

**IRAN AND SAUDI ARABIA *CIVILIO-THEO-ZATION* CLASH:  
REFORMULATING REGIONAL STRATEGIES  
FOLLOWING THE ARAB SPRING**

**Ronen A. Cohen and Gadi Hitman**

*Ariel University*

**Abstract.** The Middle East is experiencing a new era involving a cold war between the theocratic Shi'i state of Iran and its rival Saudi Arabia, a theocratic Sunni state, both considering themselves the leader of the Muslim world. These countries have been rivals for decades, and the consequences of this rivalry have been shaping the Middle East since 2011. This research intends to review the main issues over the last four decades involved in the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. By examining the main issues involved in this rivalry, the research attempts to discover whether the animosity between Tehran and Riyadh following the Arab Spring is based on both sides' effort to strengthen their proxies by using the Arab Spring's flames. The research suggests a new conceptualization of how religion – Sunna and Shi'a – represents the historical clash on the question of who should have, must have, and who has the historical right to lead the Islamic world. This clash originated mainly from one focal base, Islam, yet it represents a separation between 'theo' – the Islamic religion, and 'civilio' – ethnic rivalry, or Arab vs. Persian culture. The objective of the study is to offer a practical solution to enable the two rivals to coexist for the region's greater good, even if they cannot fully resolve their rivalry.

**Keywords:** Iran, Saudi Arabia, Persian Gulf, regionalism, international relations, reconciliation, regional supremacy, Yemen, Syria, Bahrain

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## 1. Introduction

Most scholarly literature that analyzes Saudi-Arabia–Iran interactions, rests on religious aspects, meaning Sunni vs. Shi'a or on geopolitical maneuvers. This study suggests a new comprehensive model which combines religion and ethnicity. The new conceptualization studies how religion – Sunna or Shi'a – represents the historical clash on the question of who should have, must have, and who has the historical right to lead the Islamic world. This clash mainly originated from one focal base, Islam, yet it represents a divergence between 'theo' – inter-Islam sub-groups, and 'civilio' – ethnic rivalry, or Arab vs. Persian culture.

The modern history of Persian Gulf politics shows that even from 1921 to 1979, when Iran was not a religious political entity, ethnic diversity influenced its foreign policy – particularly its vision of being the regional hegemonic power in the Gulf. In fact, under the last Shah, Iran was called 'the policeman of the Gulf'. Our argument is that this term was accepted within the Sunni camp, because this camp perceived Iran as a secular player that was not threatened by Sunni dominance in the region. The case study of 1971, when secular ethnic Persian Iran demanded sovereignty over Bahrain, proves that act was not only religious but also a *theo-civilio* one. The Islamic Revolution of 1979 intensified the religious aspect of this historical rivalry.

The relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia have been characterized by bitter rivalry for many years. The research focus has ranged from realist assessments of the regional balance of power, diplomatic historiography on issues such as oil and civil society, and complex foreign policy analysis targeting religious differences, to eclectic approaches to shared security dilemmas. At the same time, a recent study argues that Iran and Saudi Arabia are not only nation-states but can be seen as social actors that engage in cognitive processes of differentiation in the international system in order to distinguish themselves from the other and to manifest their values and prescriptions. Such processes can occur via speech, roles, images, rhetoric, symbols, or any other strategy in which the aim is to project ideology while contesting the ideological influence of rivals (Cerioli 2018: 295-296.)

This study argues that alongside regional rivalry, Iran and Saudi Arabia also share a historical religious rivalry, as both see themselves as representing the Islamic world. In accordance with a new study, claiming that both sides use religious-national identity to shape alliances and influence (Kováčiková 2019: 48), this study argues that while Iran sees itself as the leader of both the Shi'i and the Sunni worlds, Saudi Arabia sees itself as the religious leader of the Sunni world only. Moreover, this study asserts that both sides' ambitions in the regional arena emphasize the differences between them, and bring them into a conflict of *civilio-theo-zation*, as each side uses its religious creed to survive through regional expansion – religiously, territorially, and politically.

Ever since 2003, when the United States led the Western coalition to topple Saddam Hussein's dictatorship in Iraq, the regional rivalry between the Shi'a and Sunna has intensified, and the mutual hatred has reached new heights. During President George W. Bush's administration, and mainly during Obama's, the United

States abandoned its 'dual containment' policy and withdrew slightly from the Middle East region. This was clearly demonstrated during the Arab Spring upheavals by the United States allowing Mubarak's Egypt to collapse, ignoring Saudi Arabia's fears of internal turmoil, refusing to assist the rebels in Syria (thus letting Russia and Iran establish new elements inside the country), by toppling the regime in Libya, and more. All these events have subsequently made it possible for Iran, the only state in the region that has not suffered any serious social disorder, to secretly promote its nuclear ambitions and to both ideologically and materially send forth its tentacles into the Shi'ite communities in the region.

Saudi Arabia and Iran do not share a common border, but there is a long and unsettled account between them, since both aspire to ultimately lead the Muslim world, albeit in different ways. Saudi Arabia still remembers Iran's intensive efforts in the early 1980s to export its revolution into other Shi'ite communities in the Middle East region, although finally, Saudi Arabia managed to turn back these efforts by taking care of the Shi'ites within the Wahhabi Kingdom – more by economic than religious means. This approach turned out to be a blessing in disguise since despite Iran's efforts at religious indoctrination, Saudi Arabia's pragmatic yet consistent aid helped it gain the upper hand in controlling the revolutionary religious wave that was sweeping the region (Fuller and Frange 1999: 187, Goldberg 1985: 100-103).

Despite the Security Council Resolution 598, regarding ceasefire agreements concluded between Iran and Iraq during the hostilities that took place between them, the regional turmoil that Saudi Arabia was trying to manage continued when its previous ally, Iraq, became an enemy by invading Saudi Arabia's neighbor, Kuwait. When this took place, the West, especially the United States, came to the aid of the Saudis and Kuwaitis, taking care of Saddam in 1991 and later, in 2003, settling the account conclusively. Iran, on the other hand, never shed tears over the crushing of its bitter enemy, Saddam, but nonetheless opposed the United States' intervention, especially its involvement in regional disputes.

With the United States present in Iraq, both Iran and Saudi Arabia understood that the previous local treaties and alliances were now history and that they must therefore recalculate their own regional and international strategies and foreign policies. The bloody consequences of the fighting in Iraq not only led to an intensification of the sectarian conflict and the reappearance of old-new radical and terrorist forces in Iraq such as al-Qaeda and ISIS (aka: ISIL), but also to the re-establishment of branches of the local, old-new Shi'ite radical movements of Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi's Army and the Qods Forces, among others. Iraq, which not long before had been one of the major factors in the region, retreated from the regional arena, leaving Iran and Saudi Arabia to compete over hegemony, causing both of them to reconsider their ambitions in the Gulf. At first, especially between 2003 and 2016, it seemed as if both were sharpening their swords in preparation for some upcoming battle, which we have called the battle between the theocratic (or theo-ethnic) civilizations of Persian-Shi'ite Iran and Arab-Sunni Saudi Arabia. In the past, the Middle Eastern world was seen as one Muslim and Eastern entity which was antagonistic to the West, but now there were local debates and conflicts taking place within the Muslim

world and not with the outside world. Within this world there are also other ethnic and religious conflicts, between the Persian and Arab civilizations and the Shi'ite and Sunni theologies, which have jelled into a two-pronged conflict fueled by the civilizations and theologies of these two regional giants.

Until July 14, 2015, the regional tension caused by Iran's nuclear ambitions had consistently escalated, but on that day Iran signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) Agreement, and the regional race for both hegemony and its prevention shifted into a forced *status quo*. While Iran, basically, had to accept the West's demands regarding its nuclear intentions, it signed the agreement only after ensuring that its nuclear facilities would remain capable of maintaining its peaceful energy needs. On the other hand, Iran's nemesis, Saudi Arabia, was one of the regional states that had pressured the West to curtail Iran's nuclear capabilities, peaceful or otherwise. However, the agreement still left Iran with potential nuclear military capabilities and this was a bitter pill to swallow. For Saudi Arabia, a simple calculation of Iran's current abilities, President Obama's abandonment of the old Middle East treaties, and the fundamental changes that had taken place in the region as a result of the Arab Spring upheavals made it clear that it was at a crossroads and needed to recalculate its regional and foreign policies.

While Iran's advances towards obtaining nuclear weapons rang alarm bells in Saudi Arabia, forcing Riyadh and other countries to do their best to prevent the Islamic Republic from obtaining such weapons, the potential threat to Iran caused by the Saudi arms purchases was not something that could be ignored in Tehran. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), in 2016, Saudi Arabia spent \$63.7 billion on its military, while Iran spent only \$12.7 billion on defense. To compensate for this disparity in military equipment, Iran adopted a strategy of 'forward defense', meaning that it began to support friendly militias so that they could attack adversaries if they began conflicts with Iran (Rezaei 2016, SIPRI 2016).

This new development was also seen by the Saudis as the beginning of the final stage of a 35-year-long battle that had been taking place between Iran and the United States over the geopolitical order in the region in general and Iran's place in that order in particular. After containing Iran for decades, the Saudis believed that the United States and the West had come to terms with the idea of Iran as a regional power. The fear of this happening was in fact the primary reason why Saudi Arabia had opposed the nuclear deal in the first place. To the Saudis, the nuclear agreement marked the end of the United States' effort to maintain a regional order based on Iran's exclusion and on the primacy of Saudi Arabia (and Israel). Consequently, in order to both regain its centrality in Washington's strategic outlook for the Middle East and to convince the United States to establish a new order in the region based on Iran's continued isolation, Saudi Arabia, together with Israel, initiated a new hostile diplomatic campaign against Iran (Rezaei 2018).

Apart from Israel's military operations in Syria against Iranian targets, Saudi Arabia presented the strongest opposition to the rise in the regional influence of Iran. Iran's attempts to encourage the Shi'ite population in Saudi Arabia had failed,

due largely to the fact that the Saudis responded by offering economic concessions, including the building of half a million housing units for the poorest segments of the Shi'ite population in its eastern provinces. Despite Iran's efforts at religious indoctrination, Saudi Arabia's pragmatic aid helped Riyadh to gain the upper hand in controlling the revolutionary religious wave that was sweeping the region in the wake of the Arab Spring.

## **2. Relations earlier in the 20th century, up to 1979 – from friendship to hostility**

Iran and Saudi Arabia have different interests and histories, leading them to deal with international and regional politics in different ways. After the Revolution, Iran immediately severed relations with the United States, while Saudi Arabia was strengthening its relationship with Washington. The two countries have different approaches to the same issues in the Middle East, both having signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), both seeing the Israeli-Turkish relationship as a threat, and both having similar yet different approaches to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and other issues (Bahgat 2006: 431). Until the Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran, Saudi Arabia and Iran had both been monarchies that “considered Arab nationalism an immediate danger” (Furtig 2007: 627) and that saw the Arab world they inhabited as fragile. At the time this caused these pivotal enemies to find common ground and to cooperate and coordinate their regional strategies and politics.

The relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia has never since been “as friendly and fruitful” (Furtig 2007: 628) as it was between 1968 and 1979, but Iran abandoned its longstanding foreign policy after the Islamic Revolution, beginning with its regional policy toward SA and followed by the United States, which overnight became the enemy. Despite the changes in its policies, Iran, which declared that its version of Islam was the true and righteous one, demanded safe access to the holy cities of Mecca and Madinah in SA, boldly attacking one of the sources of legitimacy of the Saudi crown. This was equivalent to the Ayatollah Khomeini making an emphatic point that religiously and historically decried the notion of monarchy in Islam (Furtig 2007: 629). Despite this ‘golden era’ between the two countries, Iran did not hesitate to claim ownership of Bahrain on the basis of ethnic and historical background.

The new leadership of the Islamic Revolution in Tehran denounced the Saudi monarchy and presented it as antithetical to Islam. In addition, Khomeini's desire to export his revolution and particular brand of Islamism to the Arab world frightened the leadership of Saudi Arabia (Milani 2011). The 1979 Revolution in Iran challenged the Sunni-Wahhabi-Saudi's traditional position as the leader of the Islamic world, due to Iran being the birthplace of Islam. The sectarian dimension of the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia should not be overlooked. The policy of ‘exporting the revolution’ also had a sectarian appeal because it reserved for Shi'ite Iran a central place within the Islamic Middle East. The political message of exporting revolution

was directed at the Arab Sunni rulers, which were dubbed illegitimate, and called on the Shi'ite population to stand up against their Sunni rulers – an explicit call for 'regime change'. (Nasr 2017: 143-144, Abdo 2017, 147). This was a turning point at which the rivalry became based on a composite of ethnicity and religion, as defined in this paper – a *theo-civilio* clash.

Seeing each other as ethnic-religious rivals, both sides have constantly been trying to fight and contain the influence of the other. Tehran and Riyadh have also consistently accused each other of interfering in the other's domestic affairs and of supporting terror groups against the other's interests (Milani 2011).

### 3. The Iran-Iraq War: 1980–1988 and its consequences

During the Iran-Iraq War, SA helped Iraq to fight Iran so as to prevent the latter from exporting its revolution to the Shi'ite communities in Iraq and in Saudi Arabia, in particular. SA, however, took no further action to weaken far-off Iran any more than had already been accomplished by eight years of war, and once the Saudis felt that Iran was no longer strong enough to export its revolution into their Shi'ite areas, they asked the Iranians to acknowledge that their chances of success were limited (Furtig 2007: 630). It should also be noted that this lack of success was not necessarily because Iran looked like a weak state, but mostly because the local Shi'ite community in Saudi Arabia had changed its demands from religious protest-based to economics-based, which was something the Saudi regime could handle in a pragmatic way.

The main reason for the above Saudi behavior was that their regional policy was based more upon pragmatism than on ethnic or religious issues. Consequently, although during the Iran-Iraq war, SA naturally sided with Sunni (religious) and Arab (ethnic) Iraq (its previous enemy) against Shi'ite Iran, in 1990-1991, when Iraq initiated a war with the Saudis' ally, Kuwait, the Saudis felt that it was the right time to normalize its relationship with Iran. This normalization process started in 1991 and made it possible for Iran to expand its relations with all the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. Although Iran's main goal in this was to "reduce the GCC's foreign dependency and its reliance on the US in particular" (Furtig 2007: 630), the GCC remained strategically aligned with the United States. Nonetheless, Iran still had to preserve its priorities with the GCC for three main reasons: "oil, the location of the most important Islamic centers, and the American military presence" (Furtig 2007: 631). To these we would also add Iran's covert fourth reason, which was to maintain contact with the Shi'ite communities within the GCC countries – this time on a religious-ethnic basis.

The complicated relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, however, need to be dealt with in more detail, and Gawdat Bahgat came to the following conclusion about this when he wrote:

“The record of Saudi-Iranian relations is mixed. The two nations agree on some issues but strongly disagree on others. Since the mid-1990s, relations between Riyadh and Tehran have substantially improved and a military confrontation between them is unlikely. Still, the Saudis are alarmed by Iran’s growing status and influence in the region as a result of the developments in neighboring Iraq” (Bahgat 2006: 432).

#### **4. The US military presence in Saudi Arabia, the liberation of Kuwait, and the 2003 US invasion of Iraq**

The US invasion of Iraq in 2003, which resulted in the toppling of Saddam Hussein’s Sunni regime, removed a major military counterbalance to Iranian influence in Iraq. Since then, the sectarian architecture in Iraq created the conditions for the establishment of a Shi’a-dominated central government in Baghdad, supported by Iran – much to the distaste of Saudi Arabia. As for the Saudis, despite the Sunni regime of Saddam, Saudi Arabia did not succeed in gaining real influence in Iraq’s political system. The relations between the two countries were always a mix of suspicion and mutual respect, and the Gulf War of 1990–91 opened a deep abyss between them, and for the Saudis it enabled the establishment of the military coalition against Baghdad. One expression of this situation was Iraq’s refusal to allow the opening of a Saudi embassy in Baghdad until 2016 (Reuters, Jan. 1, 2016).

Rezaei claims that “even for Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, a man who viewed history through a spiritual perspective, the removal of Saddam Hussein was nothing short of a miracle”. Rezaei quoted Khamenei (at the Friday prayers on April 11, 2003) who said, “Saddam is gone, and the Iranian nation is happy for this. It’s been twenty years that the Iranian nation says ‘death to Saddam.’ Now death came to Saddam. The happiness of our nation in this matter is like the happiness of the Iraqi people. Our stance is just like the Iraqi nation. Iraqi people are happy with Saddam’s demise. We’re also happy. Saddam was a dictator, a bad guy, a cruel and dishonest promise breaker, and very evil ... He was very bad for both the Iraqi people and us as a neighbor” (Rezaei 2019: 115-116).

Iran moved swiftly to expand its influence in Iraq, aiming to add to its ‘Shi’ite empire’ regional project. Thus, together with the emerging Promised Day Brigade (PDB) – the successor of the Mahdi Army, the *Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq*, and the *Kataib Hezbollah*, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards waged a bloody war against Sunni minorities and thus unleashed sectarian mayhem. Reports indicate that the Islamic Republic Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) supplied the Shi’ite militias with an array of weapons, and that Iraqi-Shi’ite militants were sent to special camps in Iran where the IRGC trained them in the use of explosives or as snipers (Rezaei 2017, Ostovar 2016: 50-67, Arango 2017). Employing yet another technique, the Iranians pushed the Shi’ites to dominate the political process, resulting in the election of Nouri al-

Maliki as prime minister. Maliki's abuse and humiliation of Sunnis was one of the reasons for the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISIS), after years of insurgency combat from 2001 onward.

With their influence in government and the military diminished, marginalized Sunnis carried out bombings of embassies and mosques. The reprisal by Shi'ite forces turned the battle into a bloody war. Through "preaching networks, charity networks, volunteer networks," Saudis encouraged young Sunni volunteers to join the Sunni insurgency in Iraq. Saudi Arabia, along with other Gulf countries, directed their money to Sunnis who took up arms. According to sources, some of that money ended up with extremist groups such as ISIS's predecessor, Al-Qaeda in Iraq (Coll 2008). However, Iran eventually managed to achieve the upper hand in Iraq, and Tehran tried to make sure its agents held the political power.

Things took a turn for the worse in 2011, when a series of civil and popular protests known as the Arab Spring spread across the Arab world and changed the political power structure of the region. The so-called Arab Spring presented Saudi Arabia and Iran with opportunities to try to establish their preferred governments in the chaos-stricken states (Farhat 2016). Thus, the religious-ethnic rivalry continued in a new form – proxy wars – in recently destabilized countries such as Syria and Yemen, reflecting once again the Sunni-Shi'ite religious schism.

## **5. The "Arab Spring" and the proxy conflicts in Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain**

The regional turmoil in the Middle East has turned domestic arenas of nation states such as Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain into playgrounds where Iran and Saudi Arabia found themselves wrestling with each other, as they did in Iraq. Thus, part of the study will analyze the Iranian-Saudi interactions in these three states, focusing on the constant striving to maximize power and interests, independently or through alliances.

### *5.1. Syria*

Riyadh has taken a dim view of Iran's steadfast support for Bashar al-Assad in Syria. Iran considered the alliance with Syria as vital to the regime's sectarian-regional-national interests. According to the Iranian security doctrine, Syria serves strategically to deflect enemy attacks from ISIS or from an alliance of Saudi-Sunni Arab forces, a fact that was recently acknowledged by the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. In addition, the Assad regime has allowed Iran to move manpower, weapons, and money to Iranian proxies such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

When the civil war in Syria erupted in March 2011, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Iran's president, as well as the parastatal Revolutionary Guards, and Quds Force were unanimous in their support of Bashar al Assad. The Revolutionary Guards and the Quds Force mounted an extensive and costly operation to prop up the Syrian dictator, which reportedly cost over \$100 billion. In addition to fighters from



Hezbollah, the Revolutionary Guards and the Quds Force trained and equipped the Iraqi Shi'a group *Katai'b Al-Imam Ali* and recruited Shi'a fighters from Afghanistan and Pakistan and other countries.

Starting in 2015, President Hassan Rouhani tried to challenge the long-held view that the Assad regime was essential to Iranian national interests. Moderates insisted that the two sides had fundamentally different kinds of interests and that any alliance with Syria should be contextualized rather than automatic and open-ended. Applying a cost-benefit analysis, the Normalizers (moderate camp) proved that the financial cost to the fragile economy of the country outweighed the benefits. Hardline opponents consider Syria to be Iran's outpost and argue that Assad is essential to prevent Saudi-Sunni and Arab ethnic involvement in Syria, and they want to support Assad regardless of cost. But the hardliners have simply ignored Rouhani because in the negotiated political order, the parastatals did not require governmental approval of their expenditures (Rezaei 2019).

Assad's regime survival provides the hardliners with the ability to expand their revolutionary export-cum-terror arsenal. Training the Shi'a Liberation Army (SLA) is only one of the new pillars of the program. A potentially rewarding collaboration with the feared Syrian intelligence agency, the *Mukhabarat*, is another. Unit 400 of the Quds Force, which specializes in unconventional warfare, serves as a liaison with the *Mukhabarat*. Brigadier General Majid Alavi, the nom de guerre of Mohammad Pour Naimi, a former deputy minister of the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), heads the unit, with the help of Brigadier General Hamed Abdullahi and Brigadier General Mohsen Chizari, two of the prominent commanders of the Quds Force in Syria. Unit 400 has provided the *Mukhabarat* with advisors, weapons, equipment, training, and money for operations abroad (Keshavarz, no year).

By working with the *Mukhabarat*, the hardliners have gained important tactical advantages. For instance, the Quds Force can mount false flag operations to hide its involvement. In one case, the Turkish National Intelligence Organization (Millî İstihbarat Teşkilatı, MİT) determined that Abdulgadir Masharipov, who attacked the Ortaköy nightclub in Istanbul on New Year's Eve of 2017, was apparently recruited by the *Mukhabarat* and infiltrated into Turkey via Iran. The *Mukhabarat* is known to have penetrated virtually every group fighting in Syria, including ISIS, which helped Unit 400 to gather actionable intelligence on the complex battle lines in Syria (Yenisafak 2017).

Because of its successful involvement in the Syrian civil war, Iran has acquired a prestigious role in negotiating a solution to the conflict, along with Russia and Turkey. The Iranians are fully expected to push for the Assad regime to regain control. However, should the final agreement require the regime to enter a coalition with other groups or to give up power after a transition period, Syria would be likely to remain an important strategic asset for Iran.

The royal family of Saudi Arabia took a clear position against the Assad regime just after the beginning of the civil war, in March 2011. For example, in August 2011, the Saudis warned that "what is happening in Syria is not acceptable for Saudi Arabia ... Syria should think wisely before it's too late and issue and enact reforms

that are not merely promises but actual reforms” (Al-Jazeera 2011). Criticism against Assad’s brutality towards protesters was a common sight in the Saudi press, and in addition the Saudis doubted Assad’s intention to introduce reforms. Not only that, but the Saudis supported the opposition in Syria, hoping that toppling Bashar Assad’s regime would break up the alliance between Damascus and Tehran (Manfreda 2017). Breaking the Alawite-Shi’ite axis is a Saudi interest that may increase the dominance of the Al-Saud family in the Gulf region, which means enhancing the Sunni-Arab power. For that purpose, the Saudis agreed to support non-Arabs (Kurds).

This official line of the Saudis was constant for six years (until mid-2017). The initial position that supported the departure of Assad has changed, as Saudi Foreign Minister, Adel al-Jubeir, informed the Syrian opposition’s High Negotiations Committee (HNC) of a decision to tone down the demand for al-Assad’s departure (Reuter, 2018). The reasons that led to this change were as follows: (1) The Saudis realized that Russia’s presence in Syria had become more dominant (especially during the Obama administration); (2) along with the Russians, US President Trump, the Iranians, and the United Nations are backing direct dialogue between Assad and the opposition. Therefore, if the Saudis have an interest in influencing the new political order in Syria (and they have), a new policy is necessary (Fakude.2017). Either way, the change in Saudi policy toward the Syrian arena does not change their fundamental position that Iran is the main enemy of the Kingdom, as declared by Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman (Williams, 2017).

## 5.2. Yemen

In its latest venture, Iran has promoted the Houthi rebellion in Yemen, arguably the most direct challenge to Saudi interests in decades. The Arab Spring in Yemen, which is historically considered the Saudi’s backyard, presented a perfect opportunity for Iran to open a new front against Saudi Arabia. In January 2011, demonstrations in Sana’a against the government of President Ali Abdullah Saleh turned into sectarian riots, which brought the Houthis – a religious-ethnic movement that has been fighting against the central government since 2004 – into action. The sectarian conflict in Yemen, the poorest country in the Arab world, enabled Iran to seize the opportunity to insert itself more decisively into the mix.

Seeking more autonomy in areas where they are predominant, the Houthis challenged the central government of Ali Abdullah Saleh. With the help of Iran, the Houthi movement transformed itself into a well-organized, committed militia. Although Iran officially denied any financial and military support to the Houthis and rejected claims that they are Iran’s proxies, sympathetic voices among Iranian officials could be found. Thus, in September 2014, Ali Akbar Velayati, advisor to the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, said that Tehran ‘supports the Houthis in their rightful struggles’. Similarly, MP member Alireza Zakani claimed that the Houthi takeover of Sana’a was a “victory for Iran”, adding that “Iran now controls Baghdad, Beirut, Damascus, and Sana’a” (Farad News 2015).

Empowered by Tehran and taking advantage of the government’s paralysis, the

Houthis seized Sana'a in September 2014. They forced President Abd Raba Mansour Hadi to resign on January 22, 2015 and placed him under house arrest. Hadi fled in February 2015 to Aden, the commercial hub of Yemen, and declared it the temporary capital, whereupon he also withdrew his resignation. Notwithstanding these events, the Houthis continued their advance and soon thereafter seized most of Aden, letting Hadi escape to Saudi Arabia (Kesvelioglu 2018).

The Houthis made rapid progress and seized strategic outposts, including Sanaa' and al-Hudaydah port, close to the Bab al-Mandeb strait in the Gulf of Aden. Al-Hudaydah is crucial, both as a major route of shipping supplies to the rebels and as part of a long-term naval security project of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. Additionally, the Houthi rebels threatened to conduct cross-border raids into the Eastern Province during their southern offensive, urging Saudi Arabia to begin a large military buildup on its border (Almasmari 2015).

While it was not clear whether the Iranians ordered or approved the Houthi raids, the Saudis blamed Iran for the situation and launched an intervention code-named Operation Decisive Storm (Amaliyyat `Aṣifat al-Ḥazm) on March 25, 2015, against the Houthis. The military coalition of ten mostly Arab states – UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, Jordan, Morocco, Egypt, Qatar, Senegal, and Sudan – attacked Houthi positions and imposed a naval blockade on Yemen's northwestern coast to prevent weapons from reaching the Houthis (Karami 2015). This Arab coalition demonstrates the ethnic dimension of the Saudi Arabia and Iran rivalry.

The Saudis accused Iran of helping the Houthis, a charge that American intelligence supported. A study by Conflict Armament Research (CAR), an organization that monitors the movement and use of conventional weaponry, indicated substantial Iranian involvement. Iran provided the Houthis with a range of weapons including the Qasef-1 UAV (drone) nicknamed 'kamikaze' and capable of targeting coalition missile defense systems in 'kamikaze' attacks, and the Aabil drones, which are fitted with high-explosive warheads to engage high-value targets, such as radar and Patriot missile batteries (CAR 2017). To help in naval battles, Iran supplied unmanned, remote-controlled boats laden with explosives. Iran transferred to the Houthis anti-ship and man-portable missiles, including short-range Scud missiles and surface-to-air missiles reconfigured to operate as surface-to-surface rockets and naval mines. On land, the Houthis had the use of the Iranian Dehlavieh anti-tank guided weapons (ATGW) and the Russian-manufactured 9M133-1 Kornet ATGW. Local sources in Puntland, Somalia, also reported that Iran used the region's ports as transshipment points for weapons (CAR 2017).

While the Saudi involvement in Syria stemmed from fears of Shi'ite dominance in the region, the threat to Saudi Arabia from the Yemenite arena was more tangible. The Houthis fired missiles supplied to them by Iran at the Kingdom's territory, in order to undermine the internal stability of the Kingdom. The Saudi response was to lead a Sunni-Arab coalition to minimize security threats to the Kingdom from Yemen. At the height of the campaign in Yemen, the Saudi Foreign Ministry published a comprehensive survey of the Kingdom's involvement in the fighting. The Saudis explained that they had intervened after an official request from the

Sunni-Arab Yemeni government, quoting President Hadi who said that had it not been for the Saudi involvement, Yemen would have become an Iranian protectorate within a few days (Saudi Foreign Ministry 2017).

Saudi Arabia's interests in Yemen are: securing Saudi Arabia's border, stemming Iran's regional expansionist ambitions, combating terrorist threats and safeguarding regional security. Foreign Minister 'Adel Jubeir accused Tehran of being a shelter for terrorists (*Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* Newspaper 2019). The rigid Saudi demands are the disarming of the Houthi militias from their weapons, with an emphasis on ballistic missiles, and the return of the Sunni-Arab government of President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi, who is in exile in Saudi Arabia (Sharp 2015). If these demands are met, the Iranian influence in Yemen will be reduced. The Saudis consider the war in Yemen as a war to prevent the hegemony of Persian-Shi'ite Iran over Arab countries. As one analyst put it, "Saudis see the brutal war in Yemen, where the Houthi rebels are supported by Iran, as a necessary response in a battle for the survival for the Saudi nation and the hegemony of Arabness over Persianization" (Al-Rasheed 2018).

### 5.3. Bahrain

Bahrain is a traditional scene of conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The country has a 70–75 percent Shi'ite population with strong ties to Iran, while the ruling Al-Khalifa family is Sunni and has a strong relationship with Saudi Arabia. The country is of key strategic value for both parties and provides a perfect arena for proxy competition.

Bahrain has special importance for the Islamic Republic. Ayatollah Khomeini described the Shi'ites in Bahrain as victims of Sunni oppression, and revived the claim to Bahrain as a historical province of Iran. Rouhani stated that he did "not agree with the policies of the Shah's regime regarding Bahrain and [that] the island still [belonged] to Iran". The revolutionaries in Tehran promised to "lead a revolutionary movement for the annexation of Bahrain unless its rulers adopted an Islamic form of government like the one established in Iran" (Rezaei 2018: 163-187).

When demonstrations erupted in Manama, the capital of Bahrain, in February 2011, Iran seized upon the opportunity to intervene in order to fulfill its promise to liberate the 'oppressed Shiites'. The (IRGC) began once again to work closely with several Shi'ite cells, such as al-Wifaq and the National Democratic Action Society (Wa'ad) (Grumet 2015: 120-124). The Guards also encouraged the Bahraini opposition, including parties such as the Haq Movement and the Bahrain Freedom Movement to overthrow the government, a call that was answered on February 14, 2011, when they organized a demonstration in Manama (Assadi 2012). According to an official report written by Mahmood Cherif Bassiouni, a former Egyptian judge, all the groups that make up the Shi'ite majority in Bahrain – Arab Shi'ites and Ajams (alias for Shi'ites originating from Persia) – set out to protest against the policy of the Sunni royal house (bici 2011: 22).

With the spread of protests, the Bahraini government tried to control and manage the crisis with minimum violence and through political and peaceful methods. Four

government ministers, including the prime minister, the minister of health, the minister of water and energy and the minister of housing, were dismissed. The king also announced national mourning for the death of several protesters and appointed Crown Prince Salman ibn Hamad al-Khalifa to negotiate with the opposition. The Crown Prince announced that the Royal House would cede more power to the parliament, in addition to paving the way for holding a referendum. Representatives of the Shi'a Ajam community held a meeting with HRH the Crown Prince to reaffirm their loyalty to the monarchy and to urge that they be represented in future parliaments (bici 2011: 95). Their stance preferred Bahrain nationalism (one step after ethnicity) over religious Shi'ite affiliation with Iran.

On the other hand, encouraged by the concessions, Iran called on the opposition to reject the government's request for dialogue. The opposition set several conditions as a prerequisite for any negotiations, including the resignation of the government, the end of the army's presence in the streets, and acceptance of the idea of a constitutional monarchy (the Associated Press 2011). However, Iran's aggressive effort to subvert the political system in Bahrain prompted Saudi Arabia to intervene and to assist the Bahraini government in suppressing the anti-Shi'ite-government uprising. In the Saudi-led operation 'Peninsula Shield,' a collective military force of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) crushed the Shi'ite rebellion. The Bahraini opposition called the Saudi intervention "an occupation and a declaration of war", and pleaded for Iran's help. The Saudi intervention outraged Iranian hardliners, who asserted that the move was an invasion and accused the GCC of 'meddling' in Bahrain's internal affairs (Al-Wasat 2011). They urged the government to expel the ambassadors of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia from Iran and volunteered to go to Bahrain to fight with their 'Shi'ite brothers'. The conservative media in Iran fanned the flames by comparing these events to the heroic battle of Karbala, where Imam Hossein fought the overwhelming Sunni Umayyad force and perished (Ostovar 2015: 43, 80). On the diplomatic front, Iran sent a letter of complaint to the United Nations chief, Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, and also to the Organization of Islamic Conference, regarding Bahrain's crackdown on Shi'ite protesters, and asked regional countries to join Tehran in urging Saudi Arabia to withdraw from the island state (Assadi 2012).

However, due to the importance of Bahrain to Saudi Arabia, Riyadh exerted its full force to quell the unrest in Manama. Bahrain's importance to the Saudis stems from the shared ethnic-religious bonds between the Shi'ites of Bahrain and the Shi'ites of Saudi Arabia in the Eastern Province. More importantly, "The Shi'ites would be more receptive to Iran, if they do gain power," one analyst noted. Therefore, an increase in Shi'ite power in Bahrain increased the chances of not only diminishing the influence of Saudi Arabia in Manama, but also of empowering the Shi'a community in Saudi Arabia, making it easier for Iran to harass the Saudis (Slackman 2011).

For a quarter of a century, the relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran could be described as rivalry. Saddam Hussein's removal was a trigger for both sides to reassess their regional policy. Although it was in their mutual interest to cooperate in relation to the new reality in Iraq, their historic ethnic-religious rivalry prevailed.

As a result, despite both sides declaring a possible reconciliation and openness to cooperation, they were still suspicious and skeptical of each other (The Economist Intelligence 2004).

The focus of these two rivals, however, goes beyond any given Arab state and its functional importance to them, and is dominated by the regional politics that are always present as an undercurrent and that reveal their real attitudes toward each other's interests. Several incidents that took place in the Gulf region (in Bahrain, Yemen and Kuwait) strengthens our argument that a mixture of ethnic and religious backgrounds is the foundation of the SA-Iran rivalry. That is, Kuwait and UAE, Arab Sunni states, shared SA's position in accusing Iran of interfering in their domestic affairs.

For example, a Saudi official from the Haj Ministry announced that if Saudi Arabia's talks with Iran over Bahrain failed, permission to make the Haj pilgrimage to Mecca would be withdrawn from Iranian citizens. The official from the Haj Ministry went on to say that, in such a case, Saudi Arabia could not intervene in Iran's internal decisions (SPA-Riyadh 2010), but linking this to Iran's reaction to the bilateral talks was an indication that the Saudis did not really care if the Iranians joined the Haj or not.

Another example of the undercurrent of regional politics was Iran's reaction to the Arab Summit's declaration in *Sharm al-Shaikh* that confirmed that one of the Emirates would have full sovereignty over three islands in the Gulf, which Iran was claiming for itself. Iran complained that the summit was intervening in its internal affairs and that this was unacceptable (Majali 2015) yet it did nothing to regain those islands (Mahdi 2016). Finally, in a meeting of the Kuwaiti Foreign Minister with his Iranian counterpart, Mohammad Javad Zarif, on January 2017 in Tehran, the Kuwaiti passed on a message from the Gulf States demanding that Iran stop intervening in the region and in Yemen's internal affairs (Al-Zaidi 2017). All of the above examples demonstrate the sensitive and passive-aggressive relations that exist between the two countries.

## 6. Conclusions

Is the animosity that exists between Iran and Saudi Arabia rooted mainly in the fact that one civilization is Sunni-Arab and the other is Shi'ite-Persian? Or is this a well-calculated "Game of Thrones" scenario, being used to maintain regional survival? The answer might be that the two parties have their origins in very different civilizations, since one is religiously Shi'ite Islamic and ethnically Persian and the other is Sunni Islamic and Arab. Frankly, while this so-called "Game of Thrones" behavior serves the proxies of both sides well and preserves both countries' ability to protect their respective regional interests – which change from time to time – we can conclude that there is a 'game' being played between Iran and Saudi Arabia in which each side acts against the other not to benefit its citizens and not even to serve the will of the people, but for something that is more akin to realpolitik than

anything else. In other words, the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia is both because of their desire to protect their regional interests and due to their different cultural, civilizational, and theological perspectives.

It is the regional circumstances that have a primary role in influencing and shaping each other's foreign and regional policies, whether these originate in the Iran-Iraq War, the First and Second Gulf Wars (1991 and 2003 respectively), or the Arab Spring and its regional and other complications.

While Saudi Arabia was and still is a very religious country and a contender for the leadership of the Islamic world, Iran has shifted from a relatively secular monarchy to a religious republic. Despite this significant political change in Iran, the tendency towards suspicion is deeply embedded in the two cultures of Iran and Saudi Arabia. They both aspire to regional hegemony, while being fully aware that any hegemony established in the region would not include any of their major rivals. Saudi Arabia already enjoys the support of the Gulf States, while Iran is still working hard at building a Shi'ite fertile crescent and a bridge to Syria that would open the way through Iraq and Lebanon to increased influence in the region. The late Rafsanjani's approach of reconciliation and appeasement with regard to Saudi Arabia, adopted at the same time when Iran was fighting hard to build up its Shi'ite hegemony in the region, should be seen as no more than a smokescreen. At least this is how the Saudi Arabians saw it – consequently they were smart enough not to fall for these gestures. After all, since time immemorial, regional politics have been the game continuously played between the two major camps in the area, which have assumed the form of, alternately, monarchies vs. republicans, pan-Arabists vs. Islamists, Arabs vs. Non-Arabs, and now – Shi'ites vs. Sunnis.

Another question that needs to be answered is to what extent the issue of Iran's nuclear program is the key to a settlement or, alternatively, to increased rivalry. The examples shown above clearly demonstrate that when factoring in the empirical evidence of the domestic and foreign behavior of both parties, it appears that relations between the two countries can be evaluated as justifying the existence of a status quo which both sides are willing to maintain, each for its own strategies and reasons – whether for internal political reasons or in order to keep an eye on their regional proxies. Iran's nuclear ambitions will probably continue to stir up trouble in the region for the foreseeable future, and will force SA to embrace a more active and aggressive attitude towards Iran, but at the same time, there will probably be a reduction in the tension since both sides apparently do not wish to engage each other on the battlefield.

The ethnic-religious issue that divides the two regional powers is an important one that both sides try to emphasize while also trying to hide; i.e. each side sees itself as the ultimate leader of the Islamic world, and both see themselves committed to the historical hatred between Arabs and Persians, Sunnis and Shi'is, which is based on ethnic-religious superiority. The ongoing struggle between them can be defined as a clash of *theo-civilio-lization*. In earlier times the clashes between civilizations mainly took place between those who were basically different ethnically and religiously, and such clashes turned the wheels of history and defined the world that exists today.

In the clash between Iran and SA, on one side stands a nation with 2500 years of distinguished history, a nation that considers itself to have a superior culture not only with regard to Asia, but also in the arenas of the Middle East, Africa, and Europe, and which has accumulated numerous cultural and scientific achievements. On the other side stands another nation that has witnessed 1400 years of the innovative religion of Islam, is in possession of the most sacred and holy places of Islam, and which sees itself as the leader of the Muslim world. This cannot be resolved on the battlefield alone, but must be accompanied by obtaining enough regional power to cause the other side to accept its inferiority.

Finally, this research suggests a new theoretical basis for analyzing conflicts within the Middle East and other regions as well. The ethno-religious combination reflects deeply historical streams that come to the surface at times, when religion as an ideology prevails over secular ideology – intensifying ethnic differences and placing obstacles and barriers in the way of rival parties that have a potential for reconciliation.

Addresses:

Ronen A. Cohen

Western Campus, Building 55, floor 2, room 4,  
Ariel University,  
Ariel, 4070000  
Israel

E-mails: ronenco@ariel.ac.il, ronenco76@gmail.com

Gadi Hitman

Ariel University  
Ariel, 4070000  
Israel

E-mail: gh791966@gmail.com

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