

**T.C.**  
**DOKUZ EYLÜL UNIVERSITY**  
**GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES**  
**DEPARTMENT OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**  
**INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS PROGRAM**  
**MASTER’S THESIS**

**IRAN AND SAUDI ARABIA: THE ENDLESS  
COMPETITION IN THE MIDDLE EAST THROUGH  
PROXY WARFARE**

**Elif ÖZKOÇ**

**Supervisor**

**Assoc. Prof. Dr. İrem AŞKAR KARAKIR**

**İZMİR-2020**

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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this master's thesis titled as "Iran and Saudi Arabia: The Endless Competition in The Middle East Through Proxy Warfare" has been written by myself in accordance with the academic rules and ethical conduct. I also declare that all materials benefited in this thesis consisted of mentioned resources in the references list. I verify all these with my honour.

Date

22/05/2020

Elif ÖZKOÇ



**ABSTRACT**  
**Master's Thesis**  
**Iran and Saudi Arabia: The Endless Competition in The Middle East Through**  
**Proxy Warfare**  
**Elif ÖZKOÇ**

**Dokuz Eylül University**  
**Graduate School of Social Sciences**  
**Department of International Relations**  
**International Relations Program**

Iran and Saudi Arabia are regional powers in the Middle East having different characteristics. Since the Iranian Islamic revolution, both states have perceived each other as rival. Their foreign policy practices have caused rivalry and hesitation, and pushed these two states to confront each other, even there have been some improvements in relations. These two states have been quite aware of the possibility to increase their influence beyond their territories. On the one hand, emerged conflicts have offered both advantages and opportunities for them to benefit at the expense of the other, whereas on the other hand they have created disadvantages and challenges on many issues such as security and interest which can be abused by the other.

They have competed with each other in different conflict zones through employing proxy warfare strategy and in return causing further instabilities in the region. This endless competition is believed to be a highly critical issue affecting various actors and processes in the region. This study aims to develop a complementary analysis on this competition by utilizing the proxy warfare strategy as the theoretical framework to explain reasons of indirect involvement, to reveal their proxies and to examine the bases of proxy relationship. This thesis contributes to an understanding regarding how both rivals have supported the combatting capacities of fighting groups, changed the balance of power and extended time of conflicts in the region. It presents how

**their proxies have served as tools and helped them to pursue their general and conflict-based aims.**

**Keywords: Iran, Saudi Arabia, Proxy Warfare, Middle East, Conflict.**



## **ÖZET**

**Yüksek Lisans Tezi**

**İran ve Suudi Arabistan: Ortadoğu’da Vekalet Savaşı ile Ortadoğu’da**

**Bitmeyen Rekabet**

**Elif ÖZKOÇ**

**Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi**

**Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü**

**Uluslararası İlişkiler Anabilim Dalı**

**İngilizce Uluslararası İlişkiler Yüksek Lisans Programı**

İran ve Suudi Arabistan, Ortadoğu’da farklı özelliklere sahip olan bölgesel güçlerdir. İran İslam devriminden beri, her iki devlet de birbirlerini rakip olarak algılamaktadırlar. Onların dış politika uygulamaları, ilişkilerde yaşanan bazı iyileşmelere rağmen, karşılıklı rekabete ve şüpheye neden olmakta ve bu iki devleti birbirleriyle yüzleşmeye sevketmektedir. Bu iki devlet etkilerini kendi topraklarının ötesinde arttırmanın mümkün olduğunun oldukça farkındadırlar. Ortaya çıkan çatışmalar bir yandan taraflara diğerinin aleyhinde yararlanılabilecek avantajlar ve fırsatlar sunarken, diğer yandan, karşı tarafın suistimaline açık, güvenlik ve çıkar gibi birçok alanda dezavantajlara ve tehditlere yol açmaktadır.

İki ülke çeşitli çatışma bölgelerinde vekalet savaşı stratejisini kullanarak birbirleri ile rekabet etmekte ve bölgede daha fazla istikrarsızlığa sebep olmaktadır. Bu bitmeyen rekabet, bölgedeki çeşitli aktörleri ve süreçleri etkilemekte olan oldukça önemli bir mesele olduğuna inanılmaktadır. Çalışmanın amacı, dolaylı müdahalenin sebeplerini açıklamak, vekilleri tespit etmek ve vekalet ilişkisinin temellerini açığa çıkarmak için vekalet savaşı stratejisini teorik çerçeve olarak kullanarak, bu rekabet üzerine tamamlayıcı bir analiz ortaya koymaktır. Bu tez, iki rakip devletin çatışan grupların savaşma kapasitelerini nasıl destekledikleri, güç dengesini nasıl değiştirdiklerini ve çatışma sürelerini nasıl uzattıklarının anlaşılmasına katkıda bulunmaktadır. Çalışma, vekillerin nasıl birer araç gibi hizmet ettiklerini ve bu iki devletin

genel ve çatışma temelli amaçlarını elde etmelerine nasıl yardımcı olduklarını göstermektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** İran, Suudi Arabistan, Vekalet Savaşı, Orta Doğu, Çatışma.



# **IRAN AND SAUDI ARABIA: THE ENDLESS COMPETITION IN THE MIDDLE EAST THROUGH PROXY WARFARE**

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## ABBREVIATIONS

|                  |                                                        |
|------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>AAH</b>       | Asaib Ahl al-Haq                                       |
| <b>KH</b>        | Kata'ib Hezbollah                                      |
| <b>The CIA</b>   | The Central Intelligence Agency                        |
| <b>The FSA</b>   | The Free Syrian Army                                   |
| <b>The GCC</b>   | The Gulf Cooperation Council                           |
| <b>The IIRO</b>  | Islamic International Relief Organisation              |
| <b>The IPSA</b>  | Iraq Pipeline Trans Saudi Arabia                       |
| <b>The IRGC</b>  | The Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps                 |
| <b>The ISCI</b>  | The Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq                    |
| <b>The ISI</b>   | Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate                |
| <b>The ISIS</b>  | The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria                    |
| <b>The NA</b>    | The Northern Alliance                                  |
| <b>The NDF</b>   | The National Defence Force                             |
| <b>The OPEC</b>  | The Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries      |
| <b>The PMFs</b>  | The Popular Mobilization Forces                        |
| <b>The QF</b>    | The Qods Force                                         |
| <b>The SCIRI</b> | The Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq |
| <b>The SDF</b>   | The Syrian Democratic Forces                           |
| <b>The SNSC</b>  | The Supreme National Security Council                  |
| <b>The SU</b>    | The Soviet Union                                       |
| <b>The UAE</b>   | The United Arab Emirates                               |
| <b>The UN</b>    | The United Nations                                     |
| <b>The UNSC</b>  | The United Nations Security Council                    |
| <b>The US</b>    | The United States                                      |

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**Figure 1: A combined figure including maps of the conflict zones  
mentioned in this study**

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## INTRODUCTION

Instability is one of the unchanging facts of the Middle East. Due to the artificial and problematic establishment of states, the region has witnessed various ethnic, religious, nationalist and sectarian conflicts. Political and economic instabilities have been triggered by these different types of conflicts. Although there are divergent actors and factors to influence the conflicts taking place in the Middle East, the endless rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia has attracted a special attention. This rivalry is one of the leading sectarian conflicts to be analyzed within the discipline of International Relations, specifically in the field of Middle East Studies.

The aim of the thesis is to analyze the rivalry among Iran and Saudi Arabia, the two important regional powers competing with each other. It is important because these two states had involved and continue to involve in nearly all conflicts which has made developments more complicated. To put it differently, this rivalry contributed to regional instabilities in the past and today, its contribution to regional instabilities still continue. This study will examine the chain of proxy warfares of two states from a historical perspective to point out how they have competed, what kinds of proxies they have used and what have been the linkages between them and their proxies. Through its focus on these critical questions, this thesis offers a qualitative work which is based on “why and how” questions for the purpose of explaining how the proxy warfare has unfolded in the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Proxy warfare strategy is employed as the most appropriate conceptual framework to explain the rivalry of the two states in this unstable region through their indirect participation in a number of regional conflicts as benefactors. Their proxies act as servers for the interests of these two states. By elaborating the issue through this strategy, the aim is to provide a complementary work about their rivalry in regional conflicts.

Proxy warfare strategy has been a preferable and the cheapest war strategy to engage in conflicts indirectly for desired outcomes. This strategy historically existed to explain different types of rivalries and has been transformed by time through

involving more different actors and means in the face of systemic changes. That's why, the best way of conducting an appropriate examination through this strategy is to make a cumulative definition of it and the first chapter offers an analytical framework with respect to proxy warfare strategy.

To understand better why these states prefer proxy warfare strategy, there is need to explain the foreign policy orientations of them which have been shaped by internal and external actors and factors. Since their establishments, their divergent characteristics such as their political systems and political elites, have laid the roots of this rivalry and reflected their foreign policy priorities. The existing rivalry has prevented a total rapprochement between the two states.

In this thesis, the selected cases to point out proxy warfare strategy include Iran-Iraq war in the years between 1980-1988, Afghanistan from the Soviet invasion until the American invasion, Iraq after the invasion of the United States (US), Lebanon since its establishment and the Syrian conflict after 2011. Yemen case is excluded in this thesis for different reasons which will be indicated in the first chapter.

These above-mentioned cases are examined through the same line. To increase the knowledge on the cases and to understand what happened and/or is happening, backgrounds of the cases are introduced. Then, the importance of these conflict zones and the involved powers will be subject to examination for their importance and aims of both Iran and Saudi Arabia are indicated in the second chapter in general terms. It presents an understanding of case-based reasons and objects. After the explanation of why it has been worth to engage in conflicts for both rivals, the focus will be on their proxies and the proxy relationship among them. In this regard, commonalities ranging from religion and other cultural and linguistical characteristics will be mentioned. This will provide an understanding of proxies' characteristics and aims which have been mostly dismissed in other works studying this rivalry in the field. While analyzing the cases, some indicators such as material and financial aid and features of the proxy relationship are pointed out.

The contribution of this study to International Relations literature can be seen through three stages of analyses. Firstly, from an international outlook, there has always been a standard reading of the conflicts in the region. In general, developments are evaluated from the perspectives of the super powers, especially the US. Their contributions to instability in the region cannot be dismissed. Superpowers' attitudes effect the region and there are alliances between them and regional powers. But at some point, the established alliances may be subject to interruptions. For example, the Arab Spring showed the fragile relationship between the US and Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, the Iranian nuclear deal of 2015 came to scene to show the possibility for the international community to solve a critical problem with Iran while it has not changed the attitude of the Saudi Arabia against Iran. Thus, assuming that all changes happen because of the involvement of the superpowers is a reductionist and chronic Western-oriented tendency that prevents true evaluation of the events.

Secondly, at the regional level, this rivalry influences the considerations of other regional states involved in the crisis. Especially, two important states in the region, Turkey and Qatar, have tried to exploit this rivalry through their attempts to balance these two powers. In this respect, Qatar diplomatic crisis can be very good example. Both Turkey and Qatar considered the Saudi Arabia-Iran rivalry helpful to prevent further imposition of sanctions on Qatar by the Arab Quartet and opened dialogue channels rather than supporting one side.

Thirdly, at the societal level, populations of this region cannot remain free from the influence of these two rivals. One of them, Saudi Arabia, represents the Sunni camp and the other one, Iran, represents the Shias. Especially, this is important because Shias have been subjected to exclusive policies by the Sunni authorities in the Arab Gulf states and Iran has been good model for these excluded populations.

This study aims to shed light on the forthcoming studies about this rivalry and to present an understanding of critical developments in different parts of the Middle East. This study also aims to contribute to an understanding of future involvements by these two states. This work provides a framework to examine this rivalry. Most studies on these two states state that there is a rivalry between these two states. But,

this rivalry is not examined in a detailed way. So, this thesis is thought to be helpful to understand and evaluate the rivalry. In addition, it does not only include facts related to two states, but also helps to understand their proxy relationships which have influential in the region. It provides a close examination of proxies through looking their origins, ideological orientations and commonalities with the two states.

This study conducts an examination of the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia which has influenced different parts of the region. However, it does not reject the involvements and contributions of other regional and non-regional states and non-state entities to the selected conflict areas. Yet, the study is limited with decisions and actions of the two Islamic states and their proxies. So, in all cases, although this rivalry cannot explain all regional developments and instabilities, it is important to consider this rivalry to understand leading conflicts in the region.

This study will mainly benefit from a number of different resources. Primary resources such as official documents of governments, speeches and documents prepared by main international organizations or other reliable documents and secondary resources including daily news, academic articles, books and book chapters are used.

To this end, chapter one looks at proxy war strategy historically and provides a collection of types of conflicts, actors and proxies. It introduces features of special relationship between benefactors and proxies, which play an important role in escalating the conflicts. It also argues that this strategy has been regarded by the states as an efficient strategy for different reasons and more advantageous when compared with direct involvement in conflicts. Capturing a comprehensive understanding of this strategy is appropriate before concentrating on its analysis in different cases.

In chapter two, relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia are examined to grasp their conflictual relationship, even in the presence of some commonalities. The beginning point is the pre-Islamic revolution years in Iran to show how the revolution changed Iran and how this change has been reflected to relations with Saudi Arabia. This part also points out the reasons for their indirect engagement

through proxy war in line with the theoretical framework. The four reasons; risk, power, interest and ideology are explained in general terms which are seen as complementary and inclusive.

In chapter three, two historical cases of conflict –Iran-Iraq war and Afghanistan- are examined. These cases are important to view the existence of this rivalry from a historical perspective. While they can be seen as example cases, they also set the reasons of the continuation of this rivalry, especially the Iran-Iraq war. By examining them, it is aimed to create a chain of the patterns of proxy war actions by Iran and Saudi Arabia. Iran-Iraq war is limited with respect to participating actors and time. This case is important to evaluate the developments in the war period and post-war period. The Afghanistan case is subject to proxy engagement by both states for different reasons. This case is covered between years of Soviet invasion in 1979 and 2001 until the fall of the Taliban. During this time period, Afghanistan witnessed the conflicts between different groups having different backgrounds and orientations and their established authorities which were supported by Iran and Saudi Arabia.

In chapter four, the Iraqi case is subject for examination of the rivalry. The focus on this case begins the invasion of Iraq by the US in 2003 which deeply influenced both Iraq and the region by creating changes and challenges. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia found themselves in different positions compared with the pre-invasion years and tried to exploit the developments for their interests. They both tried to fill the power vacuum left by Saddam Hussein and have mobilized different groups which have prevented the establishment of a stable Iraq. After the establishment of the Shia dominated government, the new system has not been capable of providing equality among its subjects and clashes have continued. While Iran has succeeded to enter into security and military establishments through its proxies, Saudi Arabia has remained as the supporter of opposition Sunni groups in Iraq.

In chapter five, the last chapter of this thesis, two cases namely, Lebanon and the Syrian conflict are analyzed which are well connected to each other. The focus on the Lebanese case begins from the establishment of Lebanon and continues up to now. Current problems in this state have its roots in the political system which has

led to instability and has triggered some ethnic and religious groups to confront other domestic groups. This domestic situation as well as the geostrategical position of Lebanon have attracted both Iran and Saudi Arabia to gain influence there. The focus on the Syrian conflict, as the second case of this chapter, starts from 2011 protests which occurred as part of the Arab Spring. Since then, both Iran and Saudi Arabia have well involved into the conflict between the al-Assad regime and the opposition which was divided later into different warrior groups. While Iran has tried to maintain its pre-conflict ties with Syria by engaging in, Saudi Arabia has tried to replace the current power by a pro-Sunni government.



## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK: PROXY WARFARE**

#### **1.1. INTRODUCTION**

The war is a reality of the human history. It is mostly a bloody search for a new order, while it is a threat for the order that has already existed. Although reasons of a war can be multiple and different in accordance with the social and political context, the results of a war can be devastating. This devastating effect has contributed to the transformation of human history, ideological perspectives, political-social and economic life and in all aspects of human life and other activities of human-beings. Proxy warfare, as being one of the engagement types, is preferable for states. There are many reasons to prefer this kind of involvement. It has a long history. Through historical process, it has been shaped to large extent. This transformation in proxy warfare is related with the international system and technological developments in military capabilities.

At this point, the first step of this chapter is to locate the proxy warfare strategy in the history. In this regard, the initial focus will be on the pre-Cold War era. In this period, although the direct involvements were at the high level, indirect involvement also had a value in the warfare strategy. Second era is the Cold War throughout which the US and the Soviet Union (SU) competed with each other. Because of the necessities of that time, the rivalry of two superpowers created a dynamic for indirect engagement. The third period is the immediate post-Cold war era up to today. In this period, the main focus has been on the inclusion of non-state actors and new means of conduct with the beginning of the globalization process.

The second step is to reach a definition for this thesis. In the literature, there are many different definitions of proxy warfare. The scholars of the field formulate their definitions by focusing on different aspects of the proxy warfare. In this respect, some scholars only focus on determining the actors. They create their definitions, sometimes by putting limitations on the actors and sometimes by enlarging the actors in the proxy relationship. Some other scholars, rather than defining the types of the

actors involved in the conflict, concentrate on the relationship established between the benefactors and the proxies. They try to reach an understanding of how both sides act and influence each other. Along with the above mentioned attitudes, there are also some scholars who underline the characteristics of the conflict. These are all remarkable attempts to reach a comprehensive definition addressing both the actors and the characteristics of the proxy warfare.

The third step is about the concept of proxy warfare. To understand the concept in a good manner, the first task is to explore and explain the elements of the proxy warfare. In this respect, the two main actors are the two sides of this type of warfare. The first actor is the benefactor which can also be referred as the principal. The second actor is the proxy which serves as a tool for the benefactor. There is a linkage among these two actors which is referred as proxy relationship. All components mentioned are important in proxy warfare strategy. In addition to elements of the proxy warfare, this section contains the types of the proxy warfare. There are two types according to the involvement of the two powers in one conflict. This classification is important because each case under analysis in the thesis reflects the characteristics of a specific type.

The following sections point out the benefits of utilizing proxy warfare strategy for both sides. The aim is to explain why Iran and Saudi Arabia have preferred this strategy through listing possible advantages. For the benefactors, the list includes both material and non-material advantages. Material advantages include reduced military and fiscal commitments and avoidance from threats through a non-committed position, engagement with less loss in hard conflict environments and collecting more intelligence about non-accessible areas through using proxies. Non-material advantages include protection of prestige and image in domestic and international realms, avoidance of legitimacy problems in the conflict place, benefit of deniability and avoidance of constraints of the international system, elimination of the possibility of a direct confrontation and avoidance of threats, utilization of deterrence, procurement of motivation for others to join. From the perspective of proxies, benefits include access to greater assistance, increase in skills, knowledge and power capabilities, motivation on others to join and increase in power perceived by others.

The final section of this chapter will create a brief summary of the selected cases to provide a ground to continue step by step. To this end, there will be an attempt to draw the scheme of each case. Five conflict cases will be included in this chapter. After the introduction of all cases, the short connection between the theoretical framework and the thesis will be expressed.

## 1.2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF PROXY WARFARE

The history of warfare goes back to the initiation of written history. Means and processes have changed in waging wars against enemies through time. Proxy warfare which has existed for a long time is also a part of history.<sup>1</sup> So, it is not accepted as a new phenomenon in the field of international relations and politics.<sup>2</sup> Before the Westphalian system, there were many types of the proxies, even in the form of mercenaries. As being the most well-known examples, European powers, mainly Spanish Catholics and French Protestants supported their co-religionists in the 30 years war which were fought between 1618 and 1648.<sup>3</sup> Also, Britain's assistance to the Southern Confederation in Civil War of America can be shown as an example.<sup>4</sup> The establishment of the Westphalian state system, which had prevailed between 1648 and 1945, led to the 'state against state' paradigm in the battlefields. Territorial integrity and non-intervention have become the guiding principles of European states.

Proxy warfare is mostly linked to the Cold War period and superpower practice.<sup>5</sup> This period is accepted as a turning point for the conventional confrontations between states which were the main actors of the period. Two superpowers, the US and the SU, emerged powerful in the international system with the ending of the Second World War. Under the bipolarized world order, the two superpowers engaged in many conflicts. In these conflicts, both sides avoided direct

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Mumford, **Proxy Warfare**, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2013, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Geraint Hughes, **My Enemy's Enemy: Proxy Warfare in International Politics**, Sussex, Brighton, 2012, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> See more details in Myron P. Gutmann, "The Origins of the Thirty Years' War", **The Journal of Interdisciplinary History**, Volume 18, Number 4, 1988, pp. 749-770.

<sup>4</sup> Mumford, **Proxy Warfare**, p.11, 26-29.

<sup>5</sup> Odd Arne Westad, **The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007.

confrontation. The main reason was the existence of nuclear weapons which were acquired and increased in numbers by both sides.

The start of the decolonization process mostly in the Third World countries was a very effective dynamic for the superpowers to engage in proxy wars. In these countries, by forming insurgencies, native populations began to fight against counterinsurgencies which were backed mostly by the Western powers. These areas of the world had become a play ground of the US and the SU.

To challenge each other and to pursue their own and their bloc's interests, the US and the SU mostly used different third parties –states, international organizations, rebel groups, guerillas and even mercenaries- in different conflicts utilizing proxy warfare as their foreign policy tool. Accordingly indirect wars were waged against the other's political and ideological position and system. Through the indirect involvement, the main change in this period was that while conflict between states decreased<sup>6</sup>, external involvement in conflicts by supporting local proxies increased in numbers.<sup>7</sup> Proxy wars in this period were classified as classic proxy wars. There were many examples of the indirect engagement by the two superpowers such as the Guatemalan coup d'état in 1954, the civil war in Angola which began in 1975, the Ogaden war between Ethiopia and Somalia (1977–78)<sup>8</sup> and the civil war in Afghanistan (1979-89).<sup>9</sup>

The Cold War ended with the falling down of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the SU. With the ending of the Cold War, international system began to change with the extension of the process of globalization. In this process, in addition to the states, new actors gained power and involved in the international system. This was because of the victory of the capitalist bloc with the collapse of the communist bloc. Excluded areas of the world began to integrate into the capitalist system through breaking down barriers. Sovereignty and capabilities of the states

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<sup>6</sup> Mark W. Zacher, "The Territorial Integrity Norm: International Boundaries and the Use of Force", **International Organization**, 55/2, 2001, pp. 215–250.

<sup>7</sup> Idean Salehyan, **Rebels Without Borders: Transnational Insurgencies in World Politics**, Ithaca: Cornell University, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Vladimir Rauta and Andrew Mumford. "Proxy Wars and the Contemporary Security Environment", **the Palgrave Handbook of Security, Risk and Intelligence**, (Ed. R. Dover and Others), 2017, p.100.

<sup>9</sup> Chris Loveman, "Assessing the Phenomenon of Proxy Intervention", **Conflict, Security & Development**, 2: 03, 2002, pp. 43-47.

have faced external and internal erosion. With this erosion, new challenges have emerged along with new actors. New actors have found it easy to pass through borders which led to new means to engage with others. Military technology has also continued to develop.

With this change in the international system, indirect confrontation has found a permanent place on the top of the agendas of the benefactors. Non-state actors such as terrorist organizations have become the new proxies of confrontations. In many ethnic and religious civil wars and conflicts, non-state actors served and still continue to serve as proxies. In addition to the groups, people have organized behind closed doors through technologic devices and via internet sites against their governments or others. They have also become the proxies of the benefactors.

In the future, the proxy warfare will possibly continue to be a significant subject for the discipline of the International Relations. With the improvements in technology and military capabilities, violence will seem to intensify. Because of the complexity in terms of actors ranging from states to people, from international organizations to voluntary fighters and increasing interdependence between different parts of the world in the international system, the future seems to be unclear. New means and new tactics would be utilized in assisting the proxies in the unknown future.

### **1.3. DEFINITIONS OF PROXY WARFARE IN THE LITERATURE**

Proxy warfare is one of the types of the fighting a war. Its definition is not so clear because of the complexity and changing nature of the warfare. To reach a good definition, there is a necessity to examine different definitions in the literature. In these definitions, the scholars define the concept by using different perspectives. Some scholars focus on specific benefactors and proxies. For other scholars, definition of the concept depends on the specific relationship between benefactors and their proxies. In these definitions, type of the engagement is also included.

Mostly, proxy warfare strategy is linked to the Cold War political context. In this period, proxy warfare is defined by Karl Deutsch from the perspective of the superpowers and their engagements in the third countries of the world, which were

important in regional proximities.<sup>10</sup> The interventions made by superpowers in the third countries helped for an accumulation of the studies on proxy war strategies. In this respect, proxy warfare can be defined as an international conflict which is fought by foreign powers in a third country.<sup>11</sup> The underlying reason for the engagement is connected to an internal issue in third country.<sup>12</sup> This connection provides a safety-zone for benefactors to combat through proxies aiming to achieve foreign goals and strategies.<sup>13</sup> In this regard, interventions of foreign powers are seen as a response to the conflict.

In some studies on the proxy warfare, this concept is defined in a narrower sense in terms of the kind of the proxies. For instance, Geraint Hughes' definition is one of them. Hughes defines a proxy as a non-state actor, which is in the form of a paramilitary group.<sup>14</sup> This specific group is accepted to receive direct assistance from benefactors which are consisted of foreign powers.<sup>15</sup> This narrow definition suffers from non-inclusion of the states which possibly have the capacity to serve as proxies. It suffers because some states do not have total autonomy and they need support of different benefactors to follow their specific interests. So, not only non-state actors, but also states can serve as proxies. In terms of the motivations for indirect engagement, Hughes makes three categorization as coercion; reaching to the transformative objectives including aims of separatism, annexation and even regime change; and disruption.<sup>16</sup>

This definition also provides important criteria to determine the existence of a relationship between benefactors and proxies.<sup>17</sup> Existence of this relationship is connected to the existence of direct assistance from benefactors to proxies. Along with this, both sides of the relationship act together against a common enemy or enemies even in the case of possessing divergent interests in terms of ideologies,

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<sup>10</sup> Mumford, Proxy Warfare, p.13.

<sup>11</sup> Karl Deutsch, "External Involvement in Internal War", **Internal War: Problems and Approaches**, (Ed. Harry Eckstein), The Free Press, New York, 1964, p. 102.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Hughes, p. 11.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p.20.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p.12.

concerns and reasons behind the desire to challenge and so on.<sup>18</sup> In addition, this relationship continues for a period of time.<sup>19</sup> In the case of a common enemy, power to control interests is attained to the benefactors by ignoring self-interests of the proxies. But, having divergent interests is unescapable.

Chris Loveman's definition consists of types of actors and some criteria for the relationship. In terms of types of actors, benefactors are supposed to be only states. But Loveman adds different types of proxies such as states, armed opposition groups and para-states. This relationship firstly includes material aid from a benefactor to a proxy.<sup>20</sup> Secondly, the activities in this relationship are defined as coordinated activities.<sup>21</sup> Thirdly, the battle-ground is restricted to a localized conflict. The last characteristic is about the conflict escalation which is created by the conducted activities of actors of the proxy relationship.<sup>22</sup> The assistance of the benefactor to the proxy escalates the conflict for a while.<sup>23</sup> Loveman also tries to define the reasons for the indirect engagement. In this definition, Loveman expresses that the main motivations behind the proxy warfare are ideological similarities between the benefactor and the proxies rather than power and interests.<sup>24</sup> Also, although there is difference in terms of ideological orientations, motivations and etc., a common enemy provides a common ground for the benefactors and the proxies to work together.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to these definitions, Jeffrey M. Bale suggests a transformation in the aims of the proxies in order to be accepted as proxies.<sup>26</sup> The aims of the benefactors are accepted as superior than the aims of the proxies. In this definition, this transformation in the aims is essential to establish a relationship between benefactors and proxies.<sup>27</sup> This transformation which is mainly beneficial for the benefactors is

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.11.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.11.

<sup>20</sup> Loveman, pp. 32-33.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp. 32-33.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 32-33.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., pp 32-33.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p.32.

<sup>26</sup> Jeffrey M. Bale, "Terrorists as State "Proxies": Separating Fact from Fiction", **Making Sense of Proxy Wars States, Surrogates & the Use of Force**, (Ed. Michael A. Innes), Potomac Books, Washington, D.C, 2012, p. 28.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

problematic because proxies fight for their interests as well which in return establish common lines with benefactors.

Compatible interests, material support and power relationship are emphasized in Duner's definition.<sup>28</sup> Due to the effect of the Cold War, Duner's terminology of proxy warfare is based on power and interests. According to him, there has to be a marriage in the interests of benefactors and proxies. This marriage shows the success and value of the engagement.<sup>29</sup> In terms of power relationship, Duner points out the impossibility of a proxy warfare strategy without considering power and its exercise.<sup>30</sup> The benefactors are supposed to be force to drive the proxies for engagement.<sup>31</sup> In this relationship, benefactors apply pressure to proxies by using their high power capacity over low power capacity of their proxies. For this definition, this pressure is the main characteristic of the relationship and is the only manifestation of benefactors' interests.<sup>32</sup> In this respect, it is supposed that the proxies cannot be accepted as proxies if there is no pressure.<sup>33</sup> Because of the existence of such a pressure, two sides of this relationship must be states.<sup>34</sup>

In addition to this coercive pressure<sup>35</sup>, in the Bar-Siman-Tov's definition, this relationship can also be voluntary.<sup>36</sup> The common point here is that proxies do what benefactors want. At this point, it seems that this relationship favors the interests of the benefactors. But, this is not totally true. There must be a reciprocal relationship as proxies give service to the benefactors in exchange for their support at desired levels.<sup>37</sup> However, mutuality in terms of interests is not the sole requirement of the

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<sup>28</sup> Bertil Duner, **Military Intervention in Civil Wars: the 1970s**, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1985, pp. 99–100.

<sup>29</sup> C. Jonsson, **Superpower: Comparing American and Soviet Foreign Policy**, Pinter Publishers Limited, London, 1984, p. 107.

<sup>30</sup> Bertil Duner, "Proxy Intervention in Civil Wars", **Journal of Peace Research**, Volume 18, Number 4, 1981, p. 356.

<sup>31</sup> Duner, "Proxy Intervention in Civil Wars", p. 109.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 356.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 356.

<sup>34</sup> Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov, "The Strategy of War by Proxy", **Cooperation and Conflict**, Volume 19, 1984, pp. 263–273.

<sup>35</sup> Duner, "Proxy Intervention in Civil Wars", p. 358.

<sup>36</sup> Bar-Siman-Tov, pp. 267–272.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 269.

relationship.<sup>38</sup> For him, compatible interests which are linked to the outcome of the conflict are more important than the mutual interests.<sup>39</sup>

Likewise, by looking from the perspective of the Cold War period, Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov sees the proxy warfare as a less risky way for the superpowers to reach specific interests without taking the risk of direct engagement.<sup>40</sup> Here, risk-taking which helps to locate the powers is a relevant motivation for indirect engagement. Bar-Siman-Tov, by comparing the two sides of the relationship, finds out that risks taken by the proxies are greater than risks taken by the benefactors.<sup>41</sup>

According to the definition of Andrew Mumford, who has made great contributions to the field, proxy war is an engagement made by the third parties, which try to influence the strategic outcome of the conflict that they are interested in.<sup>42</sup> This engagement is defined as an indirect involvement.<sup>43</sup> This indirect involvement is important because it helps us to distinguish proxy relationship between benefactors and proxies from other types of relationships taking place between supporter and supported sides in a conflict, for example a coalition.<sup>44</sup> Another aspect of this definition is the inclusion of different types of actors in this relationship. On the one hand, benefactors can be states or non-state actors.<sup>45</sup> These actors are accepted as external actors which are not directly related to the roots of the conflicts. On the other hand, both states and non-state actors have the capacity to act as proxies.<sup>46</sup> As indicated above, four different combinations between benefactors and proxies are possible.<sup>47</sup>

In addition to indirect engagement, direct involvement by benefactors is also possible at the same time. It does not create incompatibility in the relationship. The conflict becomes more widespread and complicated with this additional direct

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., pp 263-271.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p.263.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 271

<sup>42</sup> Mumford, Proxy Warfare, p. 11.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., pp. 21-22.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

involvement rather than losing its proxy characteristics.<sup>48</sup> Intervening sides are labeled as third parties. So, there is no division between types of benefactors. These parties can be both states and non-state actors.

#### 1.4. PROXY WARFARE: COMPONENTS AND TYPES

Traditional warfare fulfilled its time. Justifying an intervention with the interests is no more viewed as legitimate by the international community. When a legal justification is absent while waging a war, indirect response becomes an option. This type of external intervention creates a challenge to sovereignty which was conceptualized under the Westphalian system after 1648. European states accepted the division of jurisdiction on owned territories. This sole jurisdiction principle also takes place in international charters along with non-intervention principle.<sup>49</sup>

Proxy warfare, having a long history, is a useful tool for indirect involvements. In the simple version of this strategy, there are two types of actors; a benefactor and a proxy. While a benefactor is the supporter, a proxy is the supported one. A proxy is the actor which directly involves in the conflict. While a proxy engages in the conflict to reach its aims, it also serves as a tool for the interests of a benefactor.

A special relationship exists between a benefactor and its proxy. This relationship is one of the most discussed aspects of the proxy warfare. There must be coordination in terms of activities, goals, informations, and used resources and so on between a benefactor and its proxy. Even though they may have different motivations behind involvement, both actors act against a common target and coordination among them is important in dealing with the target. At one point, there must be intersecting interests among them. This coordination has to be extracted from formal and informal sources because generally the relationship between a benefactor and its proxy is masked for some reasons.<sup>50</sup> Masking this special relationship creates a place for denial for the benefactors. In this relationship,

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<sup>48</sup> Mumford, Proxy Warfare, pp.22–23.

<sup>49</sup> Hedley Bull, **Intervention in World Politics**, Oxford University Press, New York, 1984, p. 3.

<sup>50</sup> Duner, “Proxy Intervention in Civil Wars”, p. 359.

informality generally creates uncertainty. Such an informal relationship is flexible, easy to adopt and change.<sup>51</sup>

The relationship is commonly defined as hierarchical. In this hierarchical relationship, the proxies connect their interests to the interests of the benefactors as proxies mostly rely on the abilities and resources of the benefactors.<sup>52</sup> This does not mean that the proxies just pursue the interests of their clients. The level of this connection of the interests depends upon different conditions.<sup>53</sup> Thinking the proxies only as forces serving for the sake of the benefactors is wrong. As there are different motivations and targets of proxies to change the existing order.<sup>54</sup>

There is a distinction between symmetric and asymmetric proxy warfare. This distinction is related with the type of the combating for each side. On the one hand, asymmetric proxy warfare refers that one side is directly involved in the war, and whereas the other maintains its indirect position. This type of proxy warfare does not reduce losses of the power which is directly involved in the conflict. On the other hand, in symmetric proxy warfare, neither side fight against each other by participating directly. Instead, both sides rely on their proxies in the fight and support them for their own interests.<sup>55</sup>

## 1.5. ADVANTAGES OF PROXY WARFARE FOR BENEFACTORS

Direct involvement in the conflict means taking all the risks of the confrontation. These risks include a number of things, even a total defeat which prevents the achievement of a sustainable peace. Taking the risks of a direct confrontation is a difficult decision to arrive at. Indirect involvement provides flexibility to the benefactors. This flexibility brings material and non-material

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<sup>51</sup> Glen Herald Snyder, **Alliance Politics**, Cornell University Press, 1997, pp. 15-16.

<sup>52</sup> Duner, "Proxy Intervention in Civil Wars", pp. 353-361; Steven R. David, "The Use of Proxy Forces by Major Powers in the Third World", **The Lessons of Recent Wars in the Third World**, (Ed. Stephanie G. Neuman and Robert E. Harkavy), Lexington Books, Washington D.C., 1985, pp. 199-226.

<sup>53</sup> David, pp 199-220.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 200.

<sup>55</sup> Gregory D. Stone, **Proxy War: A Critical Examination of Superpower Indirect Conflict in Africa**, (Master Thesis of Arts), Faculty of Arts University of Manitoba, 2010.

advantages to the benefactors.<sup>56</sup> Strategic goals of the benefactors are aimed to be achieved without any clearly designed military and fiscal commitments to the proxies. This type of engagement means a cheap war for benefactors.<sup>57</sup>

In terms of material advantages, this non-commitment situation provides significant reductions in threats to territory, sovereignty, and well-being of the benefactor, preventing crucial losses in military personnel and military resources and so on.<sup>58</sup> Unlike other forms of alliances, this non-commitment situation also allows the benefactors to cut their support off easily without any problem. There is no sole responsibility or total honor. If the relationship between a benefactor and a proxy is not going on in a beneficial way, it is easy to cease the relationship for the benefactor.

On the other hand, this type of conflict is preferable to avoid a long warfare.<sup>59</sup> If there is a direct involvement, the external actor will possibly continue until the end. But, some wars are fought in difficult areas where an external actor cannot fight by using all its power, even cannot reach to the conflict zone. In such a situation, a proxy can act more flexibly and more efficiently than an external power can. Proxies provide more confident way to the benefactors to fight according to the situation. For example, a state which is an external power in the conflict cannot reach to a desired end through its conventional military power. The history has showed many examples such as the US failure in Vietnam. Such an engagement also provides gathering information about inaccessible areas which are too risky to enter.<sup>60</sup>

In addition to these material advantages, proxy warfare brings non-material advantages to the benefactors. Firstly, it strengthens benefactors' prestige in domestic and international contexts.<sup>61</sup> On the one hand, power does not come only through military capabilities of the states. Winning hearts and minds of international

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<sup>56</sup> Martha Finnemore, **The Purpose of Intervention: Changing Beliefs about the Use of Force**. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, New York, 2003; Stephen D. Biddle, **Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle**, Princeton University Press, 2004.

<sup>57</sup> Andrew Mumford, "Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict", **158 THE RUSI J.** 40, 40, April/May 2013.

<sup>58</sup> Mumford, "Proxy Warfare", p. 41; Mumford, *Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict*, p. 1; Salehyan, *Rebels Without Borders*, p. 10; Loveman, p. 38.

<sup>59</sup> Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, pp. 42-43.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

<sup>61</sup> Loveman, p. 46.

community is also very important to have an influence over others. Such an influence provides an upper position in the eyes of the international community. In this respect, proxy warfare strategy contributes to the good image of benefactors. Because of absence of direct involvement in the conflict, benefactors have a suitable way to deny the improper acts that take place in the battlefield. This is a good way to overcome criticisms which would possibly be led by a direct involvement.<sup>62</sup>

On the other hand, indirect involvement in a conflict provides an advantage to maintain domestic support and prestige. The war is not something that makes people happy or contributes to their well-being. Direct engagement may create constraints over people and their life. There can be criticisms maybe even uprisings against war decisions at least in democratic countries. Such a situation creates problems in domestic context.<sup>63</sup> Rather than facing unpleasant criticisms, indirect engagement becomes a preferable option for benefactors. Without sending soldiers and putting a direct influence of the war over people, proxy warfare strategy provides and maintains a suitable domestic environment to engage for benefactors.

In a direct involvement, benefactors can face legitimacy problem. In the absence of some legitimate links, domestic populations can perceive a benefactor as an external and illegitimate actor. But, indirect involvement through local proxies increases the legitimacy of the benefactors<sup>64</sup> because local proxies act as mediators. Local proxies provide a suitable ground for the populations to believe and respect the benefactors. Securing legitimacy at enough level prevents further costs and risks.

Secondly, avoiding from political constraints of the international law is another advantage.<sup>65</sup> As it is indicated in the Charter of the United Nations (the UN), the use or threat of force is not something acceptable to the established system (Article 2/4).<sup>66</sup> There are of course open doors to use force or the threat of using

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<sup>62</sup> David Forsythe, "Democracy, War, and Covert Action", **Journal of Peace Research**, 29 (4),1994, pp 385–395.

<sup>63</sup> Scott Sigmund Gartner, "The Multiple Effects of Casualties on Public Support for War: An Experimental Approach", **American Political Science Review**, 2008, p. 102.

<sup>64</sup> Idean Salehyan, "The Delegation of War to Rebel Organizations", **Journal of Conflict Resolution**, 54(3), 2010, p. 504.

<sup>65</sup> Hughes, pp. 23-24; Mumford, Proxy Warfare, p. 41

<sup>66</sup> "Charter of the United Nations and statute of the International Court of Justice", **The United Nations**, San Francisco, 1945, p.3, <https://treaties.un.org/doc/publication/ctc/uncharter.pdf> , (11.12.2018).

force. It is only legitimate to use force either if there is self-defence or the resolution of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) (Article 51).<sup>67</sup> If there is one of these conditions, then there can be an international condemnation in the act of a direct military operation. For illegal use of the force, there are possible responses of the international community. These options range from economic embargos, political condemnations to direct military operation based on the UNSC declaration. So using proxies is a good option to avoid from negative reactions of the international community.

Above-mentioned advantages also bring an additional advantage. The use of force and the threat of using force may create counter-reaction by the targets and the allies. In this situation, the external power takes a risk of direct confrontation. But, combating through proxy warfare provides an escape from taking this risk for confrontation. Proxy warfare strategy helps to engage in a safer position and the potential for deniability is high.<sup>68</sup>

A different possible advantage is to use the proxy as a deterrence tool.<sup>69</sup> The possibility of having strong and important proxies which are able to influence current situation makes the other side of the conflict nervous about the future. In such a case, the other side probably does not act freely. So, decisions in the conflict must be taken carefully not to lead the use of proxies by opponent sides. This deterrence gives an upper hand to the benefactor over the other one. By using proxies as deterrence tools, benefactors can reach a capacity to direct the actions of both other benefactors and proxies. It helps benefactors to show their power capabilities on supporting and motivating proxies as in the case of deterrence.<sup>70</sup> If a benefactor can show its ability to sustain necessary things for a proxy, then this can encourage other actors to become proxies of this benefactor. This creates a motivation for potential proxies to engage for the sake of benefactors at some level. Then, it leads to formulation of a chain of proxies providing more influence and power for benefactors over other actors in the system.

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., pp, 10-11.

<sup>68</sup> Mumford, Proxy Warfare, p. 43. ; Hughes, pp. 26-27.

<sup>69</sup> Mumford, Proxy Warfare, p.27.

<sup>70</sup> Joseph S. Jr. Nye, **Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics**, Public Affairs, New York, 2004; Thomas Risse-Kappen, "Public Opinion, Domestic Structure, and Foreign Policy in Liberal Democracies", **World Politics**, 43, Number 4, 1991, pp. 479-512.

## **1.6. BENEFITS OF EXTERNAL ASSISTANCE FOR PROXIES**

Proxies are important actors for benefactors because success of the engagement depends on the performance of proxies in the battlefield. Their existence is crucial and thus they need to be supported. One of the advantages of external assistance for proxies includes military and financial benefits because proxies may lose their capacity and power while fighting. To continue the warfare, they depend on benefactors.

Another advantage is the improvement of skills and knowledge of proxies. Mostly, proxy warfare takes place in a weak state or in a complicated region. In such an environment, through an external assistance the proxies can possibly reach the necessary skills and knowledge which help them to increase their power. This increased capability of proxies also provides a way to find more support. In terms of human resource, support of the benefactors encourages people to fight under the control of the proxies because through this support, conditions of warfare possibly reach an optimal level. No one wants to fight without appropriate weapons, equipment and food supplies. There has to be an offer of opportunities to engage in a warfare.

All these advantages bring another advantage. The increased capacity and efficiency increases the acceptance of the proxies by other actors. In the engagement, proxies begin to get the successes. This increased capability of the proxies may prevent the ignorance by others. This is important because proxies can at one point collect benefits of their power such as sitting on the decision table for the conflict resolution and post-conflict state-building processes.

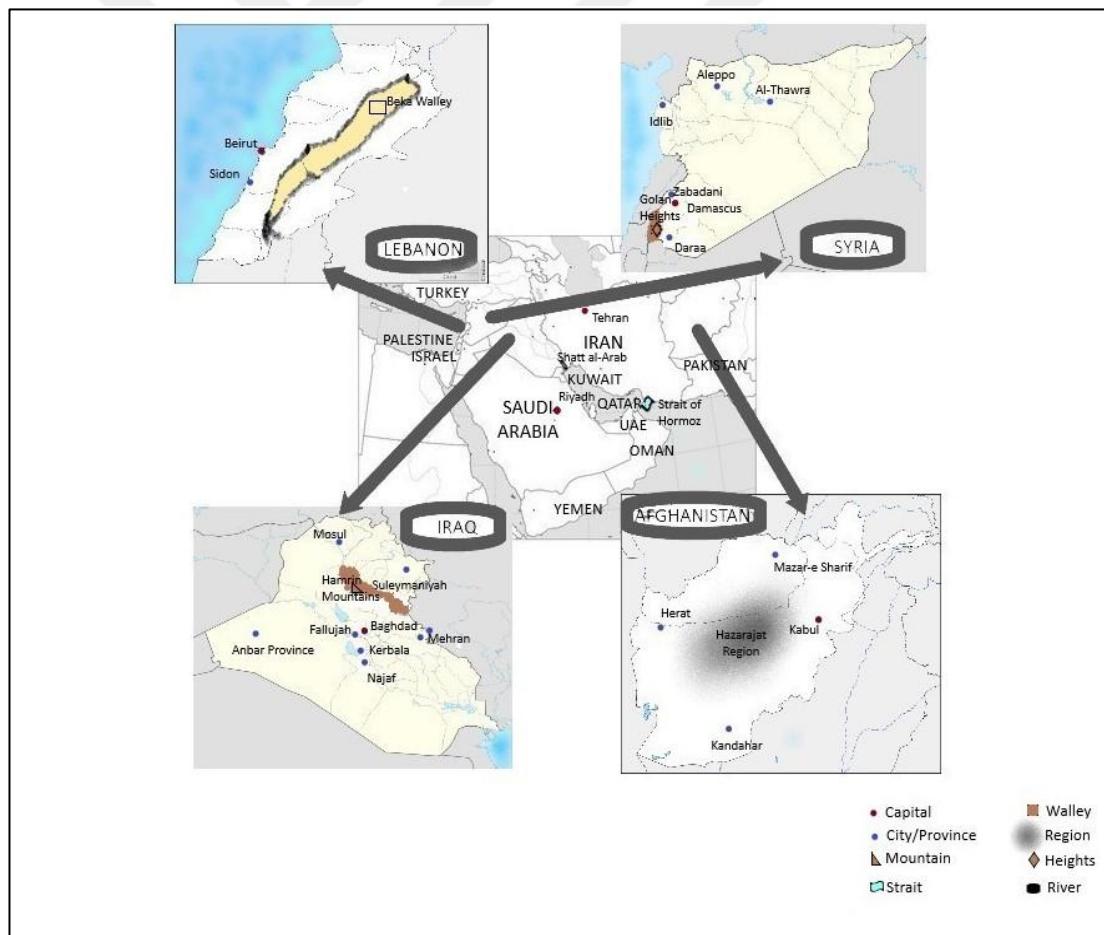
## **1.7. PROXY WARFARE AND THE CASES SELECTED**

The aim of this theoretical chapter about proxy warfare strategy is to provide a way to examine the competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Middle East step by step. The first step to do this is to reach an understanding of proxy warfare which will be appropriate for this study. All above-mentioned definitions add additional knowledge to the topic of proxy warfare. When they are combined, the definition of proxy warfare becomes clearer and easy to apply to a number of cases

which are central to this thesis. Shortly, a proxy warfare is a kind of conflict and a strategy. In such a case, actors which are receiving support from benefactors fight on the basis of common interests and on the basis of the need for support. Based on the combination of above-mentioned definitions, proxy warfare consists of different actors. In this thesis the focus will be on two benefactors which are the leading rival states in the Middle East for many reasons; Iran and Saudi Arabia.

In this thesis, there is no limitation with respect to the type of the conflict under analysis. The conflict can be a conflict between states, between actors in one state or between one state and other actors, which are not originally located in the conflict zone.

**Figure 1: A combined figure including maps of the conflict zones mentioned in this study.**



The cases to examine the rivalry in the region are selected among the conflicts taking place in locations displayed in the figure one, in which two regional powers engage. These selected cases include both past and present conflicts in the Middle East. This is important because while past experiences of indirect proxy war engagements will give a broad understanding of the rivalry and provide a basis for the present indirect proxy war engagements. The regime change in Iran will be starting point for these cases because the regime change in Iran which has shifted foreign policy attitude of Iran in the Middle East against other states of the region has influenced attitude of Saudi Arabia toward a hesitation about Iran and its intensions.

The first case of indirect proxy war among both rivals is the Iran-Iraq war between years 1980-1988. Although the war began as a conflict over the null and void declaration of 1975 Algiers agreement by Saddam Hussein claiming sovereignty over the Shatt-al Arab on the shadow of other territorial and non-territorial reasons, it turned to a war for leadership in the region between revolutionary Iran and strengthening Iraq. This war is important because it is the first example of proxy war engagement by Saudi Arabia against threatening Iran. Although Iran is one of the conflicting parties, indirect involvement of Saudi Arabia is important to add this inter-state conflict among the selected cases. This war has made Iran more protectionist and hesitant against Saudi Arabia and effected the relations between both states because it altered the conflict environment and favored Iraq against Iran. In this conflict, Saudi Arabia supported Iraq against Iran by hoping to provide status quo in the region. Although Iraq was not a really friend of Saudi Arabia, it was a balancer between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

The second selected case for indirect engagement through proxy war strategy is the Afghanistan. This case begins from the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and continues until the US invasion in 2001. Although this conflict is subject of engagement between two superpowers- the US and the SU- , Iran and Saudi Arabia fought by proxy warfare strategy in this conflict area. Involvement of Saudi Arabia along with the US against communists increased security concerns of Iran. While Saudi Arabia supported Sunni mujahideen, Iran supported Afghan Shias in Hazarajat. With the withdrawal of the Soviets, civil war began in Afghanistan. The indirect involvement by both states continued. Both supported different ethnic-

religious-linguistic groups. The established connections were subject to change by the time.

After these two historical cases, the status of Iraq after the US invasion will be the next case in this study. This case is involved to this study because the going on rivalry over Iraq effects the regional balances. Iraq is very important for two states for many reasons, especially for security concerns of both Iran and Saudi Arabia. So, proxy warfare engagement in Iraq is crucial to examine the rivalry. The US invasion left a power vacuum creating both opportunities and risks for both states. Especially Iranian willingness to increase its influence over the Sunni governed Iraq by replacing it with a Shia government has created great concerns for Saudi Arabia. Both states supported different sides by hoping to get upper hand.

The forth selected case will be Lebanon. Although there are contemporary major events such as the political crisis following the assassination of Rafik Hariri in 2005 and the “Cedar Revolution,” and the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, their rivalry goes back to the civil war years. These new events caused an increase in their involvements. While Iran has indirectly involved in this conflictual place through supporting Hezbollah since its establishment, Saudi Arabia has tried to hold the government led by a Sunni prime minister, and army strong enough to maintain the existence of Lebanon. Saudi Arabia also supports Salafist for its own aims.

The fifth selected case is Syria. When Arab Spring affected internal situation, Syria turned into an area for the rivalry of two states. From the perspective of Iran, the loss of Syria which is a strategic partner of Iran in the region, can cause a reduction in weight of Iran in the regional level. Bashar al-Assad is important ally of the Iran. Economically and militarily both has close ties historically; they supported Hamas and Hezbollah and rejected any superiority of another force in the region. Saudi Arabia, on the contrary to Iran, has supported Sunni resistance groups having different orientations. It aims to have a friendly Sunni regime which will be open for Saudi influence at the expense of Iran. To this end, Saudi Arabia supported selectively rebels.

Yemen war is excluded from this study for a number of reasons. The origins of this conflict went back to the unification years of North and South Yemen. Although

there have been continuous clashes, the current civil war started in September 2014 and Saudi Arabia involved directly with a coalition in March 2015. Although many state and non-state actors have been involved, this conflict is reduced to a proxy warfare between Iran and Saudi Arabia.<sup>71</sup> But this argument has a number of shortcomings. While Saudi Arabia gives much priority to this civil war for a number of reasons such as common long borders, Iran does not have so many interests, threat perceptions, power considerations and ideological reflections. On the contrary to Saudi Arabia, Iran did not intervene into Yemen. Its influence on Houthis is only limited with Shia understanding which started by some Zaydis students<sup>72</sup> and Iran's verbal support is not much different from its other pro-protest verbal support during the Arab Spring. Moreover, the Houthis have insisted that their aim is to have an independent state from foreign interventions in which their political and social demands are met.<sup>73</sup> That's why, many analysts accept that Iran-backed Houthis is a Saudi campaign to cover Saudi weakness against this non-state actor.<sup>74</sup> In this campaign, Saudi Arabia always accuses Iran to support the Houthis which has continuously been rejected by Iran. Although Saudi Arabia has accused Hezbollah for different activities, whether true or not, Iran cannot be shown as the main organizer because Hezbollah sometimes acts independently and can have its own proxies. Because of Saudi involvement in Lebanon, Hezbollah sees it as a challenger to its existence. Lastly, any involvement by Iran increases the risk of confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The Houthis directly threaten territories of Saudi Arabia and this is the only reason for Saudi Arabia to use its hard power.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> İrem Aşkar Karakır, "Ongoing Conflict in Yemen: A Proxy War?", **Turkish Journal of TESAM Academy**, 5(2), July-2018, p. 124.

<sup>72</sup> Thomas Juneau, "Iran's Policy Towards the Houthis in Yemen: a limited return on a modest involvement", **International Affairs**, 92: 3, May 6, 2016, p.655.

<sup>73</sup> Naseh Shaker and Faisal Edroos, "Mohammed al-Houthi: We want a united and democratic Yemen, **Al-Jazeera**, 25.12.2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/houthis-mohammed-al-houthi-united-democratic-yemen-181225104212165.html>, (04.03.2020).

<sup>74</sup> Patrick Cockburn, "Yemen is a Complicated and Unwinnable War: Donald Trump should stay out of it", **The Independent**, 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/yemen-war-donald-trump-us-military-iran-middle-east-isis-counter-terror-operation-william-owens-seal-a7622471.html>, (04.03.2020).; Seyed Hossein Mousavian, "Is Iran Really to Blame for Yemen Conflict?", **Near East News Agency**, 2015, <http://nena-news.it/is-iran-really-to-blame-for-yemen-conflict/>, (03.03.2020).; Arraf Sari, "The Armed Conflict in Yemen: A Complicated Mosaic", **The Geneva Academy**, 2017, pp. 1-10.

<sup>75</sup> For more arguments and details why it is not a proxy warfare see Karakır, "Ongoing Conflict in Yemen: A Proxy War?".

Because of these multi-conflict cases, the proxies that will be taken into consideration in this research, have no restriction in terms of types. Their types range from states to paramilitary groups and organizations.

While examining the relationships between benefactors and proxies, first of all there will be an attempt to search for different motivations behind the involvement. Every motivation can be crucial for the establishment of the relationship in different cases. Motivations behind the establishment of a relationship can change from one conflict to another due to different complexities and realities of the conflict and conflict areas. There will be an attempt to find material support provided by benefactors to proxies. Because of the possibility of masked roles in the conflicts, this study will also consider the mentioned support such as raised voice for political support or for legitimization of a situation or act of proxies by benefactors, their proxies and other actors taking place in the international system.

## **1.8. CONCLUSION**

In this first chapter of this thesis, the unit of analysis which is the proxy warfare is explored in order to provide the necessary analytical framework to examine the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the following chapters. Historically, the proxy warfare has always been on the agenda of international politics. Through time, types of the proxy warfare and the actors involved have changed. As a rooted strategy, proxy warfare was fought between the European powers under the Westphalian state system which adopted the principles of non-intervention to internal affairs and sovereignty in the pre-Cold War period. States as the sole actors of the international system became benefactors and proxies. Prior to this period, there were different proxies such as mercenaries waging war for different reasons such as religious ties. During the Cold War which was marked by the rivalry of two superpowers, the world had witnessed many proxy wars in different parts of the world. This era added new proxies and new means to the field. The main reason for indirect engagement was nuclear capacity of the two superpowers which possibly could lead to the destruction of the world. After the Cold War, the international system has changed and this change has led new conflicts such as ethnic wars. The

globalized world empowered new actors such as transnational terrorist groups which have the capacity to serve as proxies. The change in the international system is still continuing and proxy warfare becomes more preferable for the actors of the international system.

For many aspects, the proxy warfare strategy is a preferable strategy in comparison to direct military option. This strategy provides possibility for an indirect involvement for the external actors which are labeled as benefactors. Benefactors support a side in the warfare which is named as proxy through secret assistance. The proxy acts as a server for the interests of its benefactor. There is a special relationship which is discussed mostly throughout this chapter. In this relationship, the two sides are expected to have a common enemy and coordination which is generally masked and denied. The interests of the two sides are important and the assumption of a total serving by the proxy for the sake of the benefactor is misleading. Proxy warfare can be divided into two categories according to the involvement degree of the two sides. These are asymmetric and symmetric proxy warfare.

In the literature, there are many definitions of the proxy warfare which underline different aspects of it. Some of these definitions present actors as belonging to a single type such as a state acting as a benefactor or a non-state actor acting as a proxy. More comprehensive definitions do not limit the types of actors involved in the conflict. Several different combinations of actors are presented by different scholars for different reasons. There are also restrictions of the type of the conflicts. While some scholars define proxy war as an inter-state conflict, others also include intra-state conflicts within the framework of proxy war. In these definitions, reasons to engage in an indirect involvement change from internal problems to desire for more power, from ideological reasons to risks, from interests to effects the outcome of a conflict. Other motivations are categorized in different definitions such as coercion, political or strategic changes in the target. In terms of assistance, different scholars point out direct assistance in the relationship to fight against an enemy, to fight for compatible interests or mutual interests. This direct assistance is supposed to escalate the conflict for an unrestricted time in the eyes of some scholars.

The continuation of the relationship is also considered as an important criterion by some scholars of the field. In terms of priority of the interests, on the one hand, some scholars believe in a change in the interests of proxies in favor of the interests of benefactors. On the other hand, some scholars do not insist on a change taking place in the interests of proxies to fight not prioritizing the interests of benefactors. There are comparisons of the two sides of the relationship in terms of power capabilities in different definitions. Some advocate the high power capacity of benefactors over their proxies, while others connect driving force to different conditions which make proxies voluntary for a reciprocal relationship.

In this chapter, the benefits of proxy warfare are also discussed. From the perspective of the benefactors, burden of direct involvement is not preferred. Indirect involvement helps to get rid of burdens by providing flexibility for commitments and secures the assistance of benefactors until it ends when it is compared with the direct involvement. Indirect involvement increases capability of benefactors due to proxies' engagement. While the conflict is going on, by denying their assistance, benefactors can escape from criticisms in domestic and international contexts. Possibility of illegitimacy problem in conflict area is also eliminated through more close proxies to the population. Proxy warfare strategy also prevents international constraints and direct confrontations. At one point, benefactors can also use their link with strong proxies as a deterrence tool which helps to direct the sides of the conflict. It also motivates other allies and proxies in a positive way for the continuation of the links.

In terms of proxies, proxy warfare strategy provides assistance to fight against the enemy. Through this assistance, power capabilities of proxies increase. Along with increase in power, improvements in skills and knowledge of proxies can be seen. These increases make it easier for the benefactors to find new allies and proxies. More power brings more support to proxies through motivation. With the increase in efficiency, the level of non-ignorance by other actors decreases and can lead to possible future benefits for proxies.

All these aspects, clarified throughout the chapter, create an accumulative knowledge for this study. As several cases are analyzed in this study, there are no specific restrictions on the cases. The only restriction is over the type of benefactors

under analysis which are states: Iran and Saudi Arabia. Proxies change according to the cases. This thesis tries to find a ground for the establishment of a relationship between these two regional powers and their proxies concentrating on different reasons to engage in different conflicts. In this thesis, the selected cases include Iran-Iraq war in the years 1980-1988, Afghanistan from the Soviet invasion until U.S. invasion, Iraq after the invasion of the US and Lebanon and Syria cases. In these cases, there will be an attempt to explore the proxy relationship by searching different intentions of two rivals. Because of masked involvement of the benefactors in proxy warfare, the thesis searches for material and non-material implications from different actors and sources.



## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **IRAN, SAUDI ARABIA AND REASONS FOR INDIRECT INVOLVEMENT**

#### **2.1. INTRODUCTION**

In this chapter of the thesis, the first aim is to explain the foreign policy orientations of Iran and Saudi Arabia. Their foreign policy orientations are important because they help to understand their choices to involve in the conflicts indirectly. The political dynamics of internal and external environment shape their foreign policy attitudes. The roots of their establishments are going to be explained at first. This would provide an opportunity to extract and understand their characteristics which have shaped their foreign policy priorities. The leading characteristics of two states are their political system and the actors which have influence over foreign policy processes. By doing this, emerging conflict situations is going to be mentioned.

In the second part of this chapter, relations between the two states will be covered. This section points out that although there are commonalities between the two states, there are always remaining problems which prevent a total rapprochement. The relationship is going to be explained from short pre-revolution period until now. In this part, the change in the attitude of Iran with the Islamic revolution is going to be explained in addition to the problems of Saudi Arabia. This part is important to see that differences between foreign policy actors influence bilateral relations strongly along with regional developments.

The reasons for indirect engagement through proxy war will also be explained. The four reasons including risks, power, interest and ideology will be explained for two states in order to understand their engagements. These four reasons are considered as complementary to each other and they include two additional reasons for proxy strategy: the internal problems and the aim to affect the outcome of the conflict. Risks of direct engagement between the two states will be the first category to be examined with a focus on military capacities and the danger of involvement by

both internal and external actors. Secondly, power will be examined in terms of geopolitical power struggle after the Islamic revolution of Iran. Under the third category, ideology, different ideological orientations of both states will be identified and expressed which possibly have the capacity to effect their involvement into conflict through the proxy warfare. Their interests, as the last category, will be calculated by considering the economic potential of the conflict areas for both states which offer benefits for two countries in terms of different factors and main economic considerations inside.

## 2.2. IRAN AND ITS FOREIGN POLICY

Being located in a strategic geography and having important resources, Iran is an important country in the Gulf region. It has a huge population including educated and skilled workforce. Its hydrocarbons in terms of oil and gas increase its importance.

Iran Islamic Republic was established through a revolution under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, who led Iran through religious inspirations and hostility towards the US and its allies. Popular movement claimed a revision of Western-inspired religious and cultural aspects of Iran, introduced by the Shah. To do this, clergy components of the movement prevented leftists and seculars from power within three years.

The Islamic Revolution made Iran a theocratic state combined with a presidential system. This political system has multiple power centers which complicate responsibilities.<sup>76</sup> The main actors in the government are the Supreme Leader and the Supreme National Security Council (the SNSC). The executive consists of the president and ministers including the Foreign and Defense Ministers, the Parliament (the Majles) and Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (the IRGC).<sup>77</sup> The Supreme Leader has the total control over the decision-making process by having an approval power. He has the authority over national security and interest

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<sup>76</sup> Edward Wastnidge, **Diplomacy and Reform in Iran: Foreign Policy under Khatami**, I.B. Tauris, London, 2016, p. 20.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., pp. 20-21.

issues and controls the military which is a daily responsibility of the president.<sup>78</sup> The SNSC is the main branch of the government for the consultation under the leadership of the President. It brings together members who work for different branches of government. Its duty is to evaluate necessary formulations for policies including foreign and security, which makes the SNSC an effective body in Iranian politics.<sup>79</sup>

Iranian foreign policy process has a reflection of the revolution.<sup>80</sup> Under the leadership of Khomeini, Iranian experience had been showed as an example to be followed by other Muslim states which had lived under the control of the Western states. It meant emancipation and gaining autonomy by the Muslim world. Such a radical foreign policy has changed through time and has become more pragmatic.

The Iranian foreign policy has been mainly shaped by different motivations including threat perception, Shia ideology, protecting and maintaining national interests and so on.<sup>81</sup> Since the revolution, the main threat perception has been caused by the US actions and its presence in the region, which has indicated hostility and presented possibility of an attack against Iran.<sup>82</sup> Iran perceives the US as the Great Satan and a tyrant willing to dominate Islam world.<sup>83</sup> Iran is aware of the threats in terms of existence of opponents, economic restrains, and regional adversaries all of which the US may use to overthrow the regime.<sup>84</sup> Incompatible cultural influence of the western societies to Iranian societal and religious values and revolutionary regime itself is also a threat which is mentioned by the Supreme

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<sup>78</sup> The responsibility was granted to the president in 1989 under the Rafsanjani ruling to make changes and solve administrative problems. See details at: Steven R. Ward, **Immortal: A Military History of Iran and Its Armed Forces**, Center for Peace and Security Studies, Georgetown University Press, Washington D.C., 2009, p.304.

<sup>79</sup> Wastnidge, p. 22.

<sup>80</sup> Kenneth Katzman, **Iran's Foreign Policy**, Congressional Research Service, Washington D.C., 27.06.2016, p.1.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., pp.1-3.

<sup>82</sup> William Maclean, "Khamenei: U.S. Would Overthrow Iranian Government If It Could", **Reuters**, 02.08.2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-usaleader/khamenei-u-s-would-overthrow-iranian-government-if-it-could-mediaidUSBREA170CT20140208>, (19.11.2018); Erik Slavin, "Iran Emphasizes Nuclear Reconciliation, Criticizes U.S. Military Posture in Persian Gulf", **Stars and Stripes**, 5 March 2014.

<sup>83</sup> Jordan Steckler, "Iran's Ideological Expansion", **United Against a Nuclear Iran**, June 2018, [https://www.unitedagainstnucleariran.com/sites/default/files/expansion/iran%27s\\_ideological\\_expansion\\_report.pdf](https://www.unitedagainstnucleariran.com/sites/default/files/expansion/iran%27s_ideological_expansion_report.pdf), (15.02.2019).

<sup>84</sup> Maclean.

Leader, Khamenei.<sup>85</sup> Such perceptions have prevented the establishment of good relations with Saudi Arabia, the leading ally of the US in the region. Iran perceives that the support of the US strengthens Sunni Arabs.<sup>86</sup>

The roots of unique ideological position of Iran began to evolve with the Islamic Revolution. The principle of Velayat-e Fatiq, which is central for the Iranian government, privileges the thought system of the Shiism and Sharia allows the Supreme leader to advocate a justification to rule the Muslim world.<sup>87</sup> Iran, through this principle, has tried to export its ideology explicitly to the region until the 1990s.<sup>88</sup> There is still a perception of this in the case of its opposition to any intervention by western powers and actions of Israel in the region and its usage of “the oppressed” label for the people in the region.<sup>89</sup> The Iranian constitution also underlines the regime support to the oppressed people for their struggles in everywhere against tyrants.<sup>90</sup> Some Iranian officials also still stress the aim of exporting the Iranian ideology.<sup>91</sup> Non-sectarian and pan-Islamic ideological claims of Iran provide a way to support some different groups such as Hamas and secular Palestinians.<sup>92</sup>

For its national interests, Iranian decision-makers follow pragmatic actions through sometimes taking an upper hand over the ideological orientations of Iran. The most apparent example of this can be seen in the attitude of Iran in the Nagorna-Karabakh issue where Iran supports Orthodox Christian Armenia against

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<sup>85</sup> Zvi Bar’el, “Khamenei and the Western Culture Clash”, **Haaretz**, 24.11.2015, <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/.premium-khamenei-and-the-western-culture-clash-1.5425710>, (15.11.2018).

<sup>86</sup> Ramin Mostaghim, “Iranians Rally to Support Iraq; Some Blame U.S. for Sunni Insurgency”, **The Los Angeles Times**, 06.24.2014, <http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-iran-volunteers-militants-iraq-20140624-story.html>, (27.11.2018).

<sup>87</sup> Eric Hooglund and William Royce, “The Shi’i Clergy of Iran and the Conception of an Islamic State”, **State, Culture, and Society** 1, No. 3, 1985, p.106.

<sup>88</sup> Soner Cagaptay, James F. Jeffrey, and Mehdi Khalaji, “Iran Won’t Give Up on Its Revolution.” **The New York Times**, 04.26.2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/27/opinion/iran-wont-give-up-on-its-revolution.html>, (12.12.2018).

<sup>89</sup> Katzman, Iran’s Foreign and Policy, p. 2

<sup>90</sup> Article 2(6)(3) of Iranian Constitution. See in “The Constitution of Islamic Republic of Iran”, **Iran Chamber Society**, <http://www.iranchamber.com/government/laws/constitution.php>, (30.12.2018).

<sup>91</sup> Maboon Alabbasi, “Iran continues to boast of its regional reach”, **Middle East Eye**, 03.10.2015, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iran-continues-boast-regional-reach-944755422>, (22.11.2018).

<sup>92</sup> Kenneth Katzman, **Iran’s Foreign and Defense Policies**, Congressional Research Service, 09.10.2018, p. 2.

Muslim Azerbaijan mainly to decrease the sense of nationalism among Iranian Azeris in Northern Iran.<sup>93</sup> The major national aim is being recognized as a unique power in the Middle East. This is important for Iran to ensure its regime security. To this end, the characteristics of Iran which came from big Persian Empire, were stressed at the expense of newly independent monarchies of the Middle East between the 1960s-1970s.

The existence of three different fractions in the internal politics creates fluctuations in the foreign policy. Conservatives and radicals generally act in the same way with the Supreme Leader and the IRGC. On the other hand, moderate side of Iranian politics seeks to integrate Iran into the international system. Reformists focus on domestic politics. Presidents coming from different fractions adopt different attitudes and accordingly periodical changes emerge. In addition to these facts, specific developments of the time effect the actions of Iranian leaders and thus contribute to the foreign relations.

Against noticed fluctuations, there is always a consistency in the attitude of Iran. This consistent attitude is linked to the Islamic revolution which drives the cultural logic and the role of Iran in international system. Strong feeling of division makes Iran more protective and different from other states in the system, especially Saudi Arabia.<sup>94</sup> The power of the Supreme Leader keeps this feeling alive and he shapes the foreign policy decisions by having the final word.

### 2.3. SAUDI ARABIA AND ITS FOREIGN POLICY

Saudi Arabia was artificially established by Britain and France during partition of Ottoman lands after WWI which create political, economic and social problems.<sup>95</sup> The country is ruled by the Al-Saud family under a monarchical system. Along with

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<sup>93</sup> "Azerbaijani Ethno-Nationalism: A Danger Signal for Iran", **The Middle East Institute**, 29.01.2009, <http://www.mei.edu/publications/azerbaijani-ethno-nationalism-danger-signal-iran>, (22.11.2018).

<sup>94</sup> Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, **Iran in World Politics: The Question of the Islamic Republic**, Columbia University Press, New York, 2010, pp.70-71.

<sup>95</sup> Muharrem Ekşi, "Ortadoğu'da Güç Dengesi Sisteminden Vekalet Savaşı Dengesine Bölgesel Hegemonya Arayışları: İran-Suudi Rekabetinde Dengeleyici Güç Olarak Türkiye", **Academic Perspective**, Volume 11, No. 21, Winter 2017.

this family, there are ruling elites including the ulema, some ministers and officials in government. There is an interaction between upper classes. The core elites consist of members of royal family, religious elites (ulema), and other elites which consist of commercial and bureaucratic members.<sup>96</sup> They control the state, take decisions over the production of oil and management of oil revenues, govern individual resources of elites, maintain the activities of military forces in every type, protect ideological consciousness of the state and control overall information in the Kingdom.<sup>97</sup>

The Saudi ruling establishment sees itself as the responsible authority to protect the Two Holy Mosques and Islam. This leads to a consciousness as being a leader of the Muslim world.<sup>98</sup> Saudi Arabia is proud of taking place over the territories, where Islam was born. Because of this, ruling elites feel the responsibility to protect Islam and Islamic way of life.

In terms of economic structure, Saudi Arabia has rich resources, mainly petroleum. It is on the top of producers and exporter countries. Through the oil revenues, Saudi Arabia has integrated into different sectors in the international markets. This has also provided Saudi Arabia with necessary economic input to buy military equipments and to benefit from developed military technology in the world. The presence of vast petroleum has increased geopolitical importance in the eyes of other states, especially Western powers. At the same time, petroleum revenues have created a base for the strategic relationship with the US which has undertaken the responsibility to protect the regime since the 1940s.

The Al Saud family plays a dominant role in foreign policy affairs. This dominance sometimes creates problems because opinions of royal family and princes can differ over foreign policy decisions. The King is not the sole authority over all issues. Certain princes are responsible from specific areas, which are under the aspects of foreign policy relations. This sharing of power creates complexity in the foreign decision-making. The consensus principle is the central principle to reach a

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<sup>96</sup> Eduard Lecla and Luciano Zaccara, "Saudi Arabia: Family, Religion, Army, and Oil", **Political Regimes in the Arab World: Society and the Exercise of Power**, (Ed. Ferran Izquierdo), Routledge, London, 2013, pp. 155-161.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., pp. 162-167.

<sup>98</sup> "Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy", **Middle East Policy Council**, <http://www.mepc.org/saudi-arabias-foreign-policy>, (12.12.2018).

convenient and appropriate decision which is acceptable for all important members of the foreign policy making, including members involved in religion.<sup>99</sup> This principle grants an important influence effect to elites, who are powerful domestic constituents. Elites gain a chance to put pressure over the King, especially in the case of use of force.<sup>100</sup>

In the foreign policy of Saudi Arabia, ensuring the security of the Al-Saud regime is the primary object and also a foreign policy principle.<sup>101</sup> The things that are done to meet this object have a critical impact on foreign policy. In addition to this, another primary object is to protect Saudi Arabia from external interventions and invasions.<sup>102</sup> The second object is mostly driven by the first object.<sup>103</sup> They use foreign policy as a tool for maintaining their dominance over the country.

There are three leading principles which drive the foreign policy of Saudi Arabia. The first one is the protection of Islam all around the world, which the Saudi establishment claims to be the leader of it. The second principle is to preserve the existing level of well-being in the domestic context. The third principle is mostly related with the claim to be a regional power through having influence over the issues of Arab and Muslim countries in the region.<sup>104</sup>

Saudi Arabia has a traditional Islamic perspective which shapes its relations with other countries in the international context. It emphasizes its Arab identity, respect for Islamic values and ignores non-believers<sup>105</sup> in their beliefs which causes the feeling of insecurity and submission.<sup>106</sup> Although there is an emphasis of Arab

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<sup>99</sup> Gerd Nonneman, "Determinants and Patterns of Saudi Foreign Policy: "Omnibalancing" and "Relative Autonomy" In Multiple Environments", **Saudi Arabia in the Balance: Political Economy, Society, Foreign Affairs**, (Ed. Gerd Nonneman and Paul Aarts), New York University Press, 2005, p.336.

<sup>100</sup> Jessica L. Weeks, "Strongmen and Straw Men: Authoritarian Regimes and the Initiation of International Conflict", **American Political Science Review**, 106, No. 2. 2012, p.327.

<sup>101</sup> Helen Chapin Metz and Library of Congress, **Saudi Arabia: A Country Study**, Federal Research Division, the Library of Congress, 1993.

<sup>102</sup> Ertan Efegil, "Suudi Arabistan'ın Dış Politikasını Şekillendiren Faktörler", **Center For Middle Eastern Studies**, Volume 5, Number 53, March 2013, p. 105.

<sup>103</sup> Nonneman, "Determinants and Patterns of Saudi Foreign Policy", p. 318.

<sup>104</sup> Efegil, p. 106.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Madawi Al-Rasheed, **A History of Saudi Arabia**, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2002, p. 35.

identity which Islam is based on, Saudi Arabia does not support the idea of Arab nationalism. This is because such a nationalist ideology can create insecurity in the region and disturb the existing order. In addition to the consideration of regional stability, these kinds of movements challenge the authority of Al-Saud family. Against Arabian ties, Saudi Arabia prefers to privilege the identity based on blood ties.<sup>107</sup>

In terms of determinants of foreign policy, one of them is oil and its revenues which make the biggest contribution to the economy of Saudi Arabia at levels more than %70. The high rate of oil income effects foreign policy decisions and force Saudis to act according to this dependency and oil prices. This has resulted a long-lasting collaboration with OPEC countries for the same requirements of pricing to deal with exporters.<sup>108</sup>

Another determinant in foreign policy is the relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members. Saudi Arabia is one of the founding members of the GCC which was established in 1981. Saudi Arabia sees itself as the leader of the GCC which is not totally accepted by others. The reason for the claim of leadership is related to Saudi Arabia's huge territories and economy among the GCC members. Members of this council have deep ties and relations. With the aim of providing the stability by protecting legitimacy of regimes and ensuring domestic security, the members come closer at the time of disturbing events such as the Arab Spring.<sup>109</sup> However, because of different orientations and mindsets, this close interaction has not been totally friendly. Especially, trade and investment issues which require particularly the approval by Saudi Arabia among the GCC members complicate relations. The complicated relations put pressures over the Saudi actions and influence power politics.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Muhittin Ataman & Yurdanur Kuşçu, "Suudi Arabistan'da Siyasal ve Toplumsal Hareketlerin Gelişimini Etkileyen Faktörler", **Alternative Politics**, Vol. 4, Number 1, February 2012, pp. 1-26.

<sup>108</sup> Robert Mason, **Foreign Policy in Iran and Saudi Arabia: Economics and Diplomacy in the Middle East**, I.B. Tauris, London, 2015, pp. 37-38.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>110</sup> Muharrem Hilmi Özev, "Iran-Saudi Arabia Relations, 1932-2014", **Istanbul Journal of Economics**, Volume 66, 2016/1, p. 86.

## 2.4. RELATIONS BETWEEN IRAN AND SAUDI ARABIA

The relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia are subject to differentiations periodically. Their relations have not been stable. In the pre-1979 period, which began with the ouster of King Faysal in Iraq in 1958, Iran and Saudi Arabia pursued close relations.<sup>111</sup> Iran was under the control of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi and Saudi Arabia was under the leadership of King Faisal bin Abd Al-Aziz ibn Abd ar-rahman Al-Saud. This period can be referred as mutual cooperation and respect in the Middle East. Iran and Saudi Arabia had perceived common threats and good intentions.

Nasserism and Pan-Arabic Movements were major challenges of the time. The existence of Baathists in Iraq and socialists in Yemen were main security concerns for Saudi Arabia. Their ideological motivations undermined the legitimacy of Al-Saud family. To cope with them, King Faisal tried to use Islam to strengthen ties among people. The Shah of Iran supported his efforts, which resulted with two important establishments, the League of Muslim World and the Organisation for the Islamic Conference.<sup>112</sup> Shah Reza also had the same antipathy to ideological movements. The main danger for the Shah was the existence of pro-communist opposition in Iran. Unlike King Faisal's willingness to assume a religious role, the Shah had no such motivation and even attempted to limit the power of religious leaders, which made Iran an ally and friend in the eyes of Saudi Arabia in addition to the Western-oriented transformation attempts of the Shah. The level of threat perception from Wahhabi ideology also decreased in Iran. During the visit of the Shah Reza to Saudi Arabia, the Shah labeled King Faisal as the leader of Muslim believers which was attained for Ali Ibn Abitaleb, the first Imam. Also, consensus on the energy policies and the future of their monarchies had brought two states

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<sup>111</sup> Richard J. Heydarian, "Iran - Saudi Relations: Rising Tensions and Growing Rivalry", **Foreign Policy in Focus**, 2010, <https://fpif.org/iran-saudi-relations-rising-tensions-and-growing-rivalry/> (01.12.2018).

<sup>112</sup> Banafsheh Keynoush, **Saudi Arabia and Iran, Friends or Foes?**, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2010, p. 93.

closer<sup>113</sup> and made cooperation possible in different areas.<sup>114</sup> In addition to this cooperation, Iran became a supporter for the US and Saudi Arabia relations.<sup>115</sup>

This cooperation environment ended with the regime change in Iran. The attempts made by Shah increased the level of dissatisfaction among the Shia clergy. Along with the Shia clergy, pro-Soviet activists reacted against pro-capitalist activities of Shah. The 1979 Revolution led to a total change in Iran and its foreign policy. Ayatollah Khomeini came to Iran and got the support of the public and consent against Shah. The coup questioned the legitimacy of the monarchies such as Saudi Arabia. In addition to the revolutionary change in Iran, Saudi Arabia entered into a chaotic period. King Faisal was assassinated in 1975. Islamists accused King Faisal of not following real Islam and undermined the legitimacy of Royal Family by blaming them for ignorance of some events such as events of the Holy Mosque in 1979.

During the 1980s, bilateral relations were strained. In addition to Saudi support for Iraq in its war against Iran, Saudi Arabia forces and Iranian pilgrims had confronted each other during pilgrim periods, which caused many deaths. The changes in political arena in both states caused the end of diplomatic relations in 1988. The problems had continued until Hatemi Rafsanjani became the president in 1989.

The invasion of Kuwait in 1990 constituted a common danger for both states. It shifted Iranian foreign policy from exporting revolution to seeking new friends in the international system. Saudi Arabia felt the decreased intention of Iran for exportation of Shia revolution during the events of Shia intifada occurred in Southern Iraq in 1991. In addition to this, domestic crises such as unemployment and Islamist challenges in Saudi Arabia changed the attitude toward a rapprochement.<sup>116</sup> But, this rapprochement did not prevent the occurrence of fundamental tensions during

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<sup>113</sup> Henner Furtig, "Conflict and Cooperation in the Persian Gulf: The Interregional Order and US Policy", **The Middle East Journal**, Volume 61, Number 4, Autumn 2007, p. 628.

<sup>114</sup> Keynoush, p.95.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>116</sup> Gwenn Okruhlik, "Saudi Arabian-Iranian Relations: External Rapprochement and Internal Consolidation", **Middle East Policy**, Volume 10, no. 2, Summer 2003, p. 117.

1990s.<sup>117</sup> The new competition areas, after the collapse of the SU, emerged. While Iran tried to expand its influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia,<sup>118</sup> Saudi Arabia had tried to prevent it by supporting efforts of the US<sup>119</sup> and tried to spread its Salafist ideology in these lands<sup>120</sup>.

Another area for tensions has been the Middle East. Iran supported Qatar against Saudi Arabia for the border incident in 1992<sup>121</sup> and criticized Saudi Arabia for its support to South Yemen during the civil war. Saudi Arabia raised its voice against the activities of Hezbollah and the IRGC. Prince Abdullah after gaining power in Saudi politics attempted to revise the relations in 1997 during the Islamic Conference in Pakistan. Reciprocal assurances were given by both leaders.<sup>122</sup>

Mohammad Khatami pursued neighborhood policy dividing the insistence for the US withdrawal from the relations with regional states<sup>123</sup> and used “dialogue of civilizations” to increase his regime’s legitimacy.<sup>124</sup> Following Khatami’s visit to Jeddah in 1999, different agreements were signed between 2001 and 2002 and the two states worked together against al-Qaeda in Afghanistan.

When Ahmedinejad became the president of Iran in 2005, the relations became unstable. One of the main reasons behind this is the nuclear program of Iran.

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<sup>117</sup> Frederic Wehrey and Others, **Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam: Rivalry, Cooperation, and Implications for U.S. policy**, RAND Cooperation, 2009, p.18.

<sup>118</sup> Henner Furtig, **Iran’s Rivalry with Saudi Arabia Between the Gulf Wars**, Ithaca Press, New York, 2002, p. 179.

<sup>119</sup> Wehrey and Others, *Since the Fall of Saddam*, p. 18.

<sup>120</sup> Furtig, *Iran’s Rivalry with Saudi Arabia*, p. 195.

<sup>121</sup> Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, “Iran-Saudi Arabia Relations and Regional Order: Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Balance of Power in the Gulf”, **Adelphi Paper 304**, Oxford University Press for The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1996, p. 36.

<sup>122</sup> Mohsen Milani, “Iran’s Gulf Policy: From Idealism and Confrontation to Pragmatism and Moderation”, **Iran and the Gulf: A Search for Stability**, (Ed. Jamal S. al-Suwaidi), Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, Abu Dhabi, 1996; Douglas Jehl, “On Trip to Mend Ties, Iran’s President Meets Saudi Prince,” **The New York Times**, 17.05.1999, <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/05/17/world/on-trip-to-mend-ties-iran-s-president-meets-saudi-prince.html>, (21.11.2018); Howard Schneider, “Saudi Pact with Iran is Sign of Growing Trust”, **The Washington Post**, 17.04.2001, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2001/04/17/saudi-pact-with-iran-is-sign-of-growing-trust/fbdde133-8ef9-48d2-9deb-5393b7f314d4/> (03.12.2018).

<sup>123</sup> Noof Rashid ALDosari, “Foreign Policy from Khatami to Ahmedinejad, There is One Foreign Policy in Iran which is Khamenei’s Foreign Policy”, **World Journal of Social Science Research**, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2015, pp.55-58.

<sup>124</sup> See more information in Muriel Mirak-Weissbach, “Iran’s Khatami Advances ‘Dialogue of Civilizations’”, **EIR International**, Volume 26, Number 45, 12 November 1999.

Although there are negative sides of relations, there were also positive improvements in this period such as the established dialogue between the leaders of both countries in 2007.

In 2000s, regional instabilities have become main drivers for relations. Authority gap in Iraq after invasion of the US and the establishment of a Shia government, huge impact of the Arab Spring, increased influence of Hezbollah in Lebanon and Iranian involvement in the Palestinian-Israeli question, multi-type conflicts in Syria after uprisings, authority competition in Yemen have caused strained relations. Both countries have threatened each other for its attitudes and interventionist policies in the region. These instabilities are still effective and probably they will also be effective in the future. The current diplomatic crises in the region also effect the bilateral relations. The most notable example is the Qatar crisis in 2017 in which Iran supported Qatar against Saudi Arabia. Since the beginning of the relations, there have always been some issues which have prevented a total collaboration between the two states. Even, they have defined each other as “serious rivals” in the Middle East.<sup>125</sup> Their differences and common conflicting interests have prevented them to compromise and to establish a sustainable dialogue.

## **2.5. REASONS FOR INDIRECT INVOLVEMENT INTO THE CONFLICTS**

As it was already mentioned in the first chapter, the reasons behind the proxy warfare are divided into four categories by different scholars in the field as power, ideology, interest and risk. These four elements are accepted as complementary to each other in order to explain totality for the indirect proxy involvement by both sides. These four reasons also include two other reasons namely the internal problems and the aim to change the outcome of the conflict. It is fair to suggest that a clear division between these four categories seems to be hard. Because each category is linked to the others in a way. In terms of power, ideology is a driver and a supporter for the acquiring and maintaining the power capacity. Ideology gives a capability to create an influence over the populations by creating a legitimate

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<sup>125</sup> Andrew Terrill, **The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry and the Future of Middle East Security**, U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute (SSI), Carlisle, 2011, p.1.

ground for the regimes. Interests are motivations behind the desire for power which is pursued by ideological orientations and create a pressure to prefer an indirect involvement rather than a direct war. Risks are calculated by considering the weaknesses of military capabilities and perceived threats inside and attitude of external powers, mainly the US.

### 2.5.1. Risks

Due to widespread undemocratic regimes, internal insurgencies are the real facts for most of the states in the Middle East. Iran's huge population demands more in terms of both economical and democratic individual rights which does not seem to be compatible with the existing Islamic system.<sup>126</sup> Another internal challenge for Iran is the political struggle between supporters of the government and other political parties. This political struggle, from time to time, results in conflicts across the country. These conflicts weaken and make rulers less legitimate in the eyes of Iranians. Another possible internal risk is related to the ethnical composition of Iran which includes Persians as majority and Azerbaijani, Gilaki and Mazanarani, Kurd, Arab, Lur, Balouch, Turkmen and other ethnic minorities. Although Gilaki, Mazandarani and Lurs have ties with Persians, they have been in conflict in common places. These ethnic groups create pressure over the regime for rights and criticize it for being discriminatory. Iran also has a threat perception from Balouch minority located in the Eastern part of Iran and Sunni Muslims, and blames Saudis for its support to these groups through training and arming. These populations are perceived as being under the effect of Saudi Arabia<sup>127</sup> and its Salafi thought to undermine the Shi'ism of Iran.<sup>128</sup> Some voices coming from Saudi Arabia are in line with the accusations of Iran.

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<sup>126</sup> Paul Salem, "Working Toward a Stable Regional Order", **The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science**, Volume 668, 2016, p.7.

<sup>127</sup> See ethnic composition in Iran: John R. Bradley, "Iran's Ethnic Tinderbox", **Washington Quarterly**, Volume 30, No. 1, Winter 2006–2007, pp. 181–190.

<sup>128</sup> Theologians Concerned by Reported Sunni Preaching in Khuzestan", **Iranian Daily**, 20.12.2005; "Saudi Wahhabis Reportedly Funding Wahhabi Communities in Iran," **Persian Press**; "Wahhabis investing heavily in southern Iran", **Hezbollah (Tehran)**, 02.10.2007, Quoted by Wehrey and Others, *Since the Fall of Saddam*, p.70.

Saudi Arabia has similar internal realities. The opposition groups including many different groups such as Islamists, some Wahhabi clerics from Ulema and other Islamic clerics criticize Al-Saud family for the US presence in the country. Liberals, intellectuals and other Saudis in the middle class put pressure over the regime for different rights and demands. Also, possible armed revolt in the case of external protection poses risk through creating domestic legitimacy problems<sup>129</sup>. All of them create domestic security dilemma for the survival of the regime.<sup>130</sup> Another internal concern is the existence of a Shia minority, located in the Eastern province of Saudi Arabia. Wahhabist interpretations do not recognize Shias as real Muslims, which create Iranian reaction politically for Saudi treatment in the absence of a total non-discriminatory agreement. Especially, Iranian claim to be the supporter of all oppressed people causes Saudis' worries regarding possible political demands from Shias in Eastern province.<sup>131</sup>

Direct involvement is problematic for both sides externally. The most dangerous scenario for Iran is the possibility of the US involvement in the conflict. Iranian leaders are aware of the level of their military and technological collaboration lasting between the US and Saudi Arabia. The US also, most of the time, does not hesitate to finger the Iranian regime as a problematic country and to threaten Iran. A direct war with Saudi Arabia may be a chance for the US to find a ground for fighting against Iran. Iranian leaders are aware of their military capabilities which are not at the same level with the U.S military capabilities and Saudi Arabia's technologically advanced military capabilities backed by the US.<sup>132</sup>

Both states avoid from a direct confrontation with each other by considering uncertainty of the war. The possible U.S. non-involvement on the side of the Saudi Arabia prevents to foresight a clear victory. Because of their limitations and

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<sup>129</sup> Nonneman, *Determinants and Patterns of Saudi Foreign Policy*, p. 328.

<sup>130</sup> Ghadam Alghunaim, **Conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran: An Examination of Critical Factors Inhibiting Their Positive Roles in the Middle East**, (Doctoral dissertation), Nova Southeastern University, Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Florida, 2014, p.56.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., p.25.

<sup>132</sup> Al Omid, "Five Reasons Why Iran-Saudi Conflict Won't Escalate", **Al-Monitor**, 07.02.2016, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/02/five-reasons-iran-saudi-cold-war-turn-hot.html>, (01.12.2018).

problems, they cannot destroy each other or impose a regime change.<sup>133</sup> Each has different advantages along with different disadvantages. From the point of Iran, Iran has a considerable military force with active personnel and has different types of missiles. Along with them, it has the IRGC which is experienced in fighting.<sup>134</sup> But, remaining part of its military has no capacity to fight against technologically equipped modern army. In comparison with Iran, Saudi Arabia has a small army which is mostly referred as a reluctant one to take arms and is inexperienced in actual conflicts.<sup>135</sup> In addition to this, Saudi Arabia has huge territory with long coastlines which is too much to protect with limited military capability at the same time in the case of multiple enemies on all sides.<sup>136</sup>

Rather than quality and quantity of military forces and equipments, the problem of Saudi Arabia is its lack of manpower. Voluntary recruitment to army prevents the establishment of a large army such as Iran's army.<sup>137</sup> In addition to this problem, numerous distortions cause differentiations, which lead to decentralization of forces.<sup>138</sup> These two factors effect the level of dependency of Saudi Arabia to foreigners, mainly the US in terms of training and support.

The limitations that Iran and Saudi Arabia face in their military capabilities are important to consider in the case of a possible direct action against each other. From the point of Iran, the only reason to involve in a direct conflict directly may be the real threat to the existence of the Iranian regime.<sup>139</sup> On the other hand, Saudi Arabia has to consider the further attitudes of foreigners in the case of direct engagement. These limitations put pressure over two regimes not to engage in direct confrontations.

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Amitai Etzioni, James Jay Carafano, Ian Easton, Emanuele Ottolenghi, and Derek Maltz, "Why Saudi Arabia's Regional Power Plays Won't Lead to War", **The National Interest**, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/why-saudi-arabias-regional-power-plays-wont-lead-war-23257>, (18.11.2018).

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Nonneman, *Determinants and Patterns of Saudi Foreign Policy*, p. 328.

<sup>137</sup> Stephanie Cronin, **Armies and State-building in the Modern Middle East: Politics, Nationalism and Military Reform**, I.B. Tauris, London, 2014, p. 209.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., p. 236.

<sup>139</sup> Matthew J. McInnis and Ashton Gilmore, "Iran at War: Understanding Why and How Tehran Uses Military Force", **American Enterprise Institute**, December 2016, p. 12.

### 2.5.2. Power

Although both states try to increase their military capabilities, they also try to avoid from showing their power by using it. By considering above-mentioned risk factors, they indirectly pursue a power competition regionally. Both try to find a way to engage with the other side by investing on different powers since the Iranian revolution.

Since its establishment, Saudi Arabia has continued to have great influence in the world which makes it a pioneer country in its region in terms of its spiritual power.<sup>140</sup> Its economic power has provided an increase in its political power and influence. But, the Iranian revolution made Iran a radical challenger which has the capacity to favor power of Iran over Islamic and Arab world instead of Saudi Arabia. The opposing power capacity of Iran has become the threat to pioneer position of Saudi Arabia in the region.<sup>141</sup>

Iranian struggle for power in the region has a connection to the geopolitical and historical patterns of the region. Iran was subject of invasions and interventions. According to some scholars, disturbing activities of foreigners in Iran has created a paranoia among the leaders of Iran.<sup>142</sup> Gaining influence over the region is regarded as the only way to ease this paranoia at the expense of other powers. Iran advocates that the dominance over the Arabian Gulf means to be dominant over the half of the world.<sup>143</sup> Remaining part of the world which consists of the Caspian Sea and Central Asia is subject to further attempts.

The strategy to prevent possible threats is through investing on powers in conflict areas, which disturbs Saudi Arabia. Iran by increasing its influence seeks to secure its regime and to get acceptance with the support of its partners. As Iran

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<sup>140</sup> Simon Mabon, **Saudi Arabia and Iran: Soft Power Rivalry in the Middle East**, I.B. Tauris & Co, London, 2013, p.80.

<sup>141</sup> Simon Mabon, "The Middle Eastern Great Game", **The Foreign Policy Center**, June 2013, <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/167090/The%20Middle%20Eastern%20'Great%20Game'.pdf>, (05.12.2018).

<sup>142</sup> Salem, pp.6-8.

<sup>143</sup> Mabon, *Soft Power Rivalry in the Middle East*, p.49.

increases its level of security, Saudi Arabia feels itself as being surrounded through the rising influence of Iran in the region.

Especially, invasion of Iran by Iraq showed Iranians the importance of being prepared for further conflicts. This preparation is not only against aggressive Iraq, but also against the Gulf states. The reason for that is the support of the Gulf states to Iraq. For Saudi Arabia, Iraq under the leadership of Saddam Hussein was a balancer against Iran in the region. In Afghanistan, Iran tried to gain power through Hazara and anti-Taliban groups, while Saudi Arabia supported Afghan groups and Taliban. After the American withdrawal, a power vacuum emerged in Iraq. During this authority gap, both states supported different sides to increase their influence over the Iraqi future. The establishment of a Shia government in Iraq increased concerns of Saudis for the balance of power. With the removal of regimes in both Afghanistan and Iraq, Iran now has friendly and allied regimes in its neighborhood.

This engagement also has led to the other indirect involvements in the region to reshape the balance of power. Lebanon is one of them. Iran has invested in Hezbollah; a guerilla movement. Being a critical connection to Lebanese conflict, Syria under the control of Basar Al-Assad is an ally of the Iranian regime. With the beginning of civil war in Syria, Saudi Arabia had the chance to shift the power on its favor. Both countries have engaged to strength their own proxies to have an influence in Syrian politics. Threat perceptions of Iran caused new fears for Saudi Arabia.<sup>144</sup> As long as Iran has felt itself as contained by enemies and rivals, Saudi Arabia has also felt threat of insecurity in both internal and external environment and has perceived every single action of Iran as a regional hegemony-oriented one.

### **2.5.3. Ideology**

Soft powers of both Iran and Saudi Arabia are based on their religious sects. Iran and Saudi Arabia have the capacity to influence different parts of the Middle East by using their religious aspirations and to affect their spheres of interests. Their internal and foreign policies are based on different Islamic laws and clerics. Different

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<sup>144</sup> Salem, p.9.

versions of Islam represent their ideologies and their ways for survival. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia give importance to their own interpretations and want to spread them across the Middle East. This is a competition among their own Islamic interpretations in the Middle East which have led to indirect involvements in different conflicts.

Different political identities of ruling elites in both countries are drivers of this ideological competition. Specific cultural and religious indicators are used as tools through politicization of them to confront each other's identity. Although both share Islam as a religion, their ways to consolidate their legitimacy and power within the state and to cope with internal security dilemmas are related to different interpretations of Islam.<sup>145</sup> Their ideological aspects are to control identities and their constructions. In this way, through their ideologies, leaders of both states present themselves as the protectors of their nations in order to sustain their political legitimacy.

Both countries stress different selected titles for similar reasons. Iran claims to be "the leader of Ummah and the Oppressed"<sup>146</sup> and Saudi Arabia claims to be "the custodian of the Two Holy Mosques"<sup>147</sup>. Iranian claim addresses the oppressed people and Shia minorities and Muslim revolutionaries, which are discriminated and pressured through force and injustice in different parts of the Middle East. Leaders of Iran present themselves as the fighters of these groups in order to provide equalities. In the claim of the Saudis, the existence of two important places, Mecca and Medina, is a privilege which leads the claims of Saudi Arabia to be the protector of true Islam. Because of ideological contradictions, both states perceive each other as threats to survival and security for their own regimes.<sup>148</sup> Their ideological interpretations are important for their legitimacy in both their societies and the region. For these reasons, both countries engage with each other indirectly for their own ideologies to protect their own legitimacy.

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<sup>145</sup> Mabon, *Soft Power Rivalry in the Middle East*, pp. 27-28

<sup>146</sup> A label used for Iran by Islamic Invitation Turkey at <https://www.islamicinvitationturkey.com/>, (15.11.2018).

<sup>147</sup> P. Wood, "Life and Legacy of King Fahd", **BBC News**, 2005, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/4734505.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4734505.stm), (12.11.2018).

<sup>148</sup> Furtig, *Iran's Rivalry with Saudi Arabia*, p. 106.

Shiism in Iran and Wahhabism<sup>149</sup> in Saudi Arabia make toleration difficult. Their religious foundations for legitimacy constitute an important factor for tensions between Sunnis-Shias.<sup>150</sup> Shias see Sunni regimes as tyrants and authoritarians, which is contrary to the Islam. Sunnis ignore Shia by considering them as a non-Muslim sect. Their assessments shape the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the region.<sup>151</sup> Their ideologies also provide a way to put pressure over the other side and other ideologies by using them as political tools.

Another source of their ideological competition is related with their historical roots. Their ethno-national identities are different from each other as Persians and Arabs. The competition between Arabs and Persians goes back to the time of Prophet Mohammed shaping current attitudes of two states toward suspicions. The claims of Iran to reach old Persian territories by insisting on sovereign rights, which emerged after the withdrawal of British Empire from the Gulf is opposed by the Saudi regime.<sup>152</sup>

#### 2.5.4. Interests

The main national interests of all states are centered on their sovereignty and territorial integrity. Both states have great concerns for their own securities and try to protect themselves from possible instabilities in their domestic contexts.

The national interests also involve economic interests which create both constraints and opportunities for the two states. Iran and Saudi Arabia are the leading oil producers in the region which provide a different dimension for the rivalry among them. For them, oil is a political tool to decrease the power of the other side. Having a leading role in the oil market is very important for both of them.

From the perspective of Iran, embargoes and sanctions which has led to a weak economy is the main concern. This has created frustration for the Iranian regime.

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<sup>149</sup> See more information: J. Lane -E., Redissi, H., & Saydāwī, R., **Religion and Politics: Islam and Muslim Civilization**, Ashgate Publishing, Farnham, 2009.

<sup>150</sup> Wehrey and Others, *Since the Fall of Saddam*, p. 6.

<sup>151</sup> Mabon, *Soft Power Rivalry in the Middle East*, p. 105.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.3-4.

There are high numbers of inflation and unemployment<sup>153</sup> which have created unrest in Iran. To deal with this situation, conflict areas have provided economic opportunities. Increased influence of Iran over other parts of the Middle East gives a chance to get rid of the economic constraints through making collaborations with the power centers. Decreased feeling of insecurity may cause the establishment of good relations, even with the West. This challenges the production capacity of Saudi Arabia<sup>154</sup> and leads to the perception of destabilization of the region through the usage of economic gains by Iran. The opening of Iran to more markets may help it to reach the level of Saudi Arabia's oil production.<sup>155</sup>

One of the issues for Saudi Arabia is its population which is increasing rapidly. This increasing population means need for more jobs and demand for more opportunities for a qualified life. Saudi Arabia faces with these challenges which are affected by the oil pices.<sup>156</sup> Another concern for Saudi Arabia is the rising energy demand which began to give alarm. The Iranian control over the Strait of Hormoz also creates concerns for Saudi Arabia to avoid direct confrontation with Iran, as Saudi Arabia mostly relies on this strait to control its trade.<sup>157</sup> In the case of a war, losing access to the strait would lead to search for another trade route, possibly the Red Sea which may cause negative impact over oil revenues.<sup>158</sup>

Both countries have a geographically complementary capacity to each other. As being two states over the two sides of the Gulf region, they need each other to reach the other side which is passing through the other power. In terms of Iran, reaching Africa and the countries in the Indian Ocean is very important to increase the trade income. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia looks for opportunities by reaching the Caucasus, the Central and South Asian countries. These locations are important for

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<sup>153</sup> Alghunaim, p. 54.

<sup>154</sup> İbrahim Arslan, "Iran'ın Ortadoğu Politikası", **The Journal of Pamukkale University Social Sciences Institute**, No. 26, January, 2017.

<sup>155</sup> See this statement in "Saudi Arabia says backs U.S. decision to withdraw from Iran Nuclear Deal", **Reuters**, 08.05.2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-gulf/saudi-arabia-says-backs-u-s-decision-to-withdraw-from-iran-nuclear-deal-idUSKBN1I92SH>, (27.11.2018).

<sup>156</sup> Alghunaim, p. 65.

<sup>157</sup> Omid.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

the economic ties.<sup>159</sup> In the absence of collaboration between them, conflict areas become potential areas to maximize their interests due to their strategical locations.

## 2.6. CONCLUSION

Iran and Saudi Arabia are important states in terms of their economical and strategic positions. Their characteristics which drive their foreign policies are the basis of their regimes. The regime change in Iran through the revolution turned Iran into a theocratic state under mainly dominance of the Supreme Leader along with other power centers. Revolution of Iran is shown as an example to get rid of Western dominance which influence foreign policy in many ways against mostly pro-American Saudis regime. In addition to that, Shiism is privileged as a way of dominance through ideology exportation for regime security along with insistence of being Persian. Although the differences among fractions in politics, the Supreme Leader maintains the feeling of the revolution which creates consistence in the foreign attitude.

Artificially established Saudi Arabia is a monarchy under the dominance of Al-Saud family along with ruling elites. Saudi Arabia sees itself as the protector of true Islam and the leader of Islamic world by having two holy cities. Its rich resources increase its impact over international markets and benefit Saudi Arabia in terms of the last innovations. Foreign policy of Saudi Arabia is shaped by the interaction between family members. As in the case of Iran, the regime security is the sole objective of Saudi Arabia along with territorial protection. Leading principles shaping its foreign policy attitude include protection of Islam under the leadership of Saudi Arabia, maintenance of domestic well-being and regional leadership. Traditional Islamic perspective and Arab identity based on blood are emphasized. Determinants of foreign policy are oil revenues and relations with the GCC members.

Many different factors and actors make relations instable. Pre-revolution relations were affected by the different mindsets of leaders, regional movements,

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<sup>159</sup> Özev, pp. 84-85.

internal challenges, decreased threat perceptions and common energy policies, which brought two states closer. Islamic revolution in Iran, by challenging the legitimacy of other monarchies, posed a threat to the regime of Saudi Arabia which entered in a difficult period. Strained relations continued until the 1990s. Although smooth relations were established, further rapprochement between the two states did not happen with the emergence of new competition areas and issues. The instable relations have continued up to now. Many developments in the region such as nuclear program of Iran, Arab Spring, conflicts in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen, Palestinian-Israeli question, Qatar crisis, have affected the attitudes of two states.

Based on this cumulation of knowledge about the two states, the reasons for proxy warfare strategy are put forward. In the category of risk, both internal challenges and problems of both states including human right advocates, regime challengers and radical protectors, disturbing ethnic compositions are common points which may create potential risks in a direct war. External risks including involvement of the US for Iran and non-involvement of the US for Saudi Arabia and unpredictability of the outcome of the war put pressures over both sides to avoid from a direct confrontation with each other. In terms of reason of power, both states prefer investing on different powers in the region since the Iranian revolution. Challenging feature of Iran decreases the power of Saudi Arabia in different bases which has a great effect, especially in the region. More power means more protection for each regime. The mean to acquire more power is to increase their influences over close regions. Iran-Iraq war was the first indicator of this power struggle which was followed by the struggle over Afghanistan. After the American withdrawal, Iraq became another place for competition. To be effective in the future of Iraq became critical which was concluded with the establishment of an ally regime for Iran. The shift in the power has led another involvement to reshape power influence. Both states have involved in Lebanon and Syria which are connected to each other. Saudi Arabia had the chance to shift the power in its favor against Iran.

In terms of their ideological reasons, common religion, Islam, is interpreted differently (Shiism-Wahhabism) by both states, which constitute main sources for their spiritual influences. Their interpretations effect their domestic and foreign

policies against each other. These interpretations are the bases of their regime identities and they help consolidation of their regime legitimacy externally and internally. To this end, they use different meaningful labels to capture influence. In addition to interpretation difference, historical roots of them are based on their ethno-national identities (Persian-Arab) influencing their ideological orientations which increases the level of suspicion. Interests, the last category of reason, include firstly the protection of sovereignty and territorial integrity which are important for regime security. Economic reasons follow these interests. Increase in oil revenues which may be used as a political tool and being a leading power in terms of oil supply are very important for both states. Iranian ambitions to get rid of embargoes and sanctions and Saudi desire to maintain its main economic activity by increasing influence over the conflict regions conflict with each other. Economic opportunities in post-conflict areas attract both side and create a competition between them. Their internal necessities and demands cause the need for influence. In the absence of collaboration of these two countries, both will seek to reach other parts by engaging with each other and getting new powers.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **HISTORICAL CASES OF THE RIVALRY: IRAN-IRAQ WAR AND AFGHANISTAN FROM SOVIET INVASION UNTIL U.S. INVASION**

#### **3.1. INTRODUCTION**

In this chapter of the thesis, two historical conflicts, Iran-Iraq war and Afghanistan cases will be examined. These two cases are important to show the continuation of the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Both can be seen as examples and reasons of the continuation of this rivalry. On the one hand, they are the main cases to create the patterns of hostile actions of both states towards each other. On the other hand, they are historical cases of proxy engagement by two states.

The first case to focus on in this chapter will be Iran-Iraq war which is narrower in terms of involving actors and time period than the Afghanistan case. This devastating conflict broke out in 1980 and ended without victory of either side. This case is an important war because it effected and reshaped the dynamics going on in the region.<sup>160</sup> It is an essential step for further understanding of the developments in the post-1988. This war also influenced the level of engagement in Afghanistan by both states. Although both Iran and Saudi Arabia may sometimes experience smooth relations, the one sided proxy war engagement by Saudi Arabia during the war has created the roots of unending hesitations. In this war, it can be suggested that Iraq as being one of the belligerent powers, also acted as a proxy of Saudi Arabia.

The complex Afghan case includes the examination of proxy engagement by both states. Although there are many other reasons behind their proxy engagement, one of them is the perceived influence of each other. Being an unstable state and subject of interventions by outside actors, examination of the Afghanistan conflict is limited from Soviet invasion in 1979 to the fall of Taliban regime in 2001. Different ethnic, linguistic and religious groups, and the established authorities by them were subjects of the proxy engagements.

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<sup>160</sup> Oral Sander, *Siyasi Tarih 1918-1994*, 14th Edition, İmge Publishing, Ankara, 2003, p. 563.

### 3.2. IRAN-IRAQ WAR

Iran-Iraq war began in September 1980 between the two states which aimed to extend their influence in the region. In addition to the aim of extending influence, both states followed a remarkable armament policy to be a regional power until the overthrow of the Shah regime in Iran.<sup>161</sup> To this end, while Iraq tried to be closer to the USSR, Iran tried to have good relations with the West.

During the 1970s, Iran increased its economic and military capabilities more than Iraq in the face of the deliverance of weapons and increase in the price of oil during the 1973 War.<sup>162</sup> This situation effected the resolutions of different issues in favor of Iran, such as Shatt-al Arab or Arvand Rud<sup>163</sup>, and situation of Iraqi Kurds.<sup>164</sup> The revolution in Iran changed the internal dynamics of Iran. The most important outcome of this revolution for Iraq was the possible shift of power because in the aftermath of the regime change, Iran lost half of its military commanders and entered into economic turmoil.<sup>165</sup> While new Iranian regime's cleaning in military ranks was very bothersome for Iran's performance in the war, Iraqi military increased in numbers.<sup>166</sup>

Contributing events of the past include disputes over land borders, water rights for rivers, the Iranian support to oil-producing Kurdish region-the Northern Iraq-<sup>167</sup>, historic claims of Iran over the Southern Iraq, the status of Arabic-speaking Khuzistan<sup>168</sup> and the sovereignty claims over Shatt al-Arab waterway<sup>169</sup> determined with a humiliating agreement for Iraq in 1975.<sup>170</sup> The Shatt al-Arab and its around offer economic considerations and strategic calculations for both states. For Iraq, it is

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<sup>161</sup> Ferhat Pirinççi, "Power Struggle in the Gulf: A Re-evaluation of the Iran-Iraq War", **The Journal of Academic Inquiries**, Volume 10, Issue 1, 2015, p.233.

<sup>162</sup> J.W. Limbert, **Iran at War with History**, Westview Press, Colorado, 1987, p. 103

<sup>163</sup> Two different names are given by both side to highlight their claims for sovereignty over the waterway.

<sup>164</sup> Pirinççi, pp. 235-236.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., p. 238.

<sup>166</sup> E. Karsh and R. O'Neill, **Essential Histories: The Iran-Iraq War 1980-1988**, Osprey Publishing, Oxford, 2002, p.19

<sup>167</sup> Jasim M. Abdulghani, **Iraq and Iran: The Years of Crisis**, The John Hopkins University Press, London, 1984, p.185.

<sup>168</sup> Khuzistan territory of Iran inhabits mostly ethnic Arabs. Ibid., p. 188.

<sup>169</sup> It is formed by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and approximately 130 miles. It creates Iran-Iraq borders.

<sup>170</sup> Will D. Swearingen, "Geopolitical Origins of the Iran-Iraq War", **Geographical Review**, Volume 78, No. 4, October 1988, pp. 413-416.

important for maritime activities toward Basra which create vulnerability for security as well.<sup>171</sup> Although Iran is not strategically vulnerable, it has economic interests in Khorramshahr port and the Trans-Iranian railway system. Non-territorial reasons include personal intolerance between Saddam and Khomeini<sup>172</sup>, rivalry for regional leadership, ideological differences -secular Arab nationalism and fundamental Islam- and the effect of Khomeini among the Iraqi Shias.

Among these non-territorial reasons, the ideological aspect of the war is maybe the most remarkable one than others and connected to other reasons. Their ideological orientations contribute both to their regime security, personality appearance and capacity to mobilize masses. To this end, while Iraq aimed to spread its Baathist socialism to the Middle East, Iran acted in accordance with the fanaticism of Khomeini's regime. In this war, the aim of removal of the other side's regime became more apparent than a military victory. But, such a total victory of one side was dangerous for the region.

Both sides accused each other for the beginning of the war. From the point of Iran, aggressor was the Iraqi decision to invade Iran by assuming a clear victory. But Iraq pointed out earlier attacks of Iranian forces.<sup>173</sup> Iraq aimed to eliminate Iranian revolutionary movement from the region which would make Iraq a leader and protector of the Arab states. Iraq demanded the recognition of sovereign rights over the Shatt-al Arab, non-interference to internal affairs, good neighbourhood, return of occupied territories of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 1971 by Iran. Against these demands, Iranian demands involved the end of aggression, admission of Iraq's guilt and reparations. In addition to these, Khomeini referred this war as a "war against Islam..., Koran..., the prophet of Allah"<sup>174</sup> which would possibly direct Saddam regime's overthrowal.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Stephan R. Grummon, "The Iran-Iraq War: Islam Embattled", **The Washington Papers**, Volume 92, Praeger. 1982, p. 6.

<sup>172</sup> Mansour Farhang, "The Iran-Iraq War: The Feud, The Tragedy, The Spoils", **World Policy Journal**, Volume 2, No. 4, Fall, 1985, pp.659-661.

<sup>173</sup> Swearingen, pp. 405-416.

<sup>174</sup> Quoted by Osman A. Eisa, *Iraq-Iran War: Background, Development and Regional Responses*, **Air University**, The United States, March 1986, p. 10.

<sup>175</sup> M. Kocaoğlu, **Uluslararası İlişkiler Işığında Ortadoğu**, Genelkurmay Press, Ankara, 1995, p. 296.

Iraq invaded three Iranian territories; Khuzistan, the territories from Qasr-e Shirin and Sar-e Pol-Zohab to Mehran, and Suleymaniyah.<sup>176</sup> The expectations over Iraqi victory failed with the Iran's superior position in the war which was perceived as a potential sign of instability in the region. In a short time, Iraqi forces faced Iranian resistance being superior numerically and morally. After a series of confrontations, Iran began its counter attacks in January 1981. Iranian forces forced Iraqi forces back to the starting area of the war by September 1982 and marched until 100 miles of Baghdad by 1984. Khomeini blocked Saddam's attempts to negotiate.<sup>177</sup>

Mediation efforts to put an end to this war failed<sup>178</sup> because both sides of the war did not want less than a total victory in the case of non-strict reaction from outside. The balance in the war turned to in favor of Iran in 1986. Iran continued its fighting by taking the support of Kurds in the North and capturing Fao islands near Kuwait.<sup>179</sup> Iraq used chemical weapons over Kurds collaborating with Iran. The fighting became unsustainable for both parties in its eighth year. The UNSC took resolution 598 insisting on a ceasefire and turned to the lines before the war in 1987. Iran accepted this resolution and decided to make a ceasefire with Iraq in July 1988. The conflict came to an end in the absence of a winner.

Although this war was fought by two Persian Gulf states, its impact was very influential over other states which mostly relied on the oil supply of the Gulf region. Without outside support to both parties, this war would not continue for eight years.<sup>180</sup> Different states having different economic and strategic intentions participated to the conflict. Conservative Gulf states, Egypt, Jordan and the US supported Iraq while Libya, Greece, Taiwan, Syria, Israel, North Korea, and People's Republic of China and others supported Iran.<sup>181</sup>

In addition to this distinctive feature of the war, Iran-Iraq war was too destructive in terms of its economic damages and severe casualties in comparison with other conflicts between equal powers of the time. This war ended with the casualties

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<sup>176</sup> Grummon, p.22.

<sup>177</sup> Ekrem Yaşar Akçay, "Iran-Iraq Savaşının Bölgeye Etkileri", **The Journal of Ufuk University Social Sciences Institute**, No.3, 2013, p.114.

<sup>178</sup> See three attempts for a ceasefire at: Farhang, pp. 659-680.

<sup>179</sup> O. Bulut, "Devrimin Eşiğindeki Ülke: İran", **Different History Journal**, No.3, 2009, p. 10.

<sup>180</sup> Piriñçi, p. 240.

<sup>181</sup> Nader Entessar, "External Involvement in the Persian Gulf Conflict", **Conflict Quarterly**, Fall 1984, p. 41.

of more than 2 million people.<sup>182</sup> Both states spent more than 300 billion dollars to continue their fighting.<sup>183</sup> Because of the perceived necessary investments in military, they entered into economic crisis.<sup>184</sup> In addition to their spendings, the reason for economic problems was the damages of petroleum resources through airstrikes.<sup>185</sup> While Iraq became an important military power through the help during the war, the emergence of economic problems prepared a basis for Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1991. In terms of Iran, economic problems created a revision of the decision for nuclear energy which was stopped after the revolution.<sup>186</sup> The main fruit of this war for the region was the emergence of a security problem. It created a reaction through the establishment of the GCC by Kuwait, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, and Saudi Arabia in 1981.<sup>187</sup>

### 3.2.1. The Proxy Relationship between Iraq and Saudi Arabia

In this inter-state war, Iraq served as a proxy of Saudi Arabia. The most apparent reason for the establishment of the proxy relationship between Iraq and Saudi Arabia was the existence of a common enemy. Although both states were ruled by Sunni regimes, they had different orientations at that time. While Iraq was an Arab nationalist state, Saudi Arabia was a status quo power pursuing a territory-based Arab nationalism. After Iranian Islamic revolution, Iran emerged as a challenger for other two regional rival states.

The Islamic revolution disturbed the balances in the region. Both Iraq and Saudi Arabia had same considerations as Iran became dangerous through its revolution exportation policy to be the leader of the region.<sup>188</sup> The challenge of the Iran for

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<sup>182</sup> Sander, p.482.

<sup>183</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman, **The Iran-Iraq War and Western Security 1984-87: Strategic implications and Policy Options**, Jane's Publishing Co., London, 1987, pp. 9-10.

<sup>184</sup> T. G. Carpender and M. Innocent, "The Iraq War and Iranian Power", **Survival**, Volume 49, No. 4, 2008, pp. 67-82.

<sup>185</sup> F. Armaoğlu, **20. Yüzyıl Siyasi Tarihi**, 18th Edition, Alkım Press, Istanbul, 2002, p. 927.

<sup>186</sup> A. Akıncı, **İran Nükleer Krizi**, Uşak Press, Ankara, 2009, p. 36; M. Yetim ve R. Kalaycı, "Türkiye ve İran İlişkileri: Sıfır Sorun Mu?, Nükleer Sorun Mu?", **The Akademik Middle East**, Volume 5, No. 10, 2011 p. 85-109; A. Semin, "İran Nükleer Programının Körfez Ülkelerine Etkisi", **Bilgesam**, 2013, [http://www.bilgesam.org/tr/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=1430:ran-nuekleer-programnkoerfez-uelkelerine-etkisi&catid=168:ortadogu-analizler](http://www.bilgesam.org/tr/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1430:ran-nuekleer-programnkoerfez-uelkelerine-etkisi&catid=168:ortadogu-analizler) , (21.01.2019).

<sup>187</sup> Semin.

<sup>188</sup> T. Yılmaz, **Uluslararası Politikada Ortadoğu**, 2. Edition, Barış Platin Bookstore, Ankara, 2009, p. 260.

regional leadership created concerns for Saddam.<sup>189</sup> When Saddam came to power in 1979, two important events in the region influenced the foreign policy of Saddam. The traditional Arabic leadership claim of Egypt failed in the eyes of other Arab states in the region, when Egyptian President Anwar Sadat became the first Arab leader making peace with Israel through the Camp David Treaty.<sup>190</sup> Saddam condemned the peace initiative along with other Arab states. This condemnation of Saddam showed his intention to be the leader of the region and gained relative power in the eyes of regional actors. But the Iranian revolution changed the situation by bringing a pattern of Shi'a revolution in Shia-populated states.

Iranian revolution and its influence were viewed as the major threatening factors for the stability in Iraq. The Iraqi Baathists were challenged by the aggressive ideology of this revolution ending rapprochement period between two states. New Iran became a revisionist state threatening the Baathist regime because its revisionist foreign policy aimed at overthrowing secular regimes such as Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq. This challenge was dangerous for both regime security and territorial integrity of Iraq, as Saudi Arabia has felt since 1979.

The claims of Iran were very impressive over Iraqi regime. In the eyes of the Iraqi regime, the call of Iranian revolutionaries was a liberation call for a new social and political life.<sup>191</sup> Such a call may mobilize the inhabitants of Iraq including Shias and Kurds. Especially Shias are the majority of Iraqi population suffering under the minority Arab-Sunni regime. Iranian revolutionary mindset could encourage these people for another revolution in Iraq. The threat perceptions of Saddam Hussein were mainly based on the developments on its eastern border. Iran began to support Iraqi Shia population consisting 60% of the mosaic population of Iraq. The possibility of division of the power in Iraq threatened Saddam regime.<sup>192</sup> Although Saddam got some important steps to improve the quality of living standards of its Shia population such as providing membership to the Baathist Party, at the end, he did not reach a

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<sup>189</sup> Rubin Lawrance, "Research Note: Documenting Saddam Hussein's Iraq", **Contemporary Security Policy**, 32: 2, p.460.

<sup>190</sup> Tayyar Ari, **Irak, İran ve ABD Önleyici Savaş, Petrol ve Hegemonya**, Alfa Publishing, İstanbul, 2004, pp. 357-358.

<sup>191</sup> Farhang, p. 661.

<sup>192</sup> R. Stafford and Others, "The Iran-Iraq War: Exceeding Means", **National Defense University**, 20.01.2000, <http://www.dtic.mil/cgibin/GetTRDoc?Location=U2&doc=GetTRDoc.pdf&AD=ADA441679>, (12.01.2019).

concrete solution to combat against Shia rising. Saddam took decisions to imprison and execute the leading Shia people including Da'wa Party members and Shia cleric Baqir al-Sadr<sup>193</sup>.

Saudi Arabia shared the same security threat perceptions. The events of 1981 which happened during the Hajj season strained relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. In these events, Shia protestors living in Saudi Arabia demanded reforms by carrying photos of Khomeini and some clashes happened between Saudi security forces and protestors. Saudi Arabia blamed Iran as the main activator behind these events. Another event was the coup attempt in Bahrain in the same year. This instability creating events constitute the security reasons for the establishment of the GCC.

So, the revolution in Iran changed the attitudes of both Iraq and Saudi Arabia. First of all, this turning point led the signing of a security pact between Iraq and Saudi Arabia in 1979. Two states came closer militarily to act together against the Iranian threat. It was read by Iraqis as all for one and one for all.<sup>194</sup> Also, Saddam's proposal for the "National Charter for the Arab States" in 1980 demonstrated the common considerations on the regime security between Iraq and Arab states, including Saudi Arabia.<sup>195</sup> In addition to peaceful aims, collective security system under the international law context and economic integration, the current balance system between Arab states were recognized in this document.<sup>196</sup>

Also, the Gulf states supported proposal of Saddam for the National Charter. When the war was approaching, the threat of ideology exportation became apparent for the Gulf states. After the declaration of the Algiers agreement null and void by Saddam<sup>197</sup>, the level of diplomatic contact between Iraq and the Gulf states

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<sup>193</sup> H. Erol, **Türkiye-Ortadoğu İlişkileri**, (Master Thesis), Dokuz Eylül University, The Institute of Social Sciences, İzmir, 2008, p. 56

<sup>194</sup> Gerd Nonneman, **Iraq, The Gulf States and the War, 1980–1986 and Beyond**, Ithaca Press, London, 1986, p. 14.

<sup>195</sup> Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Gerd Nonneman, **War and Peace in the Gulf**, Ithaca Press, 1991, pp. 152–154.

<sup>196</sup> Gerd Nonneman, "The Gulf States and the Iran–Iraq War: Pattern Shifts and Continuities", **Iran, Iraq and the Legacies of the War**, (Ed. Lawrence G. Potter and Gary G. Sick), Palgrave, New York, 2004, p. 172.

<sup>197</sup> David. B. Ottaway, "Iraq cancels border Pact with Iran", **The Washington Post**, 18.09.1980, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1980/09/18/iraq-cancels-border-pact-with-iran/725d6c32-0a8c-4eab-afbf-0c05e2edd019/?utm\\_term=.6401f4e7a2cd](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1980/09/18/iraq-cancels-border-pact-with-iran/725d6c32-0a8c-4eab-afbf-0c05e2edd019/?utm_term=.6401f4e7a2cd), (15.02.2019).

increased.<sup>198</sup> Their insistence of the present situation and Arab solidarity showed clearly the common understanding of the enemy in a joint communiqué.<sup>199</sup> Saddam tried to confront Iranian ideological threats by using Arab-Persian split as Saudi Arabia did. For him, Arab ideology was superior to Persian ideology of Iran.

Along with these reasons, the change in the outcome also became a motivation for Saudi assistance. The power of Iran was greater than that of Iraq. It became apparent when Iran stopped Iraqi offensive in the late 1980. This date is important because after that Saudi Arabia increased its aid. From the point of Saudi Arabia, Iraq was the place of resistance against Iranian ideology exportation.<sup>200</sup> It was a gatekeeper of the border with revolutionary Iran.<sup>201</sup> The fall of Saddam Hussein by Iran would strengthen the influence and activities of Iran at the close point of Saudi Arabia because Iranian leaders fingered the supporting Gulf countries as targets after the engagement with Iraq and Saddam<sup>202</sup>. This was a possible dilemma for Saudi Arabia.<sup>203</sup> Even in the absence of a direct attack over these regimes, the increased power capacity and influence of Iran would disturb the balances in their internal affairs in a long period.<sup>204</sup>

The thing dividing Iraq from a partner is the firstly the situation of it. The Iraqi ability to continue fighting was too low in the absence of the external assistance from other states including Saudi Arabia. As having close proximity to both warrior states, Saudi Arabia was in a strategically important place for Iraq in order to transfer both military and oil. Additionally, the attitudes of the Gulf countries showed the ignorance of Iraq as a potential partner for traditional concerns. The Gulf states did not think Iraq as a natural ally during the creation of the GCC.<sup>205</sup> Iraq was a dependent country over the Gulf assistance because it was in a war with strong Iran having more soldiers and strategic advantages. This dependency over their assistance prevented it from partnership. So, Iraq turned to serve as a proxy for Saudi Arabia,

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<sup>198</sup> For a comprehensive list of exchanges and visits between Iraq and the Gulf states, see Nonneman, Iraq, Appendix III.

<sup>199</sup> Middle East Economic Survey [MEES], August 18, 1980, Quated by Nonneman, The Gulf States and Iran-Iraq War, p.173.

<sup>200</sup> Lawrance, p 460.

<sup>201</sup> Yılmaz, Uluslararası Politikada Ortadoğu, p. 263

<sup>202</sup> Akçay, p.114.

<sup>203</sup> Michael Sterner, "The Iran-Iraq War", *Foreign Affairs*, 63: 128, 1984, p.142.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq*, 2d Edition, Westview, Boulder, Colo, 2004, p. 194.

the main state in the Six. Even in the GCC, the position of Iraq was stressed as being an outsider without a clear exclusion of Iraq due to security and political considerations.<sup>206</sup> Although they perceived Iraq as a trouble, the Gulf countries, along with Saudi Arabia, supported Iraq in this war.

In addition to these considerations, the shift in the ideological orientation of Iraq may be an indicator of its proxy role. The level of Iraqi dependency over Saudi assistance grew through time. Previously, Baathist regime financed nationalist opposition groups challenging the internal domestic politics of the Gulf countries<sup>207</sup> and provided political and military aid to these anti-regime movements<sup>208</sup>. But the war with Iran shifted Iraqi insistence of socialist nationalism toward a diminished ideological insistence in the relations. One of the main indicators of this shift was the supportive attitude of Iraq over the legitimacy of Gulf regimes during the establishment of the GCC.<sup>209</sup>

When Iran began to be more influential than Iraq, change in Iraq's attitudes became apparent. One of these changes was on the Arab-Israeli issue. Although previously Iraq had rejected the Fahd Plan over the dispute, it approved the changed version of the plan in September 1982.<sup>210</sup> In addition to this political development, the final version of border treaty was agreed by Saudi Arabia and Iraq. This was a very good and important achievement for Saudi Arabia. Another indicator of the Iraqi role as a proxy was the attitude of Saudi Arabia after the decision of Iran to accept the ceasefire. Saudi Arabia cut its support for Iraq because the convincing reason was removed.<sup>211</sup> Iranian threat at the border was already stopped.

Saudi Arabia supported Iraq through different means including loans, aid, territory, helping to maintain oil exportation of Iraq and so on. In the examination of support of Saudi Arabia, Iraq was allowed to use Saudi airspace and land for its

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<sup>206</sup> Al-Watan al-Arabi, February 13, 1981; Emirates News, July 5, 1981; Arabia, 1981, no. 1, p. 29, Quoted by Nonneman, *The Gulf States and Iran-Iraq War*, p.176.

<sup>207</sup> Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh, "The Persian Gulf and Afghanistan: Iran and Saudi Arabia's Rivalry Projected", **Peace Research Institute Oslo**, March 2013, p. 6.

<sup>208</sup> Joseph A. Kechichian, "Trends in Saudi National Security", **Middle East Journal**, Volume 53, No. 2, Spring, 1999, p. 239.

<sup>209</sup> Nonneman, *Iraq, The Gulf States and the War*, pp. 40–42.

<sup>210</sup> Nonneman, *The Gulf States and the Iran–Iraq War*, p. 176.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 186.

planes in the beginning of the war.<sup>212</sup> To indicate specifically, Saudi Arabia allowed Iraq to use its three ports and airports for military purposes.<sup>213</sup> This strategic permission increased the capacity of Iraq to attack Iran from different directions.<sup>214</sup> But, at the beginning of the war, the level of this support was limited.<sup>215</sup> This was followed by the Saudi offer for the transportation of both military and civil supplies.<sup>216</sup>

When Iraqi offensive was stopped by Iran in November, 1980, Iraqi failure to win the war became apparent. This turning point led to starting of material aid to Iraq by Saudi authorities.<sup>217</sup> Saudi Arabia provided direct financial assistance (6 billion dollars) in April 1981.<sup>218</sup> Further assistance (4 billion dollars) was attained for the remaining part of 1981.<sup>219</sup> Saudi Arabia continued its aid in the following years.<sup>220</sup> Saudi Arabia gave other loans (4 billion dollars) in 1982 and (6 billion dollars) in 1983. Until that time, financial aid granted to Iraq by Saudi Arabia reached up to 20 billion dollars.<sup>221</sup> In addition to this financial assistance, Saudi Arabia accepted the proposal for the construction of the Iraq Pipeline Trans Saudi Arabia I (IPSA I) reaching to the Red Sea. This pipeline would allow Iraq to continue its oil exportation in the case of the Gulf restriction by Iran.<sup>222</sup>

After the closure of petroleum pipeline by Syria, Saudi Arabia tried to sustain the petroleum need of Iraq.<sup>223</sup> It started to give crude oil for sale to Iraqi customers.<sup>224</sup> It sold daily 280,000 barrels of oil for the sake of Iraqi regime. At the end of the war, with relief crude agreement in 1986, the value of supplies reached up

<sup>212</sup> Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), **Quarterly Economic Report for Saudi Arabia**, 1980, No. 4, p. 4; **Time Magazine**, October 13, 1980, p. 16; Mark Heller, "The Iran-Iraq War: Implications for Third Parties," **JCSS Paper**, no. 23, Tel Aviv, January 1984; Nadav Safran, **Saudi Arabia: The Ceaseless Quest for Security**, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1985, p. 368, Quoted by Nonneman, *The Gulf States and Iran-Iraq War*, p.175.

<sup>213</sup> Fakhreddin Soltani and Reza Ekhtiari Amiri, "Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait as Turning Point in Iran-Saudi Relationship", **Journal of Politics and Law**, Volume 4, No. 1, March 2011, p.188.

<sup>214</sup> William Quandt, "Reactions of the Arab Gulf States", **The Iraq Iran War: Issues on Conflict and Prospects for Settlement** (Ed. Alki E. H. Dessouki), Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1981, pp. 39-41.

<sup>215</sup> Furtig, "Conflict and Cooperation", p.629.

<sup>216</sup> Abdulghani, pp. 178-218.

<sup>217</sup> Furtig, "Conflict and Cooperation", p. 629.

<sup>218</sup> Nonneman, *The Gulf States and the Iran-Iraq War*, p. 175.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., p. 176.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid., p. 175.

<sup>223</sup> Akçay, p.115.

<sup>224</sup> Nonneman, *Iraq, the Gulf States and the War*, pp. 96 and 103.

to 9 billion dollars along with the Kuwaiti supply.<sup>225</sup> In the same year, Saudi Arabia extended aid through an additional loan (4 billion dollars) to Iraq with Kuwait. In addition to this, Saudi Arabia allowed Iraqi planes to land and to refuel.<sup>226</sup> With the signation of IPSA II, Iraq would have another 1.65 million b/d from the transport of oil to the Red Sea. During 1987, both Saudi Arabia and Kuwait aided Iraq through more than 1 billion dollars. But according to unapproved sources, Saudi Arabia alone provided another 2 billion dollars grant.<sup>227</sup> During the war, the total amount of Saudi Arabian financial assistance reached approximately 30 billion loans to Iraq.<sup>228</sup> According to other sources, the amount of financial aid given to Iraqi military reached up to 40 billion dollars.<sup>229</sup>

But the outcome of the war presented both advantages and disadvantages to these countries including Saudi Arabia. On the one hand, the war for eight years decreased the power of Iran and led a shift in the foreign policy of Iran, at least explicitly. This shift deterred the threat perception of Iranian influence at the expense of Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, their support made a base for Iranian perception of insecurity and of containment. Iraq replaced Iran as a challenger state because militarily strong aggressive Iraq emerged on the other side of Saudi borders.

During the war, the role of Saudi Arabia was determinant over the attitudes of small regional states. At the beginning of the war, Riyadh defined its position as being neutral. Although Saudi Arabia did not openly support or sanction Iraq, it provided different types of material aid to it.<sup>230</sup> Its claim of a neutral position in pro-Iraq actions continued until the end of the war.<sup>231</sup> The main reason of this situation was that it did not want to escalate the war further. Since the beginning of the war, it called for a settlement of the war between two warring parties through different means. By such attempts, Saudi Arabia, as well as others, tried to ensure to prevent a clear-cut victory by any combating states rather than helping Iraq to be the winner of

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<sup>225</sup> Ibid., pp. 102–04.

<sup>226</sup> Cordesman, p. 75.

<sup>227</sup> Nonneman, *The Gulf States and the Iran–Iraq War*, p. 183.

<sup>228</sup> H. Hussein, **Reviewing Iran-Saudi Relations**, 2007, Quoted by Soltani and Amiri, p.188.

<sup>229</sup> Reza Amiri, Ku Samsu, and Hassan Fereidouni, “The Hajj and Iran’s Foreign Policy towards Saudi Arabia,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 46, no. 6, 2011, p. 680.

<sup>230</sup> Grummon, pp. 43–44.

<sup>231</sup> Quarterly Economic Report for Saudi Arabia, p. 4; Time Magazine, p. 16; Heller; Safran, p. 368, Quoted by Nonneman, *The Gulf States and Iran-Iraq War*, p.175.

the conflict. It calculated the options in a way diminishing the power of them in the Gulf.

Saudi Arabia avoided to express Iranian aggression clearly in order to prevent tensions with Iran. The condemnations were made in a collective manner in international and regional platforms without using the name of Iran, even during the Tanker War. Although it helped Iraq, Saudi Arabia avoided to take direct actions against Iran. The only direct action made by Saudis was the drop of an Iranian plane in 1984 during a dogfight in the air.<sup>232</sup> Saudi Arabia shot down the Iranian plane through the U.S military mechanisms, mainly Airborne Warning and Control System.<sup>233</sup> This event showed that Saudi Arabia could dare to take action in the case of an attack to its territory without leading a war.<sup>234</sup> The interesting point was the money offer of Saudi Arabia to Iran in order to stop the victory of Iran in this war.<sup>235</sup>

Avoiding a direct conflict was the case for Iran, too. The support of Saudi Arabia to Iraq effected the Iranian foreign policy thinking. Khomeini called a new instruction in October 1984 to end isolation of Iran and establish new relations with other governments to expand its revolution.<sup>236</sup> In this respect, the Prime Minister of Iran, Mir-Hosein Musavi, indicated Iranian unwillingness to create instabilities in any country.<sup>237</sup>

The threats of Iran to close the Gulf did not create hesitations for Iraq because it already lost its access to the Gulf route. The subjects of threats were other actors supporting Iraq. But Iran tried to avoid from any confrontation with these powers, especially with Saudi Arabia backed by the US because Iran was aware of that the closure of the Gulf would extent the conflict beyond uncertain results. Even during the shot down of the Iranian plane by Saudi Arabia, Iran was careful and showed restrained reaction to Saudis. Both sides overcame this trouble through diplomatic channels quickly. The foreign ministers of both states, Prince Saud al-Faysal and Iran's Foreign Minister Ali-Akbar Velayati, visited each other.

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<sup>232</sup> J. Muhsin, and Others, "Iraq in The Gulf War", **Saddam's Iraq, Revolution or Reaction**, (Ed. Jabr Muhsin), Zed Books, London, 1986, p. 232.

<sup>233</sup> Sterner, p. 129.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid., p.136.

<sup>235</sup> M. Ercan, and T. Bilgin, "ABD-İran İlişkileri: ABD-İran Gerginliğinin Türkiye'ye Etkileri", **Academic Perspective**, Number 33, 2012, p. 3.

<sup>236</sup> Said Amir Arjomand, **After Khomeini: Iran under His Successors**, Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 136.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

As mentioned above, during the Iran-Iraq war Saudi Arabia involved indirectly in the conflict through its proxy, Iraq in order to stop the Iranian victory. There are many points which show the proxy relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iraq. Although there is a common religious base, the common enemy and change in the outcome of the conflict are relevant factors in the establishment of a proxy relationship. There are many indicators of common enemy perception by both sides in the pre-war period. The close proximity of Iraq to Saudi Arabia is another factor which created consideration for direct and indirect threats from the other side of the borders. The attributed proxy role for Iraq is underlined by the rejection of Iraq as a part of the Gulf. Under worsened conditions, Iraq had to act sometimes in accordance with the interests of Saudi Arabia in their relations. This proxy relationship ended with the end of the conflict in the absence of explicit danger. The support of Saudi Arabia in terms of financing and selling oil and so on contributed to the escalation of the war. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran avoided from a direct confrontation with each other and dealt with obstacles in more moderate way.

### **3.3. AFGHANISTAN**

Afghanistan had entered into an instability era by the Saur (April) Revolution of 1978 which brought Khalq party to power. The new regime introduced radical changes under the intentions of socialism without having the support of masses and necessary bases. Non-inclusion of real needs pushed people into the opposition and the new socialist government responded them by using military force. Center-periphery incompetence led internal conflicts.<sup>238</sup> The foreign aid sought by leaders for regime's basic needs radicalized people who gave priority to their independence because external pressures from major powers created widespread hesitations.<sup>239</sup> The legitimacy question in politics left the country in a disaster confronting the supporters and the resistance.

The internal events such as the assassination of 50 Soviet advisors and their families in Herat by insurgency in March 1979, the murdering of President Taraki and rapprochement between new President Amin and the US, and international

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<sup>238</sup> Joseph J. Collins, **Understanding of the War in Afghanistan**, National Defense University Press, Washington D.C., 2011, p. 21.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid., p.23.

events such as the revolution in Iran, signing of David Camp Accords and radical uprisings in Mecca caused the invasion of Afghanistan by Soviets.<sup>240</sup> Babrak Karmal came to power but he could not fix the disturbed balances in the country. Najibullah replaced Karmal who enjoyed less legitimacy in 1989. He reorganized the Afghan army and established new friendly alliances with the help of Soviets.<sup>241</sup> This regime called for a reconciliation between the opposition forces.

When Soviets completed their withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989 which was an end of the war in thought, conflict intensified increasingly. The Najibullah government collapsed in 1992. The mujahideen resistance movement which has divergent factions entered into a civil war by proclaiming their own rights to govern the country. A government was established with the help of the UN in 1992. Clashes continued between Hezb-i-Islami group of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (eastern Pashtun) and military wing of Jamiat-i Islami under Ahmed Shah Massoud (Tajik) aiming to control Kabul. While Burhanuddin Rabbani -the political head of the Jamiat-i-Islami- became the President, Hekmatyar became the prime minister and Massoud became defense minister of the intern government in 1996. The civil war continued to capture Kabul city. In other major cities, local warlords dominated their own regions. For example, while Ismail Khan controlled Herat city, Abdul Rashid Dostum controlled Mazar-i Sharif. The control of other places was disintegrated and the level of crime and violence increased.

The Taliban regime emerged as a dominant power from the civil war. But the state structure was destroyed and all groups in Afghanistan became fighters militarily and politically. This empowerment made the state ungovernable because any state structure was questioned.<sup>242</sup> Taliban tried to rule and order through sharia-based law without having Koranic scholars and other experienced people. Small successes of Taliban in Kandahar were followed by nationwide operations. The field force of it emerged in Pakistan territories and equipped with modern weaponry.<sup>243</sup> Taliban disintegrated Rabbani regime and captured the control of Kabul in 1996. Massoud

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<sup>240</sup> Ibid., pp. 28-29.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid., p. 31-32.

<sup>242</sup> Thomas Barfield, **Afghanistan; A Cultural and Political History**, Princeton University Press, 2010, p. 6.

<sup>243</sup> Ahmed Rashid, **Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil, and Fundamentalism in Central Asia**, 2d edition, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2000), pp. 27-28; Martin Ewans, **Afghanistan: A Short History of Its People and Politics**, Harper Perennial, New York, 2002, p. 255.

withdrew to the North. Hazaras and Uzbek fighters under Dostum joined him. After continued fightings, Taliban captured Mazar-i Sharif in 1999 and killed Hazaras and Iranian diplomats. The captured areas by the Northern Alliance (NA) did not reach more than 20% of the total territory of Afghanistan.<sup>244</sup>

Taliban recognized Kabul as its capital. There were only three countries which recognized Taliban as the legitimate authority; Pakistan, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia. But, the seats in organizations and embassies were continued to be occupied by the Rabbani regime's representatives. The anti-modernist and anti-progressive attitude of Taliban worsened the situation in captured areas. The al-Qaeda under the leadership of Osama Bin Laden was the applier of Taliban's brutal rule. Afghanistan turned into a safe-haven for terrorists. Saudi Arabia called the Taliban regime to surrender bin Laden in 1998, but it did not happen. Taliban preserved its position until the US invasion.

The consequences of the prolonged civil war in Afghanistan are pointed out by Barnett Rubin in an interview as; destroyed governance and social systems, radicalized groups for opportunism, led individual armament, eliminated educated and skilled person, blew up social areas along with economy, caused a big refugee problem, destroyed necessary facilities and services.<sup>245</sup>

### **3.3.1. The Importance of Afghanistan for Both States**

Afghanistan is strategically important place for Iran for its close territorial proximity as a buffer zone. So, the establishment of a friendly and stable government in Afghanistan is very important for security concerns in order to prevent dangerous regime challengers inside and outside, and the flow of unlawful goods benefitting the extremist groups. Afghanistan may be a platform for other challenging states for their attacks. It is also strategic for recognition of Iran as a regional actor so Iran wants to prevent any rivals in this country.

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<sup>244</sup> Larry Goodson, **Afghanistan's Endless War: State Failure, Regional Politics, and the Rise of the Taliban**, University of Washington Press, Seattle, 2001, p. 86.

<sup>245</sup> Nermeen Shaikh, "Barnett Rubin on the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and the Rise of the Taliban", **Asia Society**, <https://asiasociety.org/barnett-rubin-soviet-invasion-afghanistan-and-rise-taliban>, (14.02.2019).

Iranian economy depends on Afghanistan in terms of trade and energy transportation. Afghanistan has the capacity to be a corridor from the Gulf toward Central Asia and other important places for goods and services which Iran depends on. Especially, the collapse of the SU opened the Central Asia and the Caucasus to the international markets based on oil and natural gas. The distribution of these rich resources has become central for the regional powers. Iran had sought ways to be the major country for the transportation from these areas to the Persian Gulf which create an opportunity for economic strength.<sup>246</sup> The success to realize the ambitions can make Iran a key player.

Another consideration of Iran is the spread of radical Wahhabism through Madrasa system among the Afghan and Pakistani populations. This has created a sphere of influence of Sunni Muslims at the expense of Iran's Shia ideological influence area. During the conflict years, Iran wanted to export its Islamic revolution in Afghanistan through the Afghan Shia population<sup>247</sup> which would later establish an inclusive government preventing the influence of Saudi Arabia<sup>248</sup>.

In addition to security and economic factors, another important factor is the distribution of water supplied by the Helmand River at borders. The concluded agreements had never been applied fully by Afghan authorities for different reasons. The adequate water distribution is possible in the case of a stable and friendly Afghan regime. It is important for ecological and economical reasons for Iranian provinces.

Historical and cultural reasons shape the attitude of Iran in Afghanistan. Iran has close connection with Tajik and Hazara groups and it perceives the Western Afghanistan as the natural sphere of influence because of common religion, language and culture. The multi-linkage of Iran with Afghanistan creates a liability in the case of instability. Especially, the flow of refugees in huge numbers has become an important driver for Iranian activities. The anti-Iranian regime in Afghanistan could

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<sup>246</sup> Barnett R. Rubin and Sara Batmanglich, **The US and Iran in Afghanistan: Policy Gone Awry**, New York University, MIT Center for International Studies, October 2008, p. 2.

<sup>247</sup> Hafizullah Emadi, "Exporting Iran's Revolution: The Radicalization of the Shiite Movement in Afghanistan", **Middle Eastern Studies**, 31(1), 1995, pp. 1-12.

<sup>248</sup> Mohsen M. Milani, "Iran's Policy Towards Afghanistan," **Middle East Journal**, Volume 60, No. 2, Spring 2006, p. 240.

cause further flows in Iranian territories. The only option to prevent and send back refugees is to establish a welcoming regime in Afghanistan.

Although there is a US factor, Saudi Arabia's interests in Afghanistan are oriented by the Iranian influence<sup>249</sup>. Because there are no common borders, organic ties with Afghan populations, and imminent security concerns. In addition to Iranian influence, Afghanistan is the place to reach the Central Asia. In the absence of Saudi influence, Iran may be the main beneficiary of this. The Saudi strategy was to spread Wahhabist ideology during internal conflicts. This strategy would prevent the further influence of Iran through its revolutionary call.<sup>250</sup> The reason for Saudi Arabia's interest was to affirm its religious view against non-Islamist Shias along with others.<sup>251</sup> The outcome of this interest is to establish a friendly Sunni government providing more benefits to Saudi Arabia.

Both states competed through using proxies to reshape the Afghan politics in favor of themselves through easing the influence of the rival.<sup>252</sup> Their proxies generally consisted of religious, ethnic and insurgency groups which sometimes captured governance in Kabul. To examine this proxy involvement, conflicts in Afghanistan are divided into two phases as; Soviet occupation years and the civil war until the US invasion.

### 3.3.2. Soviet Occupation Era

Anti-Soviet armed resistance movement known as mujahideen consisted of different groups including political parties, commanders and public<sup>253</sup> aiming an understanding of Jihad in the complexity of environment, backgrounds, ideologies. The mujahideen harmed the Soviet presence throughout countryside, but did not have a clear victory.

The Soviet invasion created a policy challenge for Khomeini between occupation of an Islamic state and the relations with the SU to neutralize the US

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<sup>249</sup> Tadjbakhsh, Executive summary VIII.

<sup>250</sup> Milani, "Iran's Policy Towards Afghanistan", p. 239.

<sup>251</sup> Kiran Firdous, **Militancy in Pakistan**, Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad, 2009.

<sup>252</sup> Tadjbakhsh, p. 38.

<sup>253</sup> Olivier Roy, **Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990, pp. 98–148.

threat.<sup>254</sup> Iranian regime condemned the occupation suitably not to lead to tension with the SU<sup>255</sup> in order to manifest its protector mission. But, it is apparent that the Iranian involvement was not totally oriented to the Soviets. The important security threat was the possible domination of Saudi influence along with the US through Pakistani-based resistance countering the Soviet occupation strongly. Although Iran publicly supported this resistance, it set apart the resistance from its financiers.<sup>256</sup> It pursued non-hostile relations with Pakistan because Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI) was the distributor of US and Saudi financial support to the Islamic Resistance.<sup>257</sup>

During this phase of conflict, Afghan Shi'ites became proxies for Iran. These Afghans countering other powers inside compromised 20% of the population. Although hopes for change with the communist regime increased, chaotic regime strategy turned against Shia community. Historically suffered Hazaras, Qizilbash, and Farsiwans and other Shi'ites became an organized force with the help of Iran.<sup>258</sup> Iran became a model for the inspirations among the Shia opposition.<sup>259</sup> So the main place for Iranian influence through Shia resistance was Hazarajat territories. This region was the prior zone for a possible Islamic revolution.<sup>260</sup>

Iranian aid to these mujahideen remained limited within Hazarajat.<sup>261</sup> Iran provided financial support, arms<sup>262</sup> and trained them in camps within Iranian territory.<sup>263</sup> Militants who were trained in Iranian camps at the end of 1979 went back to Afghanistan, especially different parts of Hazarajat.<sup>264</sup> This led the

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<sup>254</sup> Milani, "Iran's Policy Towards Afghanistan", p. 237.

<sup>255</sup> Adam Tarock, "The Politics of the Pipeline," **Third World Quarterly**, Volume 20, No. 4, August 1999, p. 805.

<sup>256</sup> Milani, "Iran's Policy Toward Afghanistan", p.238.

<sup>257</sup> Vali Nasr, "The Iranian Revolution and Changes in Islamism in Pakistan, India and Afghanistan", **Iran and the Surrounding World**, (Ed. N. R. Keddie and R. Matthee), University of Washington Press, Seattle, 2002, pp. 327-352.

<sup>258</sup> Crises Analysis Group Pakistan's Strategic Studies Center, "The Afghanistan Crisis from Various Viewpoints", **Strategic Studies**, Vol. 11, No. 3, 1988, Quoted by Nader Alireza and Others, **Iran's Influence in Afghanistan: Implications for the US Drawdown**, RAND Corporation, 2014, p.8.

<sup>259</sup> Ewans, pp. 194-232.

<sup>260</sup> Kristian Berg Harpviken, **Political Mobilization among the Hazaras of Afghanistan 1978-1992**, (Dissertation), **Department of Sociology**, Oslo, 1996, p. 66.

<sup>261</sup> Emadi, Exporting Iran's Revolution, pp. 1-12.

<sup>262</sup> Tom Lansford, **Afghanistan at War**, ABC CLIO, 2017, p. 215.

<sup>263</sup> John K. Cooley, **Unholy Wars: Afghanistan, America and International Terrorism**, Pluto Press, London, 2000.

<sup>264</sup> Niamatullah Ibrahim, "At the Sources of Factionalism and Civil War in Hazarajat", **Crisis States Working Papers Series**, No.2, January 2009, pp. 4-5.

establishment of an Iranian network. There were mainly nine Shia groups emerged as resistance to the Soviets.<sup>265</sup> These groups made serious struggles to increase their roles in the region in the absence of an effective central government throughout the 1980s. The ideological connection established in 1979<sup>266</sup> provided an opportunity to acquire financial and military assistance from Iran. Their ideological mindset was Khomeinist political Islam.<sup>267</sup> But, Iranian support was not huge as Saudi supply to the Sunni mujahidin in the case of expenditures and costs for Iran-Iraq war in addition to the Moscow factor. These groups, then, established an alliance in 1987. Iran supported the Shia ulema and gave momentum to the development of Hazara dominated Hezb-e Wahdat party by several Afghan Shia groups which was the largest Shia organization in 1990.<sup>268</sup> The monopolistic traditional claims of the khans and ulema discriminating Hazaras were challenged by the political ideology of Shia organizations to make a total change and reform in all spheres of the life.

Iran's traditional possession claims shaped its close relations with the Western Afghanistan, Herat. This created an opportunity for Ismail Khan who was one of the most effective leaders of Afghan resistance (Jamiat-i Islami) against the Soviets to exploit Iranian considerations. Under his leadership, Iran provided significant resources, the campaigns during the fights against Soviets and later the Taliban.<sup>269</sup> The type of this assistance during the fight against the Soviets consisted of fuel, ammunition, and arms.<sup>270</sup> The actors distributing the assistance to Afghan Shias included mainly clerics, the IRGC and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>271</sup>

The invasion of Afghanistan was the beginning of Saudi support for rebel groups outside.<sup>272</sup> The Sunni dominated Afghan Mujahideen acted as a proxy and

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<sup>265</sup> See details about these groups in Ibid.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid., pp. 2-3.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>268</sup> Niamatullah Ibrahim, "The Failure of a Clerical Proto-State: Hazarajat, 1979–1984" **Working Paper**, no. 6, Crisis States Research Centre, London School of Economics and Political Science, September 2006.

<sup>269</sup> Thomas H. Johnson, "Ismail Khan, Herat, and Iranian Influence", **Strategic Insights**, Volume 3, Issue 7, July 2004, p. 4.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid.

<sup>271</sup> Bruce Keopke, "Iran's policy in Afghanistan; The Evolution of Strategic Pragmatism", **Stockholm International Peace Research Institute**, September 2013, p. 4.

<sup>272</sup> Claude Moniquet, **The Involvement of Salafism/Wahhabism in the Support and Supply of Arms to Rebel Groups around The World**, Directorate-General for External Policies Policy Department, 2013, p. 5.

received support from Saudi Arabia.<sup>273</sup> In released secret US documents by Wikileaks, the estimate of financial assistance in a year was 100 million dollars by the Gulf states to Pakistani networks providing training camps in Punjab during the Afghan-Russian war.<sup>274</sup> In addition to this indirect support, Saudi Arabia provided money and fuel directly to mujahideen.<sup>275</sup> The amount of official aid to mujahideen reached up to 4 billion dollars during the same period.<sup>276</sup> Saudi Arabia sent 500 million dollars in per year between 1986-1989.<sup>277</sup> There was unofficial aid provided by different private and individual actors in Saudi Arabia as well.

During the 1980s, Saudis made Wahhabism the main ideology for liberation against the Soviets in madrasas. They were organizers of the CIA-the ISI collaborated operation. The Sunni mujahideen received funds from Saudi Arabia through different organizations<sup>278</sup> such as the Islamic International Relief Organisation (IIRO) and the Muslim World League and individuals such as Osama bin Laden. In addition to its transfer roles, the IIRO seemed to give direct assistance to training mujahideen in six camps in Afghan territories.<sup>279</sup> In terms of individual channels during the 1980s, the significant example is in the close relationship between Saudi elites and Osama bin Laden who was the main financier until the first Gulf War.<sup>280</sup> Bin Laden provided money for equipments and skilled personnel.<sup>281</sup> He was the leading person of “the Golden Chain” collecting the money from sponsors which would be used later for al-Qaeda by himself.<sup>282</sup> The important point here is that although Saudi individuals involved in these funding activities, Saudi regime did

<sup>273</sup> Crises Analysis Group Pakistan’s Strategic Studies Center, “The Afghanistan”, Quoted by Nader, Iran’s influence in Afghanistan, p.8.

<sup>274</sup> Michael Georgy, “Saudi Arabia, UAE funded jihadi Networks in”, **Reuters**, 11.05.2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-saudi-uae/saudi-arabia-uae-funded-jihadi-networks-in-idUSTRE74L0ER20110522>, (21.02.2019).

<sup>275</sup> Greg Bruno, “Saudi Arabia and the Future of Afghanistan”, **Council on Foreign Relations**, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/saudi-arabia-and-future-afghanistan>, (01.01.2019).

<sup>276</sup> Rashid, Taliban, p. 197.

<sup>277</sup> Andrew Marshall, “Terror “blowback” burns CIA”, **The Independent**, 01.11.1998, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/terror-blowback-burns-cia-1182087.html>, (15.02.2019).

<sup>278</sup> Zachari Abuza, “Funding Terrorism in Southeast Asia: The Financial Network of Al Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah”, **Contemporary Southeast Asia**, Volume 25, No. 2, 2003.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>280</sup> Shaikh.

<sup>281</sup> Vernon Loeb, “A Global, Pan-Terrorist Network; Terrorist Entrepreneur Unifies Groups”, **The Washington Post**, 23.08.1998, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1998/08/23/a-global-pan-islamic-network/9ae41e0e-93bc-4f39-91c7-d1851cb58924/?utm\\_term=.89458f61d623](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1998/08/23/a-global-pan-islamic-network/9ae41e0e-93bc-4f39-91c7-d1851cb58924/?utm_term=.89458f61d623), (23.01.2019).

<sup>282</sup> Christopher M. Blanchard, “Saudi Arabia: Terrorist Financing Issues”, **Congressional Research Service**, June, 2008.

not undertake a full responsibility to restrict their involvement.<sup>283</sup> Saudi-sponsored camps in Pakistan's Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces under the name of madrasas were main centers for the jihadist activities of the Sunni mujahideens.<sup>284</sup> The Taliban leaders grew up and improved themselves in these camps by the ISI getting financial support from Saudi Arabia during these years.<sup>285</sup> Saudi Arabia was involved also in logistical support.<sup>286</sup>

### 3.3.3. The Civil War until the US Invasion

Saudi Arabia along with Pakistan and the US backed the Peshawar Alliance<sup>287</sup> to establish a Sunni-dominated government<sup>288</sup>. The civil war continued first among these Peshawar Seven groups and Wahdat, and then with the Taliban. Although most Sunni mujahideen agreed on forming a council in 1992, Gulbiddin Hekmetyar rejected to take its part in it at the same time with Shah Massoud. Different forces controlled different parts of Kabul; the Shia Hezb-e-Wahdat in the west, Massoud's forces in the north, Rashid Dostam's militia in the Bala Hissar area, and Abdul Rab al-Rasoul Sayyaf's loyalists in Paghman.<sup>289</sup>

The first fight was between the Hezb-e-Wahdat and Sayyaf's forces in 1992.<sup>290</sup> Hezb-e Islami attacked from the South to prevent any victory in the absence of Hekmetyar. The 1993 Islamabad Accord made Hekmetyar the Prime Minister, but militias continued to fight. Wahdat and Jamiat continued fighting. Wahdat Party took counterattacks by forming alliance with Hekmatyar and Dostum in 1994. Iran, in order to prevent a total Sunni domination encouraged Wahdat and Hezb-e Islami for

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<sup>283</sup> Ibid.

<sup>284</sup> Firdous.

<sup>285</sup> Gretchen Peters, "Haqqani Network Financing: The evolution of an industry", **Combating Terrorism Center**, July, 2012, [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/151376/CTC\\_Haqqani\\_Network\\_Financing-Report\\_Final.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/151376/CTC_Haqqani_Network_Financing-Report_Final.pdf), (15.01.2019)

<sup>286</sup> Lester W. Grau, "The Soviet-Afghan War: A Superpower Mired in the Mountains", **Journal of Slavic Military Studies**, 17:1, 2004, p. 149.

<sup>287</sup> It includes Rabbani's Jamiat, Hekmetyar's Hezb-i Islami, Sayyaf's Ittehad, Maulavi Younas Khalis's Hezb-e Islami, Ahmad Gilani's Mahaz-i Milli Islam, Sibgratullah Mojadidi's Jabha-i Nijat-Milli and Muhammad Mudadidi's Harakat.

<sup>288</sup> Keopke, p. 5.

<sup>289</sup> Rashid, *Taliban*, p. 21.

<sup>290</sup> Harpviken, p. 113.

rapprochement.<sup>291</sup> Taliban emerged in this brutal instability and rejected non-Pashtun's victory.<sup>292</sup> Ethnic minorities acting as warlords and denying centralization attempts fought with each other. Iran intensified its involvement more effectively after the Iran-Iraq war.<sup>293</sup> In this period, while Iran supported the unification of Dari/Persian-speaking fighters (non-Pashtuns) in addition to Shias,<sup>294</sup> Saudi Arabia supported Pashtuns. Non-Pashtun government was recognized by Iran. Iran supported Rabbani government of Kabul and provided assistance to Hezb-e Wahdat in its armed fighting with the Kabul government which allowed flexibility for Iran.<sup>295</sup>

Civil war intensified the competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia.<sup>296</sup> Although both states established relatively good relations during the 1990s, Saudi Arabia still had threat perception from Iran and wanted to prevent Iranian influence which began to spread through Rabbani and Massoud. Saudi Arabia funded Saudi-trained and wahhabist Pashtun leaders who would establish the Taliban.<sup>297</sup> Hekmatyar, the subject of Saudi aid in 1980s<sup>298</sup>, continued to get aid to defend Pashtuns until Taliban emerge. His Hezb-i Islami was the main recipient of Saudi aid (2 billion) between 1991-1993.<sup>299</sup> Saudi Arabia also supported Pashtun Ittehat-e Islami through hundreds of million dollars under the leadership of Abdul Rasool Sayyaf who confronted Mas'ud.<sup>300</sup> Although they were Saudi-backed groups, they followed different paths which diminished the influence of Saudi Arabia and contributed to Saudi turn toward the Taliban. In the period of inconsistent

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<sup>291</sup> Anvar -ul-Haq Ahady, "Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Conflict in Afghanistan", **Fundamentalism Reborn?: Afghanistan and the Taliban**, (Ed. W. Maley), Hurst&Company, London, 1998, p. 130.

<sup>292</sup> Shaista Wahab and Barry Youngerman, **A Brief History of Afghanistan**, Infobase Publishing, 2007, p. 193.

<sup>293</sup> Milani, "Iran's Policy Towards Afghanistan".

<sup>294</sup> Hafizullah Emadi, **Dynamics of Political Development in Afghanistan**, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2010, p. 202.

<sup>295</sup> Vahid Mojde, **Ravabat-e Siyasi-ye Iran va Afghanistan dar Qarn-e Bistom**, Maiwand Publishing Company, Maiwand, Afghanistan, 2010, Quoted by Nader, Iran's influence in Afghanistan, p.8.

<sup>296</sup> Rasul Bakhsh Rais, "Afghanistan and the Regional Powers", **Asian Survey**, Volume 33, No. 9, September 1993, pp. 905-922.

<sup>297</sup> Christopher Boucek, "Saudi Arabia", **Is a Regional Strategy Viable in Afghanistan?**, (Ed. Ashley J. Tellis & Aroop Mukharji), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington DC, 2010, Quoted by Tadjbakhsh, p.42.

<sup>298</sup> Dave Holmes and Norm Nixon, **Behind the US War on Afghanistan**, Resistance Books, Australia, 2001, p. 44.

<sup>299</sup> The Middle East, June 1993, p. 2, Quoted by Ahady, p.123.

<sup>300</sup> Peter L. Bergen, **Holy War**, Inc. Free Press, New York, 2001, p. 54.

exploitative attitude of Rabbani government, Saudi Arabia also financed this government by 150 million dollars to prevent Iran.<sup>301</sup>

When Saudi Arabia turned its face to the emerging Taliban, Hekmetyar came closer with Iran. By being aware of the impossibility of maintaining political position only by Wahdat against Sunni Pashtun parties, Iran sought alliances with radical Sunni Pashtun groups. Gulbiddin Hekmetyar acted as a channel between Iran and radical Sunni groups. He was an Islamist and Sunni Pashtun. He was also an anti-American and a suitable ally for Iran. He could be a security tool for the Eastern Afghanistan. He got remarkable money as a support from Iran.<sup>302</sup> Iran granted refugee status to him in 1996. He established his base in Iranian territories.<sup>303</sup>

The aim of Taliban was mainly to regain the Pashtun dominance.<sup>304</sup> Taliban was a preventive force against the influential threat of Iran.<sup>305</sup> Taliban as portraying itself as a card against Iran and underlying its extremist Wahhabist ideology and non-modernist attitude benefitted from Saudi Arabia. Ideological and strategical commonality between Saudi Arabia and Taliban fostered the proxy relationship. Taliban expanded the influence of Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia found a way to reach the Central Asia. It saw non-Pashtun population as an enemy to itself because it had hesitations for Iran and its Shia-privileged ideology.<sup>306</sup> It closed the Iranian embassy in 1997 by accusing Iranian interference to internal affairs of Afghanistan.

The support of Saudi Arabia to Taliban was critical for its establishment and power. Saudi Arabia provided financial and material aid through the Saudi General Intelligence Agency to Taliban in 1994.<sup>307</sup> It gave approximately 4 billion dollars.<sup>308</sup> Along with this aid, some Saudi organizations provided financial support supplied by Saudi individuals.<sup>309</sup> Saudi Arabia gave petrodollars to Taliban and funded its strategic services.<sup>310</sup> The great assistance of Saudi Arabia began in 1996.<sup>311</sup> It

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<sup>301</sup> Ahady, p. 123.

<sup>302</sup> Nader, *Iran's Influence in Afghanistan*, p. 7.

<sup>303</sup> Neamatollah Nojumi, **The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan**, Palgrave, 2002, p. 165.

<sup>304</sup> Rashid, *Taliban*, p. 2.

<sup>305</sup> Cooley, p. 146.

<sup>306</sup> William Maley, **The Foreign Policy of the Taliban**, Council on Foreign Relations Press, New York, February 2000.

<sup>307</sup> Rashid, *Taliban*, p. 201.

<sup>308</sup> Bruno.

<sup>309</sup> Rashid, *Taliban*, p. 197.

<sup>310</sup> Milani, "Iran's Policy Towards Afghanistan", p. 243.

<sup>311</sup> Rashid, "Pakistan and the Taliban," p. 76

provided military support such as artillery and ammunition<sup>312</sup> and organizational support such as financing the Taliban security service<sup>313</sup>. Even Prince Turki participated in discussion of offensive plans for Mazar-i Sharif in 1998 summer which was followed by fund offers to commanders of the NA by Turki.<sup>314</sup>

Iran refused to recognize Taliban because it was a threat to instability in eastern provinces of Iran dominated by Sunni Baluchis and to regional security which would limit the trade and investment connection to Central Asian states in addition to its attitude towards Afghan Shia. 1998 massacre and the death of Iranian diplomats brought the relations to the edge of a direct war. But, Iran preferred to support the non-Poshtun NA<sup>315</sup> against Taliban by providing money and arms<sup>316</sup>. When Taliban attempted to capture capital city of the NA, Mazar-e Sharif, Iran was the main supporter of the NA. It sent military instructors with equipments to the NA who trained up to 150 men at any given time.<sup>317</sup> The dependency of the NA was expressed by an Afghan senior who saw the impossibility of action by the NA without Iranian support<sup>318</sup>. Its support continued until the end of 2002. Iran also supported Ismail Khan against Taliban through providing material support.<sup>319</sup> Iran was the main backing country for Khan who did not get other foreign assistance.<sup>320</sup> Iranian support for him continued in the types of arms, money, training in camps located in the Eastern Iran during the Khan's exile.<sup>321</sup>

The establishment of proxy relationship in Afghanistan context was mostly based on commonalities. In addition to ideological and religious similarities, the self-interests of Iran and Saudi Arabia resulted in the support to fighting groups. The pragmatic actions of groups showed the incompatibility in the interests. While Iran

<sup>312</sup> Robert Fisk, "Circling Over a Broken, Ruined State", **The Independent**, 1996, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/circling-over-a-broken-ruined-state-1328638.html>, (13.02.2019).

<sup>313</sup> Barnett R. Rubin, "Statement to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee", 08.10.1998, Quoted in "Afghanistan: Crisis on Impunity", **Human Rights Watch**, Vol. 13, No.3 (C), July, 2001.

<sup>314</sup> Jason Burke, "Taliban split over Bin Laden", **The Independent**, 29.09.1998, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/taliban-split-over-bin-laden-1201340.html>, (06.02.2019).

<sup>315</sup> See the all groups in the NA in Ramtanu Maitra, "The Northern Alliance: With Whom Do They Stand?", **EIR**, Volume 28, Number 44, November, 2001.

<sup>316</sup> Emadi, Dynamics of Political Development in Afghanistan, p. 203.

<sup>317</sup> "Afghanistan: Crisis of Impunity", pp. 35, 39-40.

<sup>318</sup> Johnson, p. 3.

<sup>319</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>320</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>321</sup> Lutz Kleveman, **The New Great Game: Blood and Oil in Central Asia**, Atlantic Monthly Press, New York, 2003, pp. 202-203.

and Saudi Arabia tried to create their influence areas, proxies acted to dominate areas without pressure from outsiders. So, the general interest of proxies to take outside support was exploitation. They tried to get the support backing the interests of them rather than serving as a mechanism for the sake of supporters. The reluctance to be directed by a foreigner can be seen in Khan's pragmatic decisions and actions such as intolerance to Iran-backed Sunni groups<sup>322</sup> and non-collaboration with Hezb-e Wahdat after the fall of Taliban<sup>323</sup>. The inconsistent attitude of Rabbani government toward Iran in order to benefit more from every power, including Saudi Arabia, pointed out the incompetance in interests.<sup>324</sup> Although Taliban sometimes acted in line with the interests of Saudis,<sup>325</sup> it did not act according to Saudis as it refused to contain al-Qaeda in 1998. The existence of the US in Saudi Arabia changed the attitudes of its Islamist proxies such as Hekmetyar supporting Iraq during the first Gulf War<sup>326</sup>.

### 3.4. CONCLUSION

In this chapter, two main historical cases of the rivalry are examined under proxy warfare context. Iran-Iraq war, as the first case, shows the indirect Saudi reaction against perceived Iranian threat during the 1980s. This war is always accepted as the beginning of the unending distrust between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Iraq acting as a proxy of Saudi Arabia prevented Iranian influence by maintaining the current balance between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The reasons for the proxy relationship include the existence of the common enemy-Iran-, religious and ethnic similarities and security threat perceptions for their Sunni regimes and Shia-populated territories. Saudi Arabia was motivated to change the outcome of the conflict rather than to accept the Iranian victory in order to defend the buffer zone. The indicators making Iraq a proxy of Saudi Arabia are the dependency of Iraq, rejection of it as a part of the Gulf dominated by Saudi Arabia by other states, the shift in the attitude of Iraq over important issues and foreign policy and the end of Saudi assistance with the

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<sup>322</sup> Olivier Roy, **Afghanistan: From Holy War to Civil War**, Darwin Press, Princeton, 1995, p.98.

<sup>323</sup> Johnson.

<sup>324</sup> Ibid.

<sup>325</sup> İrfan Polat, **11 Eylül Saldırıları ve ABD'nin Afganistan Müdahalesi**, (Master Thesis), Süleyman Demirel University, Institute of Social Sciences, Isparta, 2006, p. 19.

<sup>326</sup> Wahab and Youngerman, p.191.

ceasefire. Saudi Arabia financed Iraq exceeding 30 billion dollars, maintained its oil exportation, allowed it to use Saudi territories and facilities, offered transportation of supplies. This assistance of Saudi Arabia contributed to Iraq to continue fighting against Iran. During the war, both Iran and Saudi Arabia avoided form a direct war.

Unstable Afghanistan also turned into a place for proxy engagement for its importance in terms of security, affirmation of common ties and ideological orientations, influence, people, transportation and trade. Iran and Saudi Arabia supported different groups changing their attitudes from time to time. The common ties between groups and two rivals are based on different shared values such as religion, language, ideologies and common enemies such as the Soviets or other rivals. At the end, the most apparent characteristic is to seek assistance for fighting. Two different phases of the instability are taken to examine the proxy relationship and to indicate the provided material support. In the Soviet occupation phase, both states supported Shia-Sunni mujahideen groups fighting against Soviets and each other. Organized Afghan Shias in Hazarajat acted as the proxies of Iran. Iran provided arms, supported by financing and trained them in Iran and motivated them to establish Wahdat. Iran also supported Khan through material equipments. Saudi Arabia participated indirectly though Sunni rebel groups by providing money for training activities, fuel and logistical support. Different organizations and individuals also involved in these activities. With the end of Soviet invasion, rebel groups fought with each other for power. Saudi Arabia backed the Peshawar Alliance. After formation of the Council in 1992, it turned its face to Hekmatyar and Sayyaf against other groups and provided money and continued funding groups at the border. Iran sought to unify non-Pashtuns in addition to Wahdat. Hekmatyar became the proxy of Iran and collaborated with Wahdat in addition to acting as a channel between Iran and radical Sunnis. With his participation, Iran backed all anti-Taliban groups unified under the NA. It provided money, training, military assistance through personnel and equipments. Saudi Arabia on the other hand preferred Taliban seeking only Pashtun domination and provided remarkable military and financial assistance, supported its services and contributed to offensive plans of it until Taliban's refusal to contain the Bin Laden.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **THE PROXY COMPETITION IN IRAQ SINCE THE FALL OF SADDAM**

#### **4.1. INTRODUCTION**

The year of 2003 can be regarded as a turning point not only for Iraq but also for the whole region and the international system. The decision of the US to oust the Saddam regime in Iraq led to profound changes and challenges. Sectarianism and terrorism have hit the overall country by causing the deaths of huge number of civilians. Iran and Saudi Arabia as the close neighbours of Iraq have closely followed these changes and challenges and have tried to benefit from them and to maintain/reshape their positions.

After the toppling of the Saddam regime, the US launched a democratic transition process for Iraq which has not been managed perfectly. Power vacuum has emerged in the country and all ethnic groups have involved in a power struggle. The central government could not allocate administrative powers well which in return has led a political and social turmoil, sectarianist and extremist insurgents and high level of corruption. Without having an optimal understanding on the ground, the new self-protection mechanisms are established by different groups in their own areas. Because of the emphasis on ethnic and sectarian identity as a primary issue for the composition of the Council of 2003, Sunnis did not feel themselves as a constitutive part of the new political and social environment. Establishment of a quota system in all spheres of life caused protests and boycotts as happened during the 2005 parliamentary elections. Shias dominated the new government by controlling important number of seats. Kurds became an important part of the government as the president was a Kurd. The constitution divided Iraq into two parts by giving autonomy to the Kurdish region in the northern Iraq. These all disturbed the balance of power and Iraq witnessed sectarian tensions.

The political landscape was not a representative platform for many including the Baathists and the Sadrists. There was no place for seculars and non-sectarians among the ethnic and religious political parties. The US fought Shia militias

including Moqtada al-Sadr and Sunni insurgents, especially in Fallujah. While Sunnis generally attacked on and bombed civilians as a reaction to the government, Shias created repression mechanisms through participating into security forces. Even the subgroups have to cope with their co-religious and co-ethnic groups in their power struggle. The violence across Iraq allowed foreigners including both states and armed groups to exploit the opportunities for years.

All events happened since the invasion of Iraq caused a serious chaos in all spheres of life. The gap in the absence of a strong power centre has brought total destruction. During the bloody years, Saudi Arabia and Iran have tried to impose their influence over Iraq. They have tried to control Iraq or, at least, to balance power for their own sake against each other's presence in this troublesome context. So, their considerations have been based on the other's covert activities in Iraq which makes the Iraqi case meaningful to examine Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry through proxy warfare strategy.

In order to analyze proxy war strategies of Iran and Saudi Arabia, firstly this chapter will provide a background information on Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein to allow a more comprehensive understanding and evaluation of the developments which took place in Iraq. This background information will include some pre-war facts and events, the establishment of Iraq as a state which keeps alive the difficulties and post-war period facts. In the following part of this chapter, the considerations of Iran and Saudi Arabia will be outlined which are based on multi-facts. It will allow to calculate importance of Iraq for both rivals in this endless competition. Finally, the proxy relationship between both states and their proxies will be explained with a focus on the reasons and indicators of this relationship.

## **4.2. IRAQ AFTER THE FALL OF SADDAM AND POSITIONS OF IRAN AND SAUDI ARABIA**

The 9/11 attacks caused the US invasion and intervention in the Middle East. The US launched "war on terror" first in Afghanistan in 2001 and, then, in Iraq in 2003. The toppling of Saddam forced the US to engage in a struggle to establish a

new democratic order. Unfortunately, it was not an easy task because of the problems and features of Iraq itself.

The problems of Iraq lied in its establishment process as a state. Iraq is an artificially established state by Britain and France in 1921 in accordance with their specific interests. Since its establishment, Iraq has faced problems in the face of the highly diverse ethnic-religious population and the urban-rural divisions<sup>327</sup>. Sunni authoritarian rule dominated Iraq for 82 years until the invasion of Iraq by the US in 2003. During this time period, the Shias were suppressed and prevented from being influential actors. Especially, under the Saddam regime, the level of oppression had reached to high levels<sup>328</sup> through restrictions over basic human needs, services, economic and bans for special Shia days. The so-called nationalist political agenda narrowing the divisions between groups<sup>329</sup> created problems institutionally and structurally for all.

The 2003 war caused the breakdown of all present social structures and the coexisting of the ethnic and religious groups. Relatively weak central authority in Iraq has seen pressure from divergent groups competing for different interests. Leading groups consist of Shias, Sunnis and Kurds. The US invasion was welcomed by Shia community for its political advantages to reshape Iraq. On the contrary to the Shia stance, many Sunnis saw the US campaign as de-baathification, especially after the years following disbanding of the military. Sunni Arabs have become the new minority group. The perceived influence of Iran in Iraq along with the handicaps of the government and fears to reach resources in relatively non-accessible places<sup>330</sup> marginalized Sunnis in their efforts to establish a Sunni identity. While the Sunnis' rhetoric related with "true Muslims" continued with humiliating prejudices,<sup>331</sup> the

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<sup>327</sup> Adeed Dawisha, **Iraq: A Political History from Independence to Occupation**, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2009.

<sup>328</sup> Zack Beaucamp, "The Real Roots of Iraq's Sunni-Shia Conflict: An Interview with Fanar Haddad", **Vox**, 20.06.2014, <http://www.vox.com/2014/6/20/5827046/who-are-sunnis-who-are-shias>, (18.09.2019).

<sup>329</sup> Dawisha.

<sup>330</sup> Frederic Wehrey and Others, "Perspectives on Potential Threats to Stability and Security in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Surrounding Regions", **Future U.S. Security Relationships with Iraq and Afghanistan: U.S. Air Force Roles**, RAND Corporation, 2008, pp- 20-21.

<sup>331</sup> Vali Nasr, **The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future**, W. Norton & Company, New York, 2007, p. 187.

Shias were unified under one single identity which brought the success in 2005 to the United Iraq Alliance.

The rise of violent sectarianism in 2005 began with rebels consisting of Sunnis who insisted on sectarianist provocations during security operations. When attacks on Sunnis grew in numbers, Islamist extremists<sup>332</sup> and Sunni nationalists<sup>333</sup> took up their arms. The polarized Iraqi population found themselves in a civil war which was fueled by external actors. Two main external actors, Saudi Arabia and Iran have perceived the groups as having capacity to serve as proxies for themselves in order to reach their aims.<sup>334</sup>

Although the insurgency had worked with the US after 2007 to fight jihadists, the government could not integrate them into the new system after the withdrawal of the American troops in 2011. Pro-Iranian Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki targeted Sunni politicians to centralize the state power. Because of his discriminatory extreme attempts, the imagined inclusive government by the US had been questioned. Exclusive politics pushed Sunnis to accept the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) at least as the best in bads which caused its expansion in 2013. From then onwards, the country experienced a total sectarian war, similar to the 2008 events. Disarray in the country brought Iran and U.S. together against presence of the ISIS. By the mid-2014, as a reaction to the control of the one third of Iraq by ISIS, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMFs) was established. In 2014, the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS was formed under the leadership of the US and they defeated ISIS in 2017. In 2018, the government took the full control over its territory. In the same year, parliamentary elections were hold and the new government was established through inclusion of all sects in important positions.<sup>335</sup>

In terms of regional perspective, the invasion of Iraq led to pramount changes in contrast to the previous Gulf wars in the region. This war eliminated one of the rivals in the region and changed the balance of power system. The triangular system

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<sup>332</sup> Ibid., p. 203.

<sup>333</sup> Beaucamp.

<sup>334</sup> Ned Parker, "Iraq Insurgency Said to Include Many Saudis", **The Los Angeles Times**, 15.07.2007, <http://articles.latimes.com/2007/jul/15/world/fg-saudi15>, (21.07.2019).

<sup>335</sup> Sarhang Hamasaeed and Garrett Nada, "Iraq Timeline: Since the 2003 War", **The US Institute of Peace**, 09.07.2019, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/07/iraq-timeline-2003-war>, (05.08.2019).

consisted of Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia was destroyed and replaced by a bipolarity between Iran and Saudi Arabia which have been confronting each other.<sup>336</sup> Previously, Iraqi desires and its stance in the regional balance of power system had made it a key player in this balance system.<sup>337</sup> The overthrowal of Saddam shifted the balances in the region. This shift in the balance impacted the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The removal of Iraq as an Arabic buffer zone privileged Iran, whose impact and presence in Iraq increased<sup>338</sup> against Saudi Arabia. Weakened Iraqi state left regional politics which was the one of the critical agendas of Iraq before 2003. In the post-invasion era, Saudi Arabia faced with Iran in an attempt to fill the gap of Iraq. Iran and Saudi Arabia provided funds and sent fighters to their proxies.<sup>339</sup>

Because of the disparities among Saudi Arabia and Iran, the tensions escalated despite the existence of some “common interests”<sup>340</sup>. Both states wished to fill the newly created power vacuum with a political entity which would further their interests at the expense of the other. The inability of the US to establish stability in Iraq left Iran as the most favored state.<sup>341</sup> The US invasion caused the toppling of one of the Sunni powers and led to the formation of a new Arab Shia state which is the first in the history.

Iran was the first country to recognize new Iraqi government. Iran by taking a constructive role for the democratization experience in Iraq established relations with the Shia majority (65% of the Iraqi total population)<sup>342</sup> along with Kurds to create an influence sphere. Iran has directly and indirectly backed up the Shia-dominated government which can be a friendly state. It promoted the unity of political Shia groups.<sup>343</sup> Iran targeted Saudi Arabia in its campaigns which included some frames

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<sup>336</sup> Shahram Chubin, “Iran’s Power in Context”, **Survival: Global Politics and Strategy**, 51, No. 1, February – March 2009, p. 168.

<sup>337</sup> Ibid.

<sup>338</sup> Ibid.

<sup>339</sup> Usjit U. Hameed, “The Saudi Iranian Rivalry: A Foreign Policy Analysis Approach”, **Towson University Journal of International Affairs**, Volume L., No. 2, Spring, 2017, p. 29; Parker.

<sup>340</sup> Okruhlik, p. 120.

<sup>341</sup> Furtig, “Conflict and Cooperation”, p. 634.

<sup>342</sup> Ibid., p. 635.

<sup>343</sup> Frederick. W. Kagan and Others, “Iranian Influence in the Levant, Egypt, Iraq, and Afghanistan”, American Enterprise Institute, May 2012, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/imce-imagesIranianInfluenceLevantEgyptIraqAfghanistan-1.pdf>,

such as al-Saud family's role as a puppet of the US and the ineffectiveness of this dynasty in sensitive regional issues like the Palestinian problem.<sup>344</sup> This challenge of Iran for the legitimacy of Saudi Arabia's leadership in the Gulf damaged the image of Saudi Arabia and gave a reason to others to question its position for leadership.<sup>345</sup> Iran proved to be more successful through Iraq's majority Shia population and its close ties to Shia groups in Iraq. During the fight against the ISIS, Iran succeeded to institutionalize Shia presence in military forces.

Although Saudi officials insisted on equal distance between them and all Iraqi groups since the beginning, Saudi Arabia did not recognize the new government and was frustrated with Shia-oriented policy agendas until 2015. Saudi Arabia ignored calls for a possible Iraqi-Saudi rapprochement in a perception of a pro-Iranian government discriminating Sunnis. The political influence of Saudi Arabia remained limited under its exclusive Sunni Iraqi dependency. Saudi-supported groups also failed to achieve important positions in government processes. Moreover, divided Sunni groups were less effective than unified Shias and Kurds.<sup>346</sup> The ineffectiveness of Saudi Arabia was mentioned by a Saudi diplomat with these words: "Iran outmaneuvered us everywhere".<sup>347</sup>

With the division of the united Shia front, Saudi Arabia got the opportunity to increase its influence. Haider al-Abadi, the next prime minister from the same party (Da'wa Party) with Nouri al-Maliki, challenged the former foreign policy<sup>348</sup> and promised to lessen Iranian influence and to establish good relations with other states, including Saudi Arabia.<sup>349</sup> During ISIS period, Saudi Arabia faced the challenge of this group which created a security threat to the ruling elites of Saudi Arabia through its penetration into the Saudi community. While this group defended Sunnis against Shias, it challenged the political systems of other Islamic states, especially Saudi

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(01.08.2019).

<sup>344</sup> Wehrey and Others, *Since the Fall of Saddam*, p. ix.

<sup>345</sup> Ariel Jahner, "Saudi Arabia and Iran: The Struggle for power and influence in the Gulf", **International Affairs Review**, Volume 20, No: 3, Spring 2012, p. 44.

<sup>346</sup> Renad Mansour, "Saudi Arabia's New Approach in Iraq", **CSIS**, November 2018, pp. 2-3.

<sup>347</sup> "Saudi Arabia: Back to Baghdad", **International Crises Group**, Washington, D.C., 22.05.2018, <https://www.cri-sisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/186-saudi-arabia-back-baghdad>, (11.09.2019).

<sup>348</sup> Renad Mansour, "Can Abadi Move Out of Maliki's Shadow?", **Carnegie Diwan**, 08.12.2014, <http://carnegiemec.org/diwan/57427?lang=en>, (26.07.2019).

<sup>349</sup> Mansour, "Saudi Arabia's New Approach in Iraq", p. 3.

Arabia. The active role of Iran to contain this group contributed to Saudi considerations to engage with Shia representatives in Iraq. Saudi Arabia has started a new phase with Iraq diplomatically due to the failure of its founded proxies.<sup>350</sup> Saudi Arabia began to work with nationalist Shia groups rather than focusing on Sunnis and seculars.<sup>351</sup> The level of mutual hesitations decreased between Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr,<sup>352</sup> the head of the Mehdi Army who criticized attitudes of Saudi Arabia for its anti-Shia stance.<sup>353</sup> Visits between Iraqi seniors including Qassim al-Araji, Iraqi interior minister and a member of the Badr Corps, and Saudi Arabia have improved the dialogue between two countries.<sup>354</sup>

#### 4.3.THE IMPORTANCE OF IRAQ FOR BOTH RIVALS

The fall of Saddam regime has changed the security paradigm in the Middle East. Iraq under the leadership of Saddam was perceived as a trouble by both Iran and Saudi Arabia. The new situation in Iraq has created multi-challenges and opportunities rather than this common perception. These challenges and opportunities include a number of things ranging from security gaps to calculations for economic troubles and from perception of a sympathizer government to its effect in their own domestic areas and, then, in the region.

As a neighbor of Iraq, the first consideration of Saudi Arabia is related with its close proximity through its borders. Common borders create a security gap for Saudi Arabia even in the case of stability behind the borders. Some features of and difficulties over borders result in uncertainty for Saudi security. Unpredicted and disordered Iraq has a huge capacity to threat Saudi Arabia's 'national and dynastic

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<sup>350</sup> James Dorsy, "Saudi Engagement in Iraq: The exception that Confirms the Rule?", **International Policy Digest**, 22.05.2018, <https://intpolicydigest.org/2018/04/22/saudi-engagement-in-iraq-the-exception-that-confirms-the-rule/>, (04.08.2019).

<sup>351</sup> Mansour, "Saudi Arabia's New Approach in Iraq", p.3.

<sup>352</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>353</sup> Ibid.

<sup>354</sup> The Badr Organization was formed by the Iranian leadership in the 1980s to fight against Iraq and until today remains a close ally with the regime in Tehran.

interests'.<sup>355</sup> One of the reasons for threat perceptions emerged with instability is the long shared borders with Iraq. Both states share a border reaching up to 500 miles long. This long border create security considerations because they are too far away from the kingdom to control and defend in the case of an attack from the side of Iraq. In addition to the fear of an attack, remote areas featured by deserts throughout borders and old tribal habits for access across these borders have made the Northern Saudi Arabia an area for smuggling activities of goods ranging from liquor, opium to arms. With the emergence of an unstable Iraq, terrorists began to benefit from this situation as they carried heavy arms and acted easily in the case of non-effective control of borders.<sup>356</sup> These terrorists are thought to create disorder in the territories of Saudi Arabia with their experienced and trained fighters by participating active groups inside and stimulating a threat to the current political situation.<sup>357</sup> The level of this danger was indicated to be worse than Afghan fighters by Nayif bin Abdul Aziz, the Interior Minister of Saudi Arabia, in 2005.<sup>358</sup> An opposite scenario is also relevant. There is scepticism about Saudi efforts to prevent radical Saudis, who would go to other countries to fight or to participate other terroristic activities.<sup>359</sup>

Although stability is something good for Saudi Arabia, it does not always come to mean security of borders and sovereignty. The character and the impression of the new regime are remarkable. As a long-term object, Saudi Arabia wants to have a good and friendly neighbor. In the invasion of Iraq, the challenge for Saudi Arabia was the removal of a Sunni regime and the establishment of a Shia dominated government, which can be a role model to topple Sunni political governments. Saudi Arabia shows reaction for any Shia dominated government which has the potential to encourage its Shia population.<sup>360</sup> This is not to say that a Sunni regime always secures Saudi Arabian interests. The history of the Middle East shows, as in the

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<sup>355</sup> Joseph Mcmillian, "Iraq and Its Neighbors. Saudi Arabia and Iraq: oil, religion, and an enduring rivalry", **The United States Institute of Peace**, Special Report 157, January 2006, p. 3.

<sup>356</sup> Ibid.

<sup>357</sup> Bryan Bender, "Study Cites Seeds of Terror in Iraq", **Boston Globe**, 17.07.2005, [http://archive.boston.com/news/world/middleeast/articles/2005/07/17/study\\_cites\\_seeds\\_of\\_terror\\_in\\_iraq/](http://archive.boston.com/news/world/middleeast/articles/2005/07/17/study_cites_seeds_of_terror_in_iraq/), (03.09.2019).

<sup>358</sup> Fawaz A. Gerges, **The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global**, Cambridge University Press, 13 April 2009, p. 264.

<sup>359</sup> Mcmillian, p. 3.

<sup>360</sup> Toby Matthiesen, **The Other Saudis: Shiism, Dissent and Sectarianism**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2014.

invasion of Kuwait by Iraq, that there will be always competition, even wars, among even co-religious and co-ethnic states. So, there has to be a Saudi mechanism to check the actions of the new government to prevent reemergence of a Saddam-like government.

The strategic place of Iraq in the oil industry is also a remarkable fact for Saudi economic considerations. Saudi Arabia always aims to maintain stability in oil prices at moderate levels for long-term sustainability. Iraq's natural resources has pushed Saudi Arabia to think and worry about the future of Iraq. Because of its experiences in oil crises, Saudi Arabia is well-aware of multi-alternatives and possible decisions of the oil-buyers. Iraq has the potential to influence the balances if it wants to produce at maximum level. In the case of the revival of an adversary government having heavy debts and needs for recovery, Saudi Arabia's interests and presence would be at stake. A strong Iraq in oil sector prevents interests of Saudi Arabia at renegotiation table in OPEC for its production quotas. The presence of a pro-Iran government at negotiation table for oil is also a challenge. Possible demands for high prices trigger measures taken by consumers which effect Saudi Arabia's gains.

With the combination of facts that makes Iraq strategic on the eyes of Saudi Arabia, the potential increase in the Iranian influence over Iraq doubles the danger. Geostrategically while two rivals are neighbors through the sea, Iranian direct or indirect presence in Iraq made them neighbors through land since 2003. The meaning of this for Saudi Arabia is to have a "close neighbor" which has high capacity and more opportunity to manipulate Shia minority located in the close borders with Iraq.<sup>361</sup> A strict collaboration between Iraq and Iran not only lead to concerns for the security of Saudi territories but also increases the worries about their collective actions in a harmony which threaten the power of Saudi Arabia. Iraq as a buffer zone has strategical territories which reach different locations. Saudi Arabia does not want Iraq to be a transition corridor for supplies from Iran to other power centers such as the Assad regime and Hezbollah. Because as far as Iran reaches and backs up them, it strenghtens its own geostrategic hand. That is, the worst scenario is the possibility of

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<sup>361</sup> Özev, pp. 92-93.

the falling down of Al-Saud family dynasty in Saudi Arabia as a Sunni regime after they lose their influence areas in the region with the collaborated efforts of Shia dominated regimes in order to undermine interests of Saudis<sup>362</sup>.

From the point of Iran, the extended borders with Iraq have also made Iraq critical. Transborder facts link these states and even create a pressure on them. These facts include Kurdish and Arab populations, possible Sunni-Arab terrorist flows, ideologies and so on. For example, historically both states did not hesitate to use ethnic minorities to stir up domestic situation in its neighbor. To overcome threats which are based on these transborder facts, the security throughout the common borders is in Iran's interests. So, the position of Iraq influences the position of Iran in different means. First of all, the removal of the Iraqi danger under Saddam ruling was a great relaxation for Iran. Because the Saddam rule was threatening Iran through its stronger conventional army and weapons of mass destruction. Iran has wanted to ensure the removal of Iraqi danger which Saddam regime posed.<sup>363</sup> This was a way to prevent threats first from Iraq and then, from its possible alliances trying to contain Iran<sup>364</sup> such as with Saudi Arabia and with other terrorist groups such as People's Mojahideen Organization of Iran which had worked with Saddam against Iran in the common border.

Iran sees Iraq as its natural influence sphere because of the presence of majority Shia population. A friendly regime in Iraq means that Iran probably may solve its problems with Iraq which sometimes lead to diplomatic crisis and even war between them. In addition to handshaking on disputed issues, Iran may have a supporter for its actions such as having peaceful energy rhetoric regarding its nuclear program. These provide Iran a more convenient way to make itself acceptable first in the region, then in the world. Iraq's Shia population and their representatives backed by Iran itself in newly established government in accordance with the US plans

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<sup>362</sup> Terrill, p. 45.

<sup>363</sup> Kagan and Others, p. 62.

<sup>364</sup> Armin Rosen, "Iran Might Be More Worried About the Us Military in Iraq Than It Is About Isis," **Business Insider**, 17.09.2014, <https://www.businessinsider.in/iran-might-be-more-worried-about-the-us-military-in-iraq-than-it-is-about-isis/articleshow/42736805.cms>, (15.09.2019).

would provide a kind of “strategic depth” for Iran.<sup>365</sup> The handicap is the national interests of Iraq. The way to overcome this handicap is to have proxies within Iraq to use them as a tool for deterrence in order to bring Iraq in a more suitable line with Iran, even in the case of American influence.

Thus, Iran prefers to have a relatively strong government in Iraq which would prevent chaos and divisions and at the same time prefers a weak state which cannot threaten Iran. On the one hand, a divided Iraq means that there is high possibility of the establishment of a Kurdish state in the north which will depend on the anti-Iranian powers and has the capacity to influence Kurds in Iran.<sup>366</sup> Iran will be at a close point to be attacked by the new neighbors through Kurds. On the other hand, the accumulation of power on one unit which independently acts from Iran is dangerous. Because of its pessimistic views for a strong government, Iran supports the continuation of the newly established constitution which depicts federalism. The success of a new democratic Iraq can also bring questions towards Iranian regime and encourage the anti-Iranian powers for regime change in Iran, too. Although threats for regime change in Iran always exist, in those days, there was a strong persistence of the mobilization against Iran after the two invasions. Iran had the worries of to be the following target. The way to prevent the danger of being targeted was to reshape Iraq’s future in which balance and retaliation calculations were carried out by Iran, and Iran still continues to carry out them today. The target of these strategic calculations not only reflects the American actions but also gives strong signals of troubles in the case of an attempt of change by those to have hesitation for Iran.

Iraq is critical for Iranian actions and power in other close proximities such as Lebanon and Syria which are strategic for Iranian security. Iran needs Iraqi territories to reach Syria keeping its Shia regime strong and allowing the establishment of a kind of supply channel from Iran to Lebanon. Thus, Iraq takes its place in the priorities of Iran to increase and to maintain its influence.<sup>367</sup> Through maximizing its

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<sup>365</sup> Christopher Blanchard and Others, “Iraq: Regional Perspective and U.S. Policy”, **Congressional Research Service**, 06.01.2009, p. 8.

<sup>366</sup> Kürşat Kolsuz, “Mezhep ve Kimlik Bağlamında Ortadoğu’da İran’ın Güç ve Güvenlik Politikaları”, **Dergipark- Iran Special Issue**, 1 (2), October 2017, pp, 11-45.

<sup>367</sup> Hameed, p, 27.

presence and effectiveness in Iraq, Iran feels that it gains a new station in the region.<sup>368</sup> A pro-Iranian Iraq will be one of the key elements in Iranian defense corridor which includes Syria and Lebanon. Iraq is also the main way to access into region economically for Iran.<sup>369</sup> The geo-strategic location of it brings many opportunities for the Iranian economy at the expense of Saudi Arabia. Moreover, huge capacity of Iraqi markets creates a suitable environment for both licit and illicit trade between Iran and Iraq. Such advantages have already made Iran the second partner in dual trade.<sup>370</sup> In the light of the harsh conditions and pressures, Iraq has became one of the strategic places to sustain the ongoing processes in Iran. For example, Iraq offered a re-branding activity for Iranian hydrocarbon goods in the case of oil embargo.<sup>371</sup>

Because of its possessions, Iraq is important for Iran as well. Many places which are important centers especially for the Shia community, are in the territories of Iraq. These places include the Askari shrine, Najaf and Kerbala which represent the Shia history in the eyes of Iranian Islamic revolutionaries.<sup>372</sup> These places witnessed important events of this sect's history such as the murder of Hz. Hussein. The responsibility to protect these symbolic places lies on Iranian shoulders as it sees itself as the sole authority of the Shia world. In addition to this awareness, Iran historically<sup>373</sup> knows that Najaf has an influence over clerics in Qum, who interpret the sectarian issues and constitute the base for power in Iran. The important challenge for Iran in the case of interpretation is the non-approval of the Velayat-e Fatiq understanding which is the cornerstone of Iranian politics. Because other Muslim traditions do not place a person as the sole source of authority in religious affairs. There is a belief of multiplicity in the Shia tradition which approves different

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<sup>368</sup> Kagan and Others, pp. 62-63.

<sup>369</sup> James Risen and Duraïd Adnan, "US Says Iraqis Are Helping Iran to Skirt Sanctions," **The New York Times**, 18.08.2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/19/world/middleeast/us-says-iraqis-are-helping-iran-skirt-sanctions.html>, (14.09.2019).

<sup>370</sup> Sara Bazoobandi, "Iran's Regional Policy; Interests, Challenges and Ambitions". **ISPI**, No.275, November 2014, p. 7.

<sup>371</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>372</sup> Imran Khan, "Why Is Iraq so Important to Iran?", **Al Jazeera**, 10.08.2014, <https://www.aljazeera.com/blogs/middleeast/2014/06/99126.html>, (18.08.2019).

<sup>373</sup> Ünal Gündoğan, **İran ve Ortadoğu**, Adres Publishing, Ankara, 2010, p. 203.

principles to be followed by ordinary people.<sup>374</sup> Although the Shia tradition privileges the ulema, Iranian understanding through attaching the ulema to the Iranian state at the highest level removes the multiple source understanding within Iran. The thing that make Iranian understanding valuable for Iran is its prevention of a possible reaction by those who claim the separation of powers within the state.

#### **4.4. THE PROXY RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TWO RIVALS AND THEIR PROXIES**

The mentioned considerations above have turned Iraq into a proxy conflict area in which Iran and Saudi Arabia have engaged. The proxies of both neighbor states generally consist of different ethnic-religious groups. While Iran prefers to use the Shia groups, Saudi Arabia has links with those consisting of Sunni insurgencies. Although the basic mechanisms of those groups continue to exist, the forms of proxy groups in terms of size, name and strength have changed over time.

From the point of Iran, since the Islamic revolution, Iran has sought to have influence in Iraq. Its proxies include militias and armed resistance groups. Iran has attempted to place its clients into the Iraqi politics, even into the armed militias.<sup>375</sup> Three of the political establishments are the Supreme Council of Iraq, the Dawaa and Sadr group. These political establishments have their own militias backed by Iran. Political figures in Iraq, including high level politicians, mostly have linkages with their own militias.<sup>376</sup> In the case of non-clear cuts, making investments in political figures comes to mean making investments in militia in Iraq. The resistance group means other armed resistance groups attacking both the US and coalition forces during the occupation years, as well as the Sunnis.

To establish an influence mechanism, Iran has already had many tools which have been developed through time. Many Shia figures who had lived in exile or

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<sup>374</sup> Ishtiaq Ali Mehkri, "Religion and Politics in Iran-Iraq Relations", **Pakistan Institute of International Affairs**, Pakistan Horizon, Vol. 58, No. 4, October 2005, p. 34.

<sup>375</sup> Terrill, p. 45.

<sup>376</sup> See some examples in Norman Cigar, "Iraq's Shia Warlords and Their Militias: Political and Security Challenges and Options," **Strategic Studies Institute**, U.S. Army War College Press, June 2015, pp. 18-22.

hidden in Iran under the Saddam's repression years entered into Iraqi politics. Other figures such as Badr chief Hadi al-Ameri, has historically felt a kind of kinship with Iran as they took the side of Iran during the Iran-Iraq war. These political groups' militias funded by Iran have been very eligible to act mostly in line with essentials of Iran.

The Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (the SCIRI) established in Iran in 1982 by exiles and since then, it has had strong ties with Iran.<sup>377</sup> Its militia force is named as the Badr Corps and Iran took the major role in its establishment to use them against Saddam.<sup>378</sup> The IRGC organized them and gave a cause to their embracement of Velayat-e Fatiq. From then, this group has not given up the Khomeinist version of thought.<sup>379</sup> In those years, the ultimate aim of these groups was the replacement of Saddam regime by an Islamic regime. Unfortunately, their perception of a strong Iran changed after the Iran-Iraq war. They got lost their faith in their fight in which Iran stopped. They were also accused for ruining a popular uprising of defeated army members. From then onwards, the SCIRI has tried to change its image and attempted to work with other groups in order to get the support of people. After 2003, the assassination of al-Hakim who headed the SCIRI, in Najaf caused a deployment of the Badr Corps throughout holy shrines in the face of security failure of the US in the south. Although they were temporarily allowed to enter Iraq for a restrictive mission, they succeeded to participate in state security forces in 2005.<sup>380</sup> The SCIRI insisted on its independence from Iran and introduced its new name in 2007, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI). Yet, the visits have continued between the leaders of this group and Iranian leaders showing the linkages between them.<sup>381</sup>

The Daawa is another Shia group which was established by exiles after the Iran-Iraq war. It differs itself from the SCIRI and its prior form in terms of its radical

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<sup>377</sup> Kagan and Others, p. 20.

<sup>378</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>379</sup> Brian Fishman and Joseph Felter, "Iranian Strategy in Iraq – Politics and Other Means", **Occasional Paper Series**, Combating Terrorism Center, West Point, October 13, 2008, pp. 14, 19-20.

<sup>380</sup> For more details about the ISCI see "The Shiite Politics in Iraq: The Role of the Supreme Council", **Middle East Report**, No.70, 15 November 2007.

<sup>381</sup> Reidar Visser, "Iran's Role in Post-Occupation Iraq: Enemy, Good Neighbor, or Overlord?", **Century Foundation**, 2009, pp. 13-15.

character. This group did not embrace Velayat-e Fatiq since its establishment and criticized the SCIRI as being a group created by Iran but it continued to maintain its relations with the SCIRI.<sup>382</sup> While some of the group members remained in Iran, others chose to move to other states. The remaining part in Iran went to Iraq in 2003 and established itself as an effective political party named as Tanzim al-Iraq. This group got important seats in the government which allowed it to take a role in the arrangement of the new security services. Its nationalist approach differentiated it from the SCIRI's ethnic based approach.<sup>383</sup> Although there is no affiliated militia of the Da'wa party<sup>384</sup>, it has provided a network for Iran to play a role in the future of Iraq.<sup>385</sup> The important names in politics from the Da'wa Party are Haydar al-Abadi and Nouri al-Maliki.

The third group is the group of Muqtada al-Sadr seizing the control of Al-Thawra part of Baghdad renamed as Sadr city. On the contrary to other two groups, this Shia group always remained in Iraq. Although it did not have a link with Iran, it came closer with Iran on the face of pressures in 2004. In addition to the pressure inside, this group perceived the US as an invader and criticized Saudi Arabia for being unfriendly. Throughout the years, this group has got a nationalist image in order to escape from its pro-Iranian image,<sup>386</sup> which is the result of its rejection of Velayat-e Fatiq. Especially after 2010 elections it became an important player with its Ahrar Party in Iraqi politics.<sup>387</sup>

The fourth group consist of the resisters for the American invasion and the government, which creates a control mechanism over the political groups trying to deal with the demands of the US and pressures of other states. The influence through those groups is the main tool for Iran to prevent the government from taking decisions without considering Iran and its position in addition to putting pressure

<sup>382</sup> Abdul-Halim al-Ruhaimi, "The Da'wa Islamic Party: Origins, Actors and Ideology", **Ayatollahs, Sufis and Ideologues: State, Religion and Social Movements in Iraq** (Ed. Faleh Abdul-Jabar), London, 2002, Quoted in "The Shiite Politics in Iraq: The Role of the Supreme Council", p.3.

<sup>383</sup> Hossein Talashan, "Dour nemayeje jeopoletike Shia dar Iraq," *Shiashenase*, Vol. 8, No.31(1389), p. 114, Quoted by Bayram Sinkaya, "Amerikan Askerlerinin Çekilmesinden Sonra Iraq-İran İlişkileri", **SETA**, No. 9, May, pp. 1-37.

<sup>384</sup> Emmet Hollingshead, "Iran's New Interventionism: Reconceptualizing Proxy Warfare in the Post-Arab Spring Middle East", **Political Science Honors Projects**, 75, 2018, p. 27.

<sup>385</sup> Fishman and Felter, pp. 20-21; Kagan and Others, p. 63.

<sup>386</sup> Hollingshead, p. 29.

<sup>387</sup> Visser, pp.18-19.

over the American military operations.<sup>388</sup> In this category, there are several groups. While some of groups are established at the beginning, others were formed by militants of political groups such as Mahdi army of Sadr, which gradually choose to disarm them. For example these groups include the Jaysh al-Mahdi army, Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH),<sup>389</sup> and the Promised Day Brigade<sup>390</sup>. Some of these groups such as the KH, are important twice because of their geo-strategic positions which allow Iran to engage also in Syria's civil war. Although many of them gave up their arms after the withdrawal of the US, the ISIS threat revealed them.<sup>391</sup> "More than 60 armed groups",<sup>392</sup> mostly Shia and includes Sunnis and Christians, laid the foundation of the PMFs after the religious decree of al-Sistani which called for fight against ISIS's capture of Mosul in 2014. Legalization of this group as a separate military force from army and police in 2016 is perceived as an evidence of Iran's hand in Iraqi politics by the Sunnis.<sup>393</sup> The PMFs, similar to Hezbollah, serve as a guarantor of the Iranian presence with "130,000 to 150,000 fighters"<sup>394</sup> in the post-ISIS period because any actor must take into account these groups to create a long-lasting stability in the Iraq.<sup>395</sup>

The reasons to establish a proxy relationship change according to the proxy. As the first reason, Iran and these groups share the similar religious sect which has been showed as the reason for the oppression under Sunni regimes. Some of them have a history of collaboration with Iran to overthrow the Saddam regime. For years, they had worked together to succeed this sole aim which would create a safer sphere

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<sup>388</sup> Kenneth Katzman, "Iran-Iraq Relations", **Congressional Research Service**, 13.08.2010; Michael Eisenstadt, Michael Knights & Ahmad Ali, "Iran's Influence in Iraq: Countering Tehran's Whole-of-Government Approach", **The Washington Institute for Near East Policy**, April 2011, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-influence-in-iraq-countering-tehrans-whole-of-government-approach>, (17.08.2019), pp. 8-11.

<sup>389</sup> Kagan and Others, pp. 63-65.

<sup>390</sup> Hollingshead, p. 28.

<sup>391</sup> Michael Eisenstadt, "Iran and Iraq", **The Washington Institute for Near East Policy**, 13.09.2015, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iran-and-iraq>, (16.09.2019).

<sup>392</sup> Garrett Nada and Mattison Rowan, "Pro-Iran Militias in Iraq", **Wilson Center**, 27.04.2018, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/part-2-pro-iran-militias-iraq>, (03.09.2019).

<sup>393</sup> "Iraqi parliament passes contested law on Shi'ite paramilitaries", **Reuters**, 26.11.2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-military-idUSKBN13L0IE>, (02.09.2019).

<sup>394</sup> John Hannah, "Iraq-backed Militias are in Iraq to stay", **Foreign Policy**, 31.07.2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/07/31/iran-backed-militias-are-in-iraq-to-stay/>, (06.09.2019).

<sup>395</sup> Hameed, p. 27; Ali Mamouri, "Has the US found a new friend in Iraq's Shiite militias?" **Al-Monitor**, 30.03.2016, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/03/iraq-us-position-support-popular-mobilization-units.html>, (26.08.2019).

for each of them in the case of the consolidation of power on their hands. It is also remarkable to say that while some groups collaborate with co-religionist Iran, others see Iran as their main power and follow Khomainism. In the beginning, marginalized Shia groups mostly concerned on having a foreign support in order to overcome the challenges inside until the institutionalization took place in government.<sup>396</sup> Iran was the only country in the Muslim world that could provide this support because Iraqi Shias had learnt lessons from their prior experiences<sup>397</sup>. Iran, on their eyes, has become the sole power in this consolidation process although the level of this is subject to change from time to time. The level of liability of Shia groups to Iran changes according to the different positions of them and situation in the time. Although these groups are tools for Iranian deterrence strategy, Iran is not able to control them fully which is dangerous for Iran in terms of their autonomous actions in the rapidly emerged crises.<sup>398</sup> The last reason is the common enemy. From the point of many Iraqis and fighters in Iraq, the US is a foreigner and a common enemy. The invasion of a Muslim country by a Christian state is troubling for nearly all groups and for Iran. Shia militants needed Iran to fight effectively against the imperialist coalition forces.<sup>399</sup> For some groups having the Iranian mindset, the common enemies include Saudi Arabia as a destabilizer for Iraq.

Since the beginning of the post-Saddam period, Iran provided every means of support to its proxies through the arbitration of the Qods Force (QF), the operative branch of the IRGC in other states.<sup>400</sup> Different sources confirm the existence of the proxy relationship. American ambassador of the period, James Jeffrey insisted on Iran's hand over the militia and resistance groups.<sup>401</sup> According to the claims of a British top diplomat, Sir John Sawers, the control of Iran over the groups became a

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<sup>396</sup> Sinkaya, p.10.

<sup>397</sup> Mahmoud Vaezi, "Rouyekarde Gorohhaaye Dakhele Iraq be Iran va Amreka", Markaze Tahgheghehate Estrategic, Tir 1387, Quoted in Sinkaya, p.10.

<sup>398</sup> J. Matthew McInnis, "Iranian Deterrence Strategy and Use of Proxies", American Enterprise Institute, 29.11.2016, [https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/112916\\_McInnis\\_Testimony.pdf](https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/112916_McInnis_Testimony.pdf), (15.09.2019), pp. 4-5.

<sup>399</sup> Fishman and Felter, p. 56.

<sup>400</sup> Kagan and Others, p. 64.

<sup>401</sup> "Remarks for the Record, Ambassador James F. Jeffrey", **Iran's Support for Terrorism in the Middle East Senate Foreign Relations Committee**, Subcommittee on Near East and South and Central Asia Affairs, (No Date).

bargaining tool for Iran during the nuclear programme negotiations around 2005s in return for British soldiers' lives.<sup>402</sup> Iranian leaders and the militant leaders made visits to their proxy groups. For example, following 2004, Al-Sadr met with Khamenei and Qassim Soleimani in Iran,<sup>403</sup> the commander of the QF and killed by US on January 3, 2020 in Iraq.

Although Iran has denied its material assistance to Shia militias, there are many allegations leading to accusations of the Iranian involvement. These allegations insist on that weapons found in the hands of Iraqi Shia militias are manufactured by Iran, even after the American occupation.<sup>404</sup> Iranian proxies carried on explosive devices and bullets created spontaneously by the QF<sup>405</sup> and many weapons and equipments such as rockets and mortars and Iranian-made exclusively formed penetrators<sup>406</sup> and small arms<sup>407</sup> to fight. The US military officials estimated that the QF has provided up to 3 million dollars for equipments and financing to Shia militias after 2006.<sup>408</sup> In terms of training facilities, the QF has provided training both in Iran, as happened historically for Badr Corps<sup>409</sup>, and in Lebanon under the command of Hezbollah instructors<sup>410</sup> through different weapons including missiles, mullers and snipers.<sup>411</sup> Iran harbored militias<sup>412</sup> are mostly trained in these camps. The QF was

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<sup>402</sup> Julian Borger, "Iran offered to end attacks on British troops in Iraq, claims diplomat", **The Guardian**, 20.02.2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/feb/20/iran-curb-attacks-on-british-troops>, (21.09.2019).

<sup>403</sup> Dick Camp, **Battle for the City of the Dead, In the Shadow of the Golden Dome, Najaf, August, 2004**, Zenitt Press, 2011, pp. 21-22.

<sup>404</sup> Fishman and Felter, pp. 72-73.

<sup>405</sup> Marcus Weisgerber, "How Many US Troops Were Killed By Iranian IEDs in Iraq?" **DefenseOne**, 08.09.2015, <http://www.defenseone.com/news/2015/09/how-many-us-troops-were-killed-iranian-ieds-iraq/120524/>, (17.09.2019).

<sup>406</sup> Kagan and Others, p. 64; Fishman and Felter, pp. 77-80.

<sup>407</sup> Mehkri, p. 39.

<sup>408</sup> Kagan and Others.

<sup>409</sup> Fishman and Felter, pp. 20-21.

<sup>410</sup> Ibid., p. 56; Ahmad Majidiyar, "Iraqi Hizbullah Threatens Retaliation against the US if Israel Attacks Iranian Assets in Iraq", The Middle East Institute, July 2018, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/iraqi-hezbollah-threatens-retaliation-against-us-if-israel-attacks-iranian-assets-iraq>, (25.09.2019).

<sup>411</sup> Matthew Levitt and Philip Smyth, "Kataib al-Imam Ali: Portrait of an Iraqi Shiite Militant Group Fighting ISIS", **The Washington Institute for Near East Policy**, 05.01.2015, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/kataib-al-imam-ali-portrait-of-an-iraqi-shiite-militantgroup-fighting-isis>, (16.08.2019); Hollingshead, p. 29.

<sup>412</sup> "Bush: Syria, Iran harboring terrorists", **CNN**, 21.06.2003, <http://edition.cnn.com/2003/US/07/21/bush.terror/>, (09.09.2019).; Raymond Tanter, "Iran's Threat to Coalition Forces in Iraq," **Policy Watch (WINEP)**, No.827, 15.01.2004,

accused to send 400 satellite phones and cash, worth of approximately 80 million dollars.<sup>413</sup> The funding activity goes back to pre-invasion years, which reached up to 20 million dollars to Badr Corps for per year.<sup>414</sup> This funding has increasingly continued after the American invasion. For example, AAH group was reported to take funding reaching up to 3 million dollars monthly by 2007.<sup>415</sup> According to a 2010 estimation, Iran funding to Iraqi proxies reached up to 100 million dollars.<sup>416</sup> Although the exact numbers of funding are not available, mentioned military aids including funding assistance may be indicators of expanded level of financial support in Iraq.<sup>417</sup>

Since 2014, the level of involvement by Iran increased because the rise of ISIS gave a ground for Iranian involvement.<sup>418</sup> According to some, Iran provided military aid more than 1 billion dollars in addition to the claims for the supply of reconnaissance and possibly strike drone by Iran which became apparent with the shut down of a drone in July 2014 by Sunni militias.<sup>419</sup> The Iranian support to the Iraqi militias was expressed explicitly by Iranian politicians in the fight against the ISIS.<sup>420</sup> Iran openly sent many military advisors and necessary equipments to Iraq,<sup>421</sup> and deployed its military advisors numbering more than 1.000 at the end of 2014.<sup>422</sup>

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<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-threat-to-coalition-forces-in-iraq>, (18.08.2019).

<sup>413</sup> Hollingshead, p. 29.

<sup>414</sup> Fishman and Felter, p. 21.

<sup>415</sup> Kagan and Others, p. 67.

<sup>416</sup> Michael Eisenstadt and Others, "The Regional Impact of Additional Iranian Money", **WINEP**, 28.07.2015, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-regional-impact-of-additional-iranian-money>, (24.09.2019).

<sup>417</sup> Missy Ryan and Loveday Morris, "The US and Iran Are Aligned in Iraq against the Islamic State for Now", **The Washington Post**, 27.12.2014, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/the-us-and-iran-are-aligned-in-iraq-against-the-islamic-state--for-now/2014/12/27/353a748c-8d0d-11e4-a085-34e9b9f09a58\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/the-us-and-iran-are-aligned-in-iraq-against-the-islamic-state--for-now/2014/12/27/353a748c-8d0d-11e4-a085-34e9b9f09a58_story.html), (05.09.2019).

<sup>418</sup> Farzin Nadimi, "Iran's Expanding Military Role in Iraq", **WINEP**, 08.09.2014, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-expanding-military-role-in-iraq>, (04.08.2019).

<sup>419</sup> Ibid.

<sup>420</sup> Mohsen Milani, "Tehran Doubles Down", **Foreign Affairs**, 22.06.2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2014-06-22/tehran-doubles-down>, (13.09.2019).

<sup>421</sup> Kim Sengupta, "War with Isis: Iran seeks to join international coalition battling militants as part of significant shift in its foreign policy," **The Independent**, 15.08.2015, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/war-with-isis-iran-seeks-to-join-international-coalition-battling-militants-as-part-of-significant-10461307.html>, (26.09.2019).; Ryan and Morris.

<sup>422</sup> Ryan and Morris.

Soleimani planned operations with militia leaders.<sup>423</sup> Although there are some claims about special operations made by the QF, Iran refused actual combat by its own.<sup>424</sup>

These groups' dependency on Iran must be examined through differentiating these groups. The nationalist oriented groups are more eligible for independency in the case of the clash between their national interests and group interests with those of Iran. They possibly will not hesitate to take action on the side of themselves. They are more concerned on their own domestic agendas in the case of exerting influence of Iran over independence of Iraq.<sup>425</sup> The Khomeinist oriented groups are more depended on Iran as they voluntarily see Supreme Leader as the sole power to believe and pursue. All groups have the memories of the past effecting their presence such as the Iran-Iraq war and the Gulf War. Furthermore, these groups also have a competition within their subgroups.<sup>426</sup> In the light of this fact, nobody can talk about consistent action within the groups. The main reason is that these groups involve many people coming from different backgrounds combining different social classes with their ideological and economical orientations.

The proxy relationship between Saudi Arabia and its proxies are more blurred than the Iranian case. Saudi proxies are from Sunni origins and generally referred to as Sunni insurgents which consist of anti-government and, sometimes, anti-American groups. These groups perceive the existence of an identity-based political system preventing Sunnis and see the government and the U.S responsible for the establishment of this system. They view the interference of Iraqi security forces in Sunni civilian areas as unacceptable or inappropriate. These insurgency groups include many Sunni armed groups such as "the Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqah al-Naqshabandia, and the General Military Council of Iraqi Revolutionaries, the Fallujah Military Council, the Council of the Revolutionaries Tribes of Anbar, the 1920 Brigades, the Islamic Army of Iraq, Jaysh al-Mujahidin, and Ansar al-Islam."<sup>427</sup> The ISIS was also seen as a branch of proxies supported, financed, and armed by

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<sup>423</sup> Mcinnis, p. 5.

<sup>424</sup> Ryan and Morris.

<sup>425</sup> Wehrey and Others, Perspectives on Potential Threats to Stability and Security, pp. 20-21.

<sup>426</sup> Examples include the clashes between the army of Sadr, the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council and other Shia subgroups and the clashes between local Sunnis, al-Qaeda militants and other jihadists.

<sup>427</sup> Sinan Adnan and Aaron Reese, "Iraq's Sunni Insurgency, Middle East Security Report", **Institute for the Study of War**, 24 October 2014.

Saudi Arabia, at least until 2014.<sup>428</sup> Although there is no clear matching of Saudi Arabia for financing these groups, it is generally accepted that Saudi Arabia, more or less, played a role in their establishment. Because of this unclear situation, this thesis calls Saudi proxies as the insurgents rather than using specific names of groups. The Sunni insurgency groups were mostly established during the occupation period in Iraq. The volume of their activities is subject to change from time to time according to their sense of being targeted. For example, some of these groups lessened their activities after 2011 until Maliki's attitudes in 2013.

These groups have different ideological orientations and political views. Some of them are secular and nationalist, others are jihadist, Islamist and salafist. They operate generally in Sunni areas such as Anbar, sides of Baghdad and Hamrin system.<sup>429</sup> Although some of these groups call for a political solution, they are mostly against the current system in Iraq. They are less effective than the proxies of Iran because they have remained as local insurgents. While some of these groups try to increase popular support through showing themselves eligible, others seek to have the potential to roll back Iraqi forces, as it happened at the time of the ISIS, in order to reach their goals.<sup>430</sup>

The assistance of Saudi Arabia to these groups includes financing, harboring and providing human resources and even providing weapons. Firstly, many accept that Saudi Arabia has offered financial support to Sunni individuals and groups in Iraq which are subjects in the insurgency as it indicated in the paper of the Iraq Study Group.<sup>431</sup> According to Iraqi sources, Iraqi leaders such as Nouri Maliki have accused Saudi Arabia for rising jihadist-salafist warrior groups in Iraq, including the ISIS and is seen as the source for terrorism.<sup>432</sup> These leaders claimed that Saudi Arabia planned to create an insurgency in Syria against the regime and that it already

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<sup>428</sup> "Supporters of Daesh must be dealt with: An interview with Anthony James Hall", **Press TV**, 04.07.2016, <https://www.presstv.com/Detail/Fr/2016/07/04/473523/Iraq-Daesh-Baghdad-Bombings-Hall>, (08.08.2019).

<sup>429</sup> Adnan and Reese, pp. 11-12.

<sup>430</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>431</sup> Blanchard, "Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations", Congressional Research Service, June 2010; James A. Baker and Lee H. Hamilton, "The Iraq Study Group Report", **Random House**, New York, 2006.

<sup>432</sup> Ammar Tarek and Hussein Lotte, "Al-Maliki: al-Sa'udiya antabahat li-khatar al-irhab lakanaha muta'akhira," **Al Sumaria News**, 05.02.2014, Quoted by Mansour, "Saudi Arabia's New Approach in Iraq".

supported these groups through the activities of financing and providing weapons.<sup>433</sup> Saudi Arabia was also suspected by some U.S. officials for financing opposition which include the sectarianist and jihadist acting against the presence of the US and new Iraqi government in the case of blurred actions of its subjects and authorities.<sup>434</sup>

Saudi Arabia's main policy has been heavily financing Sunni individuals who act as distributors. Saudi Arabia provided money to Sunni clerics including Shammar.<sup>435</sup> An Iraqi official estimated the amount given to Sunni clerics as 25 million dollars to buy weapons including shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles from different locations in the world.<sup>436</sup> Although Saudi officials deny, different sources have repeated the huge contribution of Saudi individuals and donors to Iraqi Sunni insurgency. As an evidence for this claim, there are some interviews conducted with individuals and Iraqi top officials by the Associated Press. According to these interviews, the money collected for the Islamic establishments comes in the form of zaqat and is distributed to clerics and elites who redistribute it to insurgents, and insurgents use it directly through different networks such as trucks, buses and travelling individuals.<sup>437</sup> According to some reports released in 2006, the private financial assistance funnelled by Saudi citizens through pilgrims and other ways contributed in fighting capabilities of Sunni militias in Iraq.<sup>438</sup> Saudi private organizations and individuals prefer to send their money to Islamists, especially after the ISIS, through Kuwait which can be regarded as one of the permissive environments.<sup>439</sup> Although there are efforts taken by Saudi authorities, there is no a blocker working to suspect donations efficiently. It brings a question mark on willingness of Saudi authorities, even it is known that monitoring money is difficult.

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<sup>433</sup> "US Trying to spread Syrian crisis to Iraq through Arab allies", **FNA**, 4 Eylül 2012, Quoted by Sinkaya, p.35.

<sup>434</sup> Dorsy.

<sup>435</sup> Mansour, "Saudi Arabia's New Approach in Iraq", p. 2.

<sup>436</sup> Salah Nasrawi, "Saudis Reportedly Funding Iraqi Sunnis," **The Washington Post**, 08.12.2006, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2006/12/07/AR2006120701070.html>, (26.09.2019).

<sup>437</sup> Tucker Reals, "Saudi Citizens funding Iraq Insurgents", **The Associated Press**, 08.12.2006, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/saudi-citizens-funding-iraq-insurgents/>, (01.09.2019).

<sup>438</sup> Suzanne Goldenberg, "If U.S. leaves Iraq, we will arm Sunni militias, Saudis say", **The Guardian**, 14.12.2006, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/dec/14/iraq.saudiarabia>, (22.09.2019)

<sup>439</sup> Lori Plotkin Boghardt, "Saudi Funding of ISIS", **The Washington Institute**, 23.06.2014, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/saudi-funding-of-isis>, (28.09.2019).

Although it has taken some steps since the early 2000s, it is assumed that Saudi Arabia has a long way to take in counter-terrorism activities.

There is a reality in Saudis' assistance of human-resources<sup>440</sup> which is generally not cared by Saudi officials allowing free acts of terrorists and the support collected for their fights<sup>441</sup>. For American military and intelligence officials, Saudi Arabia has not put enough pressure on the flow of Saudi fighters into Iraq which constituted the half of 60-80 foreign fighters estimated for each month during the occupation period.<sup>442</sup>

The thing that makes Saudi Arabia responsible from the activities of its subjects and private organizations is the handicap of its regime. Some of these actors have been involved in mechanisms of the regime and played role in the regime's legitimacy, sometimes Saudi authorities cannot openly oppose them making their ties with militants clear.<sup>443</sup> The reluctance of Saudi authorities was also addressed by Hillary Clinton's memo in a released document of 2009.<sup>444</sup> There are also some sources indicating the possibility of an overt support by Saudi authorities. For example, during the decision process on the withdrawal of the US in early 2008, there were some claims on the apparent intentions of Saudis to provide the same type and level of assistance as Iran already provided to Shia militias, in the case of a rapid withdrawal.<sup>445</sup> Such mentions were denied by Saudi top officials and American officials.<sup>446</sup> Following a visit from the US vice-president, Dick Cheney, news wrote

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<sup>440</sup> Mansour, "Saudi Arabia's New Approach in Iraq", p.6.

<sup>441</sup> Simon Tisdall, "Wikileaks Cables: Saudi Arabia Rated a Bigger Threat to Iraqi Stability Than Iran", **The Guardian**, 05.12.2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/dec/05/wikileaks-cables-saudi-meddling-iraq>, (14.09.2019).

<sup>442</sup> Helene Cooper, "Saudis Role in Iraq Frustrates U.S. Officials", **The New York Times**, 27.07.2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/27/world/middleeast/27saudi.html>, (27.09.2019).

<sup>443</sup> Daniel. L. Byman, "The US-Saudi Arabia counterterrorism relationship", **Brookings**, 24.05.2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/the-u-s-saudi-arabia-counterterrorism-relationship/>, (04.09.2019).

<sup>444</sup> Declan Walsh, "Wikileaks Cables Portray Saudi Arabia as a cash machine for terrorists", **The Guardian**, 05.12.2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/dec/05/wikileaks-cables-saudi-terrorist-funding>, (18.09.2019).

<sup>445</sup> Goldenberg.

<sup>446</sup> Ibid.

King Abdullah's warnings to provide arms and weapons to Sunnis fighting in civil war against Iraqi Shia militias in the event of possible massacre.<sup>447</sup>

Reasons for the establishment of the proxy relationship between insurgency and Saudi Arabia include different commonalities based on different orientations. While some of these groups share the same mindset with Saudi Arabia, others have similar lifestyles and tribal connections. Although the reason for this relationship can change for each group, they find a common enemy, the Iraqi government. From the point of Saudi Arabia, these groups are only pressure groups over the government. Even there is no possibility of change in the power, these groups can prevent the government from following total pro-Iranian policies. In terms of dependency, there is no a common orientation. If the Iraqi government satisfy the political, economic and social needs of these groups, there will be no reason for the dependency and acting as a proxy for some of them. Others which are following a path similar to the Saudi mindset against the government will probably continue their actions. It is also dependent on the number of sources coming from different locations.

#### **4.5. CONCLUSION**

Since the fall of Saddam, Iraq has become a failed state which does not have total control over its territories. The regime change in Iraq has caused promount changes both inside and across the region. The consolidation of the new democratic order in Iraq has remained as a failed attempt in the face of the power struggle among diverse groups inside and other states' involvement. Previous experiences of Iraqi people have forced them to engage in the fight which has broken the coexistence. While Shia has tried to preserve the gained power, Sunnis were marginalized. Clashes among those groups have increased violent sectarianism and led to instability in Iraq. Two neighbor countries, Iran and Saudi Arabia, have got their places through their proxies to reshape new Iraq and fill the power vacuum. While changed power system privileged Iran, it forced Saudi Arabia to confront Iranian influence. Iran got the opportunity to reach and influence the new Iraqi state,

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<sup>447</sup> Ibid.

which has been the Iranian aim since the revolution. Saudi Arabia rejected to establish relations with new Iraq until 2015 which it perceived as a pro-Iranian state.

The elimination of a common adversary has brought multi-challenges and opportunities for both states. Saudi Arabia has been frustrated for its feeling of insecurity throughout common borders with Iraq which are long, mostly uncontrolled and featured by deserts. These borders are subjects for smuggling activities and easy flow of people which create danger for Saudi Arabia and al-Saud family's dynasty. The possibility of unfriendly and pro-Iran Iraqi state doubled the fears of Saudis. From their eyes, the establishment of a Shia Iraq could be the first model for the removal of other Sunni states. A strong Iraq could also pose challenge economically by getting its place in the OPEC and the oil sector. The influence of Iran over the Iraqi government has increased concerns for being targeted directly or indirectly through land and for the establishment of a new transit way throughout Iraq among Iran and its allies in the region, which may exactly shift the balance and bring the end of Saudis.

Iraq is important for Iran in terms of transborder facts which connect both states and allow one to intervene in internal affairs of the other one. While Iran welcomed the elimination of an adversary, it was interested in the character and type of the new regime to rescue itself from being targeted by Iraq and other states including Saudi Arabia and Sunni militant groups. Iran has wanted to reshape Iraq's future and to have a friendly regime by taking advantage of the majority Shia Iraqi population in order to solve disputes and find a supporter in international realm. Iran preferred to create control mechanisms through proxies to eliminate the handicap, Iraqi national interests. Multiple opportunities for adversaries reflect Iran's willingness to establish a relatively strong government inside and a weak Iraq in the region, which was already established by the US-written federal constitution. Iran has successfully attempted to prevent implementation of the initiated democratic course in Iraq in order to eliminate the danger of regime change attempts in Iran. Geo-strategic position of Iraq reaching to other allies, has made it valuable in the eyes of Iranians for the security of defense corridor, balance of power in the region,

and economic processes. The Iraqi ownership over important places and influence of Shia clerics in Iran raised the importance of Iraq for Iran.

These considerations of both states turned Iraq an area of proxy conflict which has been engaged through different ethnic-religious groups. Iran prefers to use the Shia groups which including armed militias and anti-American resistance groups. Iran succeeded to place its clients into politics and into military establishments. Other resistance groups came together under the PMFs which are main pressure groups of Iran over the politics. While some of those groups are eligible to pursue their own agenda, others are linked with Iran through embracing Velayat-e Fatiq understanding. The reasons for the establishment of proxy relationship range from common religion and ideologic affiliation and having a supporter for the consolidation of power to common enemies and a shared historical collaboration. In many documents, the assistance of Iran in every types of means through the QF to those groups are outlined. Although Iran has provided assistance, it does not have full control over the all groups.

Saudi Arabia has links with Sunni insurgencies who have changed themselves in terms of size, name, strength and fighting means through time. The relationship between those groups and Saudi Arabia is not very clear, but Saudi Arabia is believed to involve in their establishments. These groups are anti-American and anti-governmental whose activities are subject to change. Their ideological orientations and political views divided them into different local groups; seculars, nationalists, jihadists, Islamists and salafists. The assistance of Saudi Arabia to these groups range from financing and harboring to providing human resources and weapons. Sunni individuals and organizations have acted as the distributor mechanisms which have the capacity to reach in different ways and from different places. The attitude of Saudi regime to these distributors and warnings for the possibility of direct support in some cases have put Saudi regime under accusations. Reasons of proxy relationship change for each insurgency group. While some share similar religious outlook, others share similar way of life. Although these can change, those groups find a common enemy which is the sectarianist pro-Iranian government. Those groups are important for Saudi Arabia in prevention of a total pro-Iranian politics. If the Iraqi government

satisfies the needs of those groups, there cannot be a clear answer for dependency of those groups on Saudi Arabia unless they do not have the Saudi-like mindset.



## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **LEBANON AND THE SYRIAN CONFLICT**

#### **5.1. INTRODUCTION**

The ongoing rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia is clearer in the two cases, Lebanon and the Syrian conflict, which are examined in this last chapter. Although these two cases are different from each other, they are well connected. Since its establishment, Lebanon has been an unstable country under a confessional political system which has attracted Iran and Saudi Arabia to gain influence for different aims and considerations. Both states have attempted to have influence over the rivals in Lebanon. Actors within Lebanon have turned into proxies of these states and even have taken roles in the Syrian conflict. The Syrian conflict started as an extension of the Arab Spring by early 2011 and it still continues. Because of its impact on important issues in the region, the future of the al-Assad regime has led to the recalculations of the both states.

These two cases will be examined in a similar way. Firstly, backgrounds of the cases will be explained, indicating the internal dynamics and external involvements. Secondly, critical actors within Lebanon and Syria will be examined and their importance for Iran and Saudi Arabia on different connected issues will be outlined. Lastly, the proxy relationship will be extracted on the commonalities between the two states and their proxies.

#### **5.2. AN UNSTABLE STATE: LEBANON**

Lebanon has experienced civil wars, political turmoils, foreign interventions and military deployments, and protests. It is a small state and the neighbor of Syria and Israel. Lebanon got its independence from its protector, France, in 1940. The compositions of the parliament and offices were arranged according to religious sects, which allowed Christians to gain more seats. Since then, Lebanon has witnessed a competition for power among different groups which makes it one of the most influenced states from proxy warfare in the region.

Through years, Lebanon has become a safer place for ethnic-religious refugees leading to a multi-puzzled state with Shia and Sunni muslims along with Druze and Christians populations. Under ethnic-based quotas, the civil war (1975-1989) became inevitable. The established multi-confessional system gave Shias only symbolic position which has prevented them from gaining benefits such as education and social services before the civil war.<sup>448</sup> Other regional powers found an opportunity to influence and to intervene in Lebanon. Especially Iran and Saudi Arabia have viewed Lebanon a place to send messages to adversary<sup>449</sup> and their game still continues in this front in the face of interruptions and disputes.

The Ta'if agreement (1989) partly settled the interests of proxies with the supervision of two states and divided the state power among a Christian president, a Sunni Prime Minister and a Shia parliament speaker along with a shared cabinet. This agreement did not set two important issues. Firstly, the sovereignty of Lebanon was tied to the peaceful solutions of regional conflicts among Lebanon, Israel and Syria.<sup>450</sup> Secondly, the confessional political system was renewed rather than ending power sharing among communities.<sup>451</sup> Syria also became the supervisor which caused Syrian deployment in Lebanon for years.

The occupation of Israel between the years of 1982-2000 in the South gave a cause for Hezbollah, a group defined as terrorist by many, to improve its armed capacity to counter and to damage Israeli military forces through asymmetrical attacks. After the end of the civil war, Hezbollah remained as the only armed militia in the country, while others were suspended. It continued to get military and moral support through the successful conduct of its political presence and resistance against Israel. Due to its determined resistance, Israel finally withdrew its forces in 2000.

The assassination of pro-Saudi Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005 clearly divided the country into two camps as being pro-Iranian and pro-Saudi which had

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<sup>448</sup> Ahmad Nizar Hamzeh, **In the Path of Hezbollah**, Syracuse University Press, New York, 2004, pp. 6-15.

<sup>449</sup> Ayşe Karabat, "Ortadoğu'nun Posta Kutusu: Lübnan", **Al Jazeera Türk**, 27.12.2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com.tr/blog/ortadogunun-posta-kutusu-lubnan>, (15.12.2019).

<sup>450</sup> Hassan Krayem, "The Lebanese Civil War and The Ta'if Agreement", **American University of Beirut**, <http://ddc.aub.edu.lb/projects/pspa/conflict-resolution.html>, (21.11.2019).

<sup>451</sup> Ibid.

already existed before this date. Because of adopting different positions on some topics such as the influence of foreign states over internal affairs and the levels of relations with those perceived friendly or hostile states, this two-sided political sphere has reflected two different blocks appealing these states.<sup>452</sup> In addition, Syria was put under pressure to withdraw its troops in Lebanon which was materialized in the following dates.

The war with Israel in 2006 effected Lebanon deeply because Hezbollah's prestige increased with the failure of Israel. Hezbollah has succeeded to establish itself in the politics. Because of its capability to control different apparatuses in different areas such as security, education and social networks, it has become a state-like entity within the state.<sup>453</sup> This shifted the balance on the side of Iran in both Lebanese politics and the region. Saudi Arabia has tried to roll back this shift through condemning Hezbollah.<sup>454</sup> In the following days of the 2006 war, Lebanon entered into a protest process against Siniora government which is a repeated process in Lebanon. These protests followed the assassination attempt to a member of the investigation committee for Hariri assassination, Colonel Samir Shehade, who is responsible for sentences of four pro-Syrian generals.<sup>455</sup> Political attempts to overcome these events did not bring deserved results and caused deadlocks. Hezbollah mobilized people to protest government after the government approval of the establishment of a court by the UN. Instabilities continued with the knowledge of Hezbollah's secret communication networks. This was shared with Saudi officials by Saad Hariri and pro-Saudi leaders who perceived these Iran-made establishments as the sign of Iranian takeover of Lebanon and took counter decisions against Hezbollah in May, 2008. The fight began on 7 May between Hezbollah and pro-Hariri supporters. Hezbollah entered into Sunni areas of Beirut and damaged Hariri's media and communication establishments. The government prevented the further

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<sup>452</sup> Nour Samaha and Alia Chugtai, "Lebanon: at the crossroads", **Al Jazeera**, <https://interactive.aljazeera.com/aje/2015/lebanoncrossroads/>, (12.11.2019).

<sup>453</sup> Jonathan Masters and Zachary Laub, "Backgrounds: Hezbollah," **Council on Foreign Relations (CFR)**, 1, 03.01.2014, <http://www.cfr.org/lebanon/hezbollah-k-hizbollahhizbullah/p9155>, (10.11.2019).

<sup>454</sup> Raihan Ismail, **Saudi Clerics and Shi'a Islam**, Oxford University Press, 05.02.2016, p. 158.

<sup>455</sup> John Kifner, "Bomb wounds Lebanese Linked to Assassination Inquiry, **The New York Times**, 05.09.2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/05/world/middleeast/05cnd-lebanon.html?searchResultPosition=3>, (15.11.2019).

actions of Hezbollah through cancelling counter decisions. Both sides then wanted to negotiate in order to solve this domestic issue and finally Doha agreement was reached.

There are many examples of the Iranian and Saudi Arabian presences in the country because Lebanon is stated to be “addicted to outside interference.”<sup>456</sup> The most clear division is that while Hezbollah has been involved in the Syrian conflict on the side of the regime, others contributed to Sunni rebels against the Syrian regime. The conflict between Hezbollah and Salafist groups has spread into the territories of Lebanon, specifically to Trablus and South Lebanon and Beka Valley.<sup>457</sup> The competition for power has created instabilities in Lebanon through causing authority gaps as it happened in the announcement of Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri’s resignation on 4 November 2017. This also shows how the two states have engaged in Lebanon’s domestic context because Hariri made his announcement through Saudi channels and criticized the intervention of Iran and actions of Hezbollah in his country. On 9 November 2017, only five days after the announcement, some rumors spilled suggesting a Saudi coercion on his resign.

### **5.2.1. The Importance of Lebanon for Both Rivals**

Lebanon is very strategical in terms of political and military meanings for its location in the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Interests of Iran and Saudi Arabia on Lebanon are originated from divergencies on the positions of internal actors and their reflections on the region regarding different issues. From the point of Iran, Lebanon has to be within its influence sphere. The relations between them goes back to the establishment of Lebanon in which multi-linkages on common areas such as religion, trade, culture and education were established. Even, some Iranian refugees participated into politics and the civil war in Lebanon. The emergence of the revolutionary Iran influenced its relations with Lebanon. Many Lebanese Shia

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<sup>456</sup> Joshua Craze and Mark Huband, **The Kingdom: Saudi Arabia and the Challenge of the 21st Century**, Hurst Publishers, 2009, p. 117.

<sup>457</sup> Nazih Siddiq, “Guns Fall Silent in Lebanon’s Tripoli as Army Moves in”, **Reuters**, 27.10.2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-lebanon/guns-fall-silent-in-lebanons-tripoli-as-army-moves-in-idUKKBN0IG0XK20141027>, (01.12.2019).

clerics were educated and trained in Iran and returned to Lebanon with an Iran-oriented mindset. These people become pioneers of different establishments in Lebanon in political and military fields as in the case of Hezbollah.

The existence of Hezbollah strengthens Iran's hand to have influence without responsibility and gives an opportunity to reach different locations in the region.<sup>458</sup> For Iran, Lebanon is the center for its policies to be influential in the region. Hezbollah is an operator of Iran's security projects and an actor as an intelligence service. It opens a way to supply necessary aid to al-Assad regime and Iraqi groups. In terms of economical aspects, Iran gets the opportunity to have worldwide engagement with the help of Hezbollah. Hezbollah's financial system integrated to the Lebanese banking and the black market has helped Iran to break functionality of international sanctions and to maintain its economic activities.<sup>459</sup>

In addition, Hezbollah rejects the existence of Israel in the region as Iran does. It acts as a mechanism in the camp of opponents opposing to a peace agreement with Israel to defend Islamist ideology against Zionist Israel. As Iranians introduced their ideology to support oppressed from oppressors, the Iranian involvement in Lebanon has provided a legitimization of this narrative. Lebanon's shared border with Israel is strategic for Iran to secure itself from a possible Israeli attack. Since Iranian engagement in a nuclear programme, Lebanon has gained value for deterrence.<sup>460</sup> Having influence in Lebanon deters Israel to take an action against Iran because it is dangerous to fight in two fronts for Israel. Lebanon cannot be left to hands of other powers in the region, especially to Saudi Arabia. Lebanon is a geostrategic place for containment of Iran with the broke down of Iran's defense axis. The occupation of Lebanon by Israel cannot be allowed due to its collaboration

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<sup>458</sup> Matthew Levitt, "30 Years of Terror Sponsored by Iran", The Washington Institute, 2013, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/30-years-of-terror-sponsored-by-iran>, (18.11.2019).

<sup>459</sup> Mcinnis.

<sup>460</sup> Jubin M. Goodarzi, "Radicalism or Realpolitik?: The Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran", **Babylon: The Nordic Journal of Middle Eastern Studies**, Vol.8, No.2, 2010, p.88.

with Christian Maronites in the North parts of Lebanon.<sup>461</sup> In the case of a success in invasion, Israel may dominate whole Lebanon.

Iran has tried to strengthen Hezbollah, especially after the establishment of the March 14 Alliance. This is a strategic attempt to challenge Saudi influence in the country. Every attempt of Saudi Arabia in Lebanon has been perceived as an intervention in domestic affairs. This intervention is regarded to influence the relations between Iran and Lebanon. Saudi influence has also prevented Hezbollah from gaining more ground. That's why, Iran points out the possibility and the importance of negotiation processes to keep Hezbollah alive in Lebanese politics.

Historically, Saudi Arabia gives explicit attention to Lebanon and seeks to solve its problems in more appropriate ways for its own sake. The Shia presence and its political reflections in Lebanon worry Saudis which can lead to a Shia takeover of Lebanon. The established instability by the confessional political system creates dangers for both region and Saudi Arabia as long as Saudi Arabia favors the status quo in the region. There is a possibility of spillover effect of instability into Saudi Arabia through regional dynamics.

The Doha Agreement signed in 2008 allowed Shia parties to have veto power in the parliament which has influenced Lebanese foreign policy. Especially after the Arap Spring, Saudi Arabia feels that it cannot lose control in Lebanon because it already lost Syria and Iraq to Iran. It is important to stress that the contribution of Iran in the fight against the ISIS has allowed it to increase its prestige and to consolidate its influence in those areas. In addition, Saudi Arabia's costly and humiliating intervention in Yemen has raised concern of Saudi Arabia for Lebanon being the last defensible area for it against Iran. This is mainly due to the fact that it perceives Iran as the main organizer behind the Yemeni scenario.

Besides Iranian influence, the existence of Hezbollah creates another threat perception. Saudi Arabia wants Hezbollah to abandon its military wing to prevent the collapse of Lebanese government which is the only obstacle for Hezbollah to gain

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<sup>461</sup> Talal Nizameddin, "Squaring the Middle East Triangle in Lebanon: Russia and the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah Nexus", *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 86, No. 3, July, 2008, pp. 481-482.

whole power. Although it keeps open the communication channels, Riyadh perceives Hezbollah as a terrorist group because Hezbollah does not avoid from threatening Saudi Arabia. Successes of Hezbollah add new worries and trigger Saudi Arabia to take counter-actions against it because it is transforming itself into a transnational and revolutionary armed group operating in different parts of the region. Saudi Arabia supposes that Hezbollah has contributed hugely to Houthis who threaten the Saudi homeland. Examples of the accusations include the delivery of a missile boat to Houthis<sup>462</sup> and training facilities for suicide bombings in Saudi homeland<sup>463</sup>. Even, the General Secretary of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrullah, provoked masses to chant “Death to the Al Saud” for the intervention in Yemen in 2015.<sup>464</sup>

The threat of Hezbollah to Saudi Arabia is not only limited by Yemen. It also has involved in Iraqi non-state military groups. Its mobilization and influence areas not only include conflict areas but presence in those having Shia oppositions such as pro-Saudi Bahrain. Saudi Arabia conducts a terrorist labelling propaganda against Hezbollah, equating it to the ISIS, to roll back its influence in order to represent its own way for Muslims.<sup>465</sup> In this propaganda, Saudi Arabia stresses its mission as its main responsibility given by Islam.<sup>466</sup> Saudi authorities also deal with activists inside who express admiration to both Hezbollah and Iran.<sup>467</sup> After Iraq, Hezbollah finds a new position for itself through participating in the Syrian conflict. Since then, it has used opportunities to reach arms and to increase its military experiences, even some difficulties have emerged. This involvement beyond its presence areas transforms

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<sup>462</sup> Sa'id Ilyas, “Hizbullah’s Smuggling of Missile Shipment to Houthis Fuelled Saudi Anger,” **al-Quds alArabi**, 26.02.2016, Quoted in Matteo Legranzi and Fred H. Lawson, “Saudi Arabia calls out Hezbollah, Why now?”, **Middle East Policy Council**, Volume 23, No: 2, Summer, 2016.

<sup>463</sup> Ibrahim al-Hatlani, “Saudis Increasingly Frustrated with Lebanon,” **Al-monitor**, 26.02.2016, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/02/saudi-arabia-lebanon-frustration-aid-cut-riyadh.html>, (17.11.2019).; Mohammed Hatem, “Yemen Accuses Hezbollah of Helping Houthis in Saudi Border War,” **Bloomberg**, 24.02.2016, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-02-24/yemen-accuses-hezbollah-of-helping-houthis-in-saudi-border-war>, (17.11.2019).

<sup>464</sup> Tom Perry and Laila Bassam, “Lebanon’s Hezbollah Takes Aim at Saudi Arabia on Ashura”, **Reuters**, 24.10.2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-hezbollah/lebanons-hezbollah-takes-aim-at-saudi-arabia-on-ashura-idUSKCN0SI0HQ20151024>, (18.11.2019).

<sup>465</sup> Legranzi and Lawson, p. 39.

<sup>466</sup> Nibras Kazimi, “Saudi Arabia’s ‘Islamic Alliance’: Major Challenge for al-Baghdadi’s Islamic State, or Potential Opportunity?”, **Hudson Institute**, 29.04.2016, <https://www.hudson.org/research/12291-saudi-arabia-s-islamic-alliance-major-challenge-for-al-baghdadi-s-islamic-state-or-potential-opportunity>, (15.11.2019).

<sup>467</sup> Legrenzi and Lawson, p. 39.

Hezbollah from a political and military resistance movement to an actor effecting deeply the existence of regimes as a state capable of it.<sup>468</sup>

Hezbollah's defensive position against Israel is not so crucial for Saudi Arabia whose decisions on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict depend on numerous considerations preventing it from getting a strict position. While Saudi Arabia wants to dominate Arab-Israeli conflict as being the leader of the Muslim world, it continues to engage with Israel behind closed doors. If Hezbollah gains more successes against Israel, Iran will be on the negotiation table for the settlement of the problems. Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia sees all Lebanon-linked problems as issues of the greater Arabian politics allowing it to increase its leadership image as it happened during the Taif Accords. The economic and family ties of al-Saud family with Lebanese Sunni elites also increase Saudi considerations for Lebanon.<sup>469</sup> Because these Lebanese elites having popularity and influence, attempt to involve in political processes in Lebanon which opens the doors for Saudi influence.<sup>470</sup> In addition to these elites, some places in Lebanon such as Sidon and Palestinian refugee camps shelter Salafists. These places allow Saudis to increase their influence.

### 5.2.2. The Proxy Relationship with Internal Rivalries

Lebanon faces many difficulties. It is sometimes under occupation of foreign troops and other times under domestic pressures, reactions and confrontations. It has the capacity to influence the region for its uniqueness in terms of including a state and a state-like armed group, Hezbollah, and other reactionary groups. A long-lasting peace in Lebanon seems impossible. Instability in the country makes Lebanon an important case for this thesis. Both states have different types of proxies which welcome foreign aid and direction for their domestic battles. Iran has collaborated

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<sup>468</sup> Elias Ghazai, "Why Hezbollah matters so much in a turbulent Middle East", **The Conversation**, 01.12.2017, <https://theconversation.com/why-hezbollah-matters-so-much-in-a-turbulent-middle-east-88111>, (25.11.2019).

<sup>469</sup> Thanassis Cambanis, "A Father's Shadow Clouds His Son's Rise in Lebanon", **The New York Times**, 03.10.2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/03/world/middleeast/03hariri.html?mtrref=www.google.com&gwh=2F19202990CD14121ED55F10670A4E50&gwt=pay&assetType=REGIWALL>, (14.11.2019).

<sup>470</sup> Mahan Abedin, "Saudis mull losses in Lebanon as bid for influence is shattered", **The Kingdom: Saudi Arabia and the Challenge of the 21st Century**, (Ed. Craze and Hubard), p. 105.

with armed Hezbollah and Saudi Arabia has had ties with both the Lebanese government and its army and some Salafists. The level of involvement of the two states increased after the assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005. Following the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah and the Cedar Revolution, the balances in the country changed. While March 8 Movement bloc was supported by Iran, March 14 Movement bloc was backed by Saudi Arabia.

Hezbollah, known as the Party of God, was created in 1982 as a mean for Iran to export its revolution by filling the gap in Shia leadership in Lebanon on the contrary to Amal,<sup>471</sup> a Shia party having a different narrative of Lebanese Shi'a and supporting multi-cultural and sectarian Lebanon. The Israeli invasion in Lebanon attracted Iran to continue its efforts. By the time, Iran has succeeded and Hezbollah has become an extension of Lebanese army under Syrian involvement. It acquired the control of the southern parts of Lebanon on behalf of the army which was not deployed on the common border with Israel.

Iran supported Hezbollah since its establishment through different means. Under the civil war and Israeli occupation years, Iran deployed 1,500 Iranian Revolutionary Guards in Bekaa valley and organized Shia militants through arming and funding<sup>472</sup> under the IRGC project.<sup>473</sup> Iran continued its support by providing funds and weapons after the withdrawal of Israel.<sup>474</sup> It has provided training facilities in its own territories and in Lebanon camps in which Hezbollah practised with large-scale weapons.<sup>475</sup> After the withdrawal of Syria, Iran's aid only reached to Shia places in Beirut.<sup>476</sup> That's why Iran has preferred to invest more in Hezbollah. For example, Iran attempted to support Hezbollah in terms of logistics and military in

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<sup>471</sup> Roschanack Shaery-Eisenlohr, "Postrevolutionary Iran and Shi'i Lebanon: Contested Histories of Shi'i Transnationalism", **International Journal of Middle East Studies**, Vol. 39, No. 2, Cambridge University Press, May, 2007, p. 280.

<sup>472</sup> Hamzeh, p. 24.

<sup>473</sup> Steven Ward, "Axis of Resistance: The Hezbollah-Iran-Syria Relationship", **The Cipher Brief**, 14.06.2016, <https://www.thecipherbrief.com/axis-of-resistance-the-hezbollah-iran-syria-relationship>, (30.11.2019).

<sup>474</sup> Jubin M. Goodarzi, **Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power in the Politics of the Middle East**, I. B. Tauris, London, 2009, p.87.

<sup>475</sup> Nicholas Blanford, **Warriors of God: Inside Hezbollah's Thirty-Year Struggle against Israel**, Random House, New York, 2011.

<sup>476</sup> Wehrey and Others, *Since the Fall of Saddam*, pp. 82-83.

2007<sup>477</sup> and helped for the establishment of communication network for the usage of Hezbollah in 2008. This establishment was viewed as a sovereignty eroding attempt by the government. Iran provided different types of weapons including rockets<sup>478</sup> such as long range Scuds.<sup>479</sup> The amount of Iranian aid was calculated for each year as up to 200 million.<sup>480</sup> Iran maintained its logistical and training facilities.<sup>481</sup> According to estimates, Iran provided “unmanned aerial vehicles and an estimated 100,000 to 150,000 rockets and missiles”.<sup>482</sup> Hezbollah already accepted the help of Iran in terms of funding and weaponry.<sup>483</sup>

Iran and Hezbollah have shared commonalities. They have common enemies ranging from Saudi Arabia to Israel. For example, Hezbollah sees Israel as an aggressive state that ignores Muslim rights and harms people for its own sake<sup>484</sup> as Iran does. They have ideological similarities. The embracement to Khomeinist understanding is reflected in Hezbollah’s manifesto which makes it a loyal follower of Iranian Islamic authority.<sup>485</sup> Although, Hezbollah advocates that the Velayat-e-Faqih is a valuable political model, it does not value it as the most appropriate system for Lebanon.<sup>486</sup> It is clear that Hezbollah, at least, has a sense of common understanding with Sunnis against Israel and Christians in Lebanon. Rather than

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<sup>477</sup> Kitty Logan, “Iran Rebuilds Lebanon to Boost Hizbollah,” **The Telegraph**, 31.07.2007, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1558948/Iran-rebuilds-Lebanon-to-boost-Hizbollah.html>, (28.11.2019).

<sup>478</sup> Matthew Levitt, “Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God”, **Council on Foreign Relations**, <http://www.cfr.org/world/hezbollah-global-footprint-lebanons-party-god/p35535>, (28.11.2019).

<sup>479</sup> Andrew W. Lehren and Michael G. Gordon, “U.S. strains to stop arms flow,” **The New York Times**, 06.12.2010, [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/07/world/07wikileaks-weapons.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/07/world/07wikileaks-weapons.html?_r=0), (24.11.2019).

<sup>480</sup> Levitt, “Hezbollah”.

<sup>481</sup> Ibid.

<sup>482</sup> Avi Issacharoff, “Israel Raises Hezbollah Rocket Estimate to 150,000, **The Times of Israel**”, 12.11.2015, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-raises-hezbollah-rocket-estimate-to-150000/>, (21.11.2019).

<sup>483</sup> “Hezbollah to Send More Fighters to Syria’s Aleppo,” **Al Jazeera**, 25.06.2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/06/hezbollah-send-fighters-syria-aleppo-160624180847854.html>, (12.11.2019).

<sup>484</sup> Masters and Laub.

<sup>485</sup> Lehren and Gordon.

<sup>486</sup> Emile Hokayem, “Iran and Lebanon”, *The Iran Primer: Power, Politics, and US Policy*, (Ed. Robin Wright), United States Institute for Peace Press, Washington D.C. 2010, p.178-181.

rejecting, Hezbollah attempted to create a co-existence through signing a memorandum with al-Shahal Salafists.<sup>487</sup>

Hezbollah continues to be a pro-Iranian actor in both Lebanese domestic context and the region which is a difficult image to be more than a proxy. On the one hand, Hezbollah does not always act in accordance with Iran's decisions. On the other hand, it has become more dependent on Iran due to the fact that domestic difficulties resulted from the losses and reactions reached over the surface by its participation in the Syrian conflict. One of its aims to enter into Syrian conflict on the side of the regime is its willingness to maintain its armed position in both Lebanon and the region through protecting the regime.

From the point of Saudi Arabia, its engagement in real terms started after the withdrawal of Syria. It supported pro-Saudi governments and the army along with Salafists. Its engagement was at low levels in pre-civil war period through propogandas and individuals. It tried to increase its popularity through emphasizing Arab identity and Wahhabism during the civil war years.<sup>488</sup> Since its success in the negotiations of Ta'if accords, Saudi Arabia has maintained its influence in the Lebanese politics. It divides Lebanese state activities from Hezbollah's aggression against Israel.<sup>489</sup> Its influence became more impressing during Rafiq Hariri's prime ministry between years of 1992-1998 and 2000-2004 on the face of historical, economic and political relations with the family seeking good relations between those states. Even, Hariri was accused of pursuing Saudi interests in Lebanon. Lebanese government has been unable to control and to disban Hezbollah and sees it as a challenge for the sovereignty.

During the 1980s, Saudi Arabia mostly used its money.<sup>490</sup> The 2006 war caused an increase in the funds for post-war reconstruction. The amount of aids

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<sup>487</sup> Blanford, "Lebanon Warily Watches Its Salafis," **Christian Science Monitor**, 24.09.2008, Quoted by Wehrey and Others, Since the fall of Saddam, p. 84.

<sup>488</sup> Mordechai Nisan, "Saudi Arabia's Jihad in the Middle East and the World: Implications for the United States and Thoughts for American Policy", **Ariel Center for Policy Research**, No: 168, April 2007.

<sup>489</sup> Craze and Huband, p. 113.

<sup>490</sup> Nizameddin, p. 479.

reached up to 1.5 billion dollars for different areas.<sup>491</sup> Such a commitment forced Hezbollah to regret its actions and to support the army.<sup>492</sup> Following internal conflict between the Lebanese government and Hezbollah in 2008, Saudi Arabia provided money for Hariri's political party and arms to pro-Saudi Lebanese security forces.<sup>493</sup> According to released U.S. diplomatic papers, Saudi Arabia even offered to intervene in Beirut and to create an Arab military force to prevent Iran from controlling all Lebanon.<sup>494</sup> Although Saudi Arabia abandoned its financing activities for arms and security aid for two years, it changed its strategy and sent 1 billion dollars in 2018.<sup>495</sup>

Although it is weak, small and composed of multisects, Saudis sees the Lebanese army as the only capable actor preventing Hezbollah from Lebanon's takeover, as its stance in 2008<sup>496</sup> and 2019<sup>497</sup> events happened among pro-Hezbollah and anti-Hezbollah groups and protestors, showed that it is true. Saudi Arabia provided 3 billion dollars to the army which represented the largest amount until 2013.<sup>498</sup> It was used for important missions including terrorism and prevention of illegal trafficking of weapons which are the necessary domains to curb the influence

<sup>491</sup> Alfred B. Prados and Christopher Blanchard, "Saudi Arabia: Current Issues and U.S. Relations", CRS Report for Congress, Congressional Research Service, (January 9, 2007); Nawaf Obaid, "Regional Ramifications of the Lebanon Ceasefire: A Saudi View," Saudi-US Relations Information Service, (September 27, 2006), Quoted by Wehrey and Others, Since the Fall of Saddam, p.81.

<sup>492</sup> Wehrey and Others, Since the Fall of Saddam, p. 81.

<sup>493</sup> Mohammad Bazzi, "Lebanon and the start of Iran and Saudi Arabia's proxy war", **The New Yorker**, 26.05.2015, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/lebanon-and-the-start-of-iran-and-saudi-arabias-proxy-war>, (12.11.2019).

<sup>494</sup> Ewen MacAskill, "Wikileaks Cables: Saudi Proposed Arab Force to Invade Lebanon", **The Guardian**, 07.12.2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/dec/07/wikileaks-saudi-arab-invasion-lebanon>, (16.11.2019).

<sup>495</sup> Naser Al-Tamimi, "Saudi Policy in Lebanon: No Easy Option for Riyadh", **ISPI**, 04.05.2018, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/saudi-policy-lebanon-no-easy-option-riyadh-20396>, (16.11.2019).

<sup>496</sup> Clashes started after Hezbollah's Communication Networks were detected. Rival militant groups clashed but the army stayed neutral and prevented further confrontations by arresting fighters. Are J. Knudsen, "Lebanese Armed Forces: A United Army for A Divided Country?", **Chr. Michelsen Institute Insight**, No. 9, November 2014, <https://open.cmi.no/cmi-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/2474973/Lebanese%20Armed%20Forces%3a%20A%20United%20Army%20for%20a%20Divided%20Country%3f?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>, (21.11.2019).

<sup>497</sup> The army prevented armed pro-Hezbollah supporters aiming to confront anti-Hezbollah protestors and did not allowed them to disperse crowds in different parts including Shia places. Jacques Neriah, "Is Lebanon Sliding Again into Civil War?", **Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs**, 29.01.2019, <http://jcpa.org/is-lebanon-sliding-again-into-civil-war/>, (14.11.2019).

<sup>498</sup> "Saudi Arabia halts \$3 billion package to Lebanese army, security aid", **Reuters**, 19.02.2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-lebanon/saudi-arabia-halts-3-billion-package-to-lebanese-army-security-aid-idUSKCN0VS1KK>, (21.11.2019).

of Hezbollah.<sup>499</sup> Many weapons and equipments were bought from France.<sup>500</sup> With the flow of dangerous Islamic groups into Lebanon, Saudi Arabia granted 1 billion dollars to the army for the fight against extremists on the Syria-Lebanon border in 2014.<sup>501</sup> With this aid, the Lebanese cabinet shared the plans about recruiting new security forces up to 12.000.<sup>502</sup>

As the popularity of Hezbollah has increased, Saudi Arabia has attempted to counter this group by increasing the support to Salafists who especially have links with al-Shahal family.<sup>503</sup> Lebanese Salafists are armed militants and they are against the Syrian linkages within Lebanon.<sup>504</sup> The existence of Salafists, especially those in camps, has meant a way for having a kind of “strategic depth” in Lebanon at the expense of its adversaries.<sup>505</sup> Saudi Arabia provided up to 52 million dollars to Sunnis in the North through pro-Saudi politicians.<sup>506</sup> But, with the radicalization of Salafists, while the cooperation between pro-Saudis and Salafists<sup>507</sup> was a little bit broken, the support to Hezbollah by Shia has increased to have a security belt against Salafi activists<sup>508</sup>. They have even sometimes faced with the army.<sup>509</sup>

Their commonalities are based on mostly similar attitudes towards Hezbollah, Syria and Iran as well as religious similarities but common enemies are more pressing than religion. Both Saudi Arabia and its proxies, except some individuals, want to prevent Hezbollah from further accumulation of power for the national unity.

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<sup>499</sup> K. Ghattas, “Saudi Arabia ‘to give Lebanon army \$3bn Grant”, **BBC**, 29.12.2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-25544352>, (12.11.2019).

<sup>500</sup> “Saudi Arabia halts \$3 billion package to Lebanese army, security aid”.

<sup>501</sup> Mariam Karouny, Tom Perry and Samia Nakhoul, “Saudi Arabia grants 1 billion to Lebanon’s army in the battle against Syrian rebels”, **Haaretz**, 07.08.2014, <https://www.haaretz.com/saudi-arabia-gives-1b-to-lebanon-1.5258526>, (25.11.2019).

<sup>502</sup> Knudsen.

<sup>503</sup> Wehrey and Others, *Since the Fall of Saddam*, p. 83.

<sup>504</sup> Tine Gade, “Lebanon: Political Leadership Confronted by Salafist Ideology”, **The Foundation for Strategic Research**, August 2017, p.5.

<sup>505</sup> RAND discussion with a Salafi cleric, Tripoli, Lebanon, February 2008. See also “Sunni Rising: The Growth of Sunni Militancy in Lebanon,” *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, 5 December 2007; “Fatah al-Islam,” *Jane’s World Insurgency and Terrorism*, 26 June 2007; and Nicholas Blandford, “Chaos Returns to Troubled Lebanon,” *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, Vol. 44, No. 22, 30 May 2007b. Quoted in Wehrey and Others, *Since the Fall of Saddam*, p.83.

<sup>506</sup> RAND discussion with Lebanese analysts, Beirut, February 2008, Quoted by Wehrey and Others, *Since the Fall of Saddam*, p. 83.

<sup>507</sup> Gade.

<sup>508</sup> Wehrey and Others, *Since the Fall of Saddam*, p.83.

<sup>509</sup> Cem Yılmaz, “İran ve Suudi Arabistan’ın Bitmeyen Bölgesel Rekabeti”, **The Middle East Analysis**, Vol. 3, No. 26, 2011, pp. 53-62.

Especially, most of the Salafist groups active in Lebanon are against Hezbollah<sup>510</sup> and do not have jihadist orientations<sup>511</sup>. They open the communication channels and compromise ways with other non-Sunni community, until their community is not threatened.<sup>512</sup> The active involvement of Hezbollah in the Syrian conflict resulted in reactions of Lebanese Sunnis who have criticized Hezbollah as a murderer of Arabs<sup>513</sup>. While proxies are mostly dependent on Saudi aid, they do not solely act according to Saudi wishes. For example, Saad Hariri refrained from actions which would have an effect and would create reactions inside.<sup>514</sup> In addition, Lebanon did not approve the joint Arab statement which accused Hezbollah for attacks not to disturb national unity.<sup>515</sup>

### 5.3. THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

2011 changed everything in Syria and in the region. Syria lost its place as a stable power and turned into a conflict zone in which multi-powers are interested and have invested in. The conflict has caused deaths and displacements in huge numbers, damaged all spheres of life and many war crimes have been committed. Pro-reform uprisings known as the “Arab Spring” spread into Syria with the words “your turn, Doctor” wrote by fifteen years of old boys in Daraa.<sup>516</sup> The protests grew with secular mass-reaction demanding economic and political reforms from the regime which was seen as corrupted implementer of several pressures. At the end of March

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<sup>510</sup> David Ottaway, “The King and Us”, **Foreign Affairs**, May-June 2009, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2009-05-01/king-and-us>, (27.11.2019), p.128.

<sup>511</sup> Gade.

<sup>512</sup> Ibid.

<sup>513</sup> Costas Faropoulos, “Hezbollah’s Shifting Paradigm: From Resistance Movement to Regional Military Power”, **Middle East Flashpoint**, No: 64, 09.03.2015.

<sup>514</sup> “Saudi Arabia halts \$3 billion package to Lebanese army, security aid”

<sup>515</sup> Ibid.

<sup>516</sup> “Your Turn Doctor: Graffiti boys brace for Assad attack”, **The Middle East Online**, 16.06.2018, <https://middle-east-online.com/en/your-turn-doctor-graffiti-boys-brace-assad-attack>, (18.11.2019).

2011, the regime called the protests as fitna threatening stability and unity in Syria.<sup>517</sup> Soon after, what began as an uprising for rights turned into a sectarian war.<sup>518</sup>

The regime began its deadly campaign in April. Three months later, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) was formed by fled military personnels and a unified reaction emerged to topple the regime. As the power of rebels decreased and the response of the regime grew, the external assistance to rebels began to benefit from unrest by those having different backgrounds while aiming to have a sense of power in Syria. By the time, the regime lost its authority in different parts to militant opposition. As brutality increased, the new protection and suppliance mechanisms were searched and that's why rebel movement was divided among multiple warrior groups by the late 2012. These all made reformist movement illegitimate. Violence increased and the conflict has become more complicated. The regime-Russia-Iran front was confronted by the US-France (the European Union) along with Turkey-Saudi Arabia-Qatar front which was later divided.<sup>519</sup> Some warrior groups including foreign fighters, such as ISIS, emerged and they strenghtened themselves.

The Syrian uprising shocked the regional states and confused them.<sup>520</sup> In the beginning, the Gulf favored the regime to alter the regime's attitudes.<sup>521</sup> Saudi Arabia made reform call rather than a regime change and offered help to arrange a conciliation committee with the opposition. With the escalation of violence, it changed its tone and warned al-Assad to make reforms "before it is too late".<sup>522</sup> By the time, King Abdullah declared its support to opposition by insisting the existence of "the killing machine"<sup>523</sup> and left its peaceful attempts.<sup>524</sup> In August 2011, Saudi

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<sup>517</sup> Jim Muir, "Syria: Assad speech offers little new", **BBC News**, 30.03.2011, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-12915461>, (13.11.2019).

<sup>518</sup> Line Khatib, "Syria, Saudi Arabia, the U.A.E. and Qatar: the 'sectarianization' of the Syrian conflict and undermining of democratization in the region", **British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies**, 46:3, 2019, pp.385-403.

<sup>519</sup> Tanış Tolga, "Eski Savaşçılar Ülkesi Türkiye", **Hürriyet**, 14.02.2016, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/yazarlar/tolga-tanis/eski-savascilar-ulkesi-turkiye-40054215>, (19.11.2019).

<sup>520</sup> Emile Hokayem, "Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War", **Survival**, 56:6, 2014, p. 61.

<sup>521</sup> Ibid, p. 62.

<sup>522</sup> "Saudi Arabia Calls for Syrian Reforms", **Al-Jazeera**, 08.08.2011, [www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/08/201187213922184761.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/08/201187213922184761.html), (26.11.2019).

<sup>523</sup> Adrian Bloomfield, "Syria unrest: Saudi Arabia calls on 'killing machine' to stop", **The Telegraph**, 08.08.2011, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/8687912/Syria-unrest-Saudi-Arabia-calls-on-killing-machine-to-stop.html>, (12.11.2019).

Arabia recalled his ambassador and then, it proposed to impose sanctions on the regime and reached the opposition<sup>525</sup>.

As the protests began, Iran differentiated it from other protests which were seen as “the Islamic awakening”. While Iran defined others as Islamist against pro-Western authorities which was not true at all, it fingered outsiders as manipulators of Syrian population aiming to damage its allies<sup>526</sup>. Tehran underlined its loyalty to its ally and reacted to extremist forces and terrorism to topple a legitimate regime.<sup>527</sup> However, Iran welcomed international efforts to solve problems on the condition of the regime survival.<sup>528</sup> It participated negotiation talks with Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Egypt in 2012.

In 2012, while the al-Nusra front was established, the US made call for the regime to resign. The conflict escalated into Aleppo, the second largest city. Hezbollah declared official participation in May 2013 on the side of the regime. While Saudi Arabia attended conferences as a leading power to make call for support to rebels, Iran remained as an outsider and was excluded.<sup>529</sup> Saudi Arabia used its media for propogandas to put pressure over the supporters of the regime, specifically Iran<sup>530</sup> and criticized the UNSC for its inaction.<sup>531</sup> By late 2013, radical Islamist groups such as al-Nusra and the ISIS emerged. The turning point was the declaration of caliphate by the ISIS on 30 March 2014 which was strengthened in 2015. With the shift in balance, Saudi Arabia gave signs for the possibility of reconciliation with

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<sup>524</sup> Yoel Guzansky, “Saudi Activism in a Changing Middle East”, **Strategic Assessment**, Vol. 14, No. 3, October 2011.

<sup>525</sup> “Minister of Foreign Affairs of Saudi Arabia Calls on Arab League to Reconsider Its Initiative on Syria”, **SPA**, 12.02.2012, <https://www.spa.gov.sa/969574>, (14.11.2019).

<sup>526</sup> Nadia von Maltzahn, “The Syria-Iran Axis: Cultural Diplomacy and International Relations in the Middle East”, I. B. Tauris, New York, 2015, p. 54.

<sup>527</sup> Michelle Moghtader, “Iran Says Does Not Seek Indefinite Power for Assad”, **Reuters**, 02.04.2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-syria/iran-says-does-not-seek-indefinite-power-for-assad-idUSBREA311X220140402>, (16.11.2019).

<sup>528</sup> Maltzahn, p. 55.

<sup>529</sup> Adami Ali, “Saudi Arabia and Iran: The Islamic Awakening Case”, **Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs**, Vol. 3, No. 4, 2013, p. 163.

<sup>530</sup> Ibid.

<sup>531</sup> Robert F. Worth, “Saudi Arabia Rejects U.N. Security Council Seat in Protest Move”, **The New York Times**, 18.10.2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/19/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-rejects-security-council-seat.html>, (15.11.2019).

Iran whenever it wants<sup>532</sup> and even changed its anti-regime Princes from their positions<sup>533</sup>. The change in the tones of Iran and Saudi Arabia were perceived as strategical attempts to ease the tension which could lead to a confrontation.<sup>534</sup>

After the march of the opposition into different regions, especially in Idlib, Russia was officially involved into the conflict in September, 2015 on the request of the regime. In the mid of 2016, Turkey initiated the Euphrates Shield Operation and fought the ISIS with the FSA. In the same year, the regime began to hold the important rebel-controlled areas such as some parts of Aleppo and succeeded to survive and to improve its situation. The ISIS lost its control over the occupied lands by 2019. Although peaceful initiatives continue to be presented to end the conflict, there have so far remained as failed attempts.

### 5.3.1. Syria With or Without the Al-Assad Regime

To understand better the meaning of the engagements of two states in Syria, there is need to examine their relations with the Syrian regime because the regime's attitudes and foreign policies have deeply influenced both states. Besides the relations and their impact on the regional rivalry of two states, the daily factors have also been remarkable to underline the necessity of the engagement in addition to negative and positive calculations.

Iran-Syria relations have been very good since the 1979 revolution in Iran. Their alliance is a strong strategic alliance, even in the absence of commonalities. While Iran is an Islamic republican state with Shia majority, Syria is a secular state having a socialist orientation and a significant Sunni population. This alliance was established through military and economic agreements in the late Cold War period in

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<sup>532</sup> Glen Carey and Dana El Baltaji, "Saudi Foreign Minister Says Invited Iran Counterpart to Visit", **Bloomberg**, 13.05.2014, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-05-13/saudi-foreign-minister-says-invited-iran-counterpart-to-visit>, (30.11.2019).

<sup>533</sup> F. Gregory Gause, "Saudi-Iranian Rapprochement? The Incentives and the Obstacles", **Brookings**, 17.03.2014, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/saudi-iranian-rapprochement-the-incentives-and-the-obstacles/>, (18.11.2019).

<sup>534</sup> Benedetta Berti and Yoel Guzansky, "Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy on Iran and the Proxy War in Syria: Toward a New Chapter?", **Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs**, 8:3, 2014, p. 31.

which economic difficulties of Syria increased Iranian penetration into Syria<sup>535</sup>. The alliance between Iran and Syria was the product of common threats, primarily Israel, Saddam's Iraq, and the US. While Syria supported Iran diplomatically and militarily against the Iraqi invasion, Iran mobilized its assets to Syria against the Israeli challenge in its backyard. Syria tried to cope with the international pressures through this alliance because it was aware of military and diplomatic weakness of Arab regimes against Israel.<sup>536</sup> The alliance allowed Iran to overcome its perceived non-Arab and anti-Arab image.<sup>537</sup>

Their connections increased after the American war on terror. They cooperated in military and defense areas after the fall of Saddam since they have shared similar fears for the survival of their authoritarian regimes and territorial integrity and independency. Both supported different groups in Iraq to fill gaps and to curb U.S. influence. Syria allowed Iran for the establishment of a power plant to produce electricity in 2008. These continued with the Iran's delivery of radar systems.<sup>538</sup>

In the light of these close relations benefitting Iran at the expense of others, the first aim of Iran in the conflict is to protect the Syrian regime to deter dangers from its adversaries. As Iran did not forget the help of Syria during the Iran-Iraq war, the regime in Syria would always remind it and support Iran at the expense of the Gulf states. In addition, the regime is the important part of the resistance as being a Shia, anti-western and anti-Israel.

Although the first aim is the protection of the regime, Iran has plans for the future of Syria in the reality of Sunni majority and wants to control Syria, even the regime falls. The main reason is that the Syrian territories allow Iran to maintain its connections with proxies in the resistance axis. It is located in the most available place for the connection with Hezbollah and Iraq for Iran and for pressure on Israel.

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<sup>535</sup> Piotrowski Marcin, "Iran's Reactions to The Arab Spring and The Crisis in Syria", **Bulletin**, No.99, 26.01.2011. p.596.

<sup>536</sup> Khalid al-Dakhil, "Lebanon Plays Proxy as Arab States Ponder Iran-Syria Alliance", Quoted by Craze and Huband, p.111.

<sup>537</sup> Hokayem, "Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War", p. 71.

<sup>538</sup> Jeremy M. Sharp, **Syria: Issue for the 112th Congress and Background of U.S. Sanctions**, DIANE Publishing, 2011, p.3.

On the Syrian territory, there is a missile factory which provides necessary supplies to Hezbollah.<sup>539</sup> Especially, the city of Zabadani near the Lebanon border is so critical for the supply line to Hezbollah. Mehdi Taeb, former commander in the IRGC, mentioned that Syria uprising was more important than the invasion of Khuzestan and indicated that they would choose Syria in the case of attacks to both.<sup>540</sup> Iran by engaging would gain a sit in the table to negotiate the establishment of a new government which would reverse the effect of others in the post-conflict era<sup>541</sup>. To overcome the difficulty of creating a pro-Iranian regime, Iran supported militants who can serve as control mechanisms.

The involvement in the conflict is important for Iran to increase its influence and to spread its revolutionary ideology through accomodating its presence in Syria. Iran gains more ground for its existence in Syria, especially in the areas of Golan Heights because its existence there allows Iran to stand in a more appropriate location to confront its adversaries. Since its involvement, Iran has gained opportunity to take an important role in the establishment of weapon production buildings and has well accommodated itself in security and intelligence services within the regime. Iran has got its place in Syrian military establishments for its usage and storage.<sup>542</sup> Iran has also improved its economic interests in Syria. In the regime-controlled areas, it has gained investment advantage for its own business sectors in the absence of foreign investments. The future of the regime is seen as more beneficial by Iran to guarantee its relative advantages there.

Iran opened a way to reside its proxy militias with their families in empty areas.<sup>543</sup> Their existence has allowed Iran to create and to maintain a pro-Iranian

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<sup>539</sup> Yaakov Lappin and Jeremy Binnie, "Israeli General Says Syria Has Resumed Weapons Production for Hizbullah", **IHS Janes** 360, 18.06.2016, <https://world-defense.com/threads/israeli-general-says-syria-has-resumed-weapons-production-for-hizbullah.4052/>, (16.11.2019).

<sup>540</sup> Yossi Mansharof, "Iranian official: the loss of Syria will lead to the loss of Tehran itself", **MEMRI Inquiry and Analysis Series**, No: 946, 11.03.2013, <https://www.memri.org/reports/iranian-official-loss-syria-will-lead-loss-tehran-itself-syria-iranian-province-iran-has>, (12.11.2019).

<sup>541</sup> Mahjoob Zweiri, "Revolutionary Iran and Arab Revolts: Observations on Iranian Foreign Policy and Its Approaches", **Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies**, September 2012, p.12.

<sup>542</sup> Hanin Ghaddar and Nader Uskowi, "Iran Will Spare Hezbollah in Its Conflict with Israel, for Now," **WINEP**, PolicyWatch 2977, 05.06.2018, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iran-will-spare-hezbollah-in-its-conflict-with-israel-for-now>, (21.11.2019).

<sup>543</sup> Ibrahim Abu Ahmad, "Assad's Law 10: Reshaping Syria's Demographics", **WINEP**, 17.09.2018, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/assads-law-10-reshaping-syrias-demographics>, (13.11.2019).

Syria. As it is indicated in the Iraqi case, while these groups favor a pro-Iranian policy agenda, they also put pressure on the leading government. They will remain as the local pro-Iranian residents in the case of Iranian withdrawal<sup>544</sup> and maintain the continuation of Iran's geographic power in the triangle between Syria, Iraq and Lebanon. To do so, Iran even attempts to change the composition of population, especially in Damascus, through transferring Shias to Syria.<sup>545</sup>

From the point of Saudi Arabia, the relations between Saudi Arabia and Syria did not turn either to an alliance or hostility. Their policies differentiate especially regarding their attitudes on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict which Syria calls all Arabs to support Palestinians and to cut their relations with Israel, the involvement of the US in the region and who would dominate Lebanon. Syria sabotages Saudi efforts for a reconciliation on the Palestinian issue and has seen them as an extension of the US initiatives.<sup>546</sup> Syria is important for the success of initiated efforts as Hamas' political office is based in Syria which is one of the leading powers in Palestine. Although there was a progress on issues, at one point it was broken which Saudi Arabia accused Iran of being the responsible side. The clearest convergence between their policies is their attitudes towards Lebanon in the face of their different respective allies. While Saudi government prefers to cooperate with Sunnis and others, Syria supports Shia groups. Although Syria withdrew its forces from Lebanon in 2005, Saudi Arabia has been well aware of the continuation of its influence through Hezbollah. If Saudi Arabia would succeed to reach Syria, it could restrain Hezbollah and guarantee the establishment of a united Lebanon.

The incompetence on different issues has prevented the Arab summits to get a way, as it happened in 2008<sup>547</sup>. Riyadh needs Syria to establish the Arab unity to

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<sup>544</sup> Hanin Ghaddar, "Iran and Hezbollah in Syria: U.S. foreign options", **WINEP**, A Testimony, 27.09.2018, p.3, [https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/testimony/Ghaddar\\_Testimony\\_20180927v2.pdf](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/testimony/Ghaddar_Testimony_20180927v2.pdf), (13.11.2019).

<sup>545</sup> Martin Chulov, "Iran Repopulates Syria with Shia Muslims to Help Tighten Regime's Control", **The Guardian**, 13.01.2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/13/irans-syria-project-pushing-population-shifts-to-increase-influence>, (28.11.2019).

<sup>546</sup> Paul Morro, "International Reaction to the Palestinian Unity Government," **Congressional Research Service**, 09.05.2007; Gary C. Gambill, "Syria and the Saudi Peace Initiative", **Middle East Intelligence Bulletin** 4, No. 3, March-April 2002.

<sup>547</sup> "Saudi King Snubs Damascus Summit," **Al Jazeera**, 24.03.2008, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2008/03/2008525125737944211.html>, (27.11.2019).

confront Iran which would prevent Iran from taking extreme decisions such as enriching uranium at maximum levels. Prince Faisal serving as the foreign minister indicated the necessity of an Arab reconciliation on Arab issues to deal with Iran.<sup>548</sup> To create such a common sense, Saudi Arabia has tried to connect Syria with the Arab world through dividing it from Iranian orbit<sup>549</sup> which is failed. Such attempts of Saudi Arabia were frequent especially after 2008, but Syria turned its back on the issue of investigation of Hariri's assassination.<sup>550</sup> Saudi Arabia attempted to warm relations for a possible rapprochement which included a visit to Damascus by King Abdullah in 2009 and continued until 2011.

The beginning of conflict influenced Saudi Arabia's regional security strategies. There was no reason to support the regime for Saudi Arabia and it has aimed the toppling of the regime<sup>551</sup>, even tried to encourage the US to do this<sup>552</sup>. The regime's power and the Baathist secular ideology do not reflect Saudi Arabia's aims and policies. The role of Syria rather than its characteristics in the region has created concerns for Saudi Arabia. While Saudi Arabia has not been subject to threats, huge refugee flows and flow of terrorists directly in the absence of common borders with Syria, Saudi concerns have mostly been related with Iran. Saudi Arabia has been aware of the fact that the roles taken by Syria would benefit Iran. The involvement has been seen as a way to challenge Iranian influence which has gained momentum since the fall of Saddam. Its involvement is the reflection of a greater aim, to become a regional power. The conflict allowed Saudi Arabia to get an opportunity to achieve this goal by removing a friend of Iran from the power and replacing it by another one, allied with Saudi Arabia having huge amount of money for reconstruction.

<sup>548</sup> Al-Arabiya, "Joint Arab Strategy"; Al-Arabiya, "Saudi FM Slams Tehran as Iran's Mottaki Visits," March 15, 2009; Christopher Blanchard, "Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations," Congressional Research Service, July 13, 2017, Quoted by Yehuda U. Blanga, "Saudi Arabia's Motives in the Syrian Civil War, The Middle East Policy Council, Volume 24, No.4, Winter 2017, p.48.

<sup>549</sup> Yılmaz, "İran ve Suudi arabistan'ın Bitmeyen Bölgesel Rekabeti".

<sup>550</sup> "Syria-Saudi fail on Hariri deal", **Al Jazeera**, 12.01.2011, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/01/201111204453669848.html>, (29.11.2019).

<sup>551</sup> Mariam Karouny, "Saudi Edges Qatar to Control Syrian Rebel Support", **Reuters**, 31.05.2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-saudi-insight/saudi-edges-qatar-to-control-syrian-rebel-support-idUSBRE94U0ZV20130531>, (29.11.2019).

<sup>552</sup> Adam Entous, Nour Mallas, and Margaret Coker, "A Veteran Saudi Power Player Works To Build Support to Topple Assad," **The Wall Street Journal**, 25.08.2013, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-veteran-saudi-power-player-works-to-build-support-to-topple-assad-1377473580>, (17.11.2019).

Under the leadership of al-Assad, Saudi Arabia could not weaken the collaboration between Iran and Syria as it aimed<sup>553</sup>.

Saudi Arabia was motivated with the Sunni opposition which they have wanted to see in politics in a more advantageous position. The overthrowal of the Syrian regime would possibly benefit the Gulf because nearly 4/5 population was Sunni before the flow of refugees. Saudi Arabia perceived that it could well penetrate into Syria with the help of common understandings in terms of tribal affiliations, repatriations, networks and business sectors.<sup>554</sup> It would also get some benefits which were crucial for that time. First of all, during the uprisings, Saudi Arabia preferred to support the status-quo and it even sent soldiers to back the Bahrain regime against protestors. Its attitude led to harsh criticisms, especially in its domestic context. It was a way to mitigate the influence of those criticisms.<sup>555</sup> Secondly, the Iranian-American rapprochement on the issue of nuclear weapons under Obama administration frustrated Saudi Arabia. By the time, it felt that U.S. policies would not reflect its own interests, even constitute a threat to its own regime because Barrack Obama insisted the need for the fell of all authoritarian regimes. So, Syria would be the new sphere of its influence in which Saudi Arabia got the opportunity to prevent the flow of other Islamic and radical groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood questioning the existence of the authoritarian regimes in the Gulf<sup>556</sup>. In addition to these, Saudi Arabia as the leader of the Muslim world could not tolerate such repressive actions over Sunni subjects.

The break down of supply line to the Hezbollah through Damascus would give another opportunity to Saudi Arabia to capture power in Beirut on the contrary to Iran. The change in the power would put limits on Iran's interference into Lebanon through Hezbollah.<sup>557</sup> The Saudi influence would also find a way to reach Iraq

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<sup>553</sup> Benedetta Berti, "The Ongoing Battle for Beirut: Old Dynamics and New Trends", **INSS Memorandum**, No. 111, December 2011.

<sup>554</sup> Hokayem, "Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War", p. 65.

<sup>555</sup> Benedetta Berti and Yoel Guzansky, "Saudi Arabia and Qatar's Role in the Regional Efforts to Oust Assad", **Atlantic Council New Atlanticist Blog**, 06.04.2012, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/saudi-arabia-and-qatars-role-in-the-regional-efforts-to-oust-assad/>, (18.11.2019).

<sup>556</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch, "Authoritarian Persistence, Democratization Theory and the Middle East: An Overview and Critique", **Democratization**, 13(3), 2006, p. 379.

<sup>557</sup> Hokayem, "Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War", p. 62.

through a friendly government in Syria. It could create double pressure on Iraq and direct somehow its actions, especially pro-Iranian ones. That is, the Syrian conflict has been seen critical to reverse the balance of power which has been changing since the fall of Saddam in the region.

### 5.3.2. Proxy Relationship With Conflicting Parties

The Syrian conflict is an important case to show the existence of proxy engagement by the both states. Their proxies are very different in terms of their aims and ideological orientations. Iran has backed up the Syrian regime creating new proxies and using the existing groups, while Saudi Arabia has provided support to the selected opposition groups.

The thing that makes the regime a proxy is its situation in the conflict. Iranian assistance to the regime is crucial for its survival against the attacks.<sup>558</sup> Although the regime has requested help from Iran which is perceived as a direct involvement, its legitimacy is questioned by many powers and the opposition has been supported as the legitimate one. However, in 2014, it became clear that the regime reinforced its position but it became dependent financially and militarily on Iran. Iran has succeeded to hold a dominant position against the regime and guaranteed the security of strategic places reaching to Lebanon. Iran sometimes acts by ignoring the interests of the regime in order to secure its own interests which indicates the non-existence of an alliance, as it happened in Zabadani in where Iran negotiated for the transfer of Sunnis to guarantee its own existence in Syrian territories in July 2015.<sup>559</sup> Even, the regime sometimes takes steps benefitting Iran. For example, the regime released 2.130 prisoners in return to 48 Iranian hostages rather than pro-regime Syrians in

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<sup>558</sup> Hokayem, "Syria after Geneva II: Escalation and Fragmentation", **IISS Presentation**, 2014.

<sup>559</sup> Zabadani is a strategic city on the Lebanon-Syria border for Iran. Clashes began early July, 2015 between the regime-Hezbollah forces and opposition groups. See details in Faisal Itani, "In Zabadani, Signs of a New and Worrying Iranian Strategy in Syria", **Huffington Post**, 13.09.2015, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/in-zabadani-signs-of-a-ne\\_b\\_8097416?guccounter=1&guce\\_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce\\_referrer\\_sig=AQAAAJLUOJO2orFw8i1b\\_XRqIKwjTVUHX-Mn8Pqznt6rzUC-pYyGCTl5oBbFS6wplbT6fEVDKOFfZVS\\_X7EOFAEVyDQJ1qRovMKTaLF0wE\\_RSdOa9ubMI26i-tc1-7qAV9ZO5q2zFlRjot3Dxkgnx4MMXZsGIU0QkX9S1f9GmMF0uRVP](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/in-zabadani-signs-of-a-ne_b_8097416?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAJLUOJO2orFw8i1b_XRqIKwjTVUHX-Mn8Pqznt6rzUC-pYyGCTl5oBbFS6wplbT6fEVDKOFfZVS_X7EOFAEVyDQJ1qRovMKTaLF0wE_RSdOa9ubMI26i-tc1-7qAV9ZO5q2zFlRjot3Dxkgnx4MMXZsGIU0QkX9S1f9GmMF0uRVP), (04.04.2020).

2012.<sup>560</sup> The presence of Iran by its own forces and other proxies puts the regime under pressure which mitigates the assumption of an alliance between Iran and the regime.

The other proxies of Iran include non-Syrian militant groups; Hezbollah and Iraqi groups such as AAH, KH and Saraya Khorassani. Although they aimed to control the Sayyida Zaynab area of Damascus at first, they have been involved into conflicts in different parts of Syria. New militant groups such as Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas and Liwa Kafil Zaynab were also established by Iraqis concentrating on Syria.<sup>561</sup> Their connections with Iran have already been mentioned in the previous sections of the thesis. In addition to them, new proxies were created within Syria. The National Defense Force (NDF) is a re-established form of the old army. Iran undertook the major role in its creation in 2012 and its support.<sup>562</sup> When the existence of this group was not enough for the regime survival, Iran sent members to carry out different missions. The composition of the group was seen as a necessity in the reality of small Shia population. It includes recruitments from other Shia proxies of Iran in Lebanon, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq. In addition, a new proxy known as “the Shabiha” was created by pro-regime minority militias, even some Sunnis, living in Syria. Iran brought these regime militias together under a conventional force to secure controlled areas. This force is classified as “the second Hezbollah”.<sup>563</sup> The US Secretary of Defense shared the evidences of Iranian engagement in the creation of it to fight opposition<sup>564</sup> which was confirmed by fighters in 2013<sup>565</sup>. The QF remains as the sole authority for all proxies for watching.<sup>566</sup>

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<sup>560</sup> Hokayem, “Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War”, p. 75.

<sup>561</sup> Hayder al-Khoei, “Syria, Iraq and the Struggle for Power: Intertwined Futures”, **Chatham House**, November 2016, pp.11–12.

<sup>562</sup> Will Fulton, Joseph Holliday, Sam Wyer, “Iranian strategy in Syria”, **A joint Report by AEI’s critical threats project & Institute for the Study of War**, 2013, p.11; Hossein Bastani, “Iran quietly deepens involvement in Syria’s war”, **BBC**, 20.10.2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34572756>, (30.11.2019).

<sup>563</sup> Arash Karami, “Former IRGC Commander’s Comments on Syria Censored”, **Al-Monitor**, 06.05.2014, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/05/former-irgc-commander-syria-comments-censored.html>, (28.11.2019).

<sup>564</sup> Nick Simeone, “Panetta: Iran Increases Support to Assad Regime,” **American Forces Press Service**, 14.08.2012, <https://archive.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=117501>, (17.11.2019); “US says Iran training Syrian militia,” **BBC News**, 15.08.2012, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-19264236>, (30.11.2019).

In terms of assistance, Iran has provided the regime different supplies<sup>567</sup> and assisted its fighting capability and tactics.<sup>568</sup> Since the beginning, the QF members have been in Syria for different missions.<sup>569</sup> The Iranian and Syrian intelligence and security departments have worked together.<sup>570</sup> Iranian forces officially began to participate into operations whose aim was to prevent massacres<sup>571</sup> two months after the visit of Soleimani to Damascus in January 2012. 48 IRGC's soldiers were captured in the mid of 2012 and a high-ranking General, Hassan Shateri, was assassinated in 2013 indicating Iranian engagement<sup>572</sup>. However, Iran rejected the participation of its forces to fight.<sup>573</sup> After the emergence of the ISIS, Iran deployed more than 1,500 forces in Syria.<sup>574</sup>

Iran provided financial aid and pledged 5 billion dollars in 2011.<sup>575</sup> To hold regime alive, a free agreement was signed in 2013.<sup>576</sup> Western intelligence estimated that Iranian monetary aid reached more than 15 billion dollars until 2014.<sup>577</sup> Iran helped the regime to bypass anti-regime sanctions and to maintain its main state-

<sup>565</sup> Sanjeev Miglani, "General McChrystal says Afghan insurgents trained in Iran," **Reuters**, 30.05.2010, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-iran/general-mcchrystal-says-afghan-insurgents-trained-in-iran-idUSTRE64T0U920100530>, (12.11.2019); "Insight: Syrian government guerrilla fighters being sent to Iran for training," **Reuters**, 04.04.2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/04/us-syria-iran-training-insight-idUSBRE9330DW20130404>, (14.11.2019).

<sup>566</sup> Phillip Smyth, "How Iran Is Building Its Syrian Hezbollah," **WINEP PolicyWatch** 2580, 08.03.2016, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-iran-is-building-its-syrian-hezbollah>, (12.11.2019).

<sup>567</sup> Charles Lister, "Dynamic Stalemate: Surveying Syria's Military Landscape", **Brookings Doha Center**, 2014, p.3.

<sup>568</sup> Hokayem, "Syria after Geneva II: Escalation and Fragmentation".

<sup>569</sup> Jeff Seldin, "Indications Iran Doubling Down on Use of Proxy Forces," **Voice of America**, 31.05.2017, <https://www.voanews.com/world-news/middle-east-dont-use/indications-iran-doubling-down-use-proxy-forces>, (16.11.2019).; "Footage Claims to Show Iranians in Syria", **BBC**, 15.09.2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24103801>, (17.11.2019).

<sup>570</sup> "Treasury Targets Iranian Arms Shipments," **United States Department of the Treasury**, 27.03.2012, <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1506.aspx>, (16.11.2019).

<sup>571</sup> James Reynolds, "Iran and Syria: Alliance of Shared Enemies and Goals", **BBC**, 08.06.2012, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-18369380>, (19.11.2019).

<sup>572</sup> Hokayem, "Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War", p. 73.

<sup>573</sup> Paul Taylor, "Exclusive: Saudi-Iranian proxy war over Syria spreads to Davos", **Reuters**, 23.01.2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-davos-exclusive-idUSKCN0V10BO>, (18.11.2019).

<sup>574</sup> Katzman, "Iran's Foreign Policy", p. 12.

<sup>575</sup> Niakuie Amir, "Iran's Security Strategy Towards Syria", **Islamic World Policies Journal**, Vol.3, No.1, Spring 2013, p:134.

<sup>576</sup> Aram Nerguizian, "U.S- Iranian Competition in The Levant and Syria Crisis", 10.01.2013, p. 11.

<sup>577</sup> Interviews with Western intelligence officials, 2013 and 2014, Quoted by Hokayem, "Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War", p. 74.

factions.<sup>578</sup> Iraq allowed the flow of goods and movements and facilitated economic processes on the directions of Iran. Iran also provided technical help to reach and to monitor media<sup>579</sup> and provided oil<sup>580</sup>. Iran has made payments for Afghan Shia fighters<sup>581</sup> from Fatimid Brigade<sup>582</sup>. Pakistani fighters are also Shias coming from the Zainibin Brigade.<sup>583</sup> They are estimated to be paid monthly by Iran, approximately 600 dollars.<sup>584</sup>

Iran has provided weapons to the regime and other proxies<sup>585</sup> by using Syrian airports<sup>586</sup>. Iranian proxies also have provided weapons to the regime. For example, Hezbollah has provided different types of assistance to the regime such as monitoring and transporting arms and conducting advisory and training facilities.<sup>587</sup> In addition, Iran has trained fighters. In April 2011, Iran began to facilitate training activities through the QF's third command.<sup>588</sup> The US Department of the Treasury accused the QF to train groups in both Iranian and Syrian camps, finance them and to provide weapons to them.<sup>589</sup> Recruited Shia militias got military training in Tehran before they flew to Syria.<sup>590</sup> The IRGC monitors the flow of leaders for training and

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<sup>578</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>579</sup> Joby Warrick, "Iran Reportedly Aiding Syrian Crackdown", **The Washington Post**, 27.05.2011, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/iran-reportedly-aiding-syrian-crackdown/2011/05/27/AGUJe0CH\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/iran-reportedly-aiding-syrian-crackdown/2011/05/27/AGUJe0CH_story.html), (21.11.2019).

<sup>580</sup> Jubin Goodarzi, "Syria and Iran: Alliance Cooperation in a Changing Regional Environment", **Middle Eastern Studies**, Vol.4 No.2, January, 2013, p.21.

<sup>581</sup> Hollingshead.

<sup>582</sup> Kathy Gannon, "Iran recruits Afghan and Pakistan Shiites to fight in Syria", **AP News**, 16.09.2017, <https://apnews.com/4731b95dae684f77b27d83c26e72a276/Iran-recruits-Afghan-and-Pakistani-Shiites-to-fi>, (30.11.2019).

<sup>583</sup> Ibid.

<sup>584</sup> Hollingshead.

<sup>585</sup> Goodarzi, "Syria and Iran: Alliance Cooperation in a Changing Regional Environment," p.21.

<sup>586</sup> Phil Sands, "Iran's Secret Night Flights to Arm Syria's Assad Revealed", **National**, 27.11.2013, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/iran-s-secret-night-flights-to-arm-syria-s-assad-revealed-1.469597>, (22.11.2019).

<sup>587</sup> Matthew Levitt, "The Hezbollah Connection in Syria and Iran," **The Washington Institute**, 15.02.2013, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-hezbollah-connection-in-syria-and-iran>, (23.11.2019).

<sup>588</sup> Tali Rachel Grumet, "New Middle East Cold War: Saudi Arabia and Iran's Rivalry", **Electronic Theses and Dissertations** 1028, 2015.

<sup>589</sup> "Treasury Sanctions Al-Nusra Front Leadership in Syria and Militias Supporting the Assad Regime," **United States Department of the Treasury**, 11.12.2012, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1797.aspx>, (21.11.2019).

<sup>590</sup> Farnaz Fassihi, Jay Solomon and Sam Dagher, "Iranians Dial Up Presence in Syria", **The Wall Street Journal**, 16.09.2013, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iranians-dial-up-presence-in-syria-1379298675>, (22.11.2019).

organizing Shia militias' activities.<sup>591</sup> Different Iranian airlines and cargo aircrafts have been accused of and been sanctioned for carrying weapons including missiles and rockets and personnels to Syria.<sup>592</sup>

Iranian involvement in Syria is the result of interconnected interests. The sole aim of the regime is to survive and to regain its authority. Syria and Iran have compatible interests and common enemies, opposition and jihadist groups. The proxy relationship between Iran and its proxies continues since the beginning of the conflict. For Hezbollah, Syria means to maintain its connection with Iran. The control of border with Syria is crucial for it to secure and to maintain the flow of necessary supplies from Syria rather than to protect Lebanon. The existence of al-Assad guarantees the existence of Hezbollah. Hezbollah's contribution to the regime and Iran return itself for more aid and confidence. Today, Hezbollah needs Iran more because as it increases its power in terms of both arsenal and manpower and becomes more than a defensive force, it becomes a target of domestic, regional and international actors.

Saudi Arabia has supported different opposition groups changing through time. In the beginning, especially between 2012 and 2013 it supported the FSA and its extinctions reaching up to 1000<sup>593</sup> groups. These militias consist of Sunni Salafists, seculars and even Islamists. For two years, Saudi Arabia preferred to work with mostly secular and nationalist opposition through sending logistical and military support. Jaish al-Islam has enjoyed Saudi funds, which is composed of many militant

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<sup>591</sup> Paul Bucala and Frederick W. Kagan, "Iran's Evolving Way of War: How the IRGC Fights in Syria," **AEI Critical Threats Project**, 24.03.2016, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/irans-evolving-way-of-war-how-the-irgc-fights-in-syria>, (23.11.2019).; Mcinnis, p.5.

<sup>592</sup> "Fact Sheet: Treasury Sanctions Major Iranian Commercial Entities," **United States Department of the Treasury**, 23.06.2012, <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1217.aspx>, (24.11.2019); Afshon Ostovar, "The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients: Iran's Way of War," **Security Studies**, 2018; John Irish, "France bans Iran's Mahan Air for flying arms, troops to Syria, elsewhere," **Reuters**, 25.03.2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-sanctions-france-airline/france-bans-irans-mahan-air-for-flying-arms-troops-to-syria-elsewhere-idUSKCN1R6103>, (27.11.2019); "Treasury Designates Iranian Commercial Airline Linked to Iran's Support for Terrorism," **United States Department of the Treasury**, 12.10.2011, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1322.aspx>, (30.11.2019); "Syrian Conflict: Damascus Suburb sees heavy fighting", **BBC News**, 19.09.2012, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-19645269>, (13.11.2019).

<sup>593</sup> Elizabeth O'Bagy, "The Free Syrian Army", **Middle East Security Report**, The Institute for the Study of War, 2013, pp. 9-10.

groups such as non-radical Salafists.<sup>594</sup> Some opportunistic FSA groups aimed to gather funds by showing themselves as anti-jihadists and cooperated with other groups such as Muslim Brotherhood in the battlefield. In late 2013, Saudis started to support Islamist groups through funding in order to ease the power of extreme radicals.<sup>595</sup> These groups included a coalition partner of Jaish al-Islam, Liwa' al-Islam, and the Army of the Sunnis.<sup>596</sup> In the mid of 2014, Saudi Arabia contributed to moderate groups. After the death of King Abdullah in 2015, the Saudi-backed groups also included the Muslim Brotherhood after a declaration indicating that the problem was related with some members of the organization, not with the whole organization.<sup>597</sup> Then, it led the creation of the Jaish al-Fatah consisting of the Sunni Islamist groups and tried to widen its opposition allies through adding Islamist and salafist Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra.<sup>598</sup> Through time, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), mostly composed of Kurds, was included in the chain of aid, which became apparent with the regular visits by Saudis to the group-controlled areas, specifically Raqqa.<sup>599</sup> The aim of these visits was indicated as the establishment of a coalition between Kurds and Arab tribes.<sup>600</sup>

<sup>594</sup> Yezid Sayigh, "Unifying Syrian Rebels: Saudi Arabia joins the fray", **Carnegie Middle East Center**, 28.11.2013, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2013/10/28/unifying-syria-s-rebels-saudi-arabia-joins-fray-pub-53436>, (30.11.2019).

<sup>595</sup> Ian Black, "Syria Crisis: Saudi Arabia to Spend Millions to Train New Rebel Force", **The Guardian**, 08.11.2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/07/syria-crisis-saudi-arabia-spend-millions-new-rebel-force>, (25.11.2019).

<sup>596</sup> Hassan Hassan, "The Army of Islam is Winning in Syria", **Foreign Policy**, 01.10.2013, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/10/01/the-army-of-islam-is-winning-in-syria/>, (30.11.2019).

<sup>597</sup> Ali Al-Arian, "Is Saudi Arabia Warming Up to the Muslim Brotherhood?", **Al Jazeera**, 29.07.2015, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/07/saudi-arabia-warming-muslim-brotherhood-150727121500912.html>, (29.11.2019).

<sup>598</sup> Patrick Cockburn, "Prince Mohammed bin Salman: Naive, arrogant Saudi Prince is playing with fire", **The Independent**, 09.01.2016, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/prince-mohammed-bin-salman-naive-arrogant-saudi-prince-is-playing-with-fire-a6804481.html>, (16.11.2019); Desmond Butler, "Turkey and Saudi Arabia are Officially Collaborating to Bring Down Assad in Syria", **Business Insider**, 23.05.2015, <https://www.businessinsider.com/turkey-and-saudi-arabia-collaborating-in-syria-2015-5>, (10.11.2019).

<sup>599</sup> Adhom Kako and Mohamad Misto, "Suriyeli aşiret liderinden 'Suudi Arabistan ve BAE bölgemizden elini çeksin' mesajı", **AA**, 11.06.2019, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/suriyeli-asiret-liderinden-suudi-arabistan-ve-bae-bolgemizden-elini-cekcin-mesaji/1528838>, (11.11.2019).

<sup>600</sup> "Saudi Arabia pledges \$ 100 million for SDF-controlled areas liberated from Daesh in Syria", **Daily Sabah**, 17.08.2018, <https://www.dailysabah.com/syrian-crisis/2018/08/17/saudi-arabia-pledges-100-million-for-sdf-controlled-areas-liberated-from-daesh-in-syria>, (15.11.2019).

Saudi Arabia supported the opposition through different means.<sup>601</sup> King Abdullah was the first leader in the Gulf who made a call to provide weapons to anti-Assad groups.<sup>602</sup> Nawaf Obaid indicates that Saudis would remain in Syria and continue to resist Iranian influence there.<sup>603</sup> Individuals and muftis in Saudi Arabia donate to support Sunni rebellion.<sup>604</sup> Saudi Arabia finance rebel groups. It provided money to Sunni salafists, even jihadists, between 2011 and 2013,<sup>605</sup> decided to make payments for the FSA fighters in May 2012 and allowed Syrians to allocate funds for necessary weapons which entered into Syria from Lebanon<sup>606</sup>. Saudi Arabia granted 900 million dollars for Syria along with Kuwait and the UAE during a conference in 2013.<sup>607</sup> Kuwait acted as a channel for propaganda and financing. Since 2014, Saudi Arabia has rejected officially to support extremist groups in the opposition such as al-Nusra which it calls as terrorist groups. But, it is accepted that private donations still continue to provide money to them. Lastly, Saudi Arabia pledged 100 million dollars to the SDF in 2018.<sup>608</sup>

Saudi Arabia has provided weapons and training to rebels. It has been ready to spend petrol-dollars for providing arms and training.<sup>609</sup> Saudi Arabia offered to initiate a resolution for providing every means of support including military equipments.<sup>610</sup> Although some rejected, an opposition member accepted the

<sup>601</sup> Gregory Gause, "Saudi Arabia in the New Middle East", **Council on Foreign Relations**, Special Report, No. 63, 2011, p.20-21.

<sup>602</sup> David W. Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad*, Yale University Press, 2013, pp.145-146.

<sup>603</sup> Damien McElroy, David Blair, and Peter Foster, "Saudis 'turn Away from Us' After Iran's Nuclear Deal", **Gulf News**, November, 2013, <http://m.gulfnews.com/news/gulf/saudi-arabia/saudis-turn-away-from-us-after-iran-s-nuclear-deal-1.1259908>, (15.11.2019).

<sup>604</sup> Black, "Syria Crisis: Saudi Arabia to Spend Millions to Train New Rebel Force".

<sup>605</sup> Daou Marc, "How Saudi Petrodollars Fuel Rise of Salafism", **France 24**, 29.09.2012, <https://www.france24.com/en/20120929-how-saudi-arabia-petrodollars-finance-salafist-winter-islamism-wahhabism-egypt>, (27.11.2019).

<sup>606</sup> Martin Chulov, "Saudi Arabia Plans to Fund Syria Rebel Army", **The Guardian**, 22.06.2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jun/22/saudi-arabia-syria-rebel-army>, (28.11.2019); Ian

Black, "Gulf States Warned Against Arming Syria Rebels," **The Guardian**, 10.05.2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/apr/05/gulf-states-warning-arming-syria>, (11.11.2019).

<sup>607</sup> "Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, UAE Pledge \$900 Mln for Syrians at Donors Conference", **Al-Arabia News** 30.01.2013, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/2013/03/11/-Saudi-Arabia-Kuwait-UAE-pledge-900-mln-for-Syrians-at-donors-conference-.html>, (10.11.2019).

<sup>608</sup> "Saudi Arabia pledges \$ 100 million for SDF-controlled areas liberated from Daesh in Syria"

<sup>609</sup> Grumet.

<sup>610</sup> Edmund Blair and Ayman Samir, "Arabs Open Way for Arming Syrians, Civil War Feared", **Al Arabiya**, 14.02.2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-arabs/insight-arabs-open-way-for-arming-syrians-civil-war-feared-idUSTRE81D0KZ20120214>, (10.11.2019).

weaponry supply by Saudi Arabia through using Iraqi and Lebanese connections.<sup>611</sup> Saudi Arabia contributed to an arrangement for training of rebels along with the CIA in which Saudis provided both money and weapons.<sup>612</sup> It attempted to make arrangements to buy arms, missiles and ammunitions from different states such as its deal with Croatia in 2012.<sup>613</sup> Several Croatian-made weapons were bought with Saudi money and started to be delivered by the Jordanian intelligence in the late 2012.<sup>614</sup> Before 2012, Saudi Arabia provided Chinese missiles to rebels.<sup>615</sup> In 2013, a rebel commander insisted on the replacement of Qatar in providing arms to fighters, by Saudi Arabia in the Northern provinces.<sup>616</sup> In 2014, the Saudi interior minister estimated Sunni participants as 1000, which was reestimated by others even more than 2000.<sup>617</sup> As it happened in Iraq, Saudi seniors are believed to fund extremist groups in Syria and to allow youngs to flow into Syria.<sup>618</sup> According to a released secret memo of 2012 and confirmed by Iraqi authorities, Saudi Arabia released 1239 death-sentenced prisoners in return for fighting in Syria and get salary monthly.<sup>619</sup> Lately, it is quoted that Saudi Arabia provided forces including tanks along with the UAE to support the SDF, the coalition partner of the US.<sup>620</sup>

<sup>611</sup> Jonathan Schanzer, "Saudi Arabia is Arming Syrian Opposition", **Foreign Policy**, 27.02.2012, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/02/27/saudi-arabia-is-arming-the-syrian-opposition/>, (29.11.2019).

<sup>612</sup> Mark Mazzetti and Matt Apuzzo, "Saudi Arabia, CIA and the Arming Syrian Rebels", **The Irish Times**, 24.01.2016, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/us/saudi-arabia-the-cia-and-the-arming-of-syrian-rebels-1.2508641>, (26.11.2019).

<sup>613</sup> Ibid.

<sup>614</sup> C.J. Chivers and Eric Schmitt, "Saudis step up help for rebels in syria with Croatian arms", **The New York Times**, 25.02.2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/26/world/middleeast/in-shift-saudis-are-said-to-arm-rebels-in-syria.html>, (10.11.2019), pp. 3–4.

<sup>615</sup> Thomas Pierret, "The Reluctant Sectarianism of Foreign States in the Syrian Conflict", **United States Institute of Peace**, 162, 18.11.2013, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PB162.pdf>, (26.11.2019).

<sup>616</sup> Karouny, "Saudi Edges Qatar to Control Syrian Rebel Support".

<sup>617</sup> Simeon Carr, "Saudi Arabia Cracks Down on Youths Joining Syria Jihadis", **The Financial Times**, 04.02.2014, <https://www.ft.com/content/c98efe4e-8d88-11e3-bbe7-00144feab7de>, (10.11.2019).

<sup>618</sup> Ibid.

<sup>619</sup> "Saudi Arabia Sent Death Row Inmates to Fight in Syria in Lieu of Execution", **Assyrian International News Agency**, 20.01.2013, <http://www.aina.org/news/20130120160624.html>, (10.11.2019); Michael Winter, "Report: Saudis sent death-row inmates to fight Syria", **USA TODAY**, 21.01.2013, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2013/01/21/saudi-inmates-fight-syria-commute-death-sentences/1852629/>, (10.11.2019).

<sup>620</sup> "Saudi Arabia, UAE send troops to Support Kurds in Syria", **Middle East Monitor**, 22.11.2018, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20181122-saudi-arabia-uae-send-troops-to-support-kurds-in-syria/>, (18.11.2019).

The connection of Saudi Arabia with Syrians goes back to the conflict. Saudi Arabia has different linkages with people in Syrian politics, mostly liberals, business and other religious and tribal connections.<sup>621</sup> Saudi Arabia has used Jordanian connections in terms of intelligence, security and traditional life. Before the conflict, Saudi Arabia provided support to democratic groups such as the Syrian National Salvation Front through funds and logistical support in order to create effect.<sup>622</sup> With the conflict, both sides found a common enemy and compatible interests. They share a similar expectation, the toppling of the regime. But their expectations differ from each other for the future of Syria about who would dominate and how it would do this. So, the interests of the opposition are mostly nationalist in general, limited within the Syrian lands, at least until now. They have a common enemy in this sense. Rebel groups generally have an opportunistic characteristic because they have tried to get support rather than acting loyal. The level of support has changed according to the proxy.

The proxy relationship is clear between Saudi Arabia and opposition groups. Saudi Arabia has a dominant position on the opposition. Its assistance creates a pressure on the decisions of the opposition. Especially, the replacement of Qatar by Saudi Arabia as a supplier has allowed it to direct actions of the opposition. This led to the forceful enforcement of the establishment of an inclusive opposition coalition in return to continuation of the assistance.<sup>623</sup> These groups have depended on Saudi aid to continue their fight and this situation will continue even in the future in the absence of self-sustained system. Saudi Arabia through supporting the opposition groups has got a chance to be in the negotiation table and to direct talks. It has attempted to create its own meetings with the opposition commanders through offering money in order to prevent other influential actors such as Qatar from taking the leadership role in the table and to create more loyal proxies in Syria. The Five

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<sup>621</sup> Hokayem, "Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War", p. 65.

<sup>622</sup> Seymour M. Hersh, "The Redirection: Is the Administration's New Policy Benefiting Our Enemies in the War on Terrorism?" **The New Yorker**, 05.03.2007, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/03/05/the-redirection>, (14.11.2019); "Statement of National Salvation Front on Syria's Election Farce," **Ikhwanweb**, 14.04.2007, <https://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=1836>, (29.11.2019).

<sup>623</sup> Hassan Hassan, "Saudis overtaking Qatar in sponsoring Syrian rebels", **The National**, 15.05.2013, <https://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/saudis-overtaking-qatar-in-sponsoring-syrian-rebels-1.471446>, (23.11.2019).

Front Command structure uniting five fronts, was established in 2012 and expressed as the Saudi creation on the contrary to Qatar initiatives.<sup>624</sup>

#### 5.4. CONCLUSION

In this chapter, two important cases are examined to explain the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Since its establishment, Lebanon has witnessed different confrontational problems and became subject of invasions and involvements in the face of a non-unified state under confessional system in which its subjects have aimed to dominate others. It is in a position to be influenced from the regional dynamics and stands in the middle of ongoing problems. The foreign involvement became inevitable. Iran and Saudi Arabia have well involved into Lebanon through their proxies to create their own reflections on numerous issues and their adversaries. While Iran took steps for the establishment of Hezbollah and has attempted to create a unified Shia movement there, Saudi Arabia has tried to have influence there by aiming to hold Lebanon united against the growing danger, Hezbollah. Iran has supported Hezbollah through different means of assistance including the establishment of communication networks within Lebanon. Shia Hezbollah embraces the Khomeinist understanding since its establishment and has common enemies with Iran. Saudi Arabia has mostly used its money to support the government, the army and Salafists. Its proxies mostly depend on Saudi aid and share the common enemy, Hezbollah.

In the Syrian conflict, Iran and Saudi Arabia still continue their engagements like Lebanon. Iran benefitted from the Syrian regime since its establishment on numerous facts. While the conflict has worried Iran, it also opened a way to increase its presence there, especially in the important areas within the resistance axis. Although Saudi Arabia tried to ease the tension in the beginning, it changed its attitude to replace the regime by a pro-Saudi Sunni government. Saudi Arabia has troubles with the regime that prevents an Arab unity on numerous important regional issues against Iran and its proxies. While Iran supported the regime, Hezbollah, and

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<sup>624</sup> O'Bagy, p.15.

Iraqi Shia groups, it also led the establishment of new proxies such as the NDF, al-Shabiah, and some Iraqi militant groups. Iran has provided multiple assistance ranging from weapons and money to man power through recruitments from different parts of the region. Saudi Arabia's proxies are composed of many different groups within Syria. Its proxies aim to topple the regime, the shared enemy, and to replace it as Saudis want. They are different from each other in many ways and opportunists to get money and weapons from Saudi Arabia.



## CONCLUSION

In this thesis, the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia was examined through the proxy warfare strategy. The aim was to show how these two regional powers have competed with each other and how they have made the region unstable and complex through engaging in different conflict zones. Both states have supported different groups and powers and fuelled conflicts by extending the time of conflicts. Their actions have led to new different and dangerous challenges in the Middle East.

Chapter one focused on proxy warfare strategy which is an indirect and preferable strategy. It is a transformed and enlarged phenomenon with the inclusion of new types of the proxy warfare and actors. While states and different groups were waged for the sake of different states previously, new types of proxies and means were added during the Cold War. As international system changed, different conflicts emerged and many non-state actors gained more power. Change still continues and proxy warfare has become more preferable.

Because of these changes, many definitions focusing on different aspects emerged. All allowed to reach a comprehensive definition for this thesis. This thesis used one type of benefactors, state - Iran and Saudi Arabia-, but did not put limitations on type of their proxies and cases of conflict. It focused on four reasons including ideology, risk, interest, and power for indirect engagement. This theoretical framework allowed to collect reasons for the establishment of the proxy relations; a common enemy, compatible or mutual interests and a commonality. Proxy warfare is indicated as beneficial materially and non-materially for numerous reasons for benefactors such as low level of commitments, means and losses, collection of intelligentsia, protection of prestige and legitimacy, detergency. Proxies benefit from greater assistance, increase their skills, knowledge and power capabilities and motivate others to join by showing themselves as more powerful.

Chapter two focused on the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. It firstly explored their foreign policy orientations helping to understand their choices to involve in conflicts indirectly. Iran is a theocratic state under the dominance of the Supreme Leader since 1979 and it has been against Western-dominance. The revolution privileged Shiism and made it a tool for regime security along with Persian identity. The Supreme leader creates consistency in foreign relations.

Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy governed by Al-Saud family and the ruling elites. It sees itself as the leader of Islamic world. It depends on its rich energy resources and connected with international markets and the last innovations. Its foreign policy is shaped by family members and oriented to provide regime security and territorial integrity like Iran. To this end, traditional Islamic perspective and Arab identity based on blood are emphasized. While it tries to maintain domestic well-being and to pursue a regional power status, it is influenced by oil revenues and relations with the GCC members. Many different factors and actors have made relations unstable. Although some common interests, threats and ideological orientations brought the two states closer, the revolution in Iran caused a total change which al-Saud regime hesitated. Since then, bilateral relations has remained strained.

In the absence of rapprochement, the two states have preferred the proxy warfare strategy for mainly four reasons; risk, power, interest and ideology. There have always been internal and external risks of confrontation. While both states share internal opposition and reactionary groups challenging regime's stability and military weakness, they have different prediction and non-prediction situations related with the positions of other states, mainly the US and the outcome of conflicts posing risks. Two states engage in a zero-sum game for power. They are aware of each other's challenge and, that's why, they prefer to invest in different powers and to enlarge their influence areas in order to protect their regimes. Both aim to shift power to themselves. Ideologically, two represent different factions of Islam and use them for spiritual influence. Their religious ideologies reflect their domestic and foreign policies, create bases for their regime's identities and legitimacy. Their religious ideologies are combined with their ethno-national identities. In terms of their interests, both aim to protect their sovereignty and territorial integrity. In addition, economic reasons add further incentives for proxy warfare. Their conflicting economic interests are mostly related with their calculations for oil revenues. While Iran finds a way to break embargoes and sanctions, Saudi Arabia desires to maintain its main economic activity by increasing influence. Economic opportunities in post-conflict environments also attract them to involve in conflicts. While their internal necessities and demands push them to increase their influence, they cannot collaborate with each other.

Chapter three focused on Iran-Iraq war and Afghanistan. Iran-Iraq war was a consequence of different reasons. When Iran's power declined with internal turmoil after the Islamic revolution, Iraq aimed to reverse decisions on some issues and to benefit further from weakness of Iran to secure its Baathist regime. Their different demands and external support extended the war. At the end, they accepted their inability to continue fighting and agreed on a ceasefire.

This war is accepted as the beginning of unending hesitation between Iran and Saudi Arabia. During the war, Iraq served as a proxy for Saudi Arabia against Iran. Iran was perceived as a common enemy for both states in addition to religious and ethnic similarities. They shared similar security threat perceptions for their Sunni regimes and Shia-populated territories. Despite of their differences and rivalry in the region, Iraq and Saudi Arabia collaborated militarily after the revolution in Iran.

Saudi Arabia tried to prevent the toppling of the Iraqi regime and to defend its buffer zone against Iran. Iraqi regime was accepted as a proxy for some reasons; its dependency on aid, exclusion from the GCC, and incentive offers to Saudi Arabia. Despite of its claim of neutrality, Saudi Arabia financed Iraq, helped it to maintain its oil exportation and transportation, and opened its territories and facilities.

Afghanistan, unstable since 1978, was the second case of this chapter. Failures of the new socialist government was followed by Soviet invasion by 1979 which started a war between Soviets and mujahideen. After Soviet withdrawal in 1989, conflicts continued intensively and a new government was established by the UN in 1992. Mujahideen forces entered into a civil war for power. After clashes, they formed an interim government in 1996 against Taliban. Sub-regions were controlled by local warlords until their takeover by Taliban, ruling through sharia-based law without having capable clerics. While Taliban became de facto government and was recognized as the legitimate authority by Saudi Arabia, interim government remained as de jure government until 2001.

During conflict years, Iran and Saudi Arabia involved indirectly and supported opportunistic different groups because of some common ties such as religion, language, ideology and common enemies. During the Soviet occupation years, while Iran supported Afghan Shias in Hazarajat, as well as Khan, and helped them to establish Wahdat through providing arms, money, and training facilities in

Iran, Saudi Arabia backed Sunni resistance mostly by its financial support for training activities, fuel and logistical support. After Soviet withdrawal, Saudi Arabia firstly backed Peshawar Alliance, then Hekmatyar and Sayyaf against other groups. Iran tried to enlarge its proxy groups through supporting non-Pashtuns. When Saudi Arabia abandoned its support to Hekmatyar, Iran included him in its proxy groups. With his participation, Iran became main supporter of all anti-Taliban groups unified under the NA. Saudi Arabia preferred Pashtun Taliban and gave military and organizational support in addition to financing until Taliban's refusal to contain Bin Laden.

Post-American invasion period of Iraq was examined in chapter four. After the toppling of Saddam, Iraq has become a failed state and the regime change has caused promount changes both inside and across the region. Many problems came on surface and groups began to compete for power. While Shia population gained most of the political power, Sunnis became opposition and established militant groups. The civil war followed by discriminatory policies of the government after 2011. ISIS grew up in this exclusive environment and got support from Sunnis. At the mid-of 2014, PMFs were established to fight ISIS which was succeeded in 2017.

Both Iran and Saudi Arabia engaged in Iraq for the elimination of a common adversary. Saudi Arabia has had security considerations based on common borders. This feeling of insecurity has been doubled with the removal of Sunnis from power. The possibility of a strong Iraq could pose challenge by taking an active role in the OPEC and the oil sector. Above all, Iran could target Saudi Arabia directly or indirectly from land by using its indirect presence in Iraq which would cement connections between Iran and its allies in the region and shift the balance at the expense of Saudi Arabia.

Iraq and Iran are connected with each other by transborder facts. While Iran welcomed the removal of Saddam, it also wanted to eliminate dangers originating from both Iraq and other states including Saudi Arabia. The regime composed of majority Shia population and reflected by Iran would act in line with the Iranian interests and solve problems in bilateral relations. Iran aimed to establish control mechanisms within Iraqi establishments and militant groups to deter any attack. It wanted to deal with regime change attempts in Iran through preventing democratic

processes in Iraq. In addition, Iraq could be a transit way to reach allies. The existence of religiously important places for Shiism and the presence of Shia clerics making religious interpretations have also made Iraq and its territories crucial.

Both Iran and Saudi Arabia have supported different ethnic-religious groups. Iran has used Shia groups some of which have been able to penetrate into diverse political and military establishments. Remaining groups came together under PMFs after 2015. While their ideological orientations differs, their reasons to establish a proxy relationship include common religious background, ideologic affiliation or historical collaboration with Iran and the search for a foreign supporter for power consolidation against common enemies. Iran has supported these groups through every means.

Proxies of Saudi Arabia have composed of Sunni insurgencies. Although relationship between them is not so clear, Saudi Arabia is believed to involve in their establishments. While Saudi Arabia has assisted them by financing, harboring, providing human resources and weapons, Sunni individuals and organizations have acted as distributor mechanisms. While some of these groups share similar religious outlook or similar way of life with the Saudis, others share a common enemy, the government. Like Iran, Saudi Arabia cannot control them. Their dependency can continue until their satisfaction by the Iraqi government.

Chapter five included Lebanon and the Syrian conflict which are well connected with each other. Lebanon has witnessed different problems and faced foreign invasions and involvements since its establishment. Its subjects have been in a competition which has led to civil wars, political turmoils and street protests. In addition, it is influenced by regional conflicts and refugee flows changing its composition. These all make Iranian and Saudi Arabian influence possible. Both states have proxies within Lebanon to influence numerous issues.

Iran sees Lebanon within its influence sphere due to historical bilateral relations. Iran led the establishment of Hezbollah and supported it to use in numerous regional issues, creating a security belt against its opponents such as Israel, having connection with other allies and acting independently in economic terms. Since its establishment, Hezbollah has embraced a Khomeinist ideology but it has not tried to apply it in Lebanon. Both Iran and Hezbollah share common enemies and agendas. It

has allowed Iran to legitimate its narrative of “supporter of the oppressed” and to create deterrence. That’s why, Iran opposes every attempt of Saudi Arabia in Lebanon fearing for its relations with Hezbollah and Hezbollah’s existence.

Because of strong Shia presence, Saudi Arabia chooses to protect unity in Lebanon. Although Saudi engagement was limited previously, it increased after the withdrawal of Syrian forces. Saudi Arabia began to worry about the future of Lebanon after 2008 war between Hezbollah and Israel. After the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia has given priority to Lebanon because it is the only place that Saudi Arabia can gain prestige and influence. But, anti-Saudi Hezbollah poses risk of takeover and perceives the existence of the government as an obstacle. In addition, Hezbollah is in a transformation period to be a transnational and revolutionary armed group creating direct challenges. Rather than Hezbollah’s defense against Israel, Arab-Israeli conflict is important for Saudi Arabia as long as it tries to dominate this issue. Besides Hezbollah, economic and family ties between Saudi and Lebanese Sunni elites and the existence of Salafists create opportunity for Saudi influence.

While Hezbollah serves as a proxy for Iran, Saudi Arabia supports the government, the army and Salafists. Hezbollah has succeeded to become a state-like actor with the help of Iran and became a threat to established disunity in Lebanon. Iran has supported this group through every means of support because of multiple common enemies including Saudi Arabia and religious-ideological similarities. Hezbollah can act independently, but it still needs help of Iran. Although the Saudi engagement before 2005 was limited, it has increased with financial support allocated for different security and construction projects. According to Saudi Arabia, weak and small Lebanese army composed of multisects stands as the only capable actor to prevent Hezbollah’s takeover. Therefore, Saudi Arabia tries to curb the influence of Hezbollah by providing aid for anti- illegal and anti-terroristic activities and for new recruitments as well as weapons and equipments. Moreover, Saudi Arabia provides monetary support to armed and anti-Syrian Salafists. In addition to religious similarities, these three groups of proxies share similar hesitations towards Hezbollah, Syria and Iran. Despite some individualistic attitudes, they want to sustain national unity. They depend on the Saudi aid but they do not always act in line with the Saudi wishes.

The second case of the last chapter is the Syrian conflict which began in 2011 as street protests. Because of involvement of many actors, this resistance was divided into multiple warrior groups. Different blocs were established among various state and non-state participants. Although Saudi Arabia favored the regime in the beginning, it changed its mind to support the opposition. Iran acted differently and identified the opposition as terrorists manipulated by outsiders. Peaceful attempts were made, but failed in the face of divergencies. After Russian involvement and the defeat of ISIS, the regime regained control over some important territories.

Both Iran and Saudi Arabia have been involved in this conflict for different reasons. Iran and Syria have had good relations and common enemies even in the absence of many commonalities. They supported each other to secure their authoritarian regimes and territorial unity, especially after the American invasion of Iraq. That's why, Iran has aimed to protect the regime in order to maintain collaboration and its linkage to allies. In addition, Iran has tried to secure its existence in the Syrian territories for its geo-strategic considerations. Its engagement by mobilizing militants, sometimes with their families, would allow Iran to negotiate the terms of post-conflict era, to put pressure over new government, to have more presence in strategic places to confront adversaries, to spread its ideology, to accommodate itself in Syrian establishments and to improve its economic interests.

Saudi Arabia has always hesitated about the regime's attitude and thus put a distance. Although there was progress in relations, Saudi Arabia believed that this progress was broken and collaboration in Arab summits was prevented by Iran. In this regard, Saudi Arabia needs to control Syria for a united Arab reaction against Iran. For these reasons, Saudi Arabia aimed to topple the regime and to replace it by a friendly Sunni regime. New Sunni regime would collaborate with Saudi Arabia for post-conflict reconstruction as the result of several commonalities. Its involvement would ease criticisms about anti-uprising stance, create a new defensive sphere against dangerous groups, and legitimate Saudi claim of leadership. Moreover, it would have opportunity to reach both Lebanon and Iraq. All calculations could reverse the balance of power which has changed since the fall of Saddam.

Both states have used different proxies having different aims and ideological orientations. Iran supported the regime and led the creation of new proxies in

addition to the existing groups. The regime is mentioned as Iranian proxy because Iranian financial and military assistance has been necessary for the regime's survival. Iran used Hezbollah, Iraqi groups and led the creation of the NDF and the Shabiha. Iran has provided different types of assistance to its proxies such as technical and fighting tactics, human-resource, money, weapons, training facilities and so on. Their proxy relationship is based on compatible interests such as regime survival and protection of the Syria-Lebanon border, and common enemies such as opposition and jihadist groups.

Saudi Arabia supported opposition groups changing by time. In the beginning, it directed its support to the FSA and its extinctions. It enlarged its nationalist and secularist proxies with Islamist groups fighting extremists. Jaish al-Islam, Liwa' al-Islam, and the Army of the Sunnis have enjoyed Saudi funds. After 2015, Saudi Arabia even attempted to support Muslim Brothers. It created Jaish al-Fatah and aided Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra. By the time, the SDF was included in the chain to establish a coalition between Kurds and Arabs. Saudi Arabia provided logistical and military support, money, weapons and training facilities under a CIA program and human-resource. In addition to pre-conflict linkages, common enemies such as the regime and compatible interests to create a Sunni regime led the establishment of the proxy relationship. Most of the groups have nationalist aims and opportunistic characteristics.

To sum up, both Iran and Saudi Arabia have engaged in different conflict zones in the region through the proxy warfare strategy since the revolution in Iran. While they avoided from a direct confrontation by considering risks, they aimed to increase their powers, and to pursue their ideologies and interests challenged by each other. They used different proxies and established the proxy relationship mostly on compatible interests, common enemies and religious-ideological identities. While Iran provided different types of assistance, Saudi Arabia generally used its petrodollars. They escalated conflicts by their indirect participation. Because of their regime types and general considerations and perceptions, their rivalry has been an unending one in the region.

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