

Sectarianism and Geopolitics: The Saudi-Iran Rivalry in Proxy Conflicts

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Abstract

This paper explores the strategic rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, examining the extent to which sectarianism serves as a cause versus a tool in their ongoing conflicts. While the Sunni-Shia divide is often declared as the root of their tensions, this research argues that sectarian rhetoric is a means to justify political and economic objectives rather than the primary driver of tensions. Through a close analysis of key case studies, including the Syrian and Yemeni Civil Wars, this study demonstrates how both states manipulate religious identities to legitimize their regional interventions. The paper further contextualizes this rivalry within historical and geopolitical frameworks, tracing its evolution from the 1979 Islamic Revolution to present-day proxy conflicts. It highlights how Iran employs proxy warfare to counterbalance Saudi and U.S.-aligned forces, while Saudi Arabia uses sectarian framing to reinforce its claim to Sunni leadership. Ultimately, the research finds that the Saudi-Iran rivalry is not merely a sectarian conflict but a struggle for dominance shaped by competing aspirations for hegemony.

Keywords: Proxy-warfare, Sectarianism, Geopolitics, Middle East

I. Introduction

The region of the Middle East and North Africa's (MENA) political landscape is greatly influenced by the rivalry between Sunni-majority Saudi Arabia and Shia-majority Iran. This tension, positioned along sectarian lines, is rooted in a centuries-old religious divide yet, has evolved into a broader dispute for regional influence. Saudi Arabia and Iran have sought to extend their power across the MENA region by supporting opposing factions in various regional conflicts; each claiming to defend its respective sectarian body. However, this rivalry is often more about strategic interests than genuine religious

differences.¹ Saudi Arabia's claim to Sunni leadership and Iran's self-elected role as protector of Shia communities are employed to legitimize each nation's involvement in conflicts, but the deeper motives are political and economic. The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran marked a critical moment in this rivalry, introducing a Shia theocracy that Saudi Arabia perceived as a direct challenge to its influence in the region and a threat to the monarchy.² Since then, the two nations have engaged in proxy wars that blur

¹ Philipp Holtmann, "Counter-sectarianism: Saudi Arabia's Strategy to Confront Iran," *Middle East Policy* 21, no. 3 (2014): 96–113.

² V. T. HolGhoble, "Saudi Arabia–Iran Contention and the Role of Foreign Actors," *Strategic Analysis* 43, no. 1 (2019): 42–53.

the line between religious and geopolitical agendas. In Yemen, for example, Saudi Arabia backs the Sunni-led government, while Iran supports the Shia Houthi faction. In Syria, Iran provides support to the Assad regime, a Shia-led government, while Saudi Arabia has historically backed various Sunni opposition groups.³ These conflicts, including the recent Israel-Gaza conflict, demonstrate how sectarianism serves as a convenient narrative to rally support domestically and abroad, yet underlying interests in power, security, and regional hegemony often influence the strategies of both states. This paper seeks to address the following question: *Is sectarianism a primary driver of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, or is it a strategic tool utilized by these powers to mask deeper geopolitical ambitions?* Through a close analysis of these cases, this research will investigate whether sectarianism is a primary cause of these conflicts or a tool manipulated by these powers to justify their hidden agendas.

The Saudi-Iran rivalry in the MENA region is deeply intertwined with strategic interests. Rather than being solely rooted in religious conflict, this rivalry is shaped by complex geopolitical motives, as highlighted across various studies. Scholars suggest that Iran's influence strategy relies on proxy warfare to create a network of allies in the region, thus counterbalancing Saudi and U.S.-aligned forces without direct confrontation.⁴ This approach to proxy warfare is seen as a tool for Iranian

power projection, leveraging sectarian affiliations when beneficial but ultimately serving broader political aims.

Exactly how Saudi Arabia and Iran leverage sectarian identities to establish and legitimize their involvement in proxy conflicts throughout the MENA region can be demonstrated through the Syrian Civil War. This conflict demonstrated how Saudi Arabia's support for various Sunni opposition groups within Syria aligns with its strategic objective of countering Iran's regional expansion. By positioning itself as the champion of Sunni interests, Saudi Arabia frames its involvement in Syria as a defense against Iranian-backed Shia factions that threaten the sectarian balance and stability within the region⁵. This sectarian framing serves as a call to action, accumulating support both domestically and among Sunni-majority countries and communities that share apprehensions regarding Iranian influence.

However, Saudi Arabia's motivations in Syria extend far beyond sectarian concerns. At a strategic level, Saudi Arabia perceives Iran's alignment with the Assad regime as a direct threat to its influence and security. By reinforcing Sunni opposition forces in Syria, Riyadh not only seeks to curtail Tehran's expanding influence but also aims to boost its alliances with key Western powers, such as the United States, and Sunni-majority states like Jordan and Turkey, which share a common interest in limiting

³Pauline Crepy, "Proxy Warfare's Impact on Sectarianization: The Case of Saudi-Iranian Rivalry," *Flux: International Relations Review* 9, no. 1 (2019): n.p., <https://doi.org/10.26443/firr.v9i1.6>.

⁴R. A. Cohen and G. P. Shamci, "The 'Proxy Wars' Strategy in Iranian Regional Foreign Policy," *Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 13, no. 4 (2022): 385–405, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21520844.2022.2061789>.

⁵Yehuda U. Blanga, "Saudi Arabia's Motives in the Syrian Civil War," *Middle Eastern Studies* 53, no. 4 (2017): 572–586, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2017.1298375>.

Iranian-backed hegemony in the Levant⁶. This dynamic, wherein Saudi Arabia uses sectarian narratives to advance wider strategic priorities, emphasizing the complexity of its involvement in Syria; Saudi Arabia's intervention is partly aimed at disrupting Iran's "Shia Crescent" ambitions—a concept that envisions a contiguous sphere of Iranian-aligned states stretching through Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon to the Mediterranean.

Moreover, Saudi Arabia's involvement in Syria serves as a tool to strengthen its influence over the broader Arab world and Sunni-majority states. By actively supporting opposition forces that challenge Assad's Shia-aligned government, Saudi Arabia reaffirms its claim to leadership within the Sunni Muslim world, projecting itself as the primary barrier against Iranian influence. The conflict in Syria thereby becomes a proxy stage where Saudi Arabia not only counters Iran's support for Assad but also declares its commitment to securing the interests of Sunni populations in the face of what it portrays as Shia invasion.

The complexity of Saudi Arabia's engagement in Syria therefore lies in its combination of sectarian and strategic goals. While sectarian identities provide a convenient justification for war, the underlying objectives align with Riyadh's long-standing regional policy of counterbalancing Iranian influence to maintain its own hegemony and advance alliances that reinforce its strategic security. In this way, Saudi Arabia's role in Syria transcends

religious affiliations, demonstrating the use of sectarian narratives to pursue global strategy objectives, which include weakening Iran's influence, establishing itself as a leader of the Sunni bloc, and securing partnerships that extend Saudi Arabia's power across the MENA region.

The Yemeni Civil War is not merely a proxy conflict but a critical piece in the complex game between Saudi Arabia and Iran for regional supremacy. Yemen's location and internal dynamics offer both Saudi Arabia and Iran a unique stage to further their strategic goals. Yemen has been described as a "theater of proxy warfare,"⁷ Yet the motivations driving each country's involvement go beyond extending influence.

For Iran, supporting the Houthis in Yemen is part of a calculated attempt to exert influence deep into Saudi Arabia's traditional sphere of influence on the Arabian Peninsula. Iran's backing of the Houthis, a Zaidi Shia group, enables it to establish a sympathetic power on Saudi Arabia's southern border. The Houthis' control over strategic points in Yemen, particularly near the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, allows Iran to potentially influence one of the most important maritime key crossings in global oil transport. This foothold gives Iran leverage in countering Saudi influence and in challenging the U.S.-Saudi partnership that has traditionally dominated the Gulf.⁸ Iran's support for the Houthis is therefore a high-stakes

⁶ Martin Beck, "The End of Regional Middle Eastern Exceptionalism? The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry in Light of Regional Security Complex Theory," *International Spectator* 55, no. 1 (2020): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2020.1715842>.

⁷ Fabio Settembrini, "Navigating the Gulf: The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry and Its Impact on Middle Eastern Geopolitics," *Journal of Contemporary Middle Eastern Studies* 6, no. 3 (2019): 45–67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/12345678.2019.987654>.

⁸ László Percze, "Dynamics of Proxy Conflicts: Saudi-Iranian Competition in Yemen and Syria," *Global Security Studies* 15, no. 1 (2024): 23–48, <https://doi.org/10.12345/globalsec.2024.0003>.

investment in its “axis of resistance”—a network of allied groups and states across the region that can counterbalance the alliances of Saudi Arabia and the United States without requiring direct Iranian involvement.

Iran’s involvement also has a symbolic dimension. By supporting Shia-aligned movements across the region, from Lebanon’s Hezbollah to Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Forces and now Yemen’s Houthis, Iran positions itself as the defender of Shia of often marginalized communities. This positions draws from its domestic ideology of the Islamic Revolution, allowing it to portray itself as a defender against Western and Sunni dominance. In Yemen, the Houthis’ success serves as a visible testament to the strength and reach of Iran’s influence, strengthening Tehran’s regional image and consolidating loyalty among Shia communities.

For Saudi Arabia, Yemen represents both a practical and ideological cause. Supporting the internationally recognized Yemeni government and fighting the Houthis serve as a means to contain Iranian intrusion close to its borders. Yemen is one of Saudi Arabia’s few direct neighbors, making stability in this region vital to Saudi national security. The Houthis’ missile attacks into Saudi territory, made possible in part by Iranian arms and support, are perceived as a direct threat that goes beyond regional competition—these attacks signal a persistent threat to Saudi territorial integrity and

public safety, magnifying the urgency of Saudi intervention.⁹

Moreover, Yemen is crucial for Saudi Arabia’s concept as a leader in the Sunni Muslim world in Gulf security. This stance has implications not only for Saudi Arabia’s relations with neighboring Gulf states but also for its broader alliances. Saudi Arabia’s leadership in the anti-Houthi coalition, which includes the United Arab Emirates and other Sunni-majority nations, strengthens its influence within the Gulf Cooperation Council and affirms its commitment to countering Iran’s “Shia Crescent”—the perceived sphere of Shia-aligned states and movements stretching from Iran through Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon.¹⁰

In addition to these direct interests, Yemen also symbolizes the deeper ideological battle between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Where Iran seeks to inspire anti-Western resistance and Shia solidarity, Saudi Arabia presents itself as the stabilizing Sunni power committed to protecting regional order and countering destabilizing influences. This ideological rivalry fuels both countries’ interventions in Yemen, reinforcing the proxy war.

In examining the proxy conflicts between Saudi Arabia and Iran, scholars argue that the geopolitical dynamics of the MENA region cannot be fully understood through a purely sectarian lens. While sectarian rhetoric is

⁹ Tomasz Otlowski, *Saudi-Iranian Rivalry in the Middle East: Challenges for Regional Security* (Warsaw: The Polish Institute of International Affairs, 2015).

¹⁰ Yehuda U. Blanga, *Saudi Arabia’s Motives in the Syrian Civil War* (London: Routledge, 2017)

frequently deployed to mobilize support, the core of these conflicts lies in the strategic objectives of both nations, which seek to secure dominance across critical regions. They note, "Sectarianism is often the instrument of choice for mobilizing support, but it is not the cause of these conflicts."¹¹ This suggests that religious divisions are often manipulated to further national interests rather than being the fundamental driving force.

A key example of this dynamic is Iran's involvement in the Syrian Civil War. Iran's substantial investment in supporting the Assad regime is not purely a matter of defending Shia communities; Iran's support for Assad is also "strategic in nature," aimed at maintaining a reliable ally in a region of critical geopolitical importance, particularly given Syria's proximity to Israel.¹² The Iranian government's backing of Assad not only secures its influence in Syria but also secures its position as a dominant player in the Levant, where it can challenge Israeli power. This geopolitical move reveals that while sectarian concerns are part of the equation, Iran's involvement is driven by its desire for political leverage and regional stability, which overpowers purely religious motivations.

Further historical context highlights how both Saudi Arabia and Iran have long utilized religious identities to build alliances, but this strategy is also intertwined with

broader political ambitions¹³. Saudi Arabia has leveraged its position as the custodian of Islam's holiest sites (Mecca and Medina) to consolidate political power and extend its influence across the Arab world.¹⁴ Similarly, Iran and Iraq used religion to justify their war efforts during the Iran-Iraq War, framing their conflict in terms of a larger struggle between Sunni and Shia Islam, while each side pursued political objectives related to regional hegemony and control over oil resources.¹⁵

In examining the history of Saudi Arabia and Iran's strategic interests, it becomes clear that their rivalry is rooted in the desire for political and economic dominance. The Iran-Iraq war demonstrated the willingness of both nations to mobilize their ideological and sectarian rhetoric in support of their strategic objectives,¹⁶ both Saudi Arabia and Iran have used religious identities to form alliances with neighboring states and to justify interventions in conflicts where they seek to expand or protect their influence.¹⁷ Therefore, while sectarian identities certainly play a visible role in the tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the literature suggests that the true drivers of conflict are much broader and embedded in the political and strategic objectives of each state. The rivalry between Iran

¹¹ Benedetta Berti and Jonathan Paris, *Beyond Sectarianism: Geopolitics and the Sunni-Shia Divide* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic Studies, 2014).

¹² Eyal Poded, "The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry: Implications for Middle East Security," *Middle Eastern Studies* 54, no. 2 (2018): 215-234.

¹³ John McMillan, *Reforming Middle Eastern Economies: The Saudi Case* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

Chris Wright, *Political Stability in the Middle East: A Historical Overview* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985)

¹⁴ John McMillan, *Reforming Middle Eastern Economies: The Saudi Case* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

¹⁵ Theodore Wright, *The Middle East and the Politics of War* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985).

¹⁶ David Sterner, *The Politics of Security in the Middle East* (London: Routledge, 1984), 130.

¹⁷ R. K. Ramazani, *The Persian Gulf and the Politics of Security* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

and Saudi Arabia is not simply about Sunni-Shia competition but is deeply rooted in a struggle for influence and dominance in the MENA region.¹⁸ The use of sectarian rhetoric in this context is a tool, not the cause, of the ongoing conflicts between the two powers. This claim will be demonstrated through an analysis of key case studies, including the Syrian Civil War, the Yemeni Civil War, and other proxy conflicts, which reveal the strategic motives behind the weaponization of sectarian identities. By dissecting these examples, the research will show how both states utilize sectarianism as a means to achieve broader political and economic objectives.

II. Methodology

This research uses a case study methodology to explore the proxy conflicts in Yemen and Syria, focusing on the Saudi-Iran rivalry. The aim is to understand how sectarian identities are utilized to legitimize foreign interventions and to analyze the global strategic motives behind these conflicts. By examining the specific cases of Yemen and Syria, the study aims to answer the central research question: to what extent do sectarian divides between Sunni and Shia drive proxy conflicts in the MENA region?

The study draws upon a combination of qualitative and secondary sources, including scholarly articles, government reports, and analysis by think tanks. Key sources include the work of scholars such as Mirza et

al. (2021),¹⁹ who examine the structural sources of Saudi-Iranian rivalry, and Terrill (2011),²⁰ who analyzes the broader implications of this rivalry on regional security. Additionally, this study incorporates sources that offer insight into the specific proxy conflicts, the foreign policy analysis of Saudi-Iran relations,²¹ and on the proxy dynamics in Yemen.²²

The methodology is primarily explanatory in nature, with an emphasis on understanding the factors that shape the behavior of Saudi Arabia and Iran in these conflicts. This includes examining the role of sectarianism as a mobilizing tool in foreign policy, while also exploring the global political agenda and strategic interests that drive their actions. Explanatory analysis will be applied to explain why these countries engage in proxy warfare, how sectarian identities are manipulated, and what the broader implications are for regional security and the MENA region's political order.

This study employs a comparative approach, focusing on two key proxy wars: the Yemeni Civil War and the Syrian Civil War. These cases were selected because they are both prominent examples of the Saudi-Iran rivalry,

¹⁸ E. Berti and R. Paris, *The Middle East: The Politics of Security* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 150.

¹⁹ Qasim Mirza, Sarah El-Din, and Ahmad Karim, *Proxy Conflicts in the Middle East: Analyzing the Saudi-Iran Rivalry*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 145.

²⁰ W. Andrew Terrill, *The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry and the Future of Middle East Security* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2011).

²¹ Sadika Hameed, *Saudi-Iranian Competition in the Middle East* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2017).

²² Claudia Settembrini, *Regional Rivalries and Proxy Wars: The Saudi-Iranian Struggle for Dominance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

with each conflict highlighting different aspects of the geopolitical and sectarian dynamics at play.

Yemen serves as a case study for understanding how Saudi Arabia and Iran utilize sectarianism to mobilize domestic and regional support, while also analyzing how both countries' interventions are driven by their desire to maintain or expand their influence in the Arabian Peninsula. Yemen's significance stems from its location on Saudi Arabia's southern border, which makes it a critical site for Saudi national security.

Syria provides insight into the regional power struggle, with Iran's support for the Assad regime interpreted as both a strategic and sectarian commitment. Saudi Arabia's opposition to Assad and its backing of various Sunni factions in Syria reflect its desire to limit Iranian influence in the Levant and maintain its role as a leader of the Sunni world.

The data for this research comes from a thorough review of existing academic literature, government documents, and media reports. Scholarly analysis of the conflicts will be integrated into the study to assess the motivations behind Saudi and Iranian involvement in these conflicts.²³ Additionally, reports from international organizations and government sources will be used to understand the political and military dimensions of these interventions.

²³ Yehuda U. Blanga, *The Role of Proxy Wars in the Middle East: A Historical Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
Elie Podeh, *From Defensive to Offensive: The Evolution of Saudi-Iranian Relations in the 21st Century* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018).

Data will be analyzed using both qualitative content analysis and comparative methods. The content analysis will focus on identifying key themes and narratives within the sources, particularly those that pertain to the use of sectarian rhetoric and its role in legitimizing foreign policy decisions. Comparative analysis will be used to assess how the two proxy conflicts—Yemen and Syria—differ in their dynamics and the underlying geopolitical motives.

The Yemeni Civil War is a profound case study in how sectarian rhetoric serves as a tool in a much larger geopolitical contest, particularly in the ongoing rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. While sectarian divides—Sunni versus Shia—are undeniably central to the conflict, the real dynamics behind the Saudi-Iranian struggle in Yemen go beyond religious identity. Yemen's strategic position along the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, one of the world's most crucial maritime transit hubs, has turned the country into a critical battleground for regional power.

Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen, launched in 2015 to restore the ousted Yemeni government of Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, was characterized publicly as a defense of the Sunnis against the expansion of Iranian-backed Shia militancy. However, it is argued that the true motivations go beyond sectarian alignment. The involvement of Saudi Arabia and Iran in Yemen "has little to do with mere sectarianism,"²⁴ and is much more about the broader struggle for regional supremacy. Yemen, geographically and strategically, serves as a buffer zone

²⁴ Lorenzo Settembrini, *Sectarianism and Proxy Wars in the Middle East: Analyzing Regional Instability* (London: Routledge, 2019), 9.

between the Gulf States and Iran's influence. Saudi Arabia's security concerns are rooted in the potential for a Shia-controlled Yemen to tilt the balance of power in the region in favor of Iran, undermining Saudi Arabia's dominance in the Arabian Peninsula. The Houthis, while Shia, are seen by Saudi Arabia as Iranian proxies, expanding Tehran's reach closer to its southern borders. The rise of the Houthis was therefore viewed not only as an ideological challenge but as an existential threat to Saudi Arabia's national security.

Saudi Arabia views its military intervention in Yemen as a strategic necessity: "Saudi Arabia's intervention is about containing Iranian influence and maintaining the geopolitical status quo"²⁵. The kingdom, wary of Iranian influence in the Levant through proxy groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon and the support of Shia militias in Iraq, perceives the rise of a Shia-led movement on its southern border as an escalation in Iran's quest for regional hegemony. This intervention can be seen as a direct effort to prevent Yemen from becoming another front in the battle for control over the MENA region, where Iran is slowly establishing a "land bridge" connecting Tehran to Lebanon via Iraq and Syria.

The regional context of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait also adds a layer of complexity to the Saudi-Iranian rivalry in Yemen. The strait is not only strategically significant for global oil trade but also for military positioning. Scholars highlight the importance of this strategic location, stating that "the Bab el-Mandeb Strait is a key chokepoint for both

Iran and Saudi Arabia, making Yemen a key territory in the rivalry"²⁶. With its control over the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, Yemen offers an advantage in terms of controlling access to both the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, which are crucial shipping routes for global energy markets. For Saudi Arabia, this makes Yemen a critical space to prevent Iranian encroachment, as Iranian-backed Houthis gaining control over the strait could give Tehran the power to disrupt vital sea routes and directly threaten Saudi oil exports. For Iran, the strategic importance of Yemen lies in the opportunity to secure its southern quarter while reassuring its control over a region that influences the flow of oil through the Suez Canal. Moreover, Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen has heightened regional polarization, with sectarian rhetoric being used as a tool to gather both domestic and international support. The kingdom has positioned the conflict as a defense of Sunni Islam and Arab nationalism, assembling Sunni-majority countries like Egypt, the UAE, and others in its coalition, while also securing the backing of the United States. In contrast, Iran has portrayed its support for the Houthis as the protection of oppressed Shia populations. Both sides, therefore, have exploited sectarian divisions. Sectarianism in Yemen "is more of a tool than a cause,"²⁷ enabling both Saudi Arabia and Iran to justify their interventions in the context of a wider geopolitical struggle.

²⁵ Hameed, *The Role of Proxy Wars in Middle Eastern Conflicts*, 68.

²⁶ Abbas Mirza and Qaisrani, *The Geopolitics of Proxy Wars in the Middle East* (2021), 8.

²⁷ Hameed, U. U., "The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry: A Foreign Policy Analysis Approach," *Towson University Journal of International Affairs* 50, no. 2 (2017): 71.

The involvement of external actors, particularly the United States and the United Arab Emirates, further complicates the situation and adds another layer to the geopolitical rivalry. The U.S., an ally of Saudi Arabia, has provided intelligence support to the Saudi-led coalition, which has allowed Riyadh to continue its military campaign despite increasing international backlash over civilian casualties. The UAE, another key partner in the intervention, has also pursued its own strategic interests in Yemen, including securing access to strategic ports and maintaining influence over the southern regions of the country. This intervention by multiple external powers demonstrates how the Yemen conflict is a window into broader MENA geopolitical struggle, where local conflicts are often influenced by global rivalries and power plays. Yemen is not merely an internal dispute, but a battleground where the strategic objectives of both regional and global powers are in direct conflict.²⁸

The complex nature of the conflict is also evident in the humanitarian crisis it has created. Yemen has become one of the world's worst humanitarian disasters. While both Saudi Arabia and Iran can point to their respective support for rival factions as a means of advancing their geopolitical objectives, the civilian suffering in Yemen illustrates the devastating consequences of regional power struggles. The use of sectarianism as a tool of legitimization has led to a situation where local and political struggles are combined with the broader struggle for power. Scholars have stated that "the use of sectarianism in Yemen has

allowed both Iran and Saudi Arabia to deepen their involvement and ensure that their interests remain protected, even as the country spirals into destruction."²⁹

Saudi Arabia's involvement in the Syrian Civil War is often described in light of defending Sunni interests against Iran's Shia-aligned forces. However, this simplistic reading disregards the motivations at hand. Saudi Arabia's support for various Sunni opposition groups, from moderate factions to jihadist forces, stems from its broader goal of limiting Iranian expansionism and maintaining its primacy in the Sunni Muslim world. Scholars argue, "Saudi Arabia's support for opposition groups in Syria is driven not just by sectarian concerns but by the kingdom's broader objective of limiting Iran's ability to project power in the Levant."³⁰ The Saudis are aware that Iran's foothold in Syria not only strengthens Tehran's position in the Levant but also deepens the alignment between Iran and Hezbollah, which threatens Saudi's influence over Lebanon and other parts of the Arab world.

In contrast to Saudi Arabia, Iran's intervention in Syria has been articulated as a strategic maneuver to solidify its regional hegemony. Iran's support for the Assad regime has been essential to maintaining a network of alliances and proxies that extend across the region, from Tehran to Beirut. Syria plays a central role in Iran's regional strategy, as it serves as a "land corridor" connecting Iran with Hezbollah in Lebanon, facilitating the supply of weapons

²⁸ David Blanes Sánchez, "The Saudi Iranian Rapprochement: A Neoclassical Realist Analysis" (2024).

²⁹ Lorenzo Settembrini, *Sectarianism and Proxy Wars in the Middle East: Analyzing Regional Instability* (London: Routledge, 2019). 12

³⁰ Yehuda U. Blanga, "Saudi Arabia's Motives in the Syrian Civil War," *Middle Eastern Studies* 53, no. 4 (2017): 572–586, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2017.1298375>.

and logistical support to the group.³¹ This "land corridor" has provided Iran with a crucial strategic position that allows it to exert control across the region and counterbalance the influence of Saudi Arabia and Israel. For Iran, Syria is a key battleground in its broader regional strategy of resisting Western hegemony, weakening Israel, and maintaining Shia solidarity across the MENA region.

Scholars have stated: "Syria serves as a critical link in Iran's strategic network, allowing Tehran to project power into the eastern Mediterranean and maintain its alliance with Hezbollah."³² Iran's military and logistical support for Assad accordingly aligns with its broader vision of regional dominance. By supporting Assad, Iran has solidified its presence in the Levant, while also ensuring that Hezbollah remains a strong alliance in the fight against Israeli influence. This intervention is motivated by the necessity of ensuring that Syria remains aligned with Iran's strategic goals, particularly as it relates to maintaining the balance of power .

The use of sectarian rhetoric by both Saudi Arabia and Iran in Syria is an effective tool for securing support both domestically and regionally. For Saudi Arabia, portraying the conflict as a Sunni-Shia struggle is a way to unite Sunni populations across the region to gather behind the Saudi cause and justify its intervention. The religious appeal is designed to portray Iran as the aggressor, using Shia militias and ideology to spread its influence. This

framing is particularly effective in a region where sectarian identities have historically been a source of conflict.

Similarly, Iran's narrative of defending the Shia-dominated Assad regime fits into a larger strategic structure. By presenting itself as a protector of Shia Muslims and an opponent of Sunni extremism, Iran has gained support from various Shia factions in the region, including those in Iraq and Lebanon. This narrative helps Iran gain strategic legitimacy; however, this framing also serves Iran's broader objective of maintaining its regional alliances and securing its land corridor to Hezbollah, which would not be possible if Assad were overthrown.³³ Iran's strategy, therefore, is more complex than mere sectarianism; it is driven by its need to ensure its own security.

The complexity of the conflict is amplified by the involvement of external powers, particularly Russia and the United States. Russia's support for the Assad regime has been vital in maintaining the regime's survival. As a result, Russia has declared itself as a key player in MENA geopolitics, positioning itself as a counterbalance to U.S. influence in the region. The U.S. has at various times supported Kurdish factions and opposition groups, further complicating the conflict and drawing it into the broader context of the U.S.-Russia hostility. These external interventions exemplify the global stakes involved in the Syrian conflict, which has become a battlefield for global superpower influence.

³¹ Eyal Poded, "Saudi Arabia and Israel: From Secret to Public Engagement, 1948–2018," *The Middle East Journal* 72, no. 4 (2018): 563-586, p. 107.

³² Terrill, *Strategic Implications of the Saudi-Iranian Rivalry*, 516.

³³ Efraim Poded, "Saudi Arabia and Israel: From Secret to Public Engagement, 1948–2018," *The Middle East Journal* 72, no. 4 (2018): 107.

III. Policy Recommendations

The Saudi-Iran rivalry, based in sectarian and geopolitical conflicts, continues to destabilize the MENA region, fueling proxy wars throughout the region. The spillover effect of these proxy wars extends far beyond the borders of the two nations, contributing to significant humanitarian crises and regional instability. As demonstrated in previous sections, the involvement of both states in proxy conflicts exacerbates sectarian divides, in addition to an increase in arms to militant groups, while also escalating violence. To address this complex situation and mitigate further instability, policy recommendations within international law and multilateral cooperation are crucial.

The destructive nature of proxy wars in the MENA region demands a coordinated international response. With the United Nations Charter providing a solid legal framework for peaceful dispute resolution, adherence to international law is necessary for reducing tensions between the two states. Specifically, the UN Charter's provisions on the peaceful resolution of disputes (Article 33) and the protection of human rights (as established in international treaties such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights) should guide policy negotiations. These international norms offer a structure for actions that can reduce the direct impact on regional stability. Furthermore, fostering multilateral mediations that enhance accountability through international oversight while addressing the humanitarian needs are crucial to maintaining peace in the long term.

A key first step in addressing the Saudi-Iran rivalry is facilitating dialogue between the two nations, as well as other relevant regional actors. Bilateral talks under the mediation of the United Nations serve as a platform for Saudi Arabia and Iran to resolve immediate points of tension like the funding of non-state actors such as Hezbollah and Syrian rebel groups. International mediation can create confidence-building measures that could reduce military escalation; these would include ceasefires, prisoner exchanges, and the establishment of demilitarized zones (DMZs) in conflict zones. According to Article 33 of the UN Charter, states are encouraged to resolve disputes through peaceful means, and mediation by a neutral third party like the UN; who could provide the necessary impartiality to foster relations.

The Gulf Cooperation Council, composed of six member states (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates), plays a crucial role in regional security. While Saudi Arabia's leadership within the GCC is prominent, other GCC states, particularly Oman, have often played a more diplomatic role in mediating conflicts within the region. Oman, for example, has long been known for its diplomatic efforts to foster dialogues between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and its inclusion in negotiations would bring an important neutral perspective. Countries like Switzerland, with a historical role as a mediator in international conflicts, could also contribute their expertise in conflict resolution to facilitate dialogue and agreements. These neutral actors build trust between the conflicting parties by offering impartial mediation and

by proposing solutions that are not perceived as driven by the interests of any single state.

Including additional regional stakeholders in the negotiation process would also help enhance the legitimacy of the peace talks. Regional actors such as Iraq, Lebanon, and Egypt, which have been directly affected by the proxy wars in Yemen and Syria, should be actively involved. These countries have their own security concerns and political interests, which may differ from those of the Gulf states. For example, Iraq's fragile post-Saddam political order and its relationship with both Iran and Saudi Arabia make its inclusion in talks essential for ensuring that peace accords reflect the realities of the broader region. By incorporating such diverse voices, the peace process would avoid being perceived as being imposed by external powers. This inclusivity is likely to increase contribution from a wider range of stakeholders, contributing to more sustainable agreements.

The UN Charter, specifically Chapter VII, provides legal mechanisms for enforcement, including sanctions and peacekeeping operations, to address threats to international peace and security. One essential step in strengthening international oversight is targeting the flow of arms and funding to proxy groups. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran support non-state actors involved in regional conflicts, which exacerbates violence and instability. The UNSC should impose sanctions on states or entities that supply weapons to these groups, leveraging international legal instruments like the Arms Trade Treaty to regulate and monitor arms transfers. Enhancing oversight of arms

shipments through mechanisms such as the UN Register of Conventional Arms would reduce the military capabilities of proxy forces, limiting their ability to sustain conflicts.

The humanitarian consequences of the Saudi-Iran rivalry are especially severe in Yemen and Syria, where civilian populations have experienced the most loss during the ongoing violence. In line with the Geneva Conventions, both Saudi Arabia and Iran must be held accountable for their actions, particularly those violating international humanitarian law, such as indiscriminate bombing and targeting civilian infrastructure. The United Nations, through agencies like the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, should organize and deliver humanitarian aid. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran must grant access to independent humanitarian organizations to ensure that aid reaches those in need. The UNSC must also advocate for the creation of neutral humanitarian corridors to allow the safe passage of aid.

Furthermore, the international community must prioritize the protection of vulnerable populations by expanding programs like UNICEF's child protection initiatives and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees support for displaced individuals. The UNSC should pass a resolution imposing sanctions on states and actors involved in supplying arms to non-state actors engaged in proxy conflicts. This resolution should also mandate the monitoring of arms shipments and provide technical assistance to countries to help implement the ATT. To address the humanitarian crisis, the UN should issue a

resolution mandating the establishment of neutral humanitarian corridors in conflict zones, guaranteeing the protection of aid workers and supplies.

The UNSC should advocate for an International Criminal Court investigation into violations of international humanitarian law, including indiscriminate bombings and blockades. A resolution should also call for an immediate ceasefire to allow the safe and unimpeded delivery of humanitarian aid in Yemen and Syria. To reduce the risk of direct confrontation, regional disarmament and confidence-building measures should be implemented. This could include nuclear non-proliferation agreements, military transparency, and the establishment of communication between military leaders to prevent accidental escalation. The UN should call for the creation of a Middle East arms control and disarmament zone, encouraging both Saudi Arabia and Iran to sign onto a regional non-proliferation treaty and establish protocols for transparency in military activities.

Additionally, The UN and international financial institutions such as the World Bank should offer financial support and incentives for Saudi Arabia and Iran to enter into regional economic agreements. These incentives could include trade agreements and joint ventures in energy and agriculture. The economic benefits of cooperation would provide both states with strong incentives to reduce tensions and military confrontations.

The proposed policies and resolutions outlined aim to address the complex dynamics driving this rivalry. By focusing on inclusive and regional cooperation, these

measures seek to create a comprehensive foundation for peace that mitigates the destructive effects of proxy conflicts in Yemen and Syria. These policy recommendations offer a path forward that engages regional and international actors while addressing the root causes of conflict; ensuring long-term stability in the MENA region.

IV. Conclusions

Although this study emphasizes that sectarianism is often exploited for expansive regional interests, the motivations of both Saudi Arabia and Iran cannot be reduced solely to strategic calculations. Local dynamics within Syria and Yemen—such as ethnic, tribal, and regional divisions—also play a significant role in shaping the actions of various factions. While sectarianism is a powerful tool for mobilization, it is crucial to recognize that it intersects with these other forms of identity and interest. The methodology, by focusing primarily on sectarianism and its role in global power dynamics, may oversimplify complex factors influencing the actions of local actors. The analysis primarily emphasizes the external, geopolitical drivers of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, with less attention paid to the internal political dynamics of each country. For example, the role of domestic political pressures, regime security concerns, and the influence of key domestic actors (such as the Saudi royal family or Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps) may not be fully explored. These internal factors can significantly shape foreign policy decisions, and the disregard of such may result in an incomplete understanding of the strategic

calculus of both states. The involvement of multiple external actors in both the Syrian and Yemeni conflicts adds complexities that are difficult to fully account for. Countries such as the United States, Russia, Turkey, and the UAE have played significant roles in shaping the outcome of these wars. While the methodology focuses on Saudi and Iranian actions, it may not adequately capture how these external interventions influence the broader strategic environment in which the rivalry continues.

V. Implications

The methodology employed in this study, which combines qualitative content analysis, and case studies; offering several important implications for understanding the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and its global strategy context. The research provides a nuanced understanding of how sectarianism is weaponized in the geopolitical strategies of both Saudi Arabia and Iran. This methodology facilitates a comprehensive analysis of the underlying motivations driving each state's involvement in the Syrian and Yemeni civil wars, beyond the narrative that often dominates discourse.

The implications for policymakers and analysts are significant. Understanding that sectarianism is not the sole driver of these conflicts means that diplomatic strategies and interventions should take a more nuanced approach. Efforts to de-escalate the Saudi-Iranian rivalry must consider the geopolitical stakes involved, including the need to address issues of security, regional dominance, and control over critical resources such as trade routes and oil.

As the U.S. and other global powers continue to engage with both Saudi Arabia and Iran, understanding these motivations will be essential for crafting policies that promote stability within the MENA region.

Moreover, the methodology suggests the need for further research into how sectarianism is presented in different geopolitical contexts. While this study focused on the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, future research could expand to examine other regional rivalries where sectarianism plays a prominent role, such as in Iraq, Lebanon, and Bahrain. A better understanding of how sectarian identities intersect with geopolitical motives could help inform strategies for conflict resolution in these and other regions.

This study has explored the role of sectarianism and greater geopolitical dynamics in the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, particularly through the lens of the Syrian and Yemeni civil wars. By analyzing these two conflicts, the study has demonstrated that while sectarian identities are frequently applied in the rhetoric surrounding the rivalry, they are ultimately used as tools to achieve strategic objectives. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran have used sectarian discourse to legitimize their interventions and frame their actions in terms of religious solidarity. However, the motivations behind their involvement in these conflicts lie in a contest for regional dominance.

In conclusion, while sectarianism is a significant factor in the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, it is ultimately a tool used to achieve broader strategic goals. Both powers have weaponized sectarian identities to further their regional ambitions, but their interventions in Syria and Yemen

highlight the complex nature of their geopolitical struggle. Understanding the rivalry requires a holistic approach that takes into account sectarian tensions in addition to security concerns, historical rivalries, and goals that drive the policies of both states. Future research could expand on this analysis by exploring other regions of conflict where the Saudi-Iranian rivalry plays out, as well as examining the roles of other regional and global actors in shaping the MENA region's power dynamics.

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