eventually brought the highest benefits to al-Assad and his allies. Most importantly, Saudi export of Salafism and support of HTS and Ahrar al-Sham did not really appeal to anyone, be it Syrian citizens,[331] public opinion, moderate opposition (FSA) or Western powers. As Gregory Gause put it, "the Saudis lost control of global Salafism [since the 1980s], if they ever really had it,"[332] which is why overthrow of al-Assad by unpredictable radicals seemed like exceptionally bad idea to everyone but SA and Qatar, and the Islamist opposition was not able to garner more support. Notably, the inconsistency and unconvincingness of Saudi religious and political leadership was manifested also in the religious policy towards Syria: they wanted to inspire jihad against the unjust Assad to

[327] Saudi Clerics Call for Jihad Against Syrian Government, Russia, Iran. *The Moscow Times*[online]. October 5, 2015.
[328] Hay'ah kibār al-'ulamā' al-su'ūdīyah tad'ū li-nusrah ahl Sūriyā [Saudi Council of Senior Scholars calls for help to Syrians]. *Shaam Network* [online]. October 7, 2015.
[329] Hay'ah kibār al-'ulamā' al-su'ūdīyah: al-sha'b al-sūrī yata'arrad li-l-ibādah. Tālabat bi-nusra al-sūrīyīn wa wasafat "Hizb allāh" bi-hizb muqīt al-'amīl [Saudi Council of Senior Scholars: Syrian people are subject to genocide. Council called for help to Syrians and described Hezbollah as an appaling proxy party.]. *Al Arabiya* [online]. June 26, 2013.
[330] Gulf-based Salafi preachers like Adnan al-Arour, a Syrian televangelist-in-exile and old acquaintance of the Alloush family from Saudi Arabia, collected huge sums in donations from the Muslim public. In LUND, Aron, ref. 306
[331] "The widespread rejection of Wahhabism in Syria undermines Riyadh's soft-power there." In WAGNER, Daniel and Giorgio CAFIERO, ref. 317
[332] HOKAYEM, Emile, ref. 160

direct the radical elements, but in somehow "convenient" way, so that the jihad does not turn against Saudi autocrats themselves. All in all, despite huge financial investment, SA failed in establishing its presence in Syria; in resolution of the conflict, as well as in feasible promotion of religious convergence between greater Syrian public and SA. The only thing it boosted was Sunni religious extremism.

3.3 Yemen

3.3.1 Iran and Houthi rebels

The last component of the Iranian Axis of Resistance are Yemeni Houthis[333] – or *Ansar Allah* (Partisans of God) – a large Zaydi Shia minority that makes up about 35% of Yemeni population and originates in the northern city of Sa'da.[334] In comparison with Lebanon and Syria, Yemeni society is traditionally tribal, which makes mapping of political alliances and loyalties quite convoluted. Additionally, the conflict is also aggravated by presence of al-Qaeda on Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and secessionist tendencies of Aden in the southwest. Yemen has been from 1978 till the Arab Spring ruled by Ali Abdullah Saleh who unscrupulously used the state as a source of personal enrichment for his family and allied tribes.[335] Importantly, he retained strategic ties in Yemeni military after he was deposed and replaced by Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi. Saleh described ruling Yemen to be akin to "dancing on the heads of snakes,"[336] which tells volumes about how difficult it was to manage vested interests of all the Yemeni factions.

Current conflict between Houthi rebels and President Hadi's exile government allied to SA was far from sectarian one. Houthis has been for a long time sidelined from political life and were denied their share of political power and economic advantages.[337] Since Yemen's ruling class mostly consisted of Sunni tribes, Zaydis were often subject to institutionalized discrimination. In 1990s, Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi unified the Zaydi movement, vocalized Houthi demands and stood against Saleh. After Saleh became US

[333] BELÉN SOAGE, Ana. *Iraq and Yemen: The new Iranian proxies?*. Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 2018, (58), p. 1
[334] JUNEAU, Thomas. Iran's policy towards the Houthis in Yemen: a limited return on a modest investment. *International Affairs*. 2016, 92(3), p. 651
[335] Ibid.
[336] RIEDEL, Bruce. Who are the Houthis, and why are we at war with them?. *The Brookings Institution* [online]. December 18, 2017.
[337] JUNEAU, Thomas, ref. 334, p. 652

ally in the war on terrorism due to AQAP activity in Yemen, the tensions intensified, since such move was viewed by Zaydis and large portion of Yemeni public as hugely unpopular.[338] The conflict between al-Houthi and Saleh escalated in a series of armed fights from 2004 to 2009, the most important of them being Battle of Sa'da, but the violence didn't bring any significant turn in favor of Houthis.[339] Badreddin was killed in 2004 by Saleh's army led by general Mohsen, and since then, Ansar Allah are led by his brother Abdalmalik al-Houthi. Houthis then remained sidelined until the Arab Spring in 2011, in which they actively participated together with other Saleh's opponents, including frustrated youth, Islah Islamist party (Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood), disenchanted tribes and army officers, all hoping to change then distribution of power.[340] In the meantime, Houthis were able to transform from originally Zaydi religious movement to more pragmatic political one – a move that won them support of dissatisfied and neglected Sunnis from western Yemen.[341] In 2012, Saleh was forced to step down and elections were held, in which Abdrabbuh Hadi won.[342]

After the Arab Spring, Houthis again found themselves marginalized by the new president and his political clique consisting mostly of Saudi-backed Islah and Salafi militias. As a reaction to such developments, they contracted "marriage of convenience" with Saleh who still had significant influence in the Yemeni military.[343] Top military chiefs, brigadier general al-Ahmar and general Mohsen were officially loyal to President Hadi; however, since they both belong to powerful Hashid tribal confederation along with Saleh, their loyalty was oftentimes questioned. As dissatisfaction with Hadi's government kept mounting, Houthi alliance grew stronger, which culminated in September 2014 march on Sana'a and ouster of Hadi's government. The Yemeni military still loyal to Saleh practically allowed the Houthis to capture Sana'a and gave up the city with little resistance.[344] Hadi himself fled to Aden and from there to Saudi Arabia; currently he is Yemeni President in exile. At that point, Saudis indeed began to worry – having a supposed Iranian proxy at their southern border was considered unacceptable existential

[338] BELÉN SOAGE, Ana, ref. 333, p. 11
[339] FREEMAN, Jack. The al Houthi Insurgency in the North of Yemen: An Analysis of the Shabab al Moumineen. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*. 2009, (32), p. 1008-1011
[340] BELÉN SOAGE, Ana, ref. 333, p. 12
[341] JUNEAU, Thomas, ref. 334, p. 659
[342] JUNEAU, Thomas, ref. 334, p. 651
[343] RIEDEL, Bruce, ref. 336
[344] JUNEAU, Thomas, ref. 334, p. 654; RUGH, William A. Problems in Yemen, Domestic and Foreign. *Middle East Policy*. 2015, 22(4), p. 146-7

threat. Thus, in March 2015 Saudi-led operation Decisive Storm began, currently frozen in the state of indecisive stalemate, although in the long run Saudis are expected to prevail due to their military superiority. Then, in December 2017, Saleh (and the part of Yemeni military loyal to him) began to have second thoughts on alliance with Houthis, due to which he was killed by Houthi militia.[345] Saleh previously accused Houthis of being "reckless"[346] and inexperienced in Yemeni politics; namely that they demand too much but compromise too little.[347]

As for Houthi religious motivation and identity, they belong to Zaydi branch of Shia Islam. Zaydis derive their name from Zayd ibn 'Ali, the fifth Shiite imam, for which they are sometimes called Fivers. Zaydis often adhere to Sunni Shafi'i madhab (not to the usual Shiite Ja'fari), which makes them especially close to other Yemeni Sunnis. Except for being more benevolent towards Sunnis in general, there are other doctrinal differences in comparison with Twelver Shia, such as Zaydi belief in fallibility of the imam.[348] Therefore, from the religious point of view, Zaydis have never been especially close to Iran; they also refuse the application of *velāyat-e faqīh* as a mode of government.[349] This is relevant in the complexity of the conflict, because as Gordon and Parkinson write, "erasing the distinction between Zaydis and Twelvers […] may not seem terribly consequential. But it has profound political consequences for the war in Yemen, given evolving alliance structures and the ambitions of regional powers, particularly the Saudis."[350] Thus, what Houthis did admire about Iran wasn't the religion, but the idea of Resistance against the US and Israel, and generally against then-status quo in Yemen,[351] especially during Saleh's alliance with the US.[352] Both Abdalmalik and Badreddin allegedly went to Iranian Qom to study Shia Islam, which later shaped their political views.[353] All that is, however, not a product of direct Iranian intervention, but rather of local circumstances and internal

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[345] RIEDEL, Bruce. In Yemen, Iran outsmarts Saudi Arabia again. *The Brookings Institution* [online]. December 6, 2017.
[346] GORDON, Anna and Sarah E. PARKINSON. How the Houthis Became "Shi'a". *Middle East Research & Information Project (MERIP)* [online]. January 27, 2018.
[347] LAUB, Zachary. Who Are Yemen's Houthis?. *Council on Foreign Relations* [online]. February 25, 2015.
[348] PERTEGHELLA, Annalisa. Yemen: the Sectarianization of a Political Conflict. *Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI)* [online]. March 20, 2018 .
Twelver Shiites believe that the imam is infallible.
[349] The percolating proxy war in Yemen. *Strategic Comments*. 2017, 23(1), p. i
[350] GORDON, Anna and Sarah E. PARKINSON, ref. 346
[351] LAUB, Zachary, ref. 347
[352] Well known is the Houthi flag, which reads *Allāhu akbar, al-mawt li-Amrīkā, al-mawt li-Isrā'īl, al-la'na 'alā Yahūd, al-nasr li-Islām*, or "God is the Greatest, Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse on the Jews, Victory to Islam."
[353] ABDUL-AHAD, Ghaith. Diary in Sanaa. *London Review of Books*. 2015, 37(10), p. 42-43

conflict with ruling power who happened to be US ally. Regarding religious grievances, historically there was tension between Zaydis and Saudi-backed Wahhabi preachers who with support of Saleh's government began to proselytize in the 1990s in the northern province of Sa'da. Stirring up of sectarian hatred made Zaydis feel threatened.[354] It was these Salafi groups from SA that first began to churn out "propaganda that depicted Zaydis as pawns of Iran in a global Shi'a conspiracy that seeks to divide the Muslim world."[355] Saleh's regime at that time repeatedly mischaracterized Houthis as sectarian terrorist organization linked to Iran[356] with hopes of attracting support from SA and the US.[357]

Since 2015 and beginning of Saudi-led military intervention, "the conflict underwent a dynamic of "sectarianisation," or politicization of religious identities**.** Thus, it is possible to affirm that sectarianism, rather than being inherent to the conflict or the country, has been 'activated.'"[358] This is because Saudis – just like Saleh before them – began to equate Zaydis with Iran and Shia Islam. Annalisa Perthegella writes that Iranian support to Houthis was something akin to "self-fulfilling prophecy,"[359] whereby (paradoxically) the conflict was by SA framed as sectarian Sunni-Shiite proxy war for so long Iran indeed began to support Houthis because it simply seemed as a good "investment." Riyadh managed to isolate Houthis politically and diplomatically so well there was no other option for them but ask for help from Iran and Hezbollah.[360] Thus, as Thomas Juneau writes, Yemeni conflict is a result of internal state weakness and "Iran has bandwagoned on Houthi successes: It did not cause them but wants to see them consolidated."[361]

According to UN reports, Iran definitely stepped up Houthi support after 2011 and even more after 2014,[362] but as for arms provision, Yemen has been awash with weapons since long time ago.[363] Iran has consistently denied any support to Houthis and as of now it is still not investing that much into the conflict, since Tehran doesn't consider Yemen its

[354] LAUB, Zachary, ref. 347
[355] GORDON, Anna and Sarah E. PARKINSON, ref. 346
[356] Ibid.
[357] JUNEAU, Thomas, ref. 334, p. 652
[358] PERTEGHELLA, Annalisa, ref. 348
[359] Ibid.
[360] RIEDEL, Bruce, ref. 336
[361] JUNEAU, Thomas. No, Yemen's Houthis actually aren't Iranian puppets. *The Washington Post* [online]. May 16, 2016.
[362] KATZMAN, Kenneth. *Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies - CRS Report*. Congressional Research Service, 2017, p. 40
[363] JUNEAU, Thomas, ref. 361

strategic interest (compared to Syria, Lebanon and Iraq).[364] More serious engagement in Yemen could cause Iranian overstretch. Yet, Iran is surprisingly successful in keeping the Saudi military occupied in the "Yemeni quagmire," forcing the kingdom to spend billions on military campaigns and humanitarian aid. It was estimated that while Iran spends a few million dollars a year on the Houthi support, Saudis spend $5 billion a month.[365] Except for weapon shipments, IRGC participated in training of Houthi fighters who allegedly also travelled to Lebanon for this purpose.[366] Iran also provided some civilian material support. However, interestingly, when it comes to support of Shiite religious identity and strengthening religious (and possibly ideological) convergence, Iran has invested surprisingly little in comparison with great efforts exerted in Syria and Lebanon. There is single one Iranian Arabic language channel – al-'Alam TV – broadcasting in Yemen, although other pro-Iranian pan-Arab satellite networks cover the conflict from pro-Houthi perspective as well.[367] Additionally, Iranian leadership is propping up Houthi resistance against Saudis diplomatically, but that's where the support ends.[368]

All in all, since the beginning of the Houthi–Yemeni government conflict around 2012, we can observe intensification of sectarian hatred in the places and contexts where it was not originally present. However, unlike Lebanon and Syria, Yemen seems to be for Iran a small backyard battlefield that only serves the purpose of keeping Riyadh distracted militarily, politically and economically. Such Iranian strategy is reflected in dynamic of the conflict – support is just enough to keep the conflict going, yet the profound religious convergence seems to be lacking, which is indicative of the fact that for Iran, Yemen is not a place of strategic interest. In other words, Iranians are not trying to forge deeper ties with Houthis that would be based on common Shiite identity and mutual affinity, which could suggest plans for long-term engagement. Thus, the effort to reach religious convergence – or lack thereof – can serve as a clue indicating significance of Iranian strategic interest in the given area. Iran does not have influence over Houthi decision-making; Houthis are deciding about the next course of action on their own,[369] which sometimes results into

[364] "Iranian leaders have not generally identified Yemen as a core Iranian security interest, but Iranian leaders appear to perceive Yemen's instability as an opportunity to acquire additional leverage against Yemen's neighbor, Saudi Arabia." KATZMAN, Kenneth, ref. 362, p. 39
[365] RIEDEL, Bruce, ref. 345
[366] JUNEAU, Thomas, ref. 334, p. 657
[367] BARZEGAR, Keyhan a Seyyed Morteza KAZEMI DINAN. Iran's Political Stance toward Yemen's Ansar Allah Movement: A Constructivist-Based Study. *Journal of Politics and Law*. 2016, 9(9), p. 79-81
[368] Ibid.
[369] KATZMAN, Kenneth, ref. 362, p. 40

half-baked and reckless decisions. Apparently, Iranians are not willing to sink in the Yemeni quagmire like Saudis did. Direct vicinity of Yemen to SA makes it Saudi strategic interest, which implies any serious Iranian attempts to attack SA via Yemen could be extremely dangerous, as Riyadh would not tolerate Iranian influence on the Arabian Peninsula. Thus, Iran understands Houthi victory is not the goal, since presence in Yemen is not considered Iranian strategic interest, but rather just a way to trouble Saudis.

3.3.2 Saudi Arabia, Yemeni government and Yemeni Salafists

On the other side of the conflict stands Saudi Arabia and Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, the current internationally recognized President of Yemen in exile. If one wants to imagine Saudi perspective on the Yemeni conflict, there is no better way than reading the official *White Paper on Saudi Arabia and the Yemen Conflict* issued by Saudi government in 2017. The statements about formidable Iranian strategy to attack SA via Houthi proxies are backed by several UN documents, but first and foremost by alarming statements of several US senators and policymakers (who, in the circular reasoning logic supposedly establish their positions based on information sources from the Gulf allies). Thus, Saudi views are in contradiction with factual background on Iranian-Houthi partnership introduced in the previous chapter.

Unlike Iran, SA considers Yemen to be one of its most vulnerable spots, not only because the ongoing conflict with Houthis, but also because of constant threat posed by AQAP and the de facto non-existence of the central government, i.e. state weakness and inability to protect Yemeni-Saudi border. Border areas are used by Houthi rebels to launch rockets targeting Riyadh.[370] Apart from that, Houthis threaten the ships entering the Red Sea via strategic Bab al-mandeb strait.[371] Another source of Riyadh's concern is the minority of Shiite Ismailis in Najran, Saudi province in the southwestern corner just across Yemeni border. Ismaili Shiite minority is different from Zaydis in their veneration of the seventh Imam, Isma'il ibn Ja'far al-Mubarak, but they are nevertheless linked to Houthis by tribe and custom.[372] Twelver Shiites live in the Saudi Eastern province, where majority

[370] Saudi air defense forces shoot down Houthi ballistic missile over Najran. *Arab News* [online]. April 7, 2018.
[371] KNIGHTS, Michael. Curbing Houthi Attacks on Civilian Ships in the Bab al-Mandab. *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy* [online]. July 27, 2018.
[372] TOTTEN, Michael J., ref. 42

of oilfields are located. Shiite minorities in SA which make up about 15% of population[373] are systematically discriminated against and forbidden any employment in the field of education, military and government. Such injustice caused repeated anti-government demonstrations during the Arab Spring in 2011 and after execution of famous Shiite cleric Nimr Baqir al-Nimr in 2016, in reaction to which Iran and SA cut diplomatic ties with each other.[374]

Therefore, even though Saudi action may seem like "overreacting," it is clear why Saudis see instability in Yemen and Shiites within the kingdom as a grave security threat, especially with Iranian history of capitalizing on disenchanted (Shiite) minorities. That is also the reason behind Saudi efforts to stabilize Yemen at any cost either by military intervention or by diplomatic activities. Notable is the fact that King Salman and his son, Minister of Defense and Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman acceded their respective functions on January 23, 2015. The war in Yemen began only one month into their administration, pointing at the fact that the intervention might have been planned in haste and entrapped in faulty judgement.

Before the Arab Spring, former President Saleh was a guarantor of stability in the country, which made him a Saudi ally, but this did not save him from public discontent and subsequent downfall. Involvement of the Gulf countries in Yemeni politics continued into 2012, when Saudi-dominated GCC played a key role in National Dialogue Conference where all concerned parties negotiated a new power-sharing arrangement in which Saleh got immunity and his vice-president Hadi replaced him on the presidential chair. Thus, Hadi could count on continuous Gulf support. Eventually, by 2014 it turned out that Hadi's government favors Islah way too much at the expense of other parties, and Houthis were – once again – left out which further aggravated Houthi grievance. In January 2015 Hadi resigned and fled to Aden (reportedly dressed in woman's niqab[375]) where he withdrew his resignation and fled to Riyadh. As Saudis deemed the situation unacceptable – indeed "the Houthi's [sic] rise was the realization of Saudi leaders' worst fears,"[376] – military coalition further consisting of UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Sudan has been put together to battle Houthis and stabilize Hadi's government. The intervention was in the

[373] AL-QUDAIHI, Anees. Saudi Arabia's Shia press for rights. *BBC* [online]. March 24, 2009.
[374] Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr: Saudi Arabia executes top Shia cleric. *BBC* [online]. January 2, 2016; Saudi Arabia cuts diplomatic ties with Iran. *Al Jazeera* [online]. January 4, 2016.
[375] ORKABY, Asher. *Yemen's Humanitarian Nightmare: The Real Roots of the Conflict*. Foreign Affairs, 2017, (11-12), p. 93
[376] Ibid. p. 96

very beginning supposed to last just a few weeks, but resulted in catastrophic humanitarian crisis, while the war is still dragging on.

Regarding Saudi support for spread of Salafism, it began in 1990s in efforts to stabilize Yemen and stifle Zaydi opposition as well as Marxist secessionists from Aden.[377] Historically, Yemeni Salafists have always been allies of the government; both Saleh's and Hadi's.[378] "To change the country from the bottom-up, Riyadh encouraged the spread of Salafism in Yemen, funding mosques and preachers and otherwise trying to advance its austere and anti-Shiite interpretation of Islam."[379] Among the first Saudi-supported Salafists was Sheikh Muqbil bin Hadi al-Wadi'i, who was during his studies in SA investigated by Saudi security after the seizure of Grand Mosque in Mecca due to ties to the group of Juhayman al-'Utaybi. When al-Wadi'i returned to Yemen, he established famous Salafi madrasa named *Dar al-Hadith* in Dammaj near Sa'ada which hosted thousands of foreign students of Islamic sciences.[380] It is questionable, however, whether Saudi-funded proselytizing activity helped SA or rather supported radicalization of AQAP followers, because both is probable. Although al-Wadi'i himself was apolitical purist Salafi, his institute inspired many Jihadists who later joined AQ.[381] As of 2018, AQAP managed to get hold of Saudi and Emirati arms supplies and kept its position around port city of Mukalla in the south, capitalizing of population's grievances toward both Houthis and coalition-allied Yemeni forces.[382] AQAP is trying to frame the conflict in the context of Sunni-Shia sectarian fight, which further aggravates sectarian tensions.[383]

Apart from Jihadi Salafism in Yemen, other Salafi currents are also present. Current important Salafi figures in Yemen, such as Jahya al-Hajuri[384] or Abd al-Rahman

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[377] BYMAN, Daniel L. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have a disastrous Yemen strategy. *The Brookings Institution* [online]. July 17, 2018.
[378] BONNEFOY, Laurent. Deconstructing Salafism in Yemen. *Combating Terrorism Center at Westpoint (CTC)* [online]. January 2010.
[379] BYMAN, Daniel L., ref. 377
[380] 'ĀMIR, 'Ubaydah. Lihā infisālīyah: al-salafīyah ka-sikkīn imārātī li-taqsīm al-Jaman [Dividing beards: Salafism is like an Emirati knife to partition Yemen]. *Al Jazeera* [online]. March 14, 2018; How Salafism Came to Yemen: An Unknown Legacy of Juhayman al-'Utaybi 30 Years On. *Middle East Institute* [online]. October 1, 2009; Yemen's Salafi warlord - armed by Riyadh, branded a terrorist by Riyadh. *Middle East Eye* [online]. October 28, 2017.
The school was overran by Houthis in 2014 and all the Salafists fled to the south, mainly to Ta'izz and Aden.
[381] BONNEFOY, Laurent, ref. 378; BAIDHANI, Saleh. The secret history of Yemeni Salafism. *The Arab Weekly* [online]. September 11, 2016.
[382] CRAIG, Iona. Yemen's moral quagmire: a civil war that defies an easy solution. *Financial Review* [online]. January 3, 2018.
[383] LAUB, Zachary, ref. 347
[384] Man huwa al-shaikh al-Hajūrī: sīrah dhātīyah [Who is Shaikh al-Hajuri: the biography]. *'Adan būst [Aden Post]* [online]. January 14, 2014.

al-‘Adani[385] were former students and followers of al-Wadi‘i who studied in SA and retained their ties to Saudi clerical establishment. Except for participation in Yemeni politics together with Islah and spreading Salafi da‘wa, many of them also head pro-coalition Salafi militias, albeit this is not the rule.[386] Salafists are settled in the south, near Aden and Ta‘izz.[387] Interestingly, these militias often clash with AQAP fighters, although the differences between the two groups are sometimes rather blurry.[388] Notable example of such action is recent assassination most probably by AQAP of Sheikh Abd al-Rahman al-‘Adani, pro-government Salafi cleric and former head of Dar al-Hadith.[389] Laurent Bonnefoy asserts that Salafism in Yemen – dubbed simply as “Yemeni Salafism” – is a specific quietist branch that refrains from violence as it is not that much influenced by Saudi Wahhabism.[390] While this may be true, it is known that even if quietist Salafism itself refrains from violence, its followers may beg to differ[391] and even if it is not directly influenced by Wahhabism, it can still be used by Saudis as a vehicle to reach greater convergence of identity, as well as to gain more direct influence in Yemen.[392]

Regarding support of Salafi factions, Houthis on pro-Iranian al-‘Alam channel claimed that Saudis “throw all their support to Salafi forces which now ignite war in several places in Yemen and get material and moral support from Riyadh.”[393] Bushra al-Maqtari, Yemeni writer and activist notes that “As for relationship with Saudi Arabia, the leading [force] of intervention in Yemen, and also the Emirates, several Salafi groups acquired military stockpiles enabling them to explain by force [their] political decisions, in

[385] Nubdhat ‘an hayāt fadīlat al-sheikh ‘Abd Allāh bnu Mar‘ī al-‘Adanī [Fragments from life of the venerable sheikh Abdallah b. Mar‘i al-‘Adani]. *Dār al-hadīth bi-l-Shihr [House of hadith in Shihr]* [online].
[386] ‘ĀMIR, ‘Ubaydah, ref. 380
[387] AL-MIHWARĪ, Sālih. Al-salafīyūn wa al-ikhwān al-muslimūm fī al-Yaman: ‘alāqāt mu‘aqqadah hawla awlawīyāt al-siyāsah wa qitāl al-hūthīyīn [Salafists and the Muslim Brotherhood in Yemen: complicated relationships over political priorities and the fight against Houthis]. *Rasīf 22 [Platform 22]* [online]. September 11, 2018.
[388] Yemen's Salafi warlord - armed by Riyadh, branded a terrorist by Riyadh. *Middle East Eye* [online]. October 28, 2017.
[389] ‘ĀMIR, ‘Ubaydah, ref. 380; Gunmen kill pro-govt Sunni cleric in Yemen's Aden. *Daily Mail* [online]. AFP. February 28, 2016.
[390] JOAS, Wagemakers. Salafism in Yemen: Transnationalism and Religious Identity. *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations*. 2013, 24(4), p. 530
[391] BONNEFOY, Laurent, ref. 378
[392] BONNEFOY, Laurent. *Salafism in Yemen: Transnationalism and Religious Identity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. p. 9-10
[393] Al-Su‘ūdīyah tad‘amu al-salafīyīn fī al-Jaman li-ijhād al-thawrah [Saudi Arabia supports Salafists in Yemen to destroy the revolution]. *Qanāt al-‘ālam [al-‘Alam Channel]* [online]. April 30, 2012.

addition to [justification of] political legitimacy of their fight for shari'a."[394] As a result, financial and military support of these Salafi groups helped them create more complex organizational networks (unlike popular movements they used to be until 2012) and usurp Sunni religious legitimacy in Yemen.[395] The point made by al-Maqtari is quite important, as direct support of Salafist parties can indeed result to Islamization of political discourse in the future.

An important political as well as religious ally of SA is also the Islah party,[396] or *al-Tajammu' al-Yamanī li-l-Islāh* ("Yemeni Congregation for Reform," or simply "Reform"). Islah was established in 1990 by Abdullah al-Ahmar of Hashid tribal confederation and gradually became critical of President Saleh. That resulted in Islah's role as the main organizing force during the Arab Spring and in subsequent formation of the new government.[397] "Islah has been over the decades one of the main vehicles for Saudi influence in Yemen."[398] The principal difference between Islah and other Salafi factions lies in its tolerance of political pluralism and more active role of women in the society (both within limits of shari'a, that is).[399] The party is sometimes dubbed "Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood," mainly because of its participation in politics and calling for solution of social issues. "Islah has benefited from the government's weakness and inability to provide adequate basic services to its citizens [...]. Through affiliated charitable organizations, Islamist NGOs, religious schools, imams, and preachers [...] Islah has been able to garner grassroots support behind its ideology and political agenda."[400] Islah was the most important partner of the GCC in the post-Arab Spring political negotiations; however, it has never participated in armed fights unlike other Salafi factions.[401] Islah accommodates

[394] AL-MAQTARĪ, Bushra. Al-harakah al-salafīyah fī al-Yaman bayna al-tatallu' al-siyāsī wa fakhkh al-'irhāb [Salafi movement in Yemen between political ambitions and trap of terrorism]. *Gulf House Studies & Publishing* [online]. November 13, 2017.
[395] Ibid.
[396] PARTRICK, Neil. Saudi Arabia's Yemen Gambit. *Carnegie Middle East Center* [online]. October 1, 2015.
[397] PHILBRICK YAKAV, Stacey. Yemen. HAMID, Shadi a William MCCANTS. *Rethinking Political Islam*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 88-100.
[398] JUNEAU, Thomas, ref. 334, p. 660
[399] The Islah Party: Formation and Stances. *Islamopedia Online* [online]. Yemeni women's rights activist and Nobel Prize laureate Tawakkol Karman is also a member of Islah.
[400] Ibid.
[401] Al-Riyād: walīyā al-'ahd al-su'ūdī wa al-'imārātī yaltaqiyāni "al-islāh al-yamanī" al-qarīb min "al-'ichwān" [Saudi and Emirati Crown Princes meet with Yemeni Islah, [a party] close to the Brotherhood]. *Al Nahar* [online]. December 14, 2017.

radical Salafi figures such as Abd al-Majid al-Zindani and continuously profits from Saudi largesse.[402]

Islah's affiliation to the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) proved to be problematic due to Saudi concerns of spread of the Arab Spring to the Gulf and due to MB's connections to Qatar. However, since Saudis had no other party to rely on, financing of Islah continued nevertheless.[403] Problem arose in 2017 when the Yemen crisis was exacerbated by split within coalition ranks – Saudis supported Islah-affiliated factions, while UAE preferred to finance various Salafi groups from the South[404] due to Emirati historical enmity towards MB. Except for fighting the Houthis, both factions battled each other, the Emirati-funded groups having an advantage due to higher number of troops on the ground.[405] However, it seems like both factions finally stroke a deal after Islah finally distanced itself from MB.[406] As for the Yemeni army, it is largely non-existent and there are basically mostly young men from Southern tribes loyal to Hadi or to coalition forces.[407] Chain of command is dysfunctional and the troops only answer to their tribal leaders or other powerful persons.[408]

Notably to add, Saudis are except religious activities, Salafi factions, tribal militias and Islah financing also other government services, state bureaucracy, (whatever remained of) security services and military. Significant portion of Yemeni income comes in the form of remittance by Yemenis working in SA. King Salman Humanitarian and Aid Relief Center is also the biggest donor of humanitarian aid to Yemen worth about $18 billion over past 3 years.[409] "Saudi aid has kept Yemen afloat for several decades."[410]

To conclude, Saudi Arabia is in the case of war in Yemen trying to reinforce convergence of religious identity with Salafi and Islamist factions and corresponding segments of population, so as to secure Saudi influence in territory deemed strategically important. This is being done through financing of various religious establishments,

[402] PARTRICK, Neil, ed. *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy: Conflict and Cooperation*. 2nd ed. London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 2016. Chapter 14 of e-book version.
[403] PARTRICK, Neil, ref. 369
[404] Yemen's Salafi warlord - armed by Riyadh, branded a terrorist by Riyadh. *Middle East Eye* [online], ref. 388
[405] BYMAN, Daniel L., ref. 377; and Percolating war 1
[406] Yemen Islah party sever ties with Muslim Brotherhood. *Al Arabiya* [online]. December 15, 2017.
[407] GAUB, Florence. *Whatever happened to Yemen's army?*. Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2015, p 1-3
[408] Ibid., p. 3
[409] *White Paper: Saudi Arabia and the Yemen Conflict - Report*. Riyadh: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Saudi Arabia, 2017, p. 10; BEN GASSEM, Lojien. Saudi Arabia's KSRelief: 'Humanitarian aid to Yemen is Arab coalition's top priority'. *Arab News* [online]. December 2, 2018.
[410] ALYAHYA, Mohammed. Why did Saudi Arabia intervene in Yemen?. *Al-Monitor* [online]. June 3, 2015.

charities and humanitarian organizations. Saudi humanitarian aid is often delivered with a religious message – the purpose of such action is to reinforce the aspect of help to "Sunni brothers" in Yemen. However, the problem with export of Saudi religious identity to Yemen is twofold: first, support of radical Salafi groups can negatively interfere into any future political arrangement because with financial and military backing their real power increases and they may demand substantial share of political power without the need to compromise with other parties of the conflict. Second, there is no targeted strategy and little oversight – just like in Syria, it seems like Salafi militias and the affiliated tribes that commit to fighting the Houthis are given money, arms and supplies without requirement for assurances. This leads to ineffectiveness, infighting and risk of weapons ending up with radical Jihadi strands or AQAP that could threaten SA once again in the future. Therefore, even though SA is in this case trying to make use of strong religious convergence with Yemeni pro-government factions as a way to reinforce its foreign policy interests, it is disputable whether such actions will help retain stability and uphold Saudi position in Yemen in the long run.

Conclusion

This work has tried to answer the research question *Is the concept of religious (national) identity reflected in the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and in the relationships of Saudi Arabia and Iran with their respective proxy allies in the current Middle Eastern conflicts?* The analysis of relationships between SA, Iran and their respective proxy allies in Lebanon, Syria and Yemen affirms that religious (national) identity can shape alliances and influence their quality. Diverging religious national identities of SA and Iran can be manipulated and instrumentalized, which aggravates the rivalry and impacts on the proxy conflicts. Thus, the statement formulated by Henry R. Nau in his theory of national identity is also valid, i.e. the power interests and the constructivist identities complement each other, and the pure balance of power logic is not enough to explain them. Put simply, religious identity of the actors can alter strength of an alliance as well as course of the conflict. To illustrate the point, we can imagine a structure of four layers: at the bottom, there is always a base layer of pragmatic interest aiming at safeguarding of security of a given regional power. This interest can be secured by second layer of internal balancing, which can be imagined as developing a power's superiority in the realm of material factors. Atop lies the third layer of external balancing, i.e. alliances with outside actors. In the fourth layer the identity of the outside actor comes into play, whereby the major power tries to ally with such actors that are not only able to push forward the power's agenda but at the same time share similar identity, as this would fortify their mutual relationship by creation of mutual affinity, lasting alliance and common goals. The fourth layer is the most nuanced because interplay between major power's identity and manifold minor factors, including identities, interests and alliances of the local actors within their respective states, need to be considered.

The previous chapters also demonstrate importance of religious identity in dynamics of political developments and ongoing conflicts. Syria is a very good example of deliberate manipulation of religious identities to their extreme forms by both Iran and SA, due to which the conflict became heavily sectarianized, although Syria used to be secular country. The probability that radicalized sectarian groups – especially armed Salafi and Shiite militias – will in the future negatively interfere into security of Syria is very high. In Lebanon, Hezbollah based its very existence on Shia Islam and on the idea of the Resistance, which not only shaped Lebanese political scene, but also deepened internal

sectarian rifts and propped up Iranian interests in the Syrian Civil War. In war-torn Yemen, Saudi export of Wahhabism, favoring and funding of Salafi groups and Islamist parties resembles playing with fire, especially in the almost complete absence of state structures and presence of AQAP.

The findings also suggest that in general sense, converging national or religious identities help safeguard national pragmatic interests, which is in accordance with Nau's theory. As the cases demonstrate, Iran apparently understood the identity can be used deliberately as a strategic tool long time ago, while SA has been using it somewhat haphazardly and unstrategically, which accounts for huge difference between both quality of relationships they have with their proxies, as well as the overall political/military successes (or lack thereof) both countries achieved in recent years on proxy battlefields in Syria, Lebanon and Yemen.

Therefore, when it comes to Iran and the Iranian proxies discussed in the previous chapters, we can see that not only Iran has clearly defined religious national identity, but it deliberately strengthens it in the places of key Iranian strategic interest through religious soft power, export of the Islamic Revolution and addressing the grievances of disenchanted groups, often Shia minorities, in effort to reach convergence of religious identities. The case of Yemen shows that Iran is ready to act as a spoiler of Saudi endeavor to become regional hegemon, but the core of Iranian strategic interests in the Middle East lie first and foremost in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq (which wasn't covered in this thesis). In these countries, Iran has a pattern of investing huge efforts and financial means to reinforce religious convergence with Shiite actors, as it is deemed a reliable way to create alliances based not only on common pragmatic interest but also on common identity. Remarkably, as shown in the case of Syria and Lebanon, Iran has been slowly advancing its interests via local actors by targeted and efficient approach, the goal not necessarily being complete domination over the state, as this could cause overstretch, but rather ability to influence political decision-making in the given country so that the Iranian interests abroad are secured. In failed states where authority of the state is insufficient, Iran tries to entrench its position by empowering local proxy actors and by having real power on the ground. Importantly, as can be observed in Lebanon and Syria (and it would be most probably observed also in Iraq), Iran-supported Shiite actors have a certain comprehensive vision they offer to their followers; this vision is tailored to address local grievances and specificities but is still in convergence with Iranian identity and interests.

The case of Saudi Arabia is a bit more tricky. The question of Saudi religious national identity seems to be clear at a first glance, but in fact it contains contradictions and inconsistencies stemming from the inherent nature of Wahhabi creed, absolutist nature of Saudi ruling power and need to modernize the country. Therefore, when Saudis support proxy actors in areas of their strategic interest, unlike Iran they do not come up with coherently drafted strategy and a vision to achieve certain goals. The only thing they do is support a wide range of more or less religiously affiliated groups or government actors. Thus, obviously, the core idea is to connect first and foremost with actors that would promote Saudi interests as well as Salafism, Wahhabism or generally Sunni identity. However, Saudi soft power as a tool for achieving religious convergence is historically known to produce exclusive communities and irreconcilable extremism that can be dangerously unpredictable, as it often spreads via informal networks over which Saudis do not exercise control. Ambiguity of (quietist, activist or Jihadi) Salafi creed also causes infighting and disunity in the ranks of the Saudi-supported actors themselves, as there is no feasible consensus on what the actual goal is and how to achieve it, not even speaking of retaining it in the long run. Important role is played by the oil rent factor; namely the tendency to use the funds inefficiently and to "flood" the proxies by resources in the hope it will in itself suffice to somehow enforce Saudi interests without comprehensive strategy. All this means that although SA tries to make use of identitarian convergence, it is not doing so systematically and circumspectly, and the problem also rests within the promoted Saudi religious identity itself.

Finally, all this is not to claim that religious identities in the current Middle Eastern conflicts are somehow surprisingly superior to other interfering (pragmatic) factors, because simple explanation of alliances and enmities by Sunni-Shia divide is insufficient. That would become clearly visible if complex analysis of relationships between Middle Eastern states and NSAs was conducted. Also, it is difficult to establish specifically *how* important is the religious national identity in general. As qualitative methods show, it plays certain role in each separate case but the only thing we can observe is that it matters, sometimes more, and sometimes less. In any case, this means religious identity as a separate factor in the Middle Eastern conflicts should be taken into consideration in the context of pragmatic interests, and it should not be neglected only as an unimportant side fact. Religious identities can be manipulated and used for achieving realpolitik goals, and

thus their impact on those Middle Eastern battlefields deemed strategic by both Saudi Arabia and Iran is not negligible.

Summary

The aim of this thesis was to focus attention to the constructivist side of Middle Eastern conflicts instead of usual approach that mostly deals with realist and pragmatic aspects of power. In order to do this, theoretical framework of Henry R. Nau was used to devise the concept of *religious (national) identities* that can either converge or diverge and so contribute to solid alliance or conflictual relationship. Consequently, the research question asks whether the religious (national) identity is reflected in the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and in the relationship of Saudi Arabia and Iran with their proxy allies in Lebanon, Syria and Yemen, influencing dynamics of Middle Eastern proxy conflicts. To find out answers, qualitative research was conducted on religious identities and mutual relationships between Saudi Arabia, Iran and state or non-state actors in Syria, Yemen and Lebanon.

First, construction of identities of both Saudi Arabia and Iran shows how their differing religious national identities based on Sunni or Shiite Islamic creed shape their political mindsets both internally (in domestic politics) and externally (within the broader Middle Eastern context). Namely, they are regional powers in both pragmatic and ideological sense. In accordance with Nau's assertion of unstable conflictual relationship between countries having "diverging identities, but roughly equal power," different religious national identities contribute to aggravating the rivalry: SA and Iran assume worldwide leadership of Sunni and Shiite Muslims, from which emanates the effort to use this position to strengthen influence over less powerful allies in the areas of strategic interest and to "export" their religious national identities abroad. At the same time, we find that Saudi and Iranian religious national identities differ not only in their basic functioning principles, but also in consistency and provision of unified vision. While Iranian leitmotif of the Islamic Revolution relatively feasibly integrates modern thought, totalitarian Islamic theocracy and pre-Islamic Iranian nationalism, Saudi ideological narrative struggles to find reconciliation between fundamentalist Wahhabism, radical Jihadi tendencies, absolutist monarchy and calls for modernization and moderation.

Further, construction of the religious identities of state and non-state actors in Syria, Lebanon and Yemen shows several interesting trends. First, even though the religious identities of less powerful actors are sometimes rather vague, they are often manipulated by the powers to reach greater religious convergence. As a result, export and support of

Shiite revolutionary rhetoric or Salafi extremism has significant impact on deepening of sectarian rifts and conflicts. Connected to this is the second finding, namely that greater religious convergence can be used as a strategic tool to create durable alliances sharing similar goals. The powers can use converging religious identity to entrench themselves in a state via the state or non-state actor. Thirdly, there are differences in how both powers use this tool: while Iran seems to be using it in deliberate manner to secure its interests in strategic areas, Saudi Arabia has a history of haphazard support of groups that share Saudi religious identity, but sometimes happen to be irreconcilable and unpredictable Salafi radicals unable to push forward Saudi interests. To this is linked the fourth finding, namely that Saudi support is often undeclared and informal, which can have unintended consequences, i.e. Saudi Arabia can lose control over development either on the political scene or on the battlefield.

To sum up, we see that religious (national) identity is a factor that deserves attention in study of current Middle Eastern proxy conflicts and overall Middle Eastern political settings, although additional elaboration on the role of religious (national) identities in relationships of Saudi Arabia and Iran with more Middle Eastern state and non-state actors (e.g. Iraqi militias, Egypt, Palestinian Hamas) would be useful to provide more conclusive results.

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Tematické vymedzenie

Saudská Arábia a Irán sú v súčasnosti dva štáty považované za blízkovýchodné regionálne mocnosti, ktoré významnou mierou ovplyvňujú tamojšie dianie, a to predovšetkým skrze ich vzájomnú rivalitu. I keď nepriateľstvo medzi oboma štátmi neprerástlo do otvoreného konfliktu, významne destabilizuje Blízky východ tým, že sa odráža v zástupných konfliktoch a celkovom náraste sektárskeho násilia v regióne, keďže ako Saudská Arábia, tak aj Irán podporujú spriaznených aktérov, skrze ktorých chcú v danom štáte upevniť svoju moc. Hoci táto tendencia je dlhodobá – rivalita medzi oboma štátmi sa začala prejavovať už po Islamskej revolúcii v Iráne po roku 1979 – mocenské vákuum, ktoré na Blízkom východe vzniklo po Arabskej jari (2011) poskytlo vhodnú príležitosť (*window of opportunity*) pre zintenzívnenie súperenia. Za ďalší významný bod možno považovať aj rok 2015, kedy na Blízkom východe došlo ku niekoľkým významným udalostiam. Prvou z ich bolo podpísanie Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), ktorý obmedzil iránsky jadrový program výmenou za zrušenie niektorých ekonomických sankcii, čo v Iráne vyvolalo veľký optimizmus a vyhliadku zlepšenia ekonomickej situácie. Druhou bola zmena saudského vedenia, ktoré, ako sa dalo očakávať, JCPOA neprivítalo s nadšením. Paranoja z možného nárastu iránskej moci v regióne sa ukázala už na jar roku 2015 ofenzívou na Iránom podporovaných Húthijských povstalcov v Jemene. Treťou je zvýšená miera zasahovania Iránu do konfliktu v Sýrii, kedy iránske Revolučné gardy spolu s Hizballáhom a ruskými vojenskými jednotkami zabránili zrúteniu režimu Bašára al-Asada, čím de facto zvrátili dovtedajší priebeh konfliktu. V reakcii na to dočasne vystupňovala svoju podporu sýrskej islamistickej opozícii aj Saudská Arábia a ostatné štáty Zálivu, čo však povstalcom napriek všetkému nepomohlo.

Všeobecným záverom preto býva, že Iránu sa na rozdiel od Saudskej Arábie podarilo upevniť svoju moc tam, kde mala predtým iba obmedzenú prítomnosť, čím sa myslí predovšetkým Sýria, Libanon a tiež Irak. Saudská Arábia naopak v týchto štátoch bojuje o zachovanie aspoň takej úrovne vplyvu, akú mala roky pred Arabskou jarou. Podrobnejšie skúmanie odhalí, že rozdiely sú viditeľné práve v tom, akých proxy aktérov obe mocnosti podporujú v záujme zvýšenia svojho vplyvu v danej krajine, a tiež to, s akou víziou a stratégiou prichádzajú. Táto otázka má priamy súvis s náboženskou / národnou identitou zúčastnených hráčov, čo je zo zbežného pohľadu možné pozorovať i len na niekoľkých príkladoch saudskej podpory salafistických uskupení či iránskej podpory šiitskych milícii s výrazne protizápadnou a protisaudskou rétorikou.

Nakoľko región Blízkeho východu je veľmi komplexný, poskytuje mnoho možností a uhlov pohľadu, skrze ktoré možno nahliadať na jeho vývoj. Častým predpokladom (najmä v prípade Saudskej Arábie) je to, že zahraničnopolitické rozhodnutia dotýkajúce sa zástupných vojen sú určované výlučne pragmatickými záujmami. Rozhodne nie je kategoricky možné vyhlásiť, že takéto tvrdenie je nepravdivé – strategické priority oboch hráčov sú skutočne ovplyvnené viac realpolitikou než ideologickým smerovaním. To vysvetľuje, prečo Irán sústredí svoju pozornosť na Libanon, Sýriu a Irak a prečo Saudská

Arábia vníma konflikt v Jemene ako existenčnú hrozbu. Blízky východ je však tiež regiónom, kde je náboženskej či sektárskej príslušnosti venovaná pozornosť do takej miery, že má potenciál formovať výber spojencov, trvalosť aliancii, pevnosť väzieb medzi nimi či priebeh konfliktov. Z toho dôvodu sa domnievam, že náboženská identita je prvok, ktorý by v rámci súčasnej konštelácie Iránu, Saudskej Arábie a ich spojencov v konfliktoch stál za to byť preskúmaný a poskytol by popri realistickom ponímaní aj konštruktivistický náhľad.

Výskumná otázka a cieľ práce

Cieľom práce je zodpovedanie otázky, či sa koncept národnej/náboženskej identity odráža v rivalite medzi Saudskou Arábiou a Iránom a vo vzťahoch, ktorý majú oba tieto štáty so svojimi proxy spojencami v súčasných zástupných konfliktoch na Blízkom východe.

Odpoveď na otázku nielenže určí, či táto identita je alebo nie je dôležitá, ale zároveň popíše a zhodnotí každý vzťah, ktorý má Saudská Arábia a Irán so štátnym/ neštátnym aktérom v Libanone, Sýrii a Jemene tak, aby existovala predstava, akým spôsobom a prečo do neho náboženská identita zasahuje, a z akého dôvodu je toto relevantné pre zástupný konflikt, resp. politický vývoj. Cieľom by mala byť pokiaľ možno čo najviac ucelená „mapa“ vzájomných vzťahov, ktorá by mohla byť užitočná pri analýze dynamiky Blízkovýchodných konfliktov a sektárskeho napätia z hľadiska, ktoré bude spájať realistické aj konštruktivistické pohľady. Zároveň by cieľom mala byť aj určitá aktualizácia poznatkov na základe nedávneho vývoja, nakoľko analyzované prostredie sa stále mení a obzvlášť obdobie po roku 2015 prinieslo zmeny v ich vzájomnej rivalite, keďže došlo ku podpisu JCPOA, Irán začal významne zasahovať do vojny v Sýrii v Saudskej Arábii došlo ku zmene vedenia.

Súčasný stav bádania

Čo sa týka literatúry dotýkajúcej sa témy práce, existuje pomerne veľké množstvo zdrojov, ktoré sa však častokrát uvedeným problémom zaoberajú iba z dielčej perspektívy.

Všeobecne vzaté, pramene možno deliť do dvoch základných kategórii; prvou sú zdroje politologického zamerania, ktoré sa sústreďujú predovšetkým na politický vývoj a nahliadajú na rivalitu Saudskej Arábie, Iránu a proxy konfliktov predovšetkým z pragmatického hľadiska (Akbarzadeh a Conduit: *Iran in the world: President Rouhani's Foreign Policy*, 2016; Baghat, Ehteshami a Quilliam: *Security and Bilateral Issues between Iran and Its Arab Neighbors,* 2017; Niblock: *Saudi Arabia: Power, Legitimacy and Survival*; 2006). Hoci sú tieto publikácie užitočné, slabinou niektorých z nich je v menšej miere to, že ide o prehľadové publikácie a podrobné chronologické záznamy udalostí, ktoré neposkytujú nijak zvlášť originálny náhľad na problematiku. Druhú kategóriu potom tvoria zdroje antropologické, ktoré sú veľmi užitočné pre chápanie kultúrnych a náboženských rámcov politického myslenia Saudskej Arábie a Iránu, ale väčšinou tieto skutočnosti neprepájajú v širšom kontexte aktuálneho vývoja Blízkeho východu a venujú sa podrobnému skúmaniu náboženských nuáns (Commins: *Islam in Saudi Arabia*, 2015; Al-Madawi: *Muted Modernists: Struggle over Divine Politics in Saudi Arabia,* 2016). Z toho dôvodu by všeobecným zámerom práce bolo prepojiť tieto dve kategórie a poukázať na to, ako špecifické politické myslenie formované národnou /náboženskou identitou funguje v kontexte aktuálnej problematiky zástupných konfliktov a pragmatických faktorov v nich.

Pokiaľ ide o literatúru týkajúcu sa národných/náboženských identít, táto téma je doposiaľ najlepšie spracovaná v prípade Iránu, nakoľko téma tamojšej perzsko-islamskej identity začala byť aktuálna po revolúcii v roku 1979 (Karimifard: *Constructivism, National Identity and Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 2012; Saleh a Worrall: *Between Darius and Khomeini: Exploring Iran's National Identity Problematique*, 2015). V prípade Saudskej Arábie sa téme venuje minimum zdrojov, pričom najpodstatnejší z nich bol publikovaný v roku 1998 (Nevo: *Religion and National Identity in Saudi Arabia*, 1998). Je však možné pomerne dobre pracovať s vyššie uvedenými monografiami, ktoré sa zaoberajú vznikom Wahhábizmu na Arabskom polostrove, pretože tieto súvisia aj s otázkou saudskej národnej/náboženskej identity.

Neprekvapí, že pokiaľ ide o štátnych a neštátnych aktérov v Libanone, Sýrii a Jemene, najväčšia pozornosť spomedzi nich bola doposiaľ venovaná Hizballáhu a jeho šíitskej identite, ktorá má priamy dopad na vývoj v regióne Levanty (Alagha: *The Shifts in Hizbullah's Ideology: Religious Ideology, Political Ideology and Political Program*, 2006; Kizilkaya: *Identity, War, and Just Cause for War: Hezbollah and Its Use of Force*, 2017). Pokiaľ ide o vplyv náboženskej identity Iránu v Sýrii, tento sa realizuje pod dohľadom sýrskej vlády (Maltzahn: *The Syria-Iran Axis: Cultural Diplomacy and International Relations in the Middle East*, 2013), a hoci v rokoch pred sýrskou občianskou vojnou nebol nijak markantný, od roku 2015 nadobúda dôležitosť spolu so zvýšenou prítomnosťou Hizballáhu a iránskych šíitskych milícii v krajine. Otázka salafistických skupín a ich prepojenia na Saudskú Arábiu je čiastočne spracovaná vo vedeckých článkoch a reportoch; problémom je ale pomerne veľká rozdrobenosť či už skupín samotných, alebo aj ich náboženských identít (Baylouny a Mullins: *Cash is King: Financial Sponsorship and Changing Priorities in the Syrian Civil War*, 2017; Talhany: *The Syrian Muslim Brothers and the Syrian-Iranian Relationship*, 2009). Ku téme Húthijských povstalcov a ich náboženskej identity je možné dohľadať neveľký počet zdrojov, ktoré sú však pomerne kvalitné a komplexné (Juneau: *Iran's Policy towards the Houthis in Yemen: A Limited Return on a Modest Investment*, 2016). Naopak, minimum zdrojov sa zaoberá salafizmom v Libanone (Pall: *Lebanese Salafis between the Gulf and Europe*, 2013) a Jemene (Bonnefoy: *Salafism in Yemen: Transnationalism and Religious Identity*, 2009), čo bolo trochu prekvapivé zistenie, nakoľko obe skupiny značným spôsobom ovplyvňujú stabilitu a aktuálnu bezpečnostnú situáciu v oboch krajinách. V Jemene sú salafisti súčasťou vlády a hlavným príjemcom saudskej vojenskej aj finančnej podpory, zatiaľ čo v Libanone predstavujú mobilizačnú bázu ako pre islamistických radikálov, tak aj pre voličskú základňu Saada Haríriho a jeho prosaudskej politiky.

Teoretický rámec

Práca sa v teoretickej rovine opiera o východiská, s ktorými v monografii *At Home Abroad: Identity and Power in American Politics* (2002) prichádza americký teoretik medzinárodných vzťahov Henry R. Nau. Ten hovorí, že v medzinárodnej politike i v konfliktoch je potrebné prihliadať nielen na realistické a pragmatické aspekty, ale aj na konštruktivistickú stránku veci, ktorá sa týka konceptu tzv. "národnej identity." Národná identita by sa podľa Naua dala nazvať aj akousi „ústrednou ideou štátu" a je možné ju skonštruovať na základe faktorov, medzi ktoré patria napr. história, politické zriadenie, náboženstvo, kultúrne zvyklosti, systém justície, atď. Národná identita je podstatná preto, lebo je základom legitimity štátneho zriadenia, resp. určuje normy, podľa ktorých štát môže legitímne použiť silu voči iným štátom.

Podľa Naua je tiež možné národné identity porovnávať a určovať, do akej miery sú si podobné, teda, či „konvergujú alebo divergujú.“ Táto konvergencia alebo divergencia, pokiaľ je daná do vzťahu s reálnou mocou, ktorou disponuje štát, môže určiť, do akej miery bude medzi štátmi dochádzať ku konfliktu. Pôvod konfliktu totiž Nau pripisuje diskrepancii medzi identitami, a teda zároveň diskrepancii v ponímaní toho, kedy môže štát legitímne použiť silu voči inému štátu. Nau v empirickej časti monografie konštruuje národnú identitu USA a dáva ju do vzťahu s inými mocnosťami (Rusko, Čína, Afrika, EÚ, Latinská Amerika, atď.), na základe čoho vytvára určitú konšteláciu vzťahov a pravdepodobnosti konfliktu medzi nimi.

Čo je dôležité, Nau tvrdí, že jeho teóriu je možné aplikovať na ktorýkoľvek štát na svete a vytvoriť tak jemu vlastnú konšteláciu vzťahov a konfliktov. Pointou práce je preto aplikácia tohto konceptu na Saudskú Arábiu, Irán a štátnych i neštátnych aktérov v krajinách Blízkeho východu, kde majú obe regionálne mocnosti strategické záujmy. Saudská Arábia a Irán majú národné identity založené na príslušnosti ku sunnitskému a šiitskemu islamu, rovnako ako niektorí ich spojenci. Ich vzájomné vzťahy by následne bolo možné porovnať a získať tak odpoveď na otázku, či je náboženská identita pre spojenectvá na Blízkom východe podstatná v súlade s Nauovou teóriou, čo sa odráža aj v zástupných konfliktoch, alebo sa tamojšie prostredie riadi iba pragmatickými záujmami jednotlivých hráčov.

Metodológia

Metodologicky by práca nemala byť obzvlášť komplikovaná; malo by sa jednať o sériu menších prípadových štúdii, v ktorých bude potrebné najprv skonštruovať saudskú a iránsku štátnu/náboženskú identitu, a následne ich prepojiť so štátnymi a neštátnymi aktérmi v Libanone (Hizballáh vs. Libanonskí sunniti a saláfisti), Sýrii (vláda Bašára al-Asada vs. islamistická opozícia) a Jemene (Húthijovia vs. jemenská vláda spriaznená s jemenskými saláfistami), pričom náboženskú identitu týchto hráčov bude tiež nutné vymedziť. Pri vytváraní tejto štruktúry bude nutný predovšetkým o kvalitatívny výskum na základe sekundárnych prameňov, tj. hlavne literatúry, ktorá je podrobnejšie rozpísaná v časti venovanej súčasnému stavu bádania, ale taktiež reportov a novinových článkov ku aktuálnym témam, ktoré doposiaľ neboli vedecky spracované. Takýto metodologický rámec by mal byť postačujúci na to, aby poskytol pomerne presný a ucelený obraz o úlohe, ktorú náboženská identita zohráva v spojenectvách uvedených hráčov na poli zástupných konfliktov.

Predbežná osnova

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    a. Pojem náboženskej (národnej) identity podľa teórie Henryho R. Naua
    b. Pojednanie o rovnováhe identít a rovnováhe síl
3. Metodológia
    a. Rozbor literatúry / stav bádania
4. Vytvorenie náboženských národných identít
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    b. Saudská Arábia
5. Prepojenie SA a Iránu s proxy spojencami
    a. SA, Saad Harírí a libanonskí saláfisti

    b. Irán a Hizballáh
    c. SA a islamistická opozícia v Sýrii
    d. Irán a vláda Bašára al-Asada
    e. SA, jemenská vláda a jemenskí islamisti
    f. Irán a Húthijovia
6. Záver
7. Zhrnutie
8. Zoznam použitej literatúry

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