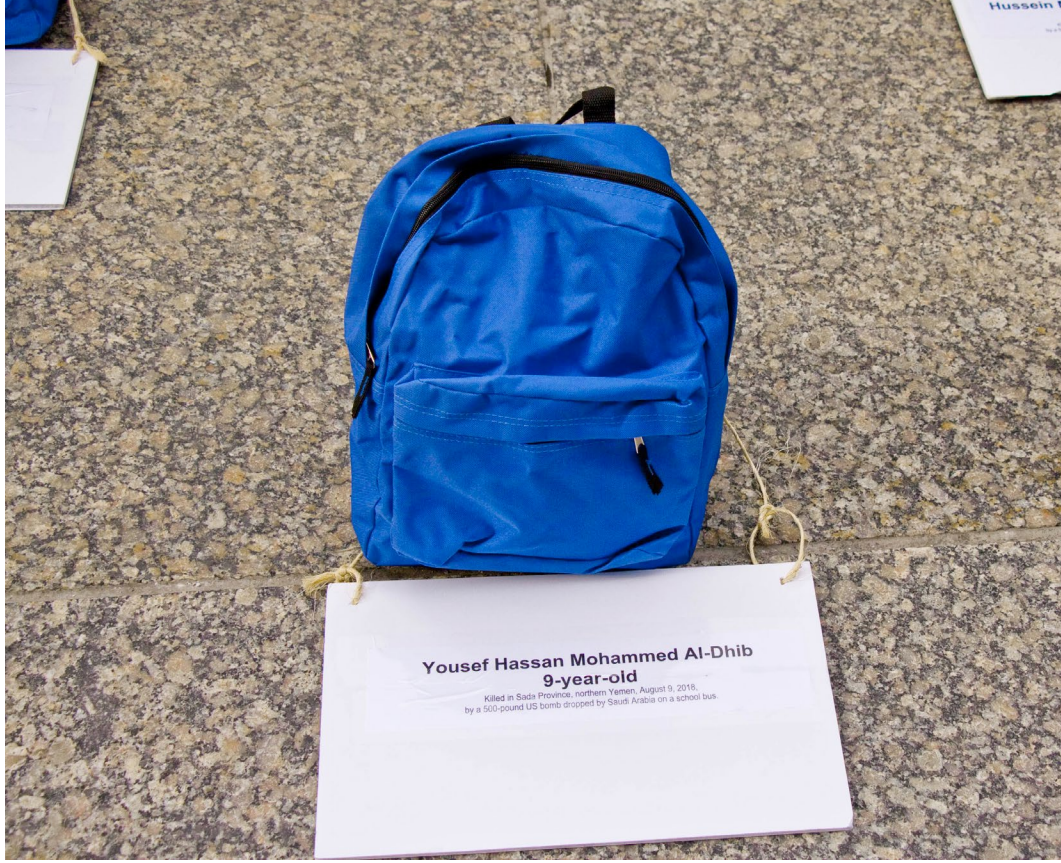

Proxy Warfare's Impact on Sectarianization: The Case of the Saudi-Iranian Rivalry

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Cover art: Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have committed a school bus bombing in Yemen in August 2018, killing 40 children. In response, an event of blue backpacks was held in Chicago, IL, to remember the loss of these children. Source: Charles Edward Miller. November 30, 2018, https://flic.kr/p/R9emBy.

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Abstract

The Saudi Arabian and Iranian rivalry has torn the Middle East apart, aggravating the region's struggles concerning persistent authoritarianism, militia violence, and sectarian tensions. This paper explores the impact of proxy warfare on sectarianization by studying the case of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry in both Syria and Yemen. It analyses the reasons for using the proxy warfare as a means to further assert rival dominance in the Middle East and examines how the rivals use existing sectarian tensions to further their cause, leading to further division. The paper finds that proxy warfare has fortified the sectarian rift in the Middle East, increasing the risk of confrontational war between Saudi Arabia and Iran and exacerbating already existing religious strains across the region.

Introduction

The Saudi Arabian and Iranian rivalry has torn the Middle East apart, aggravating the region's struggle concerning persistent authoritarianism, militia violence, and sectarian tensions. Indeed, the region's marked religious differences have allowed the rivals to form alliances with countries that share their version of Islam. But the Saudi-Iranian rivalry is not exclusively defined by a religious struggle. Rather, it is a multi-faceted competition on economic, political and religious dimensions, as both Tehran and Riyadh vie for control of the politically fraught region. With the obsolescence of total war in the twenty-first century, and in a quest for regional hegemony, the rivals have employed proxy warfare, turning the Middle East into their battlefield. Proxy wars are "conflicts in which a third party intervenes indirectly in order to influence the strategic outcome in favour of its preferred faction" (Mumford 2013, 40). This type of indirect warfare allows the rivals to orchestrate low-cost operations in neighbouring states, providing them with extended influence across the region.

By targeting opposition movements in neighbouring countries, Sunni Saudi Arabia and predominantly Shi'a Iran have further entrenched sectarian tensions and extended their respective influence in the Middle East. Propped against the background of a classic balance of power scenario, which is characterized by a zero-sum game, Riyadh and Tehran both believe that "if one country gains in the region or makes inroads with Western powers, it has to come at the expense of the other" (Robins-Early 2017).

In order to attain such influence in the region, one wonders what makes the Middle East susceptible to the strategy of proxy warfare. Within the context of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, the power of religious identity has occupied a central role in the permeability of neighboring states to indirect warfare. In effect, the rivals recognize the possibility for political gain in the conflict between the Sunnis and Shi'as and capitalize on pre-existing sectarian tensions to gain regional dominance. To better understand the prevalence of proxy warfare in the Middle East, one must turn to the sectarianization thesis; sectarianization is "an active process shaped by political actors operating within specific contexts, pursuing political goals that involve the mobilization of popular sentiments around particular identity markers" (Hashemi 2017, 3). In addition to exacerbating identity cleavages in neighbouring states, the rivalry has weakened state institutions and prolonged pre-existing civil wars in Syria and Yemen through proxy warfare. Undoubtedly, Saudi Arabia and Iran use proxy warfare as a tool to expand their regional hegemony at the expense of weaker Middle Eastern nations. Furthermore, religious identities are exploited by the rivals as a political tool for Saudi Arabia and Iran to gather support and influence in neighbouring states, further dividing the Middle East.

Historical Background of the Saudi-Iranian Rivalry

The Iranian and Saudi Arabian rivalry is multi-faceted, with two main dimensions: a positional rivalry in which states compete for political and military influence over the Middle East, and a rivalry between two competing religious identities. Although the religious schism has existed since the creation of these nation-states, the turning point in Saudi-Iranian relations was the Iranian Revolution of 1979, in which Iran threatened the legitimacy of Saudi Arabia. The Saudi Arabian Sunni monarchy was menaced by the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini, a Shi'a authority in Iran, who aimed to replace the Iranian monarchy with a theocracy. Indeed, Khomeini endangered "the territorial integrity of Saudi Arabia by appealing to its disenfranchised Shi'a population in the Eastern Province, unsettling the al-Saud's confidence about the reliability of support from the United States, challenging their claim to Islamic leadership, and imparting a new vocabulary of resistance to Islamists across the region regardless of their sectarian hue." (Wehrey 2009, 13) Khomeini denounced the al-Saud regime as illegitimate puppets of the West and accused Saudi Arabia of propagating an anti-Quranic version of Islam.

The success of the revolution in Iran created severe unrest in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, an area heavily populated by Shi'as. As Saudi's National Guard attempted to suppress the riots, the state was plunged into crisis, which

the al-Saud regime blamed on Iran (Terrill 2011, 5). The Islamic Revolution that emanated from Iran therefore exacerbated geopolitical tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran through the propagation of a revolutionary ideology that opposed the al-Saud monarchy as well as the imperialism of the West. This anti-monarchical and universalist pressure emanated by Khomeini established the grounds for the entrenched sectarianism prevalent in the region. In response to the Iranian Revolution, and faced with dwindling influence, Saudi Arabia found a foothold in the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Riyadh saw this as an opportunity to reaffirm its Sunni legitimacy to both the international community, with support from the United States, and to the Saudis themselves (Wehrey 2009, 14). Saudi Arabia used the Soviet invasion to support the recruitment and training of jihadists in Afghanistan.

From 1980 to 1988, Saudi Arabia launched its first proxy war in Iraq. Tensions had been boiling between Iran and Iraq due to various territorial and political disputes. The Islamic Revolution had incited insurgency in Iraq's Shi'a majority. Iraqi President Saddam Hussein therefore wanted to reassert his country's sovereignty and seize control of Khuzestan, an oil-producing Iranian border region (Chubbin 2004, 5). Iraq, due to its geographic position between the rivals, has always been a central determinant of the power dynamics between Riyadh and Tehran, as "a weak Iraq can arguably be said to increase rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, whereas a strong Iraq can stabilize or moderate the tensions" (Wehrey 2009, 16).

Thus, Saudi Arabia, aiming to hinder the spread of Iranian revolutionary ideas, used Iraq as a buffer against Tehran. Riyadh was heavily supported by the United States in terms of military aid and forces, which weakened Iranian influence in the region. The eight-year war, which resulted in approximately one million deaths, set the pattern of proxy warfare later commonly employed by the rivals. However, the Iran-Iraq war weakened the Iranian devotion to spreading its revolutionary ideas throughout the Middle East, and instead presented the country with a new mission: to topple the Saudi regime supported by the United States (Fisher 2016).

To Saudi dismay, Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, which had been an important ally to Riyadh. After the Iraqis were expelled from Kuwait by the United States, Saddam Hussein's regime became particularly sectarian, which allowed Iran to cultivate allies among Iraq's increasingly marginalized Shi'a population. Although Iraq remained relatively hostile to both powers until 2003, the US-led intervention spurred suspicion within the country. Distrustful of Saudi Arabian motives, and fearful that the US and Riyadh would attempt to assemble a new Iraqi government, Iraq saw a possible ally in Iran. Tehran quickly filled the postwar vacuum by utilizing its leverage with Shi'a groups to influence politics in Baghdad, and by supporting Iraqi Shi'a militias, who opposed the US intervention. After a decade of diminishing influence, Iran was finally able to gain a foothold in Iraq. It became evident that Riyadh's attempt at containing Iran by exploiting sectarianism and attempting to back the region's Sunni majority had backfired.

As the Iraqi conflict escalated in the mid-2000s, another proxy war began in Lebanon. Lebanese political dynamics, characterized by entrenched state sectarianism, made it easily penetrable for Tehran and Riyadh and allowed them to influence domestic parties and militias. With this in mind, Saudi Arabia and Iran waged "a new kind of proxy struggle 'not on conventional military battlefields' […] but 'within the domestic politics of weakened institutional structures'" (Fisher 2016).

In the midst of the 2011 Arab Spring and the consequent toppling of multiple Middle Eastern regimes, Riyadh quickly attempted to fill these vacuums, promising aid to countries such as Jordan, Yemen and Egypt. In nations such as Syria, Saudi Arabia funded Sunni rebels, with Iran later retaliating by sending Hezbollah to fight on behalf of the Syrian government. The conflict has since escalated after Iran reached nuclear deals with the US and the Saudi-backed president in Yemen was ousted by a rebel group with ties to Iran. Unfortunately, the Middle East's continuing trend of failing governments, continuing crises and proxy wars between Saudi Arabia and Iran will only further entrench sectarian tensions.

The Saudi-Iran Proxy War Hypothesis

Proxy wars occur when State A, the benefactor, encourages the population of State C to fight against State B. It is important to note that State B and/or C can be rebel groups or para-states, and State A is external to the existing conflict. Through indirect warfare, the benefactor supplies its ally with a combination of political, economic and military assistance. Because of the relatively low monetary costs and a lack of direct engagement, proxy wars are a compelling strategy for states looking to expand their regional power. This notion is central to the proxy war hypothesis, which maintains that interventions must be carried out with the intention of maximizing interest whilst minimizing risk.

Essential to the theory of proxy warfare is the presence of pre-existing tensions within the proxy state. Besides the international dimension of proxy warfare, there is an underlying domestic element to the conflict; the war deals first and foremost with local concerns. This allows those intervening by proxy to distance themselves from their actions. External powers operate with the intent to influence the outcome of the internal conflict at hand. Through means such as subversion, military training, and monetary aid, the benefactor can thus "keep aloof or pretend to keep aloof from the warfare" (Loveman 2002, 30). Therefore, unlike traditional warfare, proxy wars occur in an indirect way and allow the

benefactor to influence a country, group or region while suffering only minor consequences from its involvement.

The most common support a proxy receives from a benefactor is the supply of military equipment. By providing abundant resources and weaponry, the patron enhances the proxy's military capability, allowing for improved management of the conflict and reducing the likelihood that the benefactor will have to commit its own forces. By acting as a surrogate for direct intervention, "the proxy is an instrument of the principal state's foreign policy, and that aid gives the principal at least some influence over the proxy" (Loveman 2002, 32). Ultimately, what defines proxy warfare is the benefactor's detachment from the conflict.

Sectarianization Theory and the Saudi-Iranian Rivalry

Contextualizing the Saudi Arabian and Iranian rivalry solely as a product of a 7th century theological divide between Sunnis and Shi'as would not be accurate. However, the schism still plays an important factor in the quest for regional power. In effect, Saudi Arabia and Iran capitalize on the pre-existing sectarian differences within the region to foster ties with weaker countries and oppositional movements. This process of sectarianization allows for the manipulation and entrenchment of identity cleavages based on religious differences, in which the "state actors do not champion the cause of any one community but see political gain in the conflict between the competing identities" (Hashemi 2017, 5).

Central to the theory of sectarianization is the concept of political authoritarianism. Authoritarian governments, characterized by concentrated power in the hands of one leader or the elite, have long dominated the politics of the Middle East and have facilitated the process of sectarianization. By manipulating sectarian identities, anti-democratic regimes can divert demands for political change and maintain their influence. This is a critical factor in understanding the effects of sectarianization in the Middle East as a result of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. In effect, "to paraphrase the famous Clausewitz aphorism about war as a continuation of politics by other means, sectarian conflict in the Middle East today is the perpetuation of political rule via identity mobilization" (Hashemi 2017, 3). Regimes first use sectarianization to expand their control and the sectarian divide later leads populations to support the regime belonging to their sect.

Sectarianization, shaped by class dynamics, weak state institutions and geopolitical rivalries, is a result of Saudi-Iranian proxy warfare. The increasing sectarianization of Middle East politics has increased the permeability and efficiency of proxy warfare due to the mobilization of people on the basis of sectarian differences. In order to gather regional influence, "local actors […] seek out regional allies who can supply them with money, guns, ideological cover, and diplomatic support. They look for regional allies who share […] their own political and ideological positions, with whom they feel some kinship on ideological or identity grounds" (Gause 2014, 4). Sunni Saudi Arabia appeals to Sunni rebel groups or governments, whilst Shi'a Iran forges ties with those that support Shi'a rhetoric. Through proxy warfare, sectarianization enables the rivals to appeal and infiltrate opposition groups, which weakens state institutions and harvests regional hegemony.

According to Professor Frederic Pearson, there are three primary reasons for which a state may resort to proxy warfare: the protection of social groups, ideology, and regional power balances (1974, 262). As Hans Morgenthau explains, ideology "does not respect national boundaries […]. It finds enemies and allies in all countries […] regardless of the niceties of international law" (1967, 428). By funding religiously motivated proxy groups, Saudi Arabia and Iran can expand their respective influence without undergoing the costs of direct warfare. In order to increase their power in the region, rival regimes appeal to group identities competitively in order to preserve their alliances (Telhami 2002, 27). The religious identities of Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shi'a Iran provide them with the agency and legitimacy to expand their influence in proxies. Although the sectarian tensions and state weaknesses amongst proxies were not a product of the rivalry, the rivals certainly take advantage of these pre-existing divides. State weaknesses allow for the rivals to provide arms and economic aid to support sectarian-affiliated allies in states overcome by civil war and disorder. Syria and Yemen, two of the most identity-fragmented states in the region, are victims of the power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

The Case of Yemen

Yemen is of vital strategic value to both Saudi Arabia and Iran. Saudi Arabia's proximity to Yemen presents the kingdom with a border security threat, as the frontier is susceptible to infiltration by Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. A stable Yemen is thus indispensable for Saudi Arabia. Perhaps most threatening to Saudi stability, however, is growing Iranian influence throughout Yemen. An increase in Tehran's influence in Yemen consolidates power in favour of Iranian-supported opposition groups, in turn establishing Iranian power in the Gulf region. Yemen is therefore critical to Iran's foreign policy and domestic security, as Tehran will be able to assert military power in a region predominantly influenced by Saudi Arabia.

The modern Yemeni state was formed in 1990, with the unification of the Saudi-supported Yemen Arab Republic and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen. The patrimonial rule of Ali Abdullah Saleh established the foundations for prospective state collapse. With a failure of unification and a weak central government, Saleh became the main target of oppositional movements directed by the Houthis, a minority group within the Shi'a community (Riedel 2017). The

2003 American invasion of Iraq deeply politicized and radicalized the movement, and the following decade was marked by armed conflict between the Houthis and Yemeni state. However, the rise of Sunni leader Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi altered the course of events. Critical of the new government, the Houthis formed an alliance with former foe Saleh. After Saleh's assassination on December 4th, 2017, the Houthis continued to make military gains and consolidate power over the Yemeni capital, Sanaa (Sharp 2018, 1).

In 2015, Iranian support of the Houthis in Yemen sparked a Saudi-led intervention in the country. Known as Operation Decisive Storm, the Saudi response was marked as "a first step towards curbing Iranian expansion in the Arab world rather than a step towards protecting Yemen and its legitimacy" ("Operation" 2015). In fact, Iranian influence has increased in Yemen, primarily through artillery shipments to the Houthis. In accordance with the proxy warfare hypothesis, the Iranian provision of weaponry to Yemen has allowed the movement to gather increasing power within the state. Iran continues to sustain the Houthi movement "with an increasingly potent arsenal of anti-ship and ballistic missiles, deadly sea mines and even explosive boats that have attacked allied ships in the Red Sea or Saudi territory across Yemen's northern border" (Schmitt 2017). By using the pre-existing tensions in Yemen between the government and militia movements, Iran is able to permeate the country with much less difficulty. What results is the exacerbation of a local conflict as rebel groups strengthen and the central government weakens. This permits Iran to advance its influence across the Middle East and challenge Saudi Arabia in the context of a broader regional rivalry.

Iranian support of the Houthis has had dramatic consequences in Yemen, the region's poorest country. The Civil War, exacerbated by the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, has led to grave humanitarian grievances. The Houthi offensive and Saudi-led air campaign has led Yemen to the verge of absolute famine (Laub 2016). The coalition and resistance fighters, as well as the Houthi rebels backed by Iran, have targeted hospitals and schools, diminishing access to vital resources. Most adversely, air and sea blockades established by Saudi Arabia upon Yemen prevent the adequate distribution of imports that the country relies on for food and fuel. As a result, the number of Yemenis impacted by food insecurity has increased by 32.5% in the last seven years (Knights 2018). The rivalry between these nations has provoked further airstrikes and ground fighting, and has "also destroyed critical infrastructure, further hampering the distribution of aid" (Laub 2016).

Originally a domestic struggle for power between political and tribal factions, the conflict in Yemen has been sectarianized by the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. It is vital to understand sectarianization "as an instrument in a long-running regional contest between rival narratives of regime legitimacy" (Colgan 2016, 43). Tehran's support of the Houthis has increased Iran's influence over Yemen's Shi'a minority populations. In response, Saudi Arabia attempted to legitimise the Hadi regime by leading a coalition of mostly Sunni states, including Sudan, Kuwait, the United Arab Empires, Qatar and Egypt.

Since the 2015 Saudi intervention, Tehran and Riyadh have used sharp sectarian rhetoric to divide the population. Currently, "sectarian slurs that were once the exclusive domain of extremist groups have become mainstreamed, and open appeals to sectarian solidarity have been expressed by prominent national voices," resulting in the emergence of deep cleavages within Yemeni society (Baron 2016). The increasingly sectarian divides have been exacerbated by the Saudi-led coalition, which consists primarily of Sunni states supporting the Sunni president. Meanwhile, Iran supports Shi'a militias such as Hezbollah ("Iran-backed Militias" 2016). Ultimately, the sectarianization of the Yemeni conflict underscores the importance of religion for alliance politics. By appealing to sectarian identities in Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Iran have respectively been able to influence politics within the state.

The Case of Syria

The Syrian Civil War, which began in 2011, has been a central battlefield in the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. As Tehran's only consistent ally since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Syria is of central importance to Iran. Geographically speaking, Syria provides a direct route to the Lebanese Hezbollah, a prime Iranian ally. This means that Iran can more easily supply weapons to Hezbollah through Syria (Levitt 2013). Fearful of Iranian influence in Damascus, Saudi Arabia has advanced an anti-Assad stance and strengthened rebel groups. By fortifying ties with oppositionist militias, Saudi Arabia attempts to ensure that these rebel groups will gain control in the country once the Assad regime is toppled.

In addition to providing rebels with military equipment and financial aid, Saudi Arabia has offered "to boost the status and capabilities of the political opposition to Assad, and especially the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces" (Berti 2014, 28). Iran, on the other hand, backs the Assad regime through military support by sending military advisers from the Iranian Quds Force and soldiers from its Shi'a proxy units, namely Hezbollah and Iraqi militias (Boghani 2018).

To prevent the overthrow of the Assad regime, Tehran has supported the government through extensive military aid, including weapons, training and intelligence sharing. Iran has also deployed the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps to Syria. In fact, Iran provided the state with the resources to create Jaysh al-Shabi, a Syrian paramilitary group consisting of 50,000 soldiers. Iran's strategy in Syria does not rely "on conventional military hardware or control of territory […] but on building ties with local forces who share its goals and benefit from

its financing and expertise" (Hubbard 2018).

As a benefactor in Syria, Iranian financial aid to Damascus has been critical for the sustenance of the Assad regime. In 2013, Iran provided Syria with a US$1 billion credit facility agreement. Less than six months later, Iran provided Damascus with an additional $3.6 billion to finance Syria's purchase of petrol (Sadjadpour 2013). By supporting the Syrian regime directly in colossal monetary and military ways, Iran is undermining revolutionary movements and strengthening the Assad regime, which ensures Tehran's own growing power and influence in the Middle East. In line with the proxy warfare hypothesis, Iran and Saudi Arabia use the weakening of state institutions—namely the dwindling Assad regime—and disaster brought by civil war in order to cement their respective influence and power in the Middle East. The conflict in Syria "has become ground zero in the war of position between [Iran and Saudi Arabia]," with both states heavily invested in the crisis (Hashemi 2017, 11). The side that prevails, through the Assad regime or the opposition groups, will grant a dramatic advantage in the quest for regional hegemony.

In the wake of the Arab Spring, peaceful protests focused on political reform intensified, and the Syrian conflict was tainted by sectarian hues. As state authority collapsed, "the regime came to rely more and more on its bedrock constituency, the Alawi minority, and other religious minorities fearful of change. In a mirror image, the opposition increasingly became characterized by Sunni sectarian appeals, and armed Sunni Islamist groups played an increasing role in the conflict" (Gause 2014, 10). Confronted by violence and war, civilians were incited to join groups based on sectarian identities. These groups, politically mobilized by the Saudi-Iran proxy war, searched for external allies who would readily support them in their domestic conflicts. These conflicts were becoming increasingly sectarian in nature, and groups would in turn look to co-religionists for this support, namely Saudi Arabia for Sunnis and Iran for Shi'as (Gause 2014, 10). Anti-Assad resistance, consisting of Sunni Salafist groups, proclaimed Salafi sympathies in order to gain support from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states.

This growing sectarianization allowed Saudi Arabia and Iran to support militia rebels on the basis of religious identity. Iran supported the efforts of Hezbollah and created various alliances with Assad, Shi'a militias and Kurdish groups to expand its control over the Levant. As mentioned earlier, the Iranians support Assad through the envoy of Shi'a military advisers and militias to fight rebel groups in Syria, which prevents the overthrow of the Syrian regime (Boghani 2018). In Syria alone, Iran has over 25,000 Shiite militia fighters allowing them to grasp control over the region ("Iran-backed Militias" 2016). The militias largely control territory which was once under the authority of the Islamic State (IS). Although Saudi Arabia originally backed the Free Syrian Army and other rebel groups distanced from the Muslim Brotherhood, the nation shifted some of its support for more sectarian Salafi opposition groups and supported the formation of the Islamic Front in 2013 (Gause 2014, 6).

Conclusion

Aggravated by the Arab Spring and decades of authoritarianism and instability, state weaknesses in Iraq, Yemen, and Syria presented Saudi Arabia and Iran with the opportunity to use proxy warfare. Split amongst a Shi'a-Sunni divide, the rivals capitalized on their respective identities to appeal to sectarian militia groups, which increased their power and influence. Accordingly, sectarian relations are employed as a weapon to mobilise Sunnis and Shi'as under the umbrella of Saudi or Iranian leadership, respectively. It is thus on the basis of a common identity that citizens and militias are more easily mobilized. Tehran and Riyadh understand the possibility for political gain with the conflict between Sunni and Shi'a identities. However, by using state resources and intense propaganda, the rivals further entrench sectarian cleavages, mobilising supporters based on religious identity markers, and, in turn, gathering regional influence. What results is sectarianization, which forms an increasingly divisive and polarised society.

The rivalry has had detrimental effects on Syria and Yemen. Primarily, the struggle for regional hegemony compels the rivals to continue their respective interventions in the Yemeni and Syrian civil wars. Saudi Arabian and Iranian influence in both countries signifies that any prospect of peace in Yemen or Syria is dependent on the foreign policies and relations between the rivals. Additionally, the use of sectarianization in the region entrenches pre-existing societal and cultural cleavages, leading to sectarian violence and the continuous weakening of state institutions. Ironically, though Saudi Arabia and Iran continue to intervene in both Yemen and Syria as a means to impede their respective influence, the use of proxy warfare has made both states less secure. As Riyadh and Tehran seek to increase their relative gains, the escalating tensions between the two regional nations threaten the balance of power. Both states increase their support of regional proxies to guard themselves against the perceived threat of the other, interfering in the internal affairs of surrogate states. As Iran's influence across the Middle East increases, Saudi Arabia becomes more assertive in proxy conflicts.

In short, proxy warfare has ultimately fortified the sectarian rift in the region and has increased the chances of the rivalry escalating to confrontational war. The region must now address extensively entrenched ideological tensions, seemingly endless civil wars, and a geopolitical rivalry with little prospect for reconciliation.

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