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JOINT ADVANCED WARFIGHTING SCHOOL



KEEP YOUR FRIENDS CLOSE AND YOUR ENEMIES CLOSER:

Saudi Arabia: America's Key Strategic Partner in the Middle East

By

Thomas M. Hough

LTC, U.S. Army

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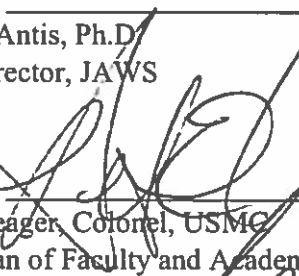
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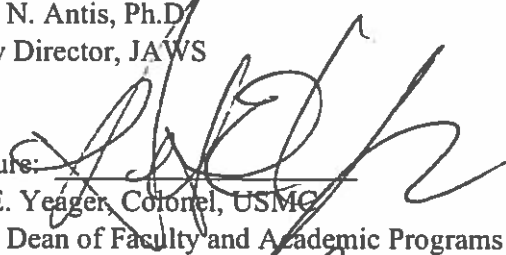
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## GLOSSARY

**Strategic Partnership:** The U.S.—Saudi Arabian shared national interest and the U.S.—Gulf Cooperation Council bilateral security agreement defines the tangible parameters of the strategic partnership.

**Legitimacy:** In the context of this research thesis, legitimacy is the authority to rule.

**Emergent Strategy:** A pattern of action that develops over time, intended or not, which creates an identifiable propensity.<sup>1</sup> “For a strategy to be perfectly emergent, there must be order—consistency in action over time—in the absence of intention about it.”<sup>2</sup> In this research, the purpose of identifiable propensity is to understand the tendency of the environment as a system. Understanding of the propensity of the system in the context of history enables critical and creative thinking to develop solutions that are compatible within the system.

**Unrealized Strategy:** Intentions not successfully realized.<sup>3</sup>

**Key Strategic Factors:** Factors that a strategist determines are at the crux of interaction within the environment that can or must be used, influenced, or countered to advance or protect the specified interests.<sup>4</sup>

**Environmental Frame:** Analysis of the relevant actors and their relationship with other actors. The syntheses of those relationships identify the key strategic factors within the environment.<sup>5</sup>

**Problem Frame:** The identification of the key strategic factor(s) that inform the relationships between the actors within the environmental frame.<sup>6</sup>

**Solution Frame:** Proposed methodology to influence the environment in the pursuit of identified objectives. The solution frame must account for the key strategic factors but retains flexibility as to the manner of addressing those factors within the proposed methodology.<sup>7</sup>

**Violent Extremist Organization:** Both state sponsored and non-state actors identified as relevant within the environmental frame. In this research, Hezbollah, Hamas, Al-Qaida, Al-Qaida in Iraq, and the Islamic State (ISIS) are Violent Extremist Organizations.

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Mintzberg, *The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 23-25.

<sup>2</sup> Henry Mintzberg and James A. Waters, “Of Strategies, Deliberate and Emergent,” *Strategic Management Journal* Vol. 6, No. 3 (Jul-Sep., 1985): 2,

<http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.658.2255&rep=rep1&type=pdf> (accessed February 3, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, United States Army, *The Strategic Appraisal: The Key To Effective Strategy*, by Harry R. Yarger, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College (Carlisle, 2010), p.56.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, United States Army, *The Operations Process (March 2010)*, Headquarters, Department of the Army (Washington D.C., 2010), p.3-7.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.





# Abstract

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The on-going Sunni—Shia war for Islam began anew in 1979. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran possess fundamentalist ideologies, which they use to increase their sphere of influence throughout the Islamic world. In this context, the past thirty years has a clear winner, Iran. Over the past several decades, the United States' vital interests in the Middle East have grown. The U.S. remains committed to ensuring the unimpeded flow of oil to global markets and the security of Israel. The Sunni and Shia inspired violent extremist organizations used by each side to increase their sphere of influence emerged from the conflict, and now threaten America's security, adding homeland security as a third U.S. national interest. The proliferation of these organizations and the ideology that inspires them are a symptom of the imbalance of power created as Iran evolved into a peer-competitor to Saudi Arabia in the region. To achieve America's national interests, the U.S. must recognize the events in the Middle East in the context of the ongoing Sunni-Shia war. A deeper understanding of the geo-political environment will allow the U.S. to implement a foreign policy that achieves the United States and its ally's interest. Through this perspective emerges a clear recognition that Saudi Arabia, the United States long-time ally, is the key to securing America's national interests in the Middle East.

# Introduction

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The United States has four vital national interests in the Middle East: homeland security, unimpeded flow of oil to the global market, the security of Israel, and the containment of Iran.<sup>1</sup> The United States' relationship with Saudi Arabia is critical to success in achieving all four national interests. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia shares the United States' national interests; however, the two nations have recently diverged in their respective foreign policies to achieve these interests. The divergence is rooted in the United States' unwillingness to recognize the Sunni—Shia war as the key strategic factor that shapes the geo-political environment in the Middle East.

In the modern Middle East, Saudi Arabia and Iran dominate. Both nations view themselves as the rightful seat of Islam, each spreading their own brand of Islamic Ideology in order to grow their sphere of influence. Although the two nations are diametrically opposed to each other, their current foreign policy approach of using ideologically inspired proxy forces to pursue their interest is strikingly similar.

Muhammad ibn Saud brought the House of Saud to power in the Arabian Peninsula through his partnership with Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the founder of Wahhabism, a powerful Islamic ideology. Almost two-hundred years later, his great-grandson Abd al-Aziz Ibn Saud completed the conquest utilizing the same ideology, Wahhabism, to establish the modern day Saudi Arabia. The religious ideology is more than just a source of power for the Saudi Monarchy; it is their

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<sup>1</sup> F. Gregory Gause III, "The Future of U.S.—Saudi Relations," *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 95, No. 4 (July-Aug 2016): 114-126.

legitimacy to rule.<sup>2</sup> The Saudi Arabian royal family sits at the top of the dominant sect of Islam, the Sunni, and controls Mecca and Medina, the two holiest sites in all of Islam. Wahhabism, and the House of Saud are inseparable, it is their source of power, their domestic policy, and approach to foreign affairs. From the Saudi monarchy's perspective, they are Islam.

Iran's view of its role in Islam and importance in the Middle East is no different. With a rich history of regional hegemony, the modern Iran exists upon the Persian Empires of the past. As Islam came to power in the region, the sixteen-century Persian Safavid Dynasty converted the empire to Shia Islam, branding the empire as the heirs of the prophet Mohammed.<sup>3</sup> Following regional decline in the twentieth century, Ayatollah Khomeini, "a Persian nationalist seeking to restore Iran to its rightful place" brought an Islamic revival to Iran in 1979.<sup>4</sup> Ayatollah Khomeini's vision was to bring the Islamic Revolution to all Muslims, regardless of sect. For his revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini established three criteria that will return Iran to its rightful place, defeat of the United States, defeat of Israel, and the defeat of the Sunni Monarchs, in particular, the House of Saud.<sup>5</sup>

Iran's success in the Middle East since the Islamic Revolution of 1979 is without equal. Everywhere the Sunnis failed, the Shia succeeded. The Sunnis failed miserably during four wars spanning thirty years to destroy Israel since its establishment in 1948. Since 1979, Iran, through its proxy Hezbollah, brought about the capitulation of the United States in Lebanon in 1983, the removal of Israel from Southern Lebanon in 2000, and the defeat of the Israeli Army in 2006. Iran's success has attracted others to its cause, forming a "Shia Crescent" drawing Shia

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<sup>2</sup> Derek Hopwood, "The Ideological Basis: Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab's Muslim Revivalism," In *State, Society and Economy In Saudi Arabia* (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1982), 23-35.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Baer, *The Devil We Know: Dealing With The New Iranian Superpower* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2008), 53.

<sup>4</sup> Ray Takeyh, *Hidden Iran: Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006), 20.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 19.

Diasporas' from Iran to the Levant into their sphere of influence. Since 1979, the traditional balance of power began shifting away from Sunni Saudi Arabia to Shiite-Iran.

The United States' invasion of Iraq in 2003 brought the Sunni-Shia conflict for the control of Islam from the edges of the Islamic civilization to Mesopotamia, part of the Islamic holy land. Viewing the Middle East through the western lens of the Westphalian Nation State model the United States failed to recognize the consequences of replacing the Sunni regime of Saddam Hussein with a Shia-dominated government in Baghdad. With a blueprint from their success in Lebanon, the Iranians were ready, and quickly pulled Iraq into their sphere of influence and manipulated the expulsion of the Americans.<sup>6</sup>

While Iran was busy, rapidly growing its sphere of influence, Saudi Arabia struggled for survival. Threatened by its own Wahhabi ideology in 1979, the House of Saud exported its homegrown extremism to Afghanistan to support its greatest ally, the United States. Unlike Iran however, Saudi efforts at building proxy militias failed, resulting in Wahhabi inspired jihadists attacking their allies and straining the House of Saud's relations throughout the world. Driven by the fear of the growing power of Iran, Saudi Arabia looked to its longtime strategic partner, the United States, to engage in its fight for supremacy against Iran.

The invasion of Iraq in 2003, followed by the Arab Spring in 2011, sparked proxy wars between Iran and Saudi Arabia throughout the Middle East. For Saudi Arabia, what was occurring in the Middle East was clear; the Sunnis were locked in a multi-state battle for influence with Iran; a conflict that has spilled over into Europe and the United States. Saudi Arabia and Iran are using proxy forces to influence the military economic and information domains.

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Baer, *The Devil We Know*, 54.

What the House of Saud did not predict, was a sea change in U.S. Middle East foreign Policy. With the election of President Barrack Obama in 2008 arrived the Obama Doctrine, the idea that the United States could no longer serve as the mediator in the Middle East between the warring Sunni and Shia.<sup>7</sup> The United States precipitously withdrew from its role as hegemon throughout the Middle East. The lack of American leadership is most evident in Syria where Saudi Arabia is pursuing a foreign policy divergent from America's national interests. In the wake of American presence, Russia is filling the void and empowering its regional ally, Iran.

The problem for the United States is that America's vital national interests in the Middle East have not changed. While the U.S. administration no longer wishes to bear the burden of its association with Saudi Arabia, the Middle East geo-political maneuvering continues. Without Saudi Arabia, the United States lacks a strong ally in the Middle East with which the United States can employ an indirect approach to secure its national interests. The policy of disengagement by the United States has equated to a policy of engagement by others who do not have the interests of the United States in mind. Without the United States' influence, Saudi Arabia and other Sunni-Arab Leaders are enacting foreign policies divergent with American interests in an attempt to rebalance power in the Middle East against Iran.

The United States needs Saudi Arabia and its other Sunni-Arab allies in the region. Although it may wish to disengage, the United States ignores the imbalance of power in the Middle East at its peril. Through Saudi Arabia is the opportunity to isolate Iran, contain the Islamic fundamentalism that threatens the United States' homeland and Europe, secure the flow of oil to global markets, and ensure the continued survival of Israel. Without strong strategic

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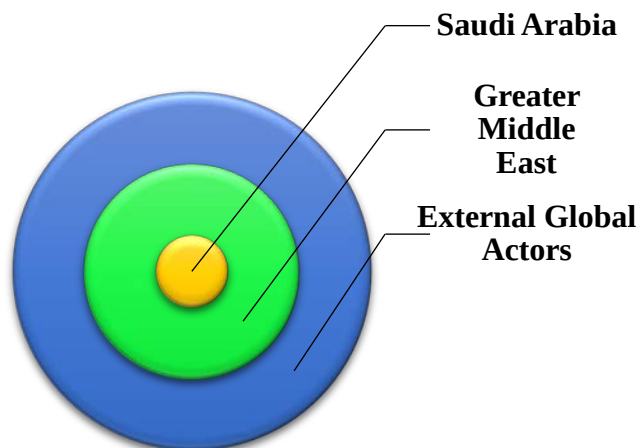
<sup>7</sup> Goldberg, Jeffery, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic.com*, April 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/> (accessed October 10, 2016).

partnership with Saudi Arabia, the United States risks transferring U.S. regional power in the Middle East to Russia and its ally, Iran. An action that could result in Saudi Arabia evolving into an open enemy of the United States.

# Part I: The Environmental Frame

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The purpose of the **ENVIRONMENTAL FRAME** is to present the key strategic factors that are at the crux of interaction within the environment.<sup>1</sup>



**Figure 1: The Environmental Frame:**

## **Chapter 1: The Impact of Colonization upon the Sunni-Arab Region.**

This analysis identifies the three pillars of legitimacy of the Saudi Monarchy: Tribal Affiliation, Proprietary authority of the Islamic Holy Land, and Wahhabism.

## **Chapter 2: Saudi Arabia's sphere of influence in the Middle East.**

This section explains Saudi Arabia's self-perception as the unequivocal leader of Islam and the Saudi Arabian methodology for expanding the Sunni sphere of influence.

## **Chapter 3: Fear, Honor and Interest.**

This section explores the relationship and influence of external global actors in the Middle East.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *The Strategic Appraisal*, 56.

## PART I: THE ENVIRONMENTAL FRAME

The synthesis of these key strategic factors enables a shared understanding of the environment and answers the following questions:

1. What is the House of Saud's source of legitimacy?
2. What is Saudi Arabia's role in the greater Middle East? How do Saudi Arabia and Iran see themselves in the context of Islam and what role does each have in the Middle East?
3. How do each of the major external actors view their interests in the Middle East, and how are they likely to act to defend those interests?

The environmental frame identifies the legitimacy of the Saud Monarchy and analyzes the key strategic factors that most influence the behavior of individual, regional, and external global actors.



## Chapter 1: The Impact of Colonization upon the Sunni-Arab Region

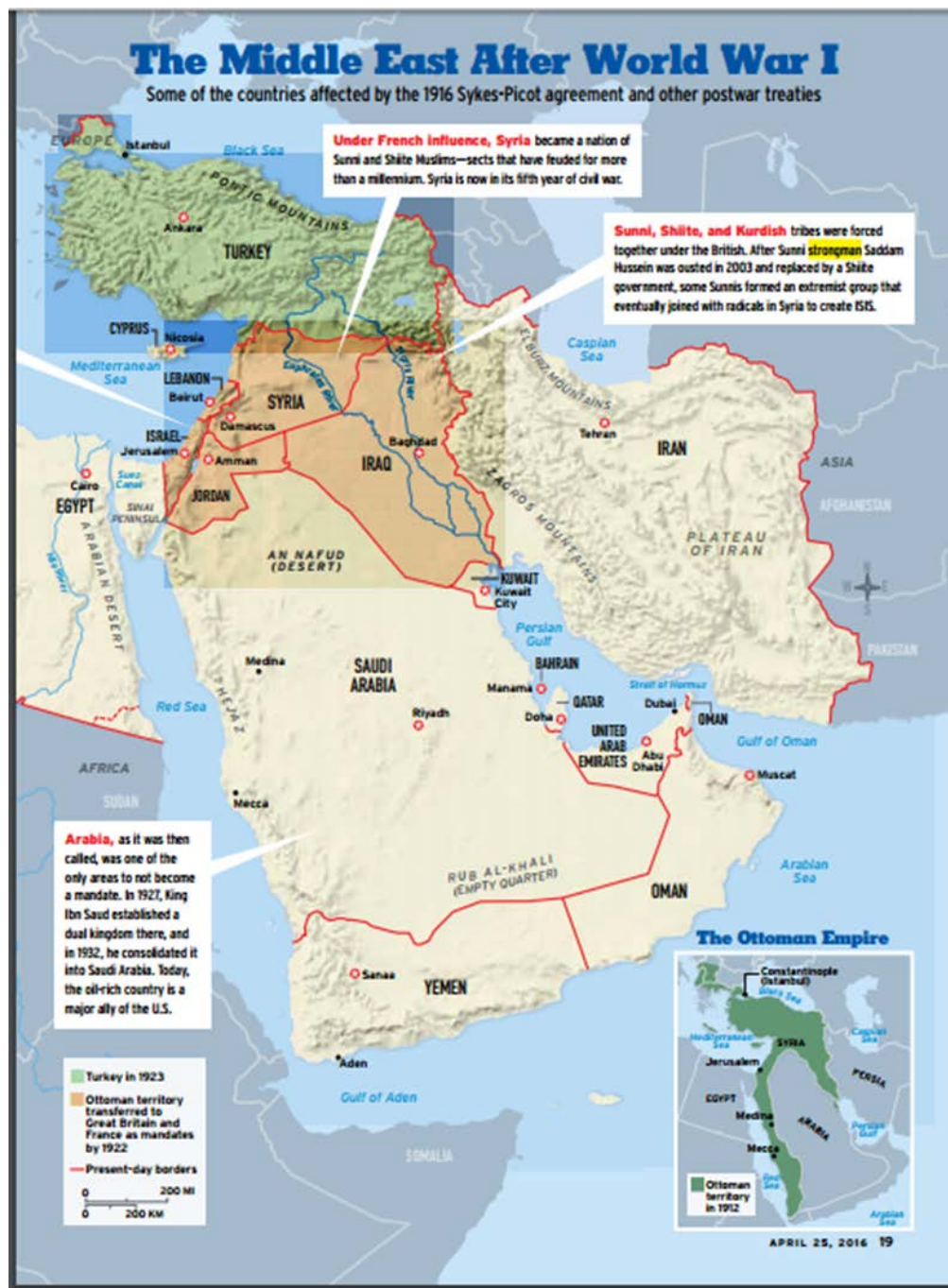


Figure 2. The Middle East After WWI.

(Joseph Berger, "How the Middle East Got That Way," The New York Times Upfront, April 25, 2016, under "The impact of Sykes-Picot Agreement," (accessed September 16, 2016)

## CHAPTER 1: THE IMPACT OF COLONIZATION UPON THE SUNNI-ARAB REGION

The defining political agreement that established the modern nation-states of the Sunni-Arab region was the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement.<sup>1</sup> This agreement cemented the spoils of WWI for the western empires following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. “Sir Mark Sykes of Britain and Francois Georges-Picot of France set the boundaries for modern-day Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, and much of the land that Israel and the Palestinians are still fighting over.”<sup>2</sup>

The agreement placed little emphasis on the preservation of historical regions based on ethnicity, religion, and culture, and placed a premium on realignment of the region to optimize western interest. “The agreement mostly ignored the complicated histories and interests of the many ethnic and religious groups who had been living there for centuries.”<sup>3</sup> Many Middle East experts continue to identify the Sykes-Picot Agreement, instituted over a century ago, as “the root of many of today’s conflicts in the Middle East.”<sup>4</sup>

Adding insult to injury, the Sykes-Picot agreement emplaced secular governments in the newly established nation-states. “The British and French argued that they were helping these countries by creating modern, non-religious nation-states.”<sup>5</sup> The secular governments imposed upon the region, combined with newly identified nation-state boundaries that violated ethnicity, history, and culture left most of the Sunni-Arab region with a governmental framework that the majority of the homogenous population view as illegitimate.

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<sup>1</sup> Yonah Alexander and Dean Alexander, *The Islamic State: Combating the Caliphate Without Borders* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2015), 6-7.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Berger, “How the Middle East Got That Way,” *The New York Times Upfront*, April 25, 2016, under “The impact of Sykes-Picot Agreement,” <http://upfront.scholastic.com/content/dam/scholastic/classroom-magazines/upfront/issues/2016-04-25/p18-21-TimesPast/UPF-042516-Lexile-print.pdf> (accessed September, 16 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 20.

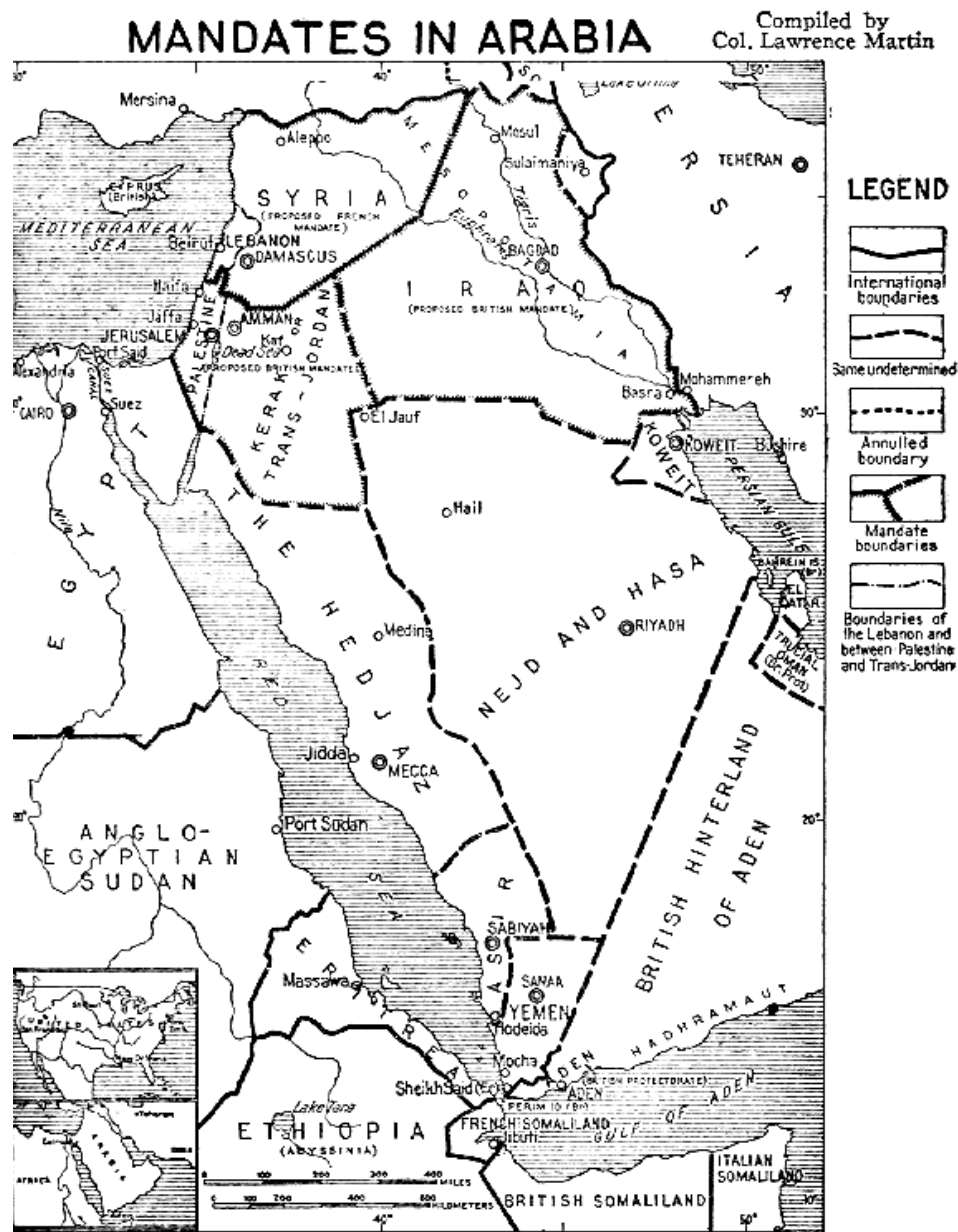


Figure 3. Mandates in Arabia

Figure 3, depicts Map of the colonized Middle East following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Lawrence Martin and John Reed, *The Treaties of Peace, 1919-1923* (Clark, New Jersey: The Lawbook Exchange, Ltd., 2007), Volume 1, p. 966.

## CHAPTER 1: THE IMPACT OF COLONIZATION UPON THE SUNNI-ARAB REGION

While the rest of the Sunni-Arab region underwent a western imperialist imposed transformation, Abd al-Aziz seized the initiative. “In December 1925, Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud finally captured Jeddah from the forces of King Ali, the son of ex-King Husain of the Hijaz, and brought an end to the struggle between the House of Hashim and the House of Saud.”<sup>7</sup> The British Empire, with its newly acquired territories in Asia, decided against further entanglement or commitment of military resources in the Middle East. With the major regions of the Arabian Peninsula under the control of a single monarch, Abd al-Aziz was able to negotiate the boundaries of what would become the modern day Saudi Arabia.

Abd al-Aziz capitalized upon the lessons of his ancestors in his conquest to unify the peninsula. Much like al-Saud before him, al-Aziz used the power of the Wahhabist ideology to support his conquest. “One of his first tasks was to establish himself in Riyadh as the Al Saud leader and the Wahhabi imam. Abd al-Aziz obtained the support of the religious establishment in Riyadh, and this relatively swift recognition revealed the political force of Wahhabi authority.”<sup>8</sup>

With the Najd region under his control, Abd al-Aziz next set his sights on the Hijaz. Simultaneously, a Wahhabi movement was underway among the Bedouin tribes of the central Najd region. The Bedouin tribes who sought Islamic purity through adoption of the Wahhabi ideology pledged loyalty to Abd al-Aziz. This revival, known as the “Ikhwan movement spread Wahhabi Islam among the nomads.”<sup>9</sup> With the Ikhwan, Abd al-Aziz had an Army of “nearly 100,000 Ikhwan waiting for a chance to fight.”<sup>10</sup> In 1924, Ibn Abd al-Aziz used his Wahhabi

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<sup>7</sup> Peter Sluglett and Marion Farouk-Sluglett, “The Precarious Monarchy: Britain, Abd Al-Aziz Ibn Saud And The Establishment Of The Kingdom Of Hijaz, Najd and Its Dependencies, 1925—1932,” in *State, Society, and Economy in Saudi Arabia* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1982), 36.

<sup>8</sup> Library Of Congress, Federal Research Division, *The Rise of Abd Al Aziz* (1993), by Helen Chapin Metz, Library of Congress, (Washington D.C., 1993). <https://www.loc.gov/item/93028506/> (Accessed September 07, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 2.

## CHAPTER 1: THE IMPACT OF COLONIZATION UPON THE SUNNI-ARAB REGION

Ikhwan Army to complete his conquest, capitalizing on his Wahhabi religious lineage to bring the vast majority of the Arabian Peninsula under his control.

Abd al-Aziz's conquest of the Arabian Peninsula created three pillars that support the legitimacy of the Saud Monarchy and lend power to its influence in the Sunni-Arab Region. The first pillar is the continuation of the tribal system in Saudi Arabian society. "The kingdom has little precedent in terms of constitutionalism. It was only in 1992 that the first constitution was developed, and even then the country has been largely governed via consensus obtained through informal means involving tribal and familial ties."<sup>11</sup> The House of Saud possesses tribal legitimacy and uses its tribal ancestry as leverage. The House of Saud's lineage remains steeped in the tribal history of the Arabian Peninsula creating a strong historical narrative, unlike many of Saudi Arabia's Sunni-Arab neighbors whose leadership framework changed following the institution of the Sykes-Picot agreement.

The second pillar is ownership of the historic birthplace of Muhammad and physical control of the two holiest sites in all of Islam by the Saud Monarchy. With the merger of the Hijaz and Nejd regions, Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud consolidated Mecca and Medina into the Kingdom of Saud. Abd al-Aziz not only protected Saudi Arabia from the fate of its Sunni-Arab neighbors, but also managed to protect the birthplace of Islam for all Muslims. The control and protection of Mecca and Medina extends the House of Saud's legitimacy beyond Saudi Arabia to the greater Sunni-Islamic civilization, which represents 87-90 percent of the world's Muslims.<sup>12</sup> While the control of Mecca and Medina represents a Saudi source of legitimacy with the Sunni sect of

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<sup>11</sup> David D. Judson, "Saudi Arabia's Succession Labyrinth," STRATFOR, September 11, 2012, under "legitimacy of the House of Saud," [https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/challenges-saudi-royal-family-legitimacy?0=ip\\_login\\_no\\_cache%3D41902553e7cce2edb9184956485d76eb](https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/challenges-saudi-royal-family-legitimacy?0=ip_login_no_cache%3D41902553e7cce2edb9184956485d76eb) (accessed September 19, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> Luis Lugo, "Mapping the Global Muslim Population," *Pew Research Center Religion and Public Life*, October 7, 2009, under "Global Islamic population by sect," <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/10/07/mapping-the-global-muslim-population/> (accessed February 1, 2017).

## CHAPTER 1: THE IMPACT OF COLONIZATION UPON THE SUNNI-ARAB REGION

Islam, it simultaneously serves as a source of friction between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the leader of the world's estimated 154-200 million Shia.<sup>13</sup> With Mecca under the protection of the kingdom, the House of Saud exercises control over the annual Hajj pilgrimage, one of the five fundamentals of Islam that all Muslims must strive to achieve. In the Islamic world, each day begins and ends with a subtle recognition of Saudi Arabia as the world's 1.6 Billion Muslims face towards Mecca to pray.

The third pillar of legitimacy for the House of Saud is the Wahhabi ideology. Abd al-Aziz's use of the Ikhwan movement further wove the importance of this religious ideology into the fabric of Saudi Arabia. "The relationship between the House of Saud and the religious leadership is a critical pillar of Saudi rule because it gives the government religious legitimacy and authority and allows it to balance an oftentimes conflicting domestic and foreign policy agenda."<sup>14</sup>

The three pillars of tribal affiliation, proprietorship of the Islamic holy land, and Wahhabism form a strong historical narrative that is the root of the House of Saud's legitimacy and remains the source of the royal family's power today. While the majority of the Sunni-Arab Region experienced turbulent shifts in power following the Sykes-Picot Agreement, the House of Saud continued to build upon its legitimacy, spreading its sphere of influence beyond the Peninsula to the greater Middle East. The Sunni perception of legitimacy of the Saud Monarchy and the House of Saud's influence throughout the Middle East are primary factors as to why the United States must continue its strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> David D. Judson, "Challenges for the Saudi Royal Family: Legitimacy," STRATFOR, September 11, 2012, under "legitimacy of the House of Saud," [https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/challenges-saudi-royal-family-legitimacy?0=ip\\_login\\_no\\_cache%3D41902553e7cce2edb9184956485d76eb](https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/challenges-saudi-royal-family-legitimacy?0=ip_login_no_cache%3D41902553e7cce2edb9184956485d76eb) (accessed September 19, 2016).





## Chapter 2: Saudi Arabia's Sphere of Influence in the Middle East

The struggle for influence between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shia Iran dominates the current Middle East geopolitical environment. The friction is rooted in both religious disagreement and ethnic strife. "The region's fault lines include those between Sunni and [Shiite] Muslims, a division that goes back nearly 1,400 years to a dispute over the rightful successor to the Prophet Muhammad. Going back at least as far are conflicts between Arabs and Persians, the forefathers of modern Iranians."<sup>1</sup>

Both Saudi Arabia and Iran view themselves as the center of the Islamic religion and the rightful heirs of the Middle East. "Saudi Arabia and Iran sit on different sides of the Sunni/Shiite divide that is tearing the Middle East apart. Saudi Arabia is predominantly Sunni, Iran largely Shiite, and both aspire to regional leadership."<sup>2</sup> Four key strategic factors since the founding of the modern Middle East shaped the current state of affairs: the ongoing struggle over the legitimacy and survival of Israel, the regional rebalancing of power beginning in 1979, the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, and the 2011-2014 Arab Spring.

Israel: The unraveling of the Ottoman Empire during WWI and subsequent Sykes-Picot Agreement imposed the Westphalian nation-state model upon the Middle East. Missing from the agreement was a resolution of the Palestinian Mandate awarded to United Kingdom by the League of Nations on September 29, 1923, which placed the region under British control.<sup>3</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> Karen Elliot House, "Kingdom At the Crossroads; Can Saudi Arabia find a middle path," Time.com, January 29, 2015, under "Saudi Arabian relationship with the Middle East," <http://web.b.ebscohost.com.proxy.library.uaf.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=18&sid=c61753b4-757b-4b1a-b993-4e231a4fb3b5%40sessionmgr101&hid=115> (accessed September 21, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Annabelle Quince, "Iran and Saudi Arabia: Divisions, proxy wars and chaos in the Middle East," Rear Vision, February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016, <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/rearvision/iran-saudi-arabia-sectarian-divisions-proxy-wars-chaos/7152358> (accessed September 21, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Noah Rayman, "Mandatory Palestine: What It Was and Why It Matters," Time, September 29, 2014, under "Palestinian Mandate," <http://time.com/3445003/mandatory-palestine/> (accessed February 3, 2017).



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United Kingdom granted Jordan independence in 1946 and declared termination of its Palestinian Mandate on May 14, 1948.<sup>4</sup> Subsequent with this announcement, “On May 14, 1948, David Ben-Gurion, the head of the Jewish Agency, proclaimed the establishment of the State of Israel. U.S. President Harry S. Truman recognized the new nation on the same day.”<sup>5</sup>

For Muslims, the existence of Israel invokes deep passions rooted in a long historic struggle for the control of Jerusalem. Compounding the problem and adding to the negative passion is the perception by many in the Middle East that Israel exists on land rightfully owned by the Palestinians. The Arab delegation did not support the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 181, which proposed the partition of the Palestine; “the Arabs of Palestine were determined to oppose with all the means at their disposal, any scheme that provided for segregation or partition, or that would give to a minority special and preferential status.”<sup>6</sup>

For the Arab Leaders of 1948, the declaration of the Israeli state by David Ben-Gurion was a deal breaker. The destruction of Israel and the return of the Palestinian territory to the control of the Arabs became the defining narrative for the Arab nations. To this end, the Arab nations led by Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon with participation from Jordan, Iraq, and, at times, Saudi Arabia, initiated four major conventional wars against Israel between 1948 and 1973.

For the Sunni-Arabs, the destruction of Israel on behalf of Islam became the unifying principle. Islamic religious leaders added to the narrative with the declaration that the destruction of Israel was the will of Allah and the responsibility of all Muslims. “At the fourth Islamic conference in Cairo, in 1968, Sheik Nadim el-Jasser of Lebanon said that Allah had posed a

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs, *Creation of Israel, 1948*, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/creation-israel> (accessed September 21, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Jeremy Hammond, “The Myth of the U.N. Creation of Israel,” *Foreign Policy Journal*, October 26, 2010, under “United Nations General Assembly Resolution 181,” <http://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/> (accessed September 22, 2016).

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challenge to the Moslems with the establishment of the Zionist entity, and their salvation could only come if they first destroyed Israel.”<sup>7</sup> The competition for leadership within the Pan-Arab movement led to the militarization of Islam. Israel became the target for Sunni-Arab leaders who wished to prove their Sunni-Arab credentials to the masses. The Arabs were not successful. After thirty years, four major wars, and four humiliating defeats at the hands Israel, the Sunni-Arab Muslim population lost faith in the ability of their leaders to defeat Israel on the behalf of Islam.

The chaotic events of 1979 in the Middle East begin the rebalancing of power between the Arab-Sunni and Persian-Shia powers. The collapse of the Pan-Arab movement was complete, “an idea that has dominated the political consciousness of modern Arabs is nearing its end, if it is not already a thing of the past. It is the myth of Pan-Arabism, of the Umma Arabiyya Wahida Dhat Risala Khalida, the one Arab nation with an immortal mission.”<sup>8</sup> The beginning of the end for Sunni-Arab hegemony started in the land of the Nile.

Egypt, led by Anwar Sadat officially recognized Israel in March 1979. “The Camp David Accords, signed by President Jimmy Carter, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin in September 1978, established a framework for a historic peace treaty concluded between Israel and Egypt in March 1979.”<sup>9</sup> Without Egypt, the Arabs lost any chance of achieving a conventional military defeat of Israel. Enraged by the actions of Egypt, the other Arab nations retaliated by removing Egypt from the Arab-League to include moving the Arab-League headquarters from Cairo to Tunisia.

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<sup>7</sup> Arie Stav, “Arabs And Nazism,” *Outpost*, January 1996, under “the real cause of conflict of the Middle East,” <http://www.afsi.org/Outpost/1996/96JAN/jan8.htm> (accessed September 23, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> Fouad Ajami, “The End of Pan-Arabism,” *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 57, No. 2 (Winter 1978/79): Essay, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/yemen/1978-12-01/end-pan-arabism> (accessed 24 September, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, *Camp David Accords and the Arab-Israeli Peace Process*, by Dr. Stephen Randolph, Director of the Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1977-1980/camp-david> (accessed 23 September, 2016).

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The defeat of the Sunni-Arabs created opportunity for Iran to ascend to power and take its perceived rightful place at the head of the table. "More than any other nation, Iran has always perceived itself as the natural hegemon of its neighborhood."<sup>10</sup> The Sunni-Arabs had successfully convinced the Islamic world that the destruction of Israel was fundamental to Islam, yet the Sunni-Arabs failed to deliver. Iran would capitalize upon this newly created narrative during its 1979 Iranian Revolution, one of the four watershed events of that year.

The Iranian Revolution began in February 1979 with the return of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The Ayatollah blamed Iran's secular leader, Shah Mohammed Riza Pahlevi and his close ties with the United States, Israel, and the Islamic monarchies of the Middle East for Iran's economic and social problems. "Ayatollah Khomeini felt a holy mission to rid Iran of what he saw as Western corruption and degeneracy and to return the country, under an Islamic theocracy, to religious purity."<sup>11</sup>

For Khomeini and his revolutionaries, the conquest was not just the liberation of Iran from Western influence. "After assuming power, Ayatollah Khomeini did not hesitate to challenge the status quo of the entire region in a radical way. He called upon *all* Muslims, irrespective of sect, to rise up as Iranians had done and rid their countries of monarchies and Western-backed dictators."<sup>12</sup>

Ayatollah Khomeini understood how to exploit the current events of 1979 to support his narrative. "'This is not a struggle between the United States and Iran,'" he declared, "'this is a struggle between Islam and blasphemy.'" He talked again and again in such acerbic tones about

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<sup>10</sup> Ray Takeyn, *Hidden Iran*, 61.

<sup>11</sup> Raymond Anderson, "Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, 89, the Unwavering Iranian Spiritual Leader," *The New York Times*, June 4, 1989. <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/06/04/obituaries/ayatollah-ruhollah-khomeini-89-the-unwavering-iranian-spiritual-leader.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed 26, September 2016).

<sup>12</sup> Pouya Alimagham, "The Saudi Roots of Today's Shi'ite-Sunni War," *Huffingtonpost.com*, August 23, 2014, "roots of Sunni and Shiite conflict," [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/pouya-alimagham/the-saudi-roots-of-todays\\_b\\_5520110.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/pouya-alimagham/the-saudi-roots-of-todays_b_5520110.html) (accessed 27 September, 2016).

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the United States, the "Great Satan."<sup>13</sup> The Ayatollah reinforced the narrative that Iran's failures were a direct result of U.S. and Western meddling in the Middle East. Prior to 1979, Iran was supportive of Israel, yet Khomeini made no distinction between Shia or Sunni animosity towards the Jewish State. The Sunni-Arabs ignited the flames of antisemitism in 1948 and Khomeini capitalized upon their efforts. "Khomeini, the most important opponent of the Shah, recognized the mobilizing power of antisemitism and exploited it himself. "I know that you do not want Iran to be under the boot of the Jews," he cried out to his supporters."<sup>14</sup> Ayatollah Khomeini later referred to Israel as "Little Satan," directly linking the existence of Israel to the United States, their "Great Satan" benefactor.

When U.S. President Jimmy Carter allowed the ousted Shah of Iran to enter the United States, Ayatollah Khomeini seized upon the opportunity to stoke the anti-western sentiment of the revolutionary movement into a frenzy. "In a fury, Iranians clambered over the walls of the American Embassy in Teheran on Nov. 4, 1979, seizing diplomats, staff members and military personnel as hostages to trade in exchange for the Shah."<sup>15</sup>

By early November 1979, The Ayatollah had solidified the United States and, to a lesser extent, Israel into the narrative. The third component, vilification of the Sunni-Arab Monarchies of the Middle East had yet to materialize. Twenty-one days into the U.S.—Iranian Hostage crisis the Ayatollah had the opportunity. On November 21, 1979, "during the crisis over Americans being held hostage in Teheran, a renegade in Saudi Arabia, proclaiming himself the Mahdi, or Messiah, seized the venerated Grand Mosque in Mecca with a band of armed followers."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Raymond Anderson, "Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini."

<sup>14</sup> Matthias Kuntzel, "The Roots of Iranian Antisemitism and its Current Consequences," *Articles*, March 11, 2014, under "the root cause of Iran's desire to destroy Israel in 1979," <http://www.matthiaskuentzel.de/contents/the-roots-of-iranian-antisemitism-and-its-current-consequences> (accessed September 26, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Raymond Anderson, "Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini."

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The attack, although generally unknown outside of the Middle East, reignited the historic power struggle between Sunni-Arab Saudi Arabia and Shiite-Persian Iran. The Saudis were completely surprised, “The November 20, 1979 takeover of the Grand Mosque by Juhayman al-Oteibi and his 400-plus fundamentalists, and the subsequent unholy, bloody military assault to dislodge them, stunned Muslims worldwide and rocked the Saudi monarchy to its foundation.”<sup>17</sup>

The Ayatollah did not hesitate. “A message from the Ayatollah Khomeini was broadcast over Iranian radio accusing the U.S. and Israel of being those who were orchestrating the despicable horrors in Mecca.”<sup>18</sup> Khomeini expanded his message beyond just his Shiite enclave, capitalizing upon the chaos to expose the weakness of the Saudi Monarchy. “In days that followed, people across the Muslim world responded to Khomeini’s description of the events at Mecca, without a clear and adamant denial from Saudi Arabia.”<sup>19</sup>

The age-old Sunni—Shia conquest for Islam was once again reborn. “The rise of an aggressive Shia theocracy in Iran posed a direct threat to majority-Sunni Saudi Arabia, reviving an age-old hostility between the two sects of Islam and undermining al Saud’s claim to leadership of the entire Muslim world.”<sup>20</sup> In just one year, a paradigm shift occurred, placing the role of leadership of Islam on the negotiating table. While the Iranians, led by Ayatollah Khomeini had the momentum, the Saudis would counter with their own emergent strategy. In response, the Saud Monarchy instituted a new foreign policy “when the Saudi regime as a matter

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<sup>17</sup> Zaffar Abbas, “Thirty years on, Mecca Mosque siege reverberates,” *Dawn.com*, November 19, 2009, under “1979 Siege of Grand Mosque,” <http://www.dawn.com/news/503835/thirty-years-on-mecca-mosque-siege-reverberates> (accessed 25 September, 2016).

<sup>18</sup> Frank E. Smitha, “The Siege of Mecca: the forgotten uprising in Islam’s Holiest Shrine and the Birth of al Qaeda,” *Macrohistory and World Timeline*, 2007, under “1979 Siege of Mecca,” <http://www.fsmitha.com/review/trofimov2.html> (accessed September 25, 2016).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Yaroslav Trofimov, *The Siege Of Mecca* (New York: Random House, 2007), 57.

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of policy began to counter Iran's revolution by financing [anti-Shiite] Islamists across the Muslim world."<sup>21</sup>

Cataclysmic events in the Middle East continued, leaving both Saudi Arabia and Iran searching for a strategy to expand their respective spheres of influence throughout the Middle East. The monarchy needed a target to direct Sunni-Wahhabi Jihadists away from Saudi Arabia. Iran faced a similar dilemma, Ayatollah Khomeini, after succeeding in the overthrow of the Shah and with Iran securely in his grasp, needed to make good on his promise to purge Islam of the Zionists and their western backers. Both would exploit their theological control over their particular sect of Islam to project their ideology along the periphery of the Middle East.

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<sup>21</sup> Pouya Alimagham, "The Saudi Roots of Today's Shi'ite-Sunni War."

### Chapter 3: Fear, Honor, and Interest

“Fear Being Our Principal Motive, Though Honor and Interest Afterwards Came In”<sup>1</sup>

The Sunni-Shia power struggle for Islam that emerged from the events of 1979 intersected with the U.S.—USSR Cold War as Iran and Saudi Arabia pushed their spheres of influence to the edges of the Middle East. The U.S. and USSR were competing over the Middle East for influence just as they were in other parts of the world, each viewing the world through the lens of the Cold War. Both the USSR and the United States looked to gain a comparative advantage in the Middle East through their allies. The United States and Saudi Arabia were motivated to act against the Soviet Union’s invasion on the Sunni-Eastern Front in Afghanistan. Iran and the USSR shared a common interest in Syria and Lebanon on the Shiite-Western Front. From 1979 to 1990, Saudi Arabia and Iran expanded their regional conquest for Islam within the context of the greater, global U.S.—USSR Cold War. The Cold War powers and their Middle East allies acted symbiotically. Each nation however sought different outcomes, motivated by their own fear, honor and interest.

On Christmas Day, 1979, only one month after the siege of Mecca, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) invaded Afghanistan. “Moscow’s motives for opening what would become a failed and nearly decade-long campaign are best understood in the larger context of the late Cold War.”<sup>2</sup> The Soviet Union was concerned with U.S. encroachment on their Southern border after they discovered that Hafizullah Amin, the Afghan communist leader, had met with

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<sup>1</sup> Robert B. Strassler, *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide To The Peloponnesian War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 43.

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Bienaime’, “The Soviet Union Decided To Invade Afghanistan 35 Years Ago Today,” *Business Insider*, December 10, 2014, under “Soviet Union Motivation for invading Afghanistan,” <http://www.businessinsider.com/the-us-is-ending-its-afghan-campaign-this-month-35-years-ago-the-soviet-union-had-just-started-its-own-2014-12> (accessed 30 September, 2016).

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U.S. officials. “The Soviets feared that Afghanistan, even in its higher echelons, was beginning to tilt away from Soviet influence in favor of a rapprochement with the United States.”<sup>3</sup>

The context of the ongoing Iranian Revolution and U.S. hostage crisis influenced the decision making of the Soviet Union as well. The Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) communist regime supported by the Soviet Union was weak domestically, threatened by Islamic Fundamentalists. If the PDPA regime collapsed, it would create a regional security dilemma for the Soviets. “The Soviets feared that an Islamist Afghanistan would ally itself with Iran and Pakistan, and assert hostility toward the USSR.”<sup>4</sup>

Also at stake for the Soviets was their sense of honor as the leader of the Communist movement. Afghanistan was just one of many nations in the early stages of their communist revolution. In Moscow, senior leaders were concerned that a failure of the communist movement in Afghanistan would expose “the threat of the ‘reversibility of communism’ pervading across fragile Third World socialist states.”<sup>5</sup>

The United States motivation to interfere in the USSR—Afghan conflict contained elements of fear, honor, and interest as well. The U.S. perspective of the Soviet invasion was influenced by the ongoing U.S.—Iranian hostage crisis which weakened the image of the United States in the international community. U.S. President Carter’s domestic approval was suffering under the weight of the hostage crisis. The invasion of Afghanistan by the USSR only added to the perception of U.S. weakness in the Middle East. “President Carter declared that the Persian Gulf area was ‘now threatened by Soviet troops in Afghanistan,’ this area was synonymous with

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<sup>3</sup> Pierre Bienaime’, “The Soviet Union Decided To Invade Afghanistan.”

<sup>4</sup> Uday Rai Mehra, “Why Did the Soviet Union Invade Afghanistan in 1979,” *E-International Relations*, October 9, 2014, under “Soviet Union invasion of Afghanistan,” <http://www.e-ir.info/2014/10/09/why-did-the-soviet-union-invade-afghanistan-in-1979/> (accessed, September 29, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.



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U.S. interest and that the United States would ‘defend’ it against any threat by all means necessary.”<sup>6</sup>

For some Americans, Afghanistan was an opportunity to defend America’s honor. Some envisioned a parallel between the Soviet Union’s support to the North Vietnamese against U.S. forces during the Vietnam War and the potential for indirect involvement in Afghanistan. Afghanistan was an opportunity for revenge. “Rep. Charles Wilson of Texas expressed a not-atypical sentiment of official Washington when he declared: There were 58,000 dead in Vietnam and we owe the Russians one.”<sup>7</sup>

For the United States, the opportunity to gain a Cold War victory against the Soviets would need to be an indirect approach. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) took lead in the resourcing of Mujahedeen forces to battle the Soviets. Saudi Arabia was a willing ally with its own interest in Afghanistan. The Saudis used the opportunity to round-up Jihadists throughout Saudi Arabia, to include some who participated on the attack of the Grand Mosque, and exported them to the new frontier.<sup>8</sup> “One of the first Saudi volunteers who traveled to Afghan front lines, and who worked hand in hand with Prince Turki’s intelligence services there, was a shy twenty-two-year-old named Osama Bin Laden.”<sup>9</sup>

The United States and Saudi Arabia both succeeded in their joint venture against the USSR in Afghanistan. What began as an unrealized strategy for Saudi Arabia in 1980, developed into an emergent strategy for Saudi Arabia by the end of the decade. “When Afghanistan,

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<sup>6</sup> William Blum, “Afghanistan, 1979-1992: America’s Jihad, *Killing Hope*, under “United States intervention in Afghanistan against the USSR,” <https://williamblum.org/chapters/killing-hope/afghanistan> (accessed September 30, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Yaroslav Trofimov, *The Siege Of Mecca*.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 245.

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another largely Sunni country nearby, moved from Soviet influence to Soviet control, in 1979, the House of Saud saw an opportunity to project itself as the global defender of Muslims.”<sup>10</sup>

Afghanistan provided an opportunity for Saudi Arabia to demonstrate strength in the Middle East following the crisis in Mecca, while at the same time demonstrating its value on the global stage with its most important international ally. “This view coalesced with the Cold War aims of the US, which saw the Saudi desire to weaponize Islamist ideology as tactically useful in the West’s struggles against the Soviet Union.”<sup>11</sup> For the United States, locked into an intensified period of the Cold War following the end of détente in 1979, Afghanistan became the front lines of the U.S. struggle against communism. The long-term consequences of “weaponized Islamist ideology” went unrecognized and underappreciated.

Throughout the Afghan War, Saudi Arabia proved indispensable to U.S. efforts to defeat the USSR with Afghan Mujahedeen forces. The Saudis proved their strategic ability to project power by providing money and infrastructure to support the effort against the Soviets. “The US-Saudi partnership reached its pinnacle in the 1980s in Afghanistan when the United States and Saudi Arabia undertook a massive effort to defeat the Soviet Union matching each other’s investments dollar for dollar. The two states ultimately put more than \$3 billion each.”<sup>12</sup> In Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia discovered the ability of their vast oil wealth to expand their sphere of influence well beyond their borders.

From Afghanistan emerged the strategy for Saudi Arabia to succeed against Iran in their conquest to control Islam. A Sunni Jihadist movement, resourced with Saudi Arabian Wahhabi

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<sup>10</sup> Carol E. B Choksy and Jamsheed K. Choksy, “The Saudi Connection: Wahhabism and Global Jihad,” *World Affairs*, May/June 2015, under “why did Saudi Arabia support the United States against the USSR in Afghanistan,” <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/saudi-connection-wahhabism-and-global-jihad> (accessed September 30, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Rachel Bronson, “Understanding US-Saudi relations,” In *Saudi Arabia in the Balance: Political Economy, Society, Foreign Affairs* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 383.

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Ideology and Saudi Arabian oil money, had defeated a superpower. “As later described in testimony before the US Senate Judiciary Committee, and listed on the late King Fahd’s website, Saudi Arabia spent \$4 billion per year on mosques, madrassas, preachers, students, and textbooks to spread the Wahhabi creed over the next decades.”<sup>13</sup>

Although the United States and Saudi Arabia cooperated to bring about the defeat of the Soviet Union, their interests were not the same. Afghanistan represented a win for the Saudi monarchy domestically, regionally, and internationally. During the Afghan conflict, the Saudis found a way to deflect the growing Wahhabi movement away from the Monarchy while simultaneously preserving the ability to use the Wahhabi movement to increase its sphere of influence. “The royal family made a grand bargain with the clerics: Riyadh would fund the spread of Wahhabism abroad as long as the extremists kept any militant activities off Saudi soil.”<sup>14</sup>

“An accord was signed in Geneva on 14 April 1988, under which the Kremlin committed itself to begin pulling out its estimated 115,000 troops on 15 May, and to complete the process by 15 February of the next year. Afghanistan, said Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, had become ‘a bleeding wound.’”<sup>15</sup> The United States achieved its interests and left Afghanistan, but the Saudis continued to support the Wahhabi infrastructure of Madrassas along the Afghanistan—Pakistan border. Afghanistan was of geographic importance to Saudi Arabia in the regional battle for the control of Islam with Iran. Afghanistan provided the Saudis a foothold on the Iranians’ Western border, a strategic location they thought they could control through the

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<sup>13</sup> Carol E. B Choksy and Jamsheed K. Choksy, “The Saudi Connection.”

<sup>14</sup> Ben Frumin (Edt.), “How Saudi Arabia exports radical Islam,” *The Week Staff*, August 8, 2015, under “how does Saudi Arabia export Wahhabism,” <http://theweek.com/articles/570297/how-saudi-arabia-exports-radical-islam> (accessed October 2, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> William Blum, “Afghanistan, 1979-1992.”

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Mujahedeen. Even if Saudi Arabia lost control over the Wahhabi Jihadists they exported, it would be reasonable to assume that any trouble they caused would be more of a problem for Iran on their Western border than for Saudi Arabia. In 1990, just two years after the Soviet Union left Afghanistan, the Saudi Monarchy permitted the United States to place U.S. forces in Saudi Arabia to defeat the threat of an invasion from Iraq. A decision viewed by the Saudi Wahhabi exiles in Afghanistan as an act of blasphemy against Islam.

While Saudi Arabia expanded its sphere of influence to the East, Iran focused on the Western front. Following the success of the Iranian revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini established the “export of the revolution” as a principle of foreign policy for Iran. “If we want to export this revolution, we must do something so that people themselves take government in their own hands, so that the people from the so-called third stratum come to power.”<sup>16</sup> Expansion served Iranian national interest and honored the commitment by Ayatollah Khomeini to bring the revolution to Israel.

Fear shaped how Iran would approach their expansionist agenda. While the Ayatollah was contemplating the expansion of the Islamic revolutionary movement, their Sunni-Arab neighbor, Iraq, unexpectedly invaded. Saddam Hussein, who came to power in 1979 during the Iranian revolution, feared the Iranian Islamic movement. “Saddam Hussein felt directly threatened by the Islamic revolution which had brought Ayatollah Khomeini to power in Iran the year before.”<sup>17</sup> This was a reasonable concern considering seventy percent of Iraq identified with the Shiite sect of Islam. Iran and Iraq engaged in an eight-year war of attrition with neither nation

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<sup>16</sup> New York Times, “Around The World; Khomeini Urges Export Of Iranian Revolution,” New York Times World, <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/10/15/world/around-the-world-khomeini-urges-export-of-iranian-revolution.html> (accessed October 3, 2016).

<sup>17</sup> Roger Hardy, “The Iran-Iraq war: 25 years on,” BBC News, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/4260420.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4260420.stm) (accessed October 3, 2016).

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achieving a decisive victory. At times, the Iranian situation was so desperate that they employed lightly armed human waves against Iraqi armored units.

The Iran-Iraq war shaped how the Iranian regime would expand their sphere of influence. “No single event has defined Iran’s revolutionary ideology, politics, perspectives on society, and security more than the Iran-Iraq War.”<sup>18</sup> The demands of the Iraq invasion consumed the conventional military resources of Iran. If the Iranians were to expand the revolution beyond their borders in the midst of the war with Iraq, they would need an unconventional approach. Much like Saudi Arabia had reached out to Sunni-Afghanistan to grow their sphere of influence, the Iranians looked to Shiite enclaves to gain a foothold along the Western sphere of the Middle East.

Iran found a strategic ally in Syria. The Iranians and the Bashar al-Assad regime shared a common Shiite heritage and both opposed Saddam Hussein as well as Israel. “The strategic alliance between Iran and Syria dates back to the 1980s and the outbreak of the war between Iran and Iraq, where Syria took Iran’s side due to Syria’s longstanding animosity with the fellow Baath ruled country.”<sup>19</sup> The 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, triggered by Lebanese-Shiite attacks against the Israelis convinced Ayatollah Khomeini to engage in a proxy war against the “Little Satan.” According to Ali Mohtashimi, the Iranian ambassador to Syria from 1982 to 1985, “after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, Ayotollah Khomeini changed his mind about sending large forces to Syria and Lebanon.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Behnam Den Taleblu, “The Long Shadow of the Iran-Iraq War,” *The National Interest*, October 23, 2014, under “the impact of the Iran-Iraq war,” <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-long-shadow-the-iran-iraq-war-11535> (accessed October 3, 2016).

<sup>19</sup> Anthina Tzemprin and Jugoslav Jozic’ and Henry Lambare’, “The Middle East Cold War: Iran-Saudi Arabia and the Way Ahead,” *Croatian Political Science Review* Vol. 52, No. 4-5 (July 2015): 187-202, <http://hrcak.srce.hr/159926?lang=en> (accessed September 18, 2016).

<sup>20</sup> Michael Rubin, “The Enduring Iran-Syria-Hezbollah Axis,” *American Enterprise Institute*, December 17, 2009, under “Syrian support for Iran and Hezbollah,” <https://www.aei.org/publication/the-enduring-iran-syria-hezbollah-axis/> (accessed September 30, 2016).

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Constrained by the burdens of the war with Iraq, Ayatollah Khomeini selected militarization of the Lebanese Shia as an indirect approach. “The only remaining way is to train the Shi’a men there, and so Hezbollah was born.”<sup>21</sup> On June 12, 1982, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards arrived in Damascus.<sup>22</sup> From Syria, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards had access to the Israeli—Lebanese conflict and the opportunity to stake a claim as the defender of Islam against the Zionist oppressors of Palestine and their Western patriarch, the United States.

On Sunday morning, October 23, 1983, Iranian inspired Hezbollah attacked the U.S. Marine Barracks in Beirut killing 241 U.S. service members.<sup>23</sup> In little more than one year on the ground in Lebanon, Ayatollah Khomeini succeeded on his promise to rid the Levant of the United States and positioned Iran to take the lead in the Islamic struggle against Israel. “President Regan withdrew the American forces from Lebanon in the wake of the bombing. Terrorists the world over drew their own lessons from the devastation.”<sup>24</sup>

Even under the immense pressure of the Iran-Iraq war on their border, the Iranians demonstrated their intellect and commitment to exporting the revolution. Never missing an opportunity, Ayatollah Khomeini increased his rhetoric against the Sunni Monarchies of the Middle East, in particular, Saudi Arabia. The Saudis and many other Arab nations supported Iraq with material goods in their war against Iran. “Iraq can also count on Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries to help pay for those arms.”<sup>25</sup> Despite fellow Arab assistance, Saddam

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Baer, *The Devil We Know*, 52.

<sup>23</sup> Jim Michaels, “Recalling the deadly 1983 attack on the Marine barracks,” *USAToday.com*, October 23, 2013, under “Hezbollah attack of U.S Marines in Beirut,” <http://www.usatoday.com/story/nation/2013/10/23/marines-beirut-lebanon-hezbollah/3171593/> (accessed October 3, 2016).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> David Segal, “The Iran-Iraq War: A Military Analysis,” *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1988 Issue, under “the history of the Iran-Iraq war,” <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/1988-06-01/iran-iraq-war-military-analysis> (accessed October 3, 2016).

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Hussein was unable to defeat his Shiite-Iranian nemesis. Iraq won the majority of the tactical victories but failed to achieve its strategic aim; Iran survived.

Capitalizing upon his successes against Israel and the United States on the Western Front, Ayatollah Khomeini next looked for an opportunity to discredit the Saudi Monarchy. “Then came 31 July 1987, Iranian pilgrims in Mecca massed after Friday’s midday prayers for the “disavowal of the pagans” rally. The pilgrims chanted “Death to America! Death to Israel!” and brandished portraits of their leader, Ayatollah Khomeini.”<sup>26</sup> In the ensuing confrontation between Iranian Pilgrims and Saudi Police two hundred and seventy-five Iranian Shiite Pilgrims died. Ayatollah Khomeini seized upon the opportunity to associate the Saudi Monarchy with the United States and Israel as any enemy of Islam.

“A few days later, Ayatollah Khomeini, in a speech which marked the beginning of an open conflict between the two states, fiercely attacked the House of Saud, the ruling royal family of Saudi Arabia. “How better could we prove to the world that those...[Saudis] can do nothing except ensure the interests of America and Israel?...If we wanted to prove to the world that the House of Saud government, those Godless Wahhabis, are like a knife that has always penetrated into the Muslims’ hearts, we could not do it so well as the feeble and deliberate Saudi executives have done it.”<sup>27</sup>

On June 3, 1989, Ayatollah Khomeini died, passing executive authority to Ayatollah Khamenei, the new Supreme Leader. The lessons of the Iranian revolution and subsequent war for survival against Sunni-Arab Iraq, while successfully exporting the revolution against Israel and the United States, was not lost upon the Iranians. In Lebanon, Iran identified its strategic

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<sup>26</sup> Shahir Shahidsaless, “Saudi’s real reason for fearing Iran lies closer to home,” *Middleeasteye.net*, November 3, 2015, under “Ayatollah Khomeini comments about the House of Saud,” <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/why-saudi-arabia-relentlessly-competes-iran-1753133787> (accessed October 5, 2016).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

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approach to gain dominance over Saudi Arabia for control of Islam. “The Lebanon war is Iran’s blueprint for its new empire, fought for and held by proxies.”<sup>28</sup>

In the Saudi—Iranian struggle for control of Islam, the Saudis were losing. Two years after the Iran—Iraq war, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait and threatened Saudi Arabia. The House of Saud rejected an offer from Osama Bin Laden to raise a Mujahedeen Army to defend Saudi Arabia.<sup>29</sup> Saudi Arabia instead relied upon the United States to defend the Kingdom from the threat of Saddam Hussein. In the perspective of the Sunni Mujahedeen who fought against the Soviets on behalf of Islam, allowing the United States to defend the Muslim holy land was unacceptable. Public opinion throughout the Islamic world and particularly in the Middle East began to view Iran as the defender of Islam against the West.

In May 2000, Israel pulled out of Lebanon after twenty-two years of occupation in accordance with United Nations Resolution 425. The perspective of many was that Iranian backed Hezbollah had defeated the Israelis, something the Sunni-Arabs never achieved. “Hezbollah Secretary-General Sheik Hassan Nasrallah celebrated with hundreds of followers at his headquarters in Beirut, the Lebanese capital. “’This is the first glorious victory in 50 years of Arab-Israel conflict.’”<sup>30</sup>

The victory of Hezbollah, Iran’s proxy force in Lebanon is the realization of the vision articulated by Ayatollah Khomeini during the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Following the Israeli withdraw his successor stated, “Lebanon is Iran’s greatest foreign policy success. We will repeat it across Dar al-Islam (the Islamic world) until all of Islam is liberated.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Robert Baer, *The Devil We Know*, 54.

<sup>29</sup> John-Thor Dahlburg and Alex Rodriguez, “Osama bin Laden, born to privilege, dies a pariah,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 2, 2011.

<sup>30</sup> Marjorie Miller and John Daniszewski and Tracy Wilkinson, “Israel Leaves South Lebanon After 22 Years,” *latimes.com*, May 24, 2000, under “Israel pullout of Lebanon in 2000,” <http://articles.latimes.com/2000/may/24/news/mn-33497> (accessed 05 October, 2016).

<sup>31</sup> Robert Baer, *The Devil We Know*, 55.



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As a new Western Century dawned upon the Middle East, many outside the region failed to recognize that in the historical power struggle for Islam, Iran had the momentum. The House of Saud's credibility, both regionally and internationally, diminished following the Al-Qaida attacks upon the United States on September 11, 2001. Saudi Arabia lost control of its Islamic Warriors while Iran gained a seat at the table in the international Israeli-Palestinian negotiations due to the success of Hezbollah, the Iranian proxy army in Lebanon. "The rising stature of its protégé [Hezbollah] allowed Iran a voice in deliberations well beyond its actual military capabilities."<sup>32</sup>

The 2003 United States invasion of Iraq placed the largest Shia population external to Iran within its grasp. Iran, which already had a blueprint for war against a superior force using proxy forces moved quickly to capitalize upon the U.S. mistake. "The Iranians had no idea that within three years after Israel's withdraw from Lebanon, the United States would blunder into Iraq, destroy Iran's historical enemy Saddam Hussein, and offer up Iraq on a silver platter."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ray Takeyh, *Hidden Iran*, 206.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Baer, *The Devil We Know*, 55.

## Part II: The Problem Frame

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The purpose of the **PROBLEM FRAME** is to synthesize the interaction of the actors within the environmental frame in relation to the key strategic factors. The interaction of the various actors establishes patterns of behavior, which shape perceptions and formulate a narrative. The variance in perception between actors in relation to the key strategic factors defines the problem.

### **Chapter 4: The Obama Doctrine**

The analysis of the Obama Doctrine identifies the administrations underappreciation of the Sunni-Shia struggle for supremacy in the Middle East, a key strategic factor. The perception of the Obama Doctrine by other actors within the environment is evident by the changes in behavior toward the United States.

### **Chapter 5: ISIS, Oil, and the GCC**

Economic warfare and the desynchronized strategy to defeat ISIS.

### **Chapter 4: The Obama Doctrine**

The United States' invasion of Iraq brought the Sunni—Shia war for Islam from the edge of the Islamic civilization to Mesopotamia, part of the Islamic holy-land. The war for influence over Islam is not new; rather it is a conflict as old as Islam itself with the latest “hot war” sparking in 1979. What is different this time is the intensity; the desperate measures each side is willing to take to gain the upper hand. One side, Iran, has a formula for success while the Saudis continue to invest in an ideology that is a threat to them and everyone else. The Iranian led Shia,

## CHAPTER 4: THE OBAMA DOCTRINE

which represents an estimated 10% of the total Muslim population is winning, and winning big.<sup>1</sup>

The success of the Iranians since 1979 has disrupted the historical balance of power of the Islamic system. The system is out of balance.

It is not just that the Iranians are winning; it is also the speed of Iran's ascent to power, succeeding at a task, which the Saudi-led Arabs failed. When viewed in the proper context of a power struggle between the Iranian Regime and Saudi Monarchy since 1979, the Shia win-loss record demonstrates why the Saudis are so concerned and desperate. The newly formed Islamic Republic of Iran fought Saddam Hussein's Army, equipped with Russian hardware and funded by the Saudis and other Sunni-Arab nations, to a standstill. While they achieved little in terms of battlefield victory, the fact that they survived is a strategic win.

At the same time the Iranians were fighting Saddam, they took on Israel employing an innovative and successful approach. In just two years, the Iranians forced the United States out of Lebanon and replaced the Sunni-backed Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) with their own proxy Army, Hezbollah. While the Sunni-Arabs attacked Israel four times in thirty years and failed, the Iranians achieved phenomenal success from the very beginning. The Iranians pushed the Israelis out of Southern Lebanon in 2000 and provided the Israeli Army what many have perceived as their first tactical defeat in 2006.

From 1983 forward, Sunni organizations such as Hamas, a political organization in Palestine with its own military wing, drifted away from Saudi Arabia and into the orbit of Iran. Even Saudi Arabia's highly successful Afghanistan Mujahedeen turned on them, evolving into Al-Qaida and humiliating Saudi Arabia with their attacks on Saudi Arabia's strategic ally, the

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<sup>1</sup> Luis Lugo, "Mapping the Global Muslim Population," *Pew Research Center Religion and Public Life*, October 7, 2009, under "Global Islamic population by sect," <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/10/07/mapping-the-global-muslim-population/> (accessed February 1, 2017).

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United States. On social media sites throughout the jihadi networks, the Saudis and their strategic partnership with the United States became the symbol for the resistance.

The United States' invasion of Iraq and subsequent removal of the Sunni-Baathist government placed Iraq in the midst of the Saudi Arabia—Iranian struggle for control of the Middle East. The United States did not recognize the risk of removing the Sunni dictator and turning Iraq over to its seventy percent majority Shiite population. Sunni-Arab leaders throughout the region tried to warn the Americans. “King Abdullah II of Jordan sounded a warning that America’s toppling of Saddam Hussein in Iraq would lead to the emergence of an Iranian-influenced “Shia crescent”—code for Iranian expansion—from Lebanon to Saudi Arabia.”<sup>2</sup>

Sunni and Shia leaders alike understood what the U.S. invasion of Iraq meant for the Middle East. During an interview with Mummar el-Qaddafi six months prior to the invasion he was asked who would benefit from the invasion to which he immediately replied “Bin Laden, there is no doubt about that. Iraq could end up becoming the staging ground for Al Qaeda, because if the Saddam government collapses, it will be anarchy in Iraq.”<sup>3</sup>

In late 2005 as Iraq deteriorated into civil war, the much more organized Iranians expertly maneuvered through the political environment of Baghdad. The Americans supported the election of Nouri Al-Maliki, leader of the Shiite-Dawa party as Iraqi Prime Minister, placing an Iranian ally in power. Through Al-Maliki, the Iranians engineered the ejection of the US from the proxy fight for control over Iraq. “Iranian leverage was seen as a key factor in Maliki’s win

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<sup>2</sup> “The Shia crescendo: Shia militias are proliferating in the Middle East,” *The Economist* Vol. 414, No. 8931 (March 28, 2015): 52, <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21647367-shia-militias-are-proliferating-middle-east-shia-crescendo> (accessed October 3, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Scott Anderson, “Fractured Lands: How The Arab World Came Apart,” *New York Times Magazine*, August 14, 2016, under “The Arab Spring,” [http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/08/11/magazine/isis-middle-east-arab-spring-fractured-lands.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/08/11/magazine/isis-middle-east-arab-spring-fractured-lands.html?_r=0) (accessed August 16, 2016).

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against Allawi, and pressure from Tehran is widely believed to have scuttled negotiations with the Obama administration over leaving a residual U.S. troop presence in Iraq.”<sup>4</sup> The new Iraqi Government refused to come to terms on a status of forces agreement (SOFA) with the United States. Without the agreement, leaving U.S. forces in Iraq was politically unacceptable in the United States.

In Iraq, the Iranians were outmaneuvering the Saudis. “The Saudis see all regional politics through the lens of Iranian advances and, in their more honest moments, through the lens of their own failure to counter such moves earlier.”<sup>5</sup> The United States withdrawal from Iraq left the Saudis with few options; either leave Iraq to the fate of the Iranian-backed Shia, or partner with the Sunni Violent Extremist Organizations left in the wake of the U.S. withdraw. The Saudis rallied their fellow Sunni Monarchies in the Persian Gulf to resource the Sunni Violence Extremist Organizations willing to fight the Iranian-backed Shiite militias.

Although the House of Saud was fearful of funding Sunni Jihadists who might turn against them, their fear of encirclement by an ever-growing Shia crescent was greater. Richard Dearlove, the former director of the British intelligence service, MI6 said “The Saudi policy towards jihadists has two contradictory motives: fear of jihadists operating within Saudi Arabia, and a desire to use them against Shia powers abroad. The Saudis are deeply attracted towards any militancy which can effectively challenge Shiadom.”<sup>6</sup>

The 2011 Arab Spring, a civic movement to rid primarily Sunni-Arab countries of their dictators swept across the Middle East and collided with the Saudi—Iranian struggle for control

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<sup>4</sup> Jason M. Breslow and Evan Wexler, “Losing Iraq; Who is Nouri al-Maliki,” *Frontline*, July 29, 2014, under “Nouri al-Maliki and Iran,” <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/who-is-nouri-al-maliki/> (accessed October 8, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> F. Gregory Gause III, “The Future of U.S.-Saudi Relations,” 117.

<sup>6</sup> Patrick Cockburn, *The Rise Of Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution* (New York: Verso, 2015), 36.

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of the Middle East. Already losing to the Iranians in Iraq, the House of Saud felt even more threatened as the Arab Spring targeted regimes allied with the House of Saud. “The Arab Spring only heightened Riyadh’s sense of encirclement. When protestors toppled Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, the Saudi’s lost one of their most reliable partners.”<sup>7</sup> The House of Saud viewed the Arab Spring as a threat to their survival. Regional allies were under threat of the movement and Saudi Arabia felt abandoned by their international allies, in particular, the United States. Fearful of their own survival and desperate to make some gains against the Iranians, the Saudis were looking for any opportunity.

The Arab Spring-inspired revolt by the Sunni majority population in Syria against the Bashar Al-Assad regime aligned with Iran was the opportunity they needed. “The Saudis see the Syrian uprising against Assad as their best chance to reverse Iran’s geopolitical gains.”<sup>8</sup> On August 23, 2013, the Syrian regime used chemical weapons in an attack against Syrian civilians, killing approximately 1400 people, including women and children. The Obama administration had previously declared in 2012 that the use of chemical weapons would be a “red line” that would alter the United States’ approach to the Syrian civil war. President Obama said, “We have been very clear to the Assad regime, but also to other players on the ground, that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus.”<sup>9</sup>

On August 30, 2013, the U.S. administration confirmed the use of chemical weapons by the Syrians and hinted at pending U.S. military action. The administration understood the

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<sup>7</sup> F. Gregory Cause III, “The Future of U.S.-Saudi Relations,” 118.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> James Ball, “Obama issues Syria a ‘red line’ warning on chemical weapons,” *The Washington Post*, August 20, 2012. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obama-issues-syria-red-line-warning-on-chemical-weapons/2012/08/20/ba5d26ec-eaf7-11e1-b811-09036bcb182b\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obama-issues-syria-red-line-warning-on-chemical-weapons/2012/08/20/ba5d26ec-eaf7-11e1-b811-09036bcb182b_story.html) (accessed October 10, 2016).

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expectations of the United States' allies in the region. The U.S. Secretary of State, John Kerry, remarked that the "credibility and the future interests of the United States of America and our allies were at stake."<sup>10</sup> President Obama accentuated the severity of the act committed by the Syrian regime. "It's important for us to recognize that when over 1,000 people are killed, including hundreds of innocent children, through the use of a weapon that 98 to 99 percent of humanity says should not be used even in war, and there is no action, then we're sending a signal that the international norm doesn't mean much. And that is a danger to our national security."<sup>11</sup>

Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Arab leaders expected the United States would take military action against Syria, an act that would reassure America's strategic partnership with the Sunni Arabs. The Saudis thought the United States was once again committed to the long standing U.S.—Saudi partnership against the growing Iranian sphere of influence. For Saudi Arabia, Syria was the lynchpin of the Iranian "Shia crescent." "The Syrian crisis provided Saudi Arabia with an opportunity to weaken Assad's regime and subsequently isolate Iran in the region."<sup>12</sup> Saudi Arabia was under the illusion that the United States viewed the Middle East in the same way Saudi Arabia did, as a power struggle against the growing threat of Iran. Saudi Arabia believed that Syria had finally brought the U.S.—Saudi alliance against Iran back to the forefront. "The Saudi ambassador in Washington at the time, Adel al-Jubeir, told friends, and his superiors in Riyadh that the president was finally ready to strike."<sup>13</sup> From the perspective of the Saudi Arabian ambassador to the United States, President Obama finally "figured out how important this is."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Jeffery Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic.com*, April 2016, under "The Obama Doctrine," <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/> (accessed October 10, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Athina Tzemprin and Jugoslav Jozic and Henery Lambare', *The Middle East Cold War*, 187-202.

<sup>13</sup> Jeffery Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine."

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

## CHAPTER 4: THE OBAMA DOCTRINE

A week after initially indicating that the United States would intercede militarily in Syria, President Obama reversed course. The president instead opted for a diplomatic solution to the Syrian crisis and asked Russian President Vladimir Putin if Russia could influence Syria to give up its stockpile of chemical weapons through Russia's Middle East ally, Iran.<sup>15</sup> This decision is the watershed moment in U.S.—Saudi Arabian diplomatic relations. The reaction from Sunni—Arab allies in the region was recognition of a paradigm shift in U.S. foreign policy.

“The crown prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, who was already upset with Obama for “abandoning” Hosni Mubarak, the former president of Egypt, fumed to American visitors that the U.S. was led by an “untrustworthy” president. The king of Jordan, Abdullah II—already dismayed by what he saw as Obama’s illogical desire to distance the U.S. from its traditional Sunni Arab allies and create a new alliance with Iran, Assad’s Shia sponsor—complained privately, “I think I believe in American power more than Obama does.” The Saudis, too, were infuriated. They had never trusted Obama—he had, long before he became president, referred to them as a “so-called ally” of the U.S. “Iran is the new great power of the Middle East, and the U.S. is the old,” Jubeir, the Saudi ambassador in Washington, told his superiors in Riyadh.”<sup>16</sup>

Since 2013, Saudi Arabia and the United States existed on divergent paths concerning the most critical Middle East security issue, ISIS. The U.S. nuclear deal with Iran and an emerging narrative of Saudi Arabia as the true source of Islamic fundamentalism continue to deepen the divide between the United States and Saudi Arabia. In 2015, the Obama administration attempted to close the divide. The Saudis however, no longer convinced of America’s commitment, took matters into their own hands on a path inconsistent with U.S. national interests.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.



## Chapter 5: ISIS, Oil, and the GCC

Today, Saudi Arabia and Iran are engaged in proxy wars in Iraq, Syria, Bahrain, and Yemen. Their methodology of gaining influence in the Islamic world by spreading their religious ideology has generated Al-Qaida, Hezbollah, Hamas, and now ISIS. It is in this context that the United States must envision the geo-political environment in the Middle East. The United States' problem is the inability, or unwillingness to view the conflict through the lens of Saudi Arabia and Iran as they vie for power throughout the Middle East. The United States and its western allies focus on tactics, primarily counter-terrorism. While they may achieve tactical success through employment of the Iraqi Army, Kurdish Peshmerga, and both Sunni and Shiite militias, they do not recognize the core issue. The key strategic factor is the growth of Iranian influence that is tilting the balance of power in favor of the minority Shia over the majority Sunni. The United States' deliberate attempt to ignore the conflict has greatly reduced U.S. influence in the Middle East and placed its national interests at risk.

The U.S. administration is attempting to create a balance of power in the Middle East between the Iran and Saudi Arabia. This attempt however, lacks historical context of the region and understanding of Middle East propensities. In an interview with Jeffrey Goldberg of *The Atlantic*, President Obama stated that Saudi Arabia and Iran “needed to share the Middle East.”<sup>1</sup> “The competition between the Saudis and the Iranians—which has helped to feed proxy wars and chaos in Syria and Iraq and Yemen—requires us to say to our friends as well as to the Iranians that they need to find an effective way to share the neighborhood and institute some sort of cold

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<sup>1</sup> Danielle Pletka, “Symposium: A preview of Obama’s trip to Saudi Arabia,” *American Enterprise Institute*, April 18, 2016, under “President Obama and the GCC,” <https://www.aei.org/scholar/danielle-pletka/> (accessed September 23, 2016).

peace.”<sup>2</sup> Although a laudable goal, the Obama foreign policy ignores the magnitude of the key strategic factor in the region, the Sunni-Shia war for supremacy. The designers of the U.S. Middle East foreign policy cannot look past the fact that globally, eight-five to ninety percent of Muslims are Sunni. As a region, the Middle East is composed of twenty-two countries with majority Sunni populations compared to a Shia population represented as the majority in only four countries, Iran, Iraq, Bahrain and Lebanon.<sup>3</sup>

Following the 2013 decision by the Obama Administration to forgo regime change in Syria, Saudi Arabia embarked upon its own independent strategy to combat the growth of Iran. No longer seeking the approval of the United States, the Saudis adopted an aggressive foreign policy, attempting to counter Iran’s influence through the Middle East. Shortly after the Arab Spring-inspired Sunni uprising in Syria, Bahrain emerged as the next front in the Shia-Sunni war. “The epicenter of the Saudi—Iranian competition is the Kingdom of Bahrain. The small island of Bahrain has a Shia majority population as high as 70 percent, and is ruled by a Sunni minority.”<sup>4</sup> Willing to risk international criticism for unilateral action, Saudi Arabia deployed “1,200 troops in fear that if the Shia majority prevailed, Iran could expand its influence and provoke unrest in other neighboring countries.”<sup>5</sup>

One year after the infamous “red-line” incident, the U.S. administration began an international dialog to build a consensus for diplomatic negotiations with Iran. In 2015, Iran agreed to a nuclear deal that will delay the production of a weapon in exchange for the ending of economic sanctions. From the Saudi Arabian perspective, the United States was empowering

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<sup>2</sup> Jeffery Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine.”

<sup>3</sup> Luis Lugo, “Mapping the Global Muslim Population,” *Pew Research Center Religion and Public Life*, October 7, 2009, under “Global Islamic population by sect,” <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/10/07/mapping-the-global-muslim-population/> (accessed February 1, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Athina Tzemprin and Jugoslav Jozic and Henery Lambare’, *The Middle East Cold War*, 187-202.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

their enemy, treating Iran as a regional heavyweight engaged in high-level diplomatic talks with the world's most powerful country. The United States' 2015 diplomatic efforts to secure an Iranian nuclear offset agreement reinforced Saudi fears that their strategic partnership with the United States was under threat. "Saudi Arabia is afraid of a revival of the pre-Islamic revolution US—Iranian alliance. Such a development could shift completely the balance of power and enable Iran to emerge as the uncontested regional leader."<sup>6</sup>

Convinced that the United States is no longer committed to a strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia following the Iranian nuclear agreement, Saudi Arabia embarked upon its own strategy in Syria. As the United States attempted to build a coalition of Sunni-Arab militias to defeat ISIS, Saudi Arabia acted unilaterally outside of the U.S. plan. "In Syria, the Americans backed a plan by Saudi Arabia to build up a "Southern Front" based in Jordan that would be hostile to the Assad government in Damascus, and simultaneously hostile to al-Qaeda-type rebels in the north and east."<sup>7</sup> The Saudi Yarmouk Brigade conceptualized initially to be a joint venture between Saudi Arabia and the United States. Once employed however, it became clear that the force was operating with Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN), the al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria.<sup>8</sup>

The United States and Saudi Arabia do not share a common goal in Syria. The United States' focus is on counter-terrorism to contain ISIS while resourcing Iraqi, Kurdish, and even Iranian militias to reduce ISIS territorial gains in Iraq. For Saudi Arabia, the number one objective is not the defeat of ISIS, but the overthrow of the Iranian-aligned Alawite regime of Bashar al-Assad. The strategic impasse prevented the ability of the United States and the Saudi-led Sunni-Arab leaders from building a coherent coalition. The Saudis' actions manifest from its

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Patrick Cockburn, *The Rise Of Islamic State*, 52-53.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

disbelief in America's commitment and resolve. The U.S. stated policy is the defeat of ISIS and removal of the Bashar al-Assad regime. The U.S.—Saudi Arabian impasse prevented unity of effort early in the conflict and ceded the initiative to the Iranians. The U.S. Ambassador to Syria confirmed the level of Iranian involvement in Syria during a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on October 30, 2013. "The regime is suffering serious manpower shortages. For that reason, it has brought in foreign fighters from Hezbollah, from the Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps and even Iraqi Shia militiamen."<sup>9</sup>

While the Sunni-Arabs and the United States searched for a common purpose for action in Syria and Iraq, the Syrian Regime and their Iranian ally resourced their own international heavyweight. "On 30 September, Russia's parliament approved a request by President Vladimir Putin to launch air strikes in Syria. Within hours, the country's first intervention in the Middle East in decades began."<sup>10</sup> With the backing of the Russians, the Iranians demonstrated their ability to gain a commitment from one of the few world powers with the military capability and resources to intervene. The United States more modest goal of countering ISIS while remaining detached from the regional Sunni-Shia power struggle for Syria expired with the emergence of a Russian—Iranian led coalition. "Russia and Iran have strongly backed Syrian President Bashar Assad's government throughout the five-and-a-half year civil war with rebel groups supported by the United States and allies such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia."<sup>11</sup>

The Syrian civil war and ISIS share the same key strategic factor, the Sunni-Shia power struggle for regional supremacy. The United States' focus remains counter-terrorism against ISIS

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<sup>9</sup> U.S. Department of State, U.S. Ambassador to Syria, *U.S. Policy Towards Syria*, by Robert S. Ford, Open-file report, Senate Foreign Relations Committee (Washington, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> Middle East Editor, "Russia Joins War in Syria: Five Key Points," *bbc.com*, October 1, 2015, under "Russia enters war in Syria," <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34416519> (accessed October 12, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> Bradley Klapper, "Russian-Iran cooperation in Syria sends message to U.S.," *PBS.org*, August 17, 2016, under "Iranian Russian support in Syria," <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/russia-iran-cooperation-syria-sends-message-u-s/> (accessed October 12, 2016).

while Saudi Arabia and the other Arab states are engaged in the larger strategic context of Sunni—Shia regional supremacy. The divergent focus may result in a Sunni-Arab tolerance of ISIS as a better alternative than allowing the Iranian back al-Assad regime to remain in power. As the United States—Saudi Arabian disagreement over a strategic approach to the Syria—Iraq—ISIS problem continues to manifest, a new western narrative of Saudi Arabia is growing.

Media outlets supportive of the Obama administration's Middle East foreign policy are critical of Saudi Arabia, emphasizing Saudi Arabia's decades-long efforts to spread Wahhabism throughout the region. "Hardly a week passes without a television pundit or a newspaper columnist blaming Saudi Arabia for jihadist violence."<sup>12</sup> The emerging narrative places the blame for Islamic fundamentalism on Saudi Arabia. A recently published editorial in the New York Times by the Iranian Foreign Minister is just one example of how the Sunni-Shia conflict has entered into the information domain. "Saudi Arabia's effort to persuade its Western patrons to back its shortsighted tactics is based on the false premise that plunging the Arab world into further chaos will somehow damage Iran."<sup>13</sup> The growing narrative, critical of Saudi Arabia and their spread of Wahhabism, is changing U.S. public opinion towards Saudi Arabia, particularly in the United States Congress. The recently passed Justice against Sponsors of Terrorism Act will allow the families of victims killed by the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 to pursue civil litigation against Saudi Arabia.

A move to rethink the United States strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia is under consideration led by Senator Chris Murphy. "For the past year, Murphy has continued to call for

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<sup>12</sup> Scott Shane, "Saudis and Extremism: Both the Arsonists and the Firefighters," *nytimes.com*, August 26, 2016, under "Saudi Arabian support to Islamic Extremism," <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/26/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-islam> (accessed August 28, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> Mohammad Javad Zarif, "Let Us Rid the World of Wahhabism," *The New York Times*, September 13, 2016, under "Iranian Foreign Minister critique of Wahhabism," <http://nyti.ms/2cD2SRT> (accessed September 14, 2016).

his colleagues on Capitol Hill to rethink the status quo of American support for the Saudi Kingdom. His is a controversial and unpopular position because the country is viewed as a key partner in the Middle East, but it's one that's growing in popularity.”<sup>14</sup> Although the United States is attempting to disengage from the Saudi Arabia—Iran power struggle, the information domain has brought the conflict into the realm of American public opinion.

Already competing for supremacy in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Iran are now engaged in economic warfare. With the lifting of sanctions as part of the U.S.—Iranian nuclear agreement, Iran struck an agreement with Iraq to “increase its oil production to 13 million barrels per day over the next seven years.”<sup>15</sup> Saudi Arabia countered Iran and Russia with its own oil as a weapon policy. “In 2014, Saudi Arabia’s decision to expand drilling operations and flood the market with oil was enacted in order to drive both Russian and, more specifically, U.S. energy companies out of business.”<sup>16</sup>

Russia’s willingness to enter into the Syrian conflict is more than just its allegiance to Iran and its ally Syria. The alliance provides the Russians an opportunity to influence the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) through Iran, which is a member. The strategic alliance between Russia and Iran provides the Russians an indirect path to counter Saudi Arabia’s manipulation of the global oil market, which is severely affecting the Russian economy. “So far the strategy has been effective not only in forcing U.S. energy corporations

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<sup>14</sup> Mazin Sidahmed and Sabrina Siddiqui, “Senator Chris Murphy: US support for Saudi Arabia ‘can’t be unconditional,” *theguardian*, September 22, 2016, under “U.S. legislation against Saudi Arabia,” <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/22/senator-chris-murphy-saudi-arabia-arms-sale-connecticut> (accessed October 12, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> Athina Tzemprin and Jugoslav Jozic and Henery Lambare’, *The Middle East Cold War*, 187-202.

<sup>16</sup> Elihugh M. Abner, “The Collapse Of Saudi Arabia and the Cataclysmic Power Shift in the Middle East,” *Journal of International Affairs* Vol. 69 No. 2 (Spring/Summer 2016): 169-173, <https://jia.sipa.columbia.edu/collapse-saudi-arabia-cataclysmic-power-shift-middle-east-2> (accessed September 24, 2016).

into laying off thousands of workers, but has successfully struck a blow to the Russian economy, half of whose budget is funded through oil exports.”<sup>17</sup>

The Obama Doctrine attempted to disengage the United States from the regional Saudi Arabia—Iranian power struggle. The strategy however has not isolated the United States from the escalating struggle between the two powers for supremacy. Since the 2013 friction between the United States and Saudi Arabia over the strategy to combat ISIS, the contest has entered into the information and economic domains and provided Russia an opportunity to fill the void left by the United States’ attempt at disengagement. In an effort to repair the damage, the Obama administration reengaged with the United States’ long-time Sunni allies through the Gulf Cooperation Council.

The administration attempted to counter the perception of the U.S. leaning towards Iran by strengthening the United States’ commitment to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). “On May 14, 2015, President Barack Obama and the Heads of Delegations of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states reached agreement at Camp David to deepen their strategic partnership in defensive cooperation.”<sup>18</sup> While the agreement provides an anti-ballistic missile defense capability for the members of the GCC (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates), it does little to address the on-going proxy wars between Saudi Arabia and Iran. In exchange for agreeing to the nuclear deal, the Iranians received relief from economic sanctions; funds that the Iranians are already committing to their fight against the Saudis for regional supremacy. “The Iran nuclear deal has set the stage for a significant change in the military balance in the Middle East. Iran has leveraged sanctions relief and the general

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Peppino DeBiaso, “Missile Defense and the GCC: Strengthening Deterrence through a New Framework,” *Perspectives*, Spring 2016, under “The United States and the GCC,” (ADD URL) (accessed October 3, 2016).

atmosphere of Western engagement to take delivery of the S-300 air defense system from Russia. It has presented Moscow with a \$6 billion shopping list of military hardware.”<sup>19</sup>

In April 2016, President Obama traveled to Riyadh in an effort to suppress Saudi Arabia’s perceptions of a U.S. pivot towards Iran. While meeting with the leadership of the GCC, President Obama reconfirmed the United States’ pledge “that the US would cooperate with them to address what he called Iran’s “destabilizing activities in the region.”<sup>20</sup> The six leaders of the GCC led by King Salman of Saudi Arabia presented four requests during the conference asking the administration to reconsider their Iraq policy in an effort to “facilitate representation of the Sunnis in the central government in Baghdad. The Gulf rulers told Obama that his policy of trying to win the support of Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi is mistaken. Obama rejected the request and said he refuses to change his Iraq policy.”<sup>21</sup> While the United States views Iraq as a separate nation-state, Saudi Arabia and the members of the GCC do not. From the Saudi-led GCC perspective, the United States’ support for Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi is tacit support for Iran. Iraq, in their view is ground zero in their war with Iran.

The declarations of the President, when weighed with the actions of the administration, leave the Saudis and the other members of the GCC with a perception that the United States is pulling away from them in favor of Iran. At the same time the U.S. President is attempting to reassure Saudi Arabia of America’s commitment, the U.S. State Department is sending mixed signals. Farah Pandith, the U.S. State Department Special Representative to Muslim communities worldwide, when discussing the role of Saudi Arabia and Islamic extremism said,

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<sup>19</sup> Danielle Pletka and Frederick W. Kagan and Michael Rubin and J. Matthew McInnis and Katherine Zimmerman, “Symposium: A preview of Obama’s trip to Saudi Arabia,” *American Enterprise Institute*, April 18, 2016, under “President Obama and the GCC,” (ADD URL) (accessed September 23, 2016).

<sup>20</sup> Dr. Abdul Ruff, “GCC-US Summit: Obama’s Failed Trip To Saudi Arabia,” (ADD Source), April 27, 2016, under “United States and the Gulf Cooperation Council,” (Add URL) (accessed September 23, 2016).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.



“If the Saudis do not cease what they are doing, there must be diplomatic, cultural and economic consequences.”<sup>22</sup> The perception in the Middle East is that the United States is considering sanctions against Saudi Arabia. Although no official discussion of sanctions by the administration occurred, the fact that the United States lifted sanctions against Iran as part of the U.S.—Iranian Nuclear Agreement is more evidence of a shift in U.S. foreign policy away from Saudi Arabia.

The administration’s historic nuclear deal with Iran combined with the policy reversal following Syria’s use of chemical weapons and growing narrative critical of Saudi Arabia has suspended the traditional U.S. hegemony in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia no longer views the United States as vested in protecting its interest. The problem is that the United States has vital national interests in the Middle East and those interests are most achievable through a strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia. The Obama Doctrine’s disengagement in the Middle East and acquiescence towards Iran is detrimental to the United States’ national interests.

The administration’s attempt to create parity in the Middle East risks elevating Iran to a position of regional dominance and jeopardizes the United States’ national interest. “The Obama administration’s failure to deter Iran’s destructive activities in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen while simultaneously negotiating the nuclear deal, is seen as an historic abdication of one of America’s main goals in the region: to prevent the rise of a regional hegemon.”<sup>23</sup> Relations with Iran are desirable, but not at the expense of alienating the United States’ most important ally in the region. For the United States to be successful in the Middle East requires a foreign policy that

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<sup>22</sup> Scott Shane, “Saudis and Extremism.”

<sup>23</sup> Matt McInnis, “Symposium: A preview of Obama’s trip to Saudi Arabia,” *American Enterprise Institute*, April 18, 2016, under “President Obama and the Gulf Cooperation Council,” <https://www.aei.org/scholar/j-matthew-mcinnis/> (accessed September 23, 2016).

## CHAPTER 5: ISIS, OIL, and the GCC

recognizes the geo-political environment of the region, a power struggle for regional supremacy between its ally Saudi Arabia and the Saudi's enemy, Iran.

The Obama Administrations Middle East Foreign Policy suffered from a perception of imbalance. The administration needed to balance the securing of a nuclear agreement to include the lifting of sanctions with Iran with similar actions that favored the Sunni perspective. If the Obama administration desired parity, then the foreign policy approach should offer parity. Condemning the lack of Sunni inclusion by the heavily Iranian influenced Baider al-Abadi administration in Baghdad at the request of the GCC would have been a good place to start.

# Part III: The Solution Frame

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## Chapter 6: Shared Interests: U.S. and Saudi Arabia

The United States has four vital national interests in the Middle East: Deterring threats to the U.S. homeland, the unimpeded flow of oil to global markets, the continued security of Israel, and containment of Iran.<sup>1</sup> The United States shares its Middle East national interests with the United States' indispensable Middle East ally, Saudi Arabia.<sup>2</sup> Although the United States and Saudi Arabia share common interests, the two nations are not currently committed to a multinational strategy to achieve these goals. From the United States' perspective, Iran is part of the solution and therefore part of the strategy. The Saudi Arabian perspective, however, does not envision Iran as a partner. This difference in perspective is the source of friction between the United States and Saudi Arabia.

Since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iran emerged as a peer competitor to Saudi Arabia. The United States attempted a balancing of regional power between Saudi Arabia and Iran. This attempt in many respects alienated Saudi Arabia and emboldened Iran, which is detrimental to the United States' national interests. To achieve success the United States must recognize that no historical propensity exists between Iran and Saudi Arabia to share power. The key strategic factor dominating the Middle East is the power struggle between Sunni and Shia for control of the Middle East and influence throughout the Islamic civilization. For the United States to

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<sup>1</sup> F Gregory Gause III, "Future U.S.-Saudi Relations."

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Bryon Greenwald, "Aftermath of WW II lecture, identify the indispensable nations," The Joint Advanced Warfighter School, October 13, 2016. Dr. Greenwald introduced the idea of indispensable nations, an idea applied by the author to strategic partners in the regional environment.

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achieve the desired outcomes of its national interests in the Middle East, the U.S. foreign policy in the region must acknowledge the geo-political environment. An analysis of the United States' four national interests in the region demonstrate that Saudi Arabia is a critical strategic partner that shares the U.S. national interests, while Iran does not.

Deterring threats to the homeland is the most pressing of the four U.S. national interests in the Middle East. Horrific violence by ISIS and the Syrian Regime against civilians, combined with ISIS and other violent extremist organization attacks in Europe and the United States, dominate the media. From these attacks is an emerging narrative of Saudi Arabia as the patriarch of the Wahhabi ideology that fuels ISIS and other violent extremist organizations. This ideological link between Saudi Arabia and ISIS is the greatest source of friction between the United States and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

From the United States' perspective, the defeat of ISIS is priority number one in the Middle East. To this end, the United States continues to promote a coalition of Iranian-Shia proxy forces and Saudi Arabian sponsored Sunni forces in a combined effort. While Iran and Saudi Arabia do both desire to defeat ISIS, each viewing ISIS as a threat, they desire to defeat ISIS for different reasons.

For Iran, defeating ISIS is part of its strategy to sustain the current Bashar Al-Assad regime in Syria. The Al-Assad regime is a critical partner for the Iranians as Syria provides Iran access to an important element of its national power, Hezbollah in Lebanon. A defeat of ISIS sustains the Iranians' "Shia Crescent" from Iran to the Levant.

Across the border in Iraq, the Iranians are providing Shia militias in the fight against ISIS, which provides the Iranians tremendous influence in Baghdad. The strategy of gaining and maintaining influence is a lesson from the Iranian playbook in Lebanon. The Shia militias may

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provide a short-term gain in the fight against ISIS, but come with longer-term risk. Iranian attempts to leave residual Shia forces in historically Sunni territory or import other strategies from Lebanon risk igniting new Sunni—Shia sectarian violence. ISIS and other Sunni violent extremist organizations use the growing threat of Shia domination over Islam and the presence of Shia militias in traditional Sunni territory as an important recruiting tool. As long as Iranian-Shia proxy forces are in Iraq, the potential of Sunni non-state actors emerging to counter them remains high.

The evolution of Sunni based violent extremist organizations from Al-Qaida, to Al-Qaida in Iraq, and now ISIS share a common ideology, Wahhabism. Unquestionably, Saudi Arabia bears responsibility for the promotion and spread of the Wahhabi ideology throughout the Middle East and the greater Islamic civilization. Ostracizing Saudi Arabia, however, will not convince Saudi Arabia to curtail its efforts to increase its influence throughout Islam by promoting its brand. In fact, the opposite is a more plausible outcome. In the fight against Wahhabi inspired violent extremist organizations, Saudi Arabia is the United States best ally.<sup>3</sup>

The House of Saud and Wahhabi ideology are inseparable; Wahhabism provides the House of Saud with the religious mandate to rule. The monarchy, however, understands the propensity of the Wahhabi ideology to inspire forces that threaten its reign. The founder of the modern day Saudi Arabia, Abd al-Aziz, crushed a rebellion of his Wahhabi inspired Ikhwan Warriors after he used them to conquered the Arabia Peninsula. “Abd al-Aziz set a fanatical force in motion which he was ultimately unable to control, and which might well have destroyed him and his followers but for outside intervention from his British allies.”<sup>4</sup> In 1979, following

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Pregent, “Saudi Arabia Is a Great American Alley,” Foreign Policy, April 20, 2016, under “Saudi Arabia ally of the United States,” <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/04/20/saudi-arabia-is-a-great-american-ally-not-iran/> (accessed 11 August, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Peter Sluglett and Marion Farouk-Sluglett, “The Precarious Monarchy,” 37.

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the siege of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, the Monarchy executed many of the Wahhabi Jihadists who participated in the assault and sent the rest to Afghanistan.

The historical trend is that the House of Saud Monarchy is willing to suppress the Wahhabi ideology when it becomes a threat to them. Since the attacks on the United States in September 2001, the Saudi Arabian government embarked upon a new era to remove the extremists who pose a threat to Saudi Arabia and its allies. “In January, the Saudi authorities had executed 47 people in a single day on terrorism charges, 45 of them Saudi citizens.”<sup>5</sup> The Saudis are motivated to defeat ISIS, as the violent extremist organization is more evidence of their Wahhabi imprint upon Islamic fundamentalism. “In a huge embarrassment to the Saudi authorities, the Islamic State adopted official Saudi textbooks for its schools until the extremist group could publish its own books in 2015.”<sup>6</sup>

In the same fashion as antibiotics, the disease can also be the cure. Without a doubt, Saudi Arabia’s spread of Wahhabi ideology inspired violent extremist organizations are a threat to the United States, Europe, and also Saudi Arabia. The Saudis are the United States’ best ally in countering the violent extremist organizations and, over time, changing the Wahhabi narrative. “The reach of the Saudis has been stunning, touching nearly every country with a Muslim population, from the Gothenburg Mosque in Sweden to the King Faisal Mosque in Chad, from the King Fahad Mosque in Los Angeles to the Seoul Central Mosque in South Korea.”<sup>7</sup>

The Saudis are the only ones capable of leading the effort to reform their extremely influential ideology. For Saudi Arabia to commit to reform, the Monarchy must feel assured that the United States is likewise committed to its continued security. The Western narrative of

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<sup>5</sup> Scott Shane, “Saudis and Extremism.”

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

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Wahhabism is synonymous with terrorism. The Saudi Monarchy recognizes the threat and counters the negative perception by targeting the Wahhabi generated extremists. Holistic reform of Wahhabism led by the Saudi Monarchy is ongoing but slow. The utility of the ideology to counter the growing Iranian influence necessitates continued investment. The fear of the growing Iranian influence is pervasive, shaping every aspect of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy. A reframing of the United States Middle East Foreign Policy that recognizes the value of Saudi Arabia in achieving the United States' security interest must include the recognition of the Saudi—Iranian struggle for power. Doing so empowers the Saudi Monarchy to reform Wahhabism at a faster pace and greater depth.

The United States' attempt to balance power between Saudi Arabia and Iran is affecting the U.S. national interest of securing the unimpeded flow of oil to the global market. The 2015 U.S.—Iranian nuclear agreement lifted sanctions on Iran's oil production, a proposal strongly opposed by Saudi Arabia. "Saudi Arabia has consistently opposed the nuclear deal fearing that it will strengthen Iran economically and allow it to increase funding for proxy conflicts in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen."<sup>8</sup> Iran immediately implemented a plan to return to pre-sanction production levels within a year. With the return to production, Iran is once again an important voice in the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), an organization that Saudi Arabia views within its sphere of influence.

The United States' diplomatic engagement with Iran and the lifting of sanctions in exchange for a nuclear agreement resulted in oil becoming another weapon in the Saudi—Iranian struggle. "For decades, the Kingdom has insisted it does not wield oil as a diplomatic weapon, but at the weekend (reference to the April 2016 OPEC meeting) it did just that as part of an

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<sup>8</sup> John Kemp, "Saudi Arabia turns oil weapon on Iran: Kemp," *reuters.com*, April 18, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-oil-meeting-kemp-idUSKCN0XF2AR> (accessed October 13, 2016).

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intensifying conflict with Iran.”<sup>9</sup> Allowing an Iranian return to power in OPEC enables its strategic ally Russia. Russia, which is economically dependent on oil for “about half of its government’s revenue”, now has a stronger voice in OPEC through Iran.<sup>10</sup>

The United States’ national interest ensuring the unimpeded flow of oil from the Middle East to the global market is not achievable in just the physical space of the Persian Gulf. The use of oil as a weapon in the regional power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran places the United States’ interest in oil at risk. As the United States is not a member of OPEC, nor a major exporter of oil, the most realistic approach to stabilizing the world oil market is through Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is the dominant member of the Gulf Cooperation Council, a powerful Sunni-Arab security organization that includes Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar, all members of OPEC.<sup>11</sup> This association provides Saudi Arabia direct influence over four of the fourteen OPEC members. A strong strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia is the United States’ best approach to ensure the continued security of global oil availability.

Saudi Arabia’s fear of Iranian power creates an opportunity with another United States ally and vital national interest in the Middle East, Israel. Since Israel’s inception in 1948, the United States immediate recognition of the controversial Jewish State and commitment to Israeli security has defined U.S. power in the Middle East. The United States has substantiated its commitment to Israel with both military and economic power and diplomatic support. Any wavering of commitment by the United States is a threat to Middle East stability. For over fifty years, the United States has steadfastly stood next to Israel, convincing the world that any attack

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Himani Pant, “Russia’s Economy in 2016,” *The Diplomat*, May 11, 2016, under “The value of oil to the Russian Economy,” <http://thediplomat.com/2016/05/russias-economy-in-2016/> (accessed February 6, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Organization of the Oil Exporting Countries, *Member Countries*, [http://www.opec.org/opec\\_web/en/about\\_us/25.htm](http://www.opec.org/opec_web/en/about_us/25.htm) (accessed October 16, 2016).



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upon Israel will garner a response from the United States. The quantitative value of real power generated by the United States' support for Israel is difficult to calculate; in the Middle East both Sunni and Shia alike resisted the U.S. position, but respected the commitment.

Iran's success against Israel is its source of legitimacy as a regional hegemon. The Iranian Revolution's success "exporting the revolution" against the Zionist and the "Great Satan" who supports them, is the foundation of its foreign policy. Israel is a key strategic factor; both Sunni-Arabs and Shia-Iranians exploited Israel, each seeking legitimacy to rule over Islam. Today, however, Israel is a subset of the greater conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The Sunni—Arabs no longer seek legitimacy through a military conquest of Israel. In fact, Egypt, Jordan, and Turkey officially recognize the Jewish State.

The United States' national interests in respect to the continued security of Israel and the containment of Iran are directly related. The Iranians' exploitation of their success in Israel is also Iran's source of credibility in the Middle East. The growing Israeli rhetoric towards Iran is a source of escalation within the region, triggered by Iranian sponsored Hezbollah attacks on Israel and heavy handed Israeli responses. Since 1978, the United States led the efforts to achieve an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement - a complex and exhaustive effort that achieved little success. In the context of the emerging Saudi Arabian—Iranian struggle for regional supremacy in the Middle East is a new opportunity. Through the U.S. partnership with Saudi Arabia there is the potential to pull the rest of the Sunni-Arabs towards a negotiated Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement.

Nuanced indications from the House of Saud and the Israelis resulted in high-level secret talks between the two nations in early 2015. "Former Saudi and Israeli officials confirmed that they had held a series of high-level meetings to discuss shared concerns, such as the growing

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influence of Iran in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon, as well as Iran's nuclear enrichment program."<sup>12</sup> The normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel is achievable through a two-state solution.<sup>13</sup> A complex negotiation that will take time and comes with political consequences for both Saudi Arabia and Israel is worth the investment by the United States. A negotiated solution to the Israeli-Palestinian issue has the potential to reverse the imbalance of power within the greater Middle East.

Removal of the Sunni-Arabs as an obstacle to a negotiated two-state solution that recognizes a free and independent Palestine, distinct from the State of Israel, would isolate Iran as the last roadblock to peace. Iran can be pragmatic, but on the issue of Israel it is rarely so. "So long as Iran's policy toward the Arab East remains immured in its conflict with Israel, Tehran is unlikely to edge toward the type of pragmatism that it has demonstrated in the Gulf."<sup>14</sup> Israel, the source of the Iranians' ascent to power in the Middle East is also its potential Achilles heel. If Iran chooses to remain defiant, they risk isolation in the international community.

Recognition of Israel by the GCC led by Saudi Arabia changes the narrative in the Middle East and, over time, repairs the imbalance in regional power. To achieve such a goal the United States must remain engaged in the Middle East. The United States' best approach to achieving all four vital U.S. national interests is through the U.S. strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia.

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<sup>12</sup> Medea Benjamin, "Israel and Saudi Arabia: Strange Bedfellows in the New Middle East," *Foreign Policy in Focus*, May 18, 2016, <http://fpif.org/israel-saudi-arabia-strange-bedfellows-new-middle-east/> (accessed October 13, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ray Takeyn, *Hidden Iran*, 71.

# Conclusion

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Saudi Arabia is the key to achieving the U.S. vital national interests in the Middle East. The U.S. national interests of protecting the U.S. homeland, unimpeded flow of oil to global markets, security of Israel, and isolation of Iran are achievable through an indirect approach with Saudi Arabia. The key strategic factor in the Middle East is the struggle for regional supremacy and global influence throughout the Islamic Civilization between Saudi Arabia and Iran. For the United States to achieve these vital national interests, the U.S. foreign policy must recognize the geo-political landscape created by the Sunni-Shia conflict.

The United States' foreign policy already recognizes the important role of the Wahhabi ideology and its connection with Sunni violent extremist organizations. Saudi Arabia is the United States best indirect approach to achieve long-term reform. The inclusion of Iranian-backed Shia militias in the fight against ISIS undermines the U.S. relationship with Saudi Arabia. Although the Iranians can provide Shia militias against ISIS, in the context of the greater Sunni-Shia conflict, the use of the Shia proxy forces will only exacerbate the friction between Sunni and Shia in Iraq.

The United States' strategy against ISIS and other violent extremist organizations must acknowledge the propensity of both Saudi Arabia and Iran to use extremist ideology to spread their influence. The fight against Wahhabi inspired Sunni violent extremist organizations will require decades of effort. Saudi Arabia is within both the problem frame and the solution frame of Sunni violent extremist organizations. The United States' commitment to Saudi Arabian security and recognition of the Saudi Arabian-Iranian power struggle in the formulation of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East can significantly influence Saudi Arabia's willingness and effectiveness to reform.

## CONCLUSION

The United States' nuclear deal with Iran placed the unimpeded flow of oil to global markets at risk. Since the lifting of sanctions both Saudi Arabia and Iran weaponized oil as they opened the economic domain in the on-going conflict. Iran, backed by Russia, is attempting to challenge Saudi Arabia's supremacy as the top supplier of crude from the region. As a member of OPEC and the leader of the GCC, Saudi Arabia holds influence over four of the fourteen members of OPEC. As the U.S. is not a member of OPEC, nor a major oil exporter, the United States' best approach to achieve U.S. national interest of the unimpeded flow of oil to global markets is through a strong partnership with Saudi Arabia.

The Israeli-Palestinian issue cannot be ignored as a key strategic factor within the Middle East environment and a component in the Saudi Arabian-Iranian power struggle. Iran's methodology for spreading its sphere of influence throughout the greater Middle East is the duplication of its success utilizing Hezbollah as a proxy force. A foundational principle of Iran's Foreign Policy since the 1979 revolution is instability. Continued instability between Israel and its Palestinian neighbors secures Iran a voice in the conflict through Hezbollah.

The continued security of Israel and resolution of the Israel-Palestinian conflict is a vital national interest for the United States. To achieve this end, the United States should influence Saudi Arabia to recognize Israel as a state, thereby setting the conditions for a two-state solution. The United States' commitment to Saudi Arabian security and recognition of the key strategic factor of the Sunni-Arab and Shia-Iranian struggle for control of Islam are precursors to a Saudi Arabian official recognition of Israel.

The most continuous aspect of the current U.S.—Saudi Arabian relationship is the Saudis' role in the spread of Wahhabism throughout the world. An Islamic fundamentalist movement responsible for numerous violent extremist organizations to include Al-Quida and

## CONCLUSION

ISIS. In this vein, one of the United States closest allies, Saudi Arabia, is responsible for producing one of the preeminent security threats to the United States in the form of Sunni-Islamic Ideology. The reality is that only Saudi Arabia has the power to reform the movement, a capability that the Saudi's demonstrated during their inception and once again in 1979. The United States should recognize that one of the best methods to achieve protection of the U.S. homeland from Sunni Violent Extremist Organizations is through Saudi Arabia.

It is not simply a matter of picking one side over the other. Saudi Arabia supports U.S. national interests in the Middle East and Iran does not. A strategic relationship with Iran is within the United States' national interests. However, fundamental reforms of Iran's foreign policy and Iran's investment in regional instability must occur before meaningful partnership between the U.S. and Iran should occur. Failing to do so will only alignite our friends and encourage our enemies. As a principle, we should keep our friends close, and our enemies closer.

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# Vita

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LTC Thomas Hough received a commission as a United States Army Infantry Officer in 1996. Following completion of the Infantry Officer Basic Course and U.S. Army Ranger School LTC Hough served as a Platoon Leader in the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division (AASLT).

Upon completion of the Maneuver Captains Career Course LTC Hough next served with the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division and commanded B/2-325<sup>th</sup> AIR during the invasion of Iraq in 2003. LTC Hough returned to Iraq in 2005 as the Company Commander of F Co. 51<sup>st</sup> IN (LRS) (ABN), XVIII ABN Corps.

LTC Hough attended the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College in 2008 and subsequently attended the School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS) in 2009. Upon completion LTC Hough was assigned to the 10<sup>th</sup> MTN Division where he served as the BN Executive Officer for 1-32 IN and the 3<sup>rd</sup> BDE Operations Officer in Regional Command-South Afghanistan from 2011-2012.

Upon graduation from the Defense Language Institute (DLI) LTC Hough participated in the Military Personnel Exchange Program and served with the Brigata Alpina Julia (Italian Alpini BDE) in Udine, Italy. In 2013 LTC Hough deployed as the J-35 to Regional Command-West as part of the Italian Multi-national BDE.

LTC Hough latest assignment is with the 1<sup>st</sup> Stryker Brigade Combat Team in Ft. Wainwright, AK serving as the Battalion Commander for 1<sup>st</sup> BN, 5<sup>th</sup> Infantry (Bobcat) prior to attending the Joint Advanced Warfighter School.

LTC Hough currently holds a Master's Degree in International Relations and a Masters in Military Art and Science. He is married to Addie House and together they have four sons and one daughter.