

Syria

**The Hegemonic Flashpoint Between
Iran and Saudi Arabia**

Paul Antonopoulos & Drew Cottle



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Foreword

by Oliver Villar

Imperial wars by proxy, Tweedledum Tweedledee elections to distract the masses, 2016 was the year of growing inter-imperialist rivalries, shifting alliances and capitulation. The Syrian war, tensions in the South China Sea, the restoration of capitalism in Cuba and the ending of the world's longest running civil war in the Andean nation of Colombia, will all be seen as decisive moments for historians in years to come.

On a purely strategic standpoint, imperial wars are being waged by proxy states, alliances and agreements are being shaped by economic interests, and many of these state actors are in fact dictatorships. In this era of waging terrorism for imperial gain the dictators the West supports get Nobel peace prizes or are praised for being 'innovative.' The governments Russia and China support are the subject of media bias. President Bashar al-Assad is one such example. United States imperialism wants him out, Russian imperialism wants him to stay. All of them claim they are fighting terrorism.

Unlike most political analyses in conflict, security or area studies, this study does not take a safe, conventionally liberal examination of the Syrian war. It goes beyond the 'Sunni-Shi'ite divide' offered by most commentators and exposes the official propaganda of the West. The study refutes any suggestion of a 'civil war' and demonstrates it is an interventionist proxy war shaped by Saudi-Iranian geopolitical rivalry in the region.

In no other region but the Middle East can we find states engaged in such violent geopolitical rivalry. In Latin America and Africa, the Chinese drive for trade, energy sources and markets for investment is challenging Washington but not imperialism. As the European Union struggles to survive, the Pacific Ocean is fast becoming another theatre for inter-imperialist rivalry. Syria is a victim of numerous aspiring imperial powers and their proxies ranging from the Kurds to ISIL.

The struggle to preserve or topple Assad is complex. Whatever we may think of him or his chief supporter Russian President Vladimir Putin or the 'Axis of Resistance' alliance between Iran, Syria and the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah which this study

proposes, it makes an important contribution to understanding twenty-first century imperialism. It lays the foundation for examining imperialism and Wahhabi terrorism in the Middle East, and as Iran's influence continues to grow the meaning of its 1979 revolution and its ongoing confrontation with Israeli Zionism.

There is no 'revolution' in Syria and the Western backed jihadists must be defeated. This study must be commended not just for acknowledging inter-imperialist rivalry and denouncing US imperialism, but for helping to expose the bankruptcy which now accounts for much of the so-called 'left' today. How Donald Trump in the White House will change the Syrian war remains to be seen but making an enemy of China when US imperialism needs Chinese imperialism more will provide clues to how regions plagued by imperialism will be affected.

I reject any idea of a 'permanent peace' existing between the imperialist powers, there are only permanent 'smaller wars' before an inevitable major one. Whether Trump can court America's rivals as Zbigniew Brzezinski has proposed will be a challenge that will either ignite or delay this major war between the imperial powers.

The destabilization of the Middle East is no longer a 'unipolar moment.' Like the Syrian war, the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts as well as the Libyan fiasco have also been shaped by regional ideologies, resource extraction and the fight for domination by the rival imperialists. In no small irony, the support for Assad, Putin or the 'Syrian Revolution' has been made possible by the flag wavers from left to right demonstrating again the bankruptcy engulfing both the 'experts' and 'activists.'

Whatever our politics or ideological orientation, we cannot afford to live in the past when examining Syria, the Ukraine, Cuba/Venezuela, Colombia, and most importantly, any of the leading imperial powers the USA, Russia and the 'People's Republic of China' which shape our times. Failure to heed this call means abandoning a concrete understanding of a concrete situation in favour of mere book worship, and placing the 'state' above class relations and analysis.

In this troubled century which we now face, no country is safe from imperialism whether it is from the Americans, Russians, Chinese or any aspiring contender. This study therefore only tells half the story. The war for Syria is also an ideological one as for every conflict won what follows is ideas.

The ruling classes and their 'states' jockeying for position in the global economic capitalist system seek to fool the masses. It is only time, however, until the people of the world will see through their lies and falsehoods, the people want a new world where leaders stick to their promises and martyrs die for something.

- Canning Waters, 2017

Acknowledgements

This book must first and foremost acknowledge the Syrian people. In the face of the most gruesome war of the 21st Century so far, that has seen the rise of sectarian and barbaric death cults like ISIS, the al-Nusra Front, Ahrar al-Sham and the hordes of other terrorist groups, with the support of the rich and puritanical Gulf dictators and from Western imperialist powers, they have remained steadfast in defiance against this aggression. The Syrian people's rejection of Wahhabism, Zionism and Western imperialism has made them a target to the powers that be. They have faced one of the most aggressive wars seen in human history with courage and optimism.

Also we thank Dr Oliver Villar, lecturer at Charles Sturt University, who wrote the foreword to this book, and his endless encouragement and support to get this work completed.

We happily acknowledge many people in the field who have countered and exposed the lies associated to Syria; principally Dr Tim Anderson whose book "The Dirty War on Syria" has been an important piece of work in revealing the truth, Maram Susli aka Syrian Girl, who has effortlessly committed the better part of her life since 2011 for Syria, and to Leith Abou Fadel, owner of Al-Masdar News, who has established one of the few news outlets offering fair and accurate reporting from the war.

Introduction

“Colonisation failed before, and it won’t win later in misleading our people, to mislead our populace, notice this rabid campaign that is waged by foreign media and especially those combined media, this rabid campaign that targets our people’s self-confidence, targets the confidence of our people in their leadership, but our people is big and noble, big in their ambitions, big in their understanding, big in their struggle. Misleading media will not be able to get to our people through radios, newspapers nor any other misleading medium, they won’t get to ‘affect’ our people’s determination, and its seriousness all the mediums of the colonisers.”¹

This statement by the late Syrian President Hafez al-Assad was made shortly after the suppression of the Islamist uprising that ended with the supposed Hama massacre of 1982. It demonstrates that since the accession of the Ba’athist Party, Syria has been an integral part of the anti-Western Imperialist, anti-Americanism and anti-Zionism alliance in the region and has always been systematically targeted, not only by the media but also by neo-colonial forces in the West and Israel.

Since the outbreak of the Syrian crisis in 2011, the Syrian state, government and its people have been the targets of the same aggressive rhetoric that they faced during the Muslim Brotherhood uprising that began in 1976. The Islamist uprising of 1976-1982 had minimal Saudi and Iranian involvement and polarization unlike the current Syrian war. Parallels can be drawn, as Hafez Assad’s statement directly correlates to the aggressive war gripping Syria today.

The main mythology surrounding the war in Syria is the notion that it is a ‘civil war’. This concept has persisted since the conflict began, with mainstream media, as well as Western and Arab leaders, referring to the conflict as such. Nevertheless, this supposed ‘civil war’ is anything but that: rather, it is an interventionist proxy war fought between Riyadh and Tehran. Although Riyadh, Saudi Arabia’s capital city, and Tehran, Iran’s capital city, has vied for control in Bahrain, Yemen, the Lebanon and across the rest of the region, this geopolitical rivalry is most polarized in Syria.

The war from the outset was blamed on President Bashar al-Assad’s initiation of brutal crackdowns on peaceful protestors. Early analyses of the war overlooked the Riyadh-Tehran geopolitical rivalry as an underlining cause of the full-scale development of conflict from what were initially peaceful protests. However, as the

war has advanced, this has come under careful examination by analysts and commentators.²

The weakness in most analyses of the geopolitical rivalry is that they dwell on the Shi'ite-Sunni divide as the central cause of the split between Riyadh and Tehran. Analysing the geopolitical rivalry as being one along Shi'ite and Sunni lines is a simplistic treatment of what is a more complex divide. Rather than just being based on sectarian divisions, the split between Riyadh and Tehran also encompasses ideological differences, resource rivalry and the quest to be the region's hegemonic power. By simplifying the rivalry along sectarian lines, the 'true' nature of the split, which we argue is due to ideological differences and alternative perspectives on resources, is overlooked.

Tehran constitutes a part of the axis of resistance, a coalition of anti-Western Imperialist and anti-Zionist forces comprising Iran, Syria and Hezbollah. Riyadh however has always been allied with London and Washington putting it at odds with Tehran who has always been the target of British and American imperialism.³ Although Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was a loyal subservient to American foreign policy in Iran, with his demise and the commencement of the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini under the new Islamic Republic of Iran, all American influence in the country was removed. Ayatollah Khomeini soured relations with the Saudi regime by claiming that monarchies had no place in Islamic leadership.⁴ This set the stage for the Tehran-Riyadh rivalry.

As well as ideological differences on imperialism and the role of Washington in the Middle East, Tehran and Riyadh have consistently found themselves at odds over resource diplomacy. Saudi Arabia and Iran, as OPEC's (Organization for Petroleum Exporting Countries) two biggest powers, play an important role in determining global oil prices. The resource issue further polarized the rivalry when Iran expressed it desired to build a pipeline from its Persian Gulf gas fields through Syria and into Europe.⁵ The Assad government had rejected a similar proposal put forward by Qatar which would have resulted in the building of a new pipeline through Saudi Arabia.⁶ The pipeline issue has often been overlooked by analysts as a cause of the war.

Syria, however, has not been the only battlefield between Saudi and Iranian-supported proxies. The destabilization of Bahrain, the Lebanon, Yemen and Iraq has directly resulted from this geopolitical rivalry. Although Iran and Saudi Arabia gravitate towards supporting

Shi'ite or Sunni forces respectively, these forces only serve to carry out the spreading Riyadh's Wahhabism or defending Iran from isolationist policies against it. This sponsorship of particular forces has polarized the region and led to more destabilization as a result of the rivalry.

This book will explore the origins and causes of the war from the initial uprising phase, and Tehran's and Riyadh's reaction to this, the rise of the Assad regime, Saudi-Iranian historical relations, the proxy war at play in Syria and across the region, Saudi and Iranian foreign policy towards the Syrian war, and pipeline diplomacy, oil oversupply and nuclear proliferation as causes for the escalation of the war. These topics illuminate why this conflict is occurring for reasons beyond the scope of a supposed "brutal dictator" violently cracking down on peaceful protestors, or oppressed Sunni majorities attempting to overthrow an Alawite regime. Rather, this book will demonstrate that the Syrian war is one created by a clash of different ideologies about imperialism, resources and regional dominance.

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Chapter 1

Uprisings, Media Propaganda, and the reactions from Riyadh and Tehran

Street protests in January 2011 led immediately to a propaganda war against the government in Damascus. Reports persisted of the Syrian government's repression against the peaceful protesters.¹ However, a careful analysis of the initial stages of the uprisings and the development into war provides a different understanding of what actually happened.

What becomes evident is the push by Riyadh to enforce regime change, whilst at the same time Tehran was providing support to allow its ally to survive. In terms of garnering international support, analyzing the role media and political bias played in condemning and propagating what actually occurred must be explored.

Al-Qaeda's leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, endorsed and supported the people opposing Syria's secular government in March 2011. This demonstrates that even in the first few months, radical Islamists were taking notice of developments. The uprisings were marked by protests that were quickly infiltrated by these Islamist elements, who responded violently to the Syrian state. In return, the Syrian state reacted with an aggressive response.²

Minor protests began as early as January 2011 amidst the Arab Spring, as anti-government opposition demonstrated against the Ba'athist rule of President Bashar al-Assad. As the demonstrations spiralled out of control, a group of armed rebels defected from the Syrian Arab Army and established the Free Syrian Army on 29 July, 2011.

A Day of Rage, organized for 3 February 2011, was called for by anti-government activists in Syria through Facebook and Twitter.³ This however did not eventuate, signalling how minor and unpopular the protests were.

In Dara'a, where peaceful protests first took off, further instability began when 15 young teenagers were jailed for writing anti-government graffiti in the city on 6 March. Protestors clashed with security forces and Assad quickly sacked the governor of Dara'a as accusations of torture were made.⁴ However, this was not considered enough to alleviate the tensions, and a violent mob

burned down the Ba'ath Party headquarters in Dara'a and other public buildings on 20 March, leading to the death of seven police officers and four protesters.⁵

An event known as the 'Friday of Dignity', held on 18 March 2011, led to large-scale protests in Banias, Damascus, Hasakah, Deirez-Zor and Hama. The protestors involved called for the release of political prisoners, the removal of Syria's 48-year old Emergency Law, more freedom for civilians and the press, and an end to government corruption.

On 25 March, mass protests nationwide were organised for after Friday prayers. Hundreds of thousands of Syrians mobilised across Syria, most significantly in Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama and Latakia. Through the course of the day, as the protests spiralled out of control and again into mob violence, Syrian security forces nationwide reacted by killing over 70 protesters.⁶

Under increasing pressure from the mass mobilization of protestors, Assad continued his modernization process, commenced since ascending to the presidency in 2000, by announcing that political and social reforms were going to be made. He announced that compulsory army service would be shortened, that there would be crackdowns on corruption, political prisoners would be released, that there would be tax cuts, the salaries of public sector workers would be increased, and that there would be greater freedom for the press, and increased job opportunities.⁷

How is it then that even when most of the demands of the protestors were met, the peaceful demonstrations descended into war? It is widely accepted by politicians, academics and analysts in the West and the puritanical Gulf monarchies, that the Syrian government's brutal crackdown on protestors was the main reason for Syria descending into chaos.

However, what politicians, academics and analysts who advance this account often fail to acknowledge is the infiltration by Islamist elements, like the Muslim Brotherhood, into the peaceful protests. In 2011 Professor Michel Chussudovsky questioned what was 'really' going on during the outbreaks. He stated:

An armed insurrection integrated by Islamists and supported covertly by Western intelligence is central to an understanding of what is occurring on the ground. The existence of an armed insurrection is not mentioned by the Western media. If it were to be acknowledged and analysed, our understanding of unfolding events would be entirely different. What is mentioned profusely is that the armed forces and the police are involved in the indiscriminate killing of protesters. The deployment of the armed forces including tanks in Daraa is

directed against an organized armed insurrection, which has been active in the border city since March 17-18.⁸

Chussudovsky argued that a well organised anti-Assad campaign had been coordinated by the West, Gulf dictatorships and Islamist fighters. It must be questioned how opposition fighters were well armed even before the defections from the Syrian Arab Army occurred, how this coordinated effort between imperial powers and Islamist fighters worked, and how Iran reacted to these infringements on Syrian sovereignty.

From the very outbreak of the conflict, Iran supported the Assad government. The then president of the United States, Barack Obama, claimed that Assad had brutally cracked down on protestors and demanded that Assad should “listen to his own people”. He stated that Assad was “seeking Iranian assistance in repressing Syria’s citizens through the same brutal tactics that have been used by his Iranian allies.”⁹

Without suggesting a diplomatic solution or political resolution, Obama condemned both Syria and Iran. Obama’s rhetoric demonstrated that early on in the conflict, the aim was to remove a pro-Iranian and anti-Western imperialistic force in the Middle East. However, to justify the removal of a secular government, the propaganda war, led by the West and Doha-based Al-Jazeera, was to play a crucial role in stirring up anti-Assad sentiment across the world.¹⁰

As the major events of early 2011 unfolded, newspaper headlines across Western, Qatari and Saudi media chronicled how the ‘regime’ was brutally cracking down on peaceful demonstrators. This was echoed by academic think tanks and Western governments. What was almost overlooked, were attacks against government officials, security forces, public infrastructure and even people in mundane government positions such as postal workers.

Despite this, some reports portrayed a different story. Although headlines in early 2011 were dominated by coverage of brutal crackdowns on protestors, Human Rights Watch acknowledged that protest movements were “overwhelmingly peaceful until September 2011.” The report, prepared by Human Rights Watch, also went on to claim that “a number of witnesses told Human Rights Watch that non-state armed groups identifying themselves with the opposition are kidnapping both civilians and members of the security forces.”¹¹

This rare acknowledgement of the radicalization by the militants provides an insight into the nature of the rebellion, where

civilians were being kidnapped by those who were supposedly liberating them from the clutches of Ba'athism. The radicalization of the dissident fighters came to a peak when reports emerged that postal workers were thrown off the roofs of buildings. Their only crime was that they were public service workers. Immediately doctors, teachers, municipal workers and public servants were threatened with death merely for having a government paid job. Although this case received large media attention in the West, it was barely mentioned in Saudi Arabia who had already invested heavily in the anti-government forces.

Dr Tim Anderson highlights that the aim of this uprising was not to install a democratic political state in Damascus, but to install a radical Salafist theocratic caliphate. Anderson explains that:

Saudi Arabia, a key US regional ally, had armed and funded extremist Salafist Sunni sects to move against the secular government. Saudi official Anwar Al-Eshki later confirmed to BBC television that his country had sent arms to Daraa and to the al-Omari mosque. From exile in Saudi Arabia, Salafi Sheikh Adnan Arour called for a holy war against the liberal Alawi Muslims, who were said to dominate the Syrian government: 'by Allah we shall mince [the Alawites] in meat grinders and feed their flesh to the dogs'.¹²

Iran, recognizing Saudi Arabia as a willing subservient of American imperialist ambitions in the region, made moves to ensure that the Assad government survived the initial volatility of the situation. The regional uprisings of the Arab Spring saw the swift removal of Gaddafi from Libya, Mubarak from Egypt, Saleh from Yemen and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali from Tunisia. With Iran observing what happened to Gaddafi, with the coordination of Islamist fighters, media propaganda and Western imperialist organizations like NATO, working in unison, Iran made speedy moves to ensure the survival of its sole Arab-state ally.

Despite grappling with the economic sanctions imposed by Western states, by February 2012, Iran had sent the Syrian government \$9 billion to help it survive similar Western imposed sanctions.¹³ However, from a geopolitical point of view, Iran was left with little option but to jeopardize its own fragile economy to assist the Syrian government. Saudi Arabia, along with its fellow Wahhabi ally Qatar, recruited thousands of jihadists to fight in Syria. This was reminiscent of the heavy recruitment drive to enlist Mujahedeen's during the Soviet-Afghan war. The extremist fighters sent into Syria were a serious threat to the Iranian-friendly government in Damascus and undermined the resistance to Israel that Hezbollah had struggled for.

However, Riyadh, following Washington's foreign policy in the region, made these moves with encouragement from Obama. In August 2011, Obama and the then King Abdullah, "agreed that the Syrian regime's brutal campaign of violence against the Syrian people must end immediately."¹⁴ President Obama overlooked the mythology of a brutal campaign of violence in Syria when making this statement with, ironically, the ruler of a puritanical Wahhabi kingdom that denies people political, religious, gender and media freedoms.¹⁵

Washington and Riyadh ignored neutral sources of information about what actually happened during the initial uprisings. Father Frans Van der Lugt, a Dutch Jesuit priest based in Homs who strived for harmony between Syria's Christian and Muslim communities, was killed by Al-Nusra terrorists on 7 April, 2014. He noted in January 2012 that "I have seen from the beginning armed protesters in those demonstrations... they were the first to fire on the police. Very often the violence of the security forces comes in response to the brutal violence of the armed insurgents."¹⁶

Such accounts were overlooked by Riyadh, despite Damascus' insistence that peaceful protests had been infiltrated by armed militants. The Syrian Arab News Agency reported in March 2011 that large caches of weapons, explosives and night-vision goggles were intercepted at the Tanaf border crossing between Syria and Iraq, where the driver would be paid \$5000 to successfully deliver the equipment to terrorists.¹⁷

The uprisings had not yet escalated into armed conflict, when covert operations like this allowed Syria to be flooded with weapons. This suggests that there was a coordinated effort to create this outcome. In the early stage of the war it was not clear who sent weapons to Syria. However by 2012, Jordan, Qatar, Turkey and Saudi Arabia were openly coordinating with the CIA to support the militants in Syria with weapon shipments.

Anwar Al-Eshki, a Saudi official, confirmed on the BBC that Riyadh had sent arms to Daraa and the al-Omari mosque in early 2011.¹⁸ Little condemnation or acknowledgement came from Washington about Riyadh openly flooding Syria with armed militants to destabilize the country. This suggests that without Saudi-backing, the peaceful social movements would have dissolved, with Assad acceding to the demands of the protestors.

It must be questioned whether Riyadh's Syria policy was to support a democratic movement. It would seem a paradoxical action

for Saudi Arabia, since it is a repressive theocratic state, yet it insists upon democratic change in secular Syria.

On 2 January 2016, Saudi Shi'ite cleric Nimr al-Nimr was beheaded in the Saudi kingdom. His crime was to call peacefully for free elections in Saudi Arabia and criticize the government.¹⁹ This was one of many cases of crackdowns on any dissidence shown towards the Saudi regime. This leads to the question of Saudi motives in destabilizing Syria. It would suggest that Riyadh's support for the armed militants was not to bring about democracy in Syria, but to weaken Iran's influence in the Levant by removing its sole Arab ally from power.

Wesley Clark, a former general in the United States Army, claimed in November 2001 that an unnamed senior military staff officer in the Pentagon had disclosed to him that there was a five-year plan in which the United States would be involved in wars against Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Iran, Somalia and Sudan.²⁰ This demonstrates that the United States planned to secure these strategic regions on its own terms. Although it did not eventuate within the five year plan from 2001, what has happened is that Washington and its allies in Riyadh, Israel and NATO have significantly destabilized these countries.

In 2003 there was a US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq that resembled 19th century imperialism. In 2006, Israeli aggression against Hezbollah led to its occupation of South Lebanon. In 2011 the Libyan leader, Colonel Gaddafi, was removed from power. Somalia has experienced continued destabilization with piracy and the rise of the terrorist group Al-Shabaab.²¹ In Sudan, South Sudan split from Khartoum and then disintegrated into a civil war. Saudi Arabia, Israel, the United States and its Western allies denounced Tehran as a rogue state because it pursued a nuclear program. Syria since 2011 has had Riyadh, Ankara and Washington demand the end of the Assad government.

Anderson notes that:

after the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and the destruction of Libya, Syria was to be the next state overthrown. Washington and its regional allies had planned this for some time. After 'regime change' in Damascus, Syria's ally Hezbollah leader of the Lebanese Resistance to Israel, would be isolated. The Islamic Republic of Iran would remain the only Middle East country without US military bases.²²

When it is considered that Riyadh is a willing conduit for Washington's foreign policy, it is understandable why the Saudi

regime took a lead role in transforming peaceful protests into armed insurrection. This can be seen as a strategic initiative.

By July 2011, the Free Syrian Army had been established after mid-level officers defected from the Syrian Arab Army. This marked the turning point when the protest stage of the crisis turned into a war. It was later revealed that Saudi Arabia made a large purchase of thousands of rifles, hundreds of machine guns, and an unknown quantity of ammunition from Croatia. These weapons were remnants from the Yugoslav Wars and they were delivered to the Free Syrian Army via Jordan in December 2012.²³ Although the arming of the Free Syrian Army by Saudi Arabia had begun much earlier, this was the first well-publicized case of this occurring.

Whilst Saudi Arabia was arming the Free Syrian Army in the early stages of the conflict, Iran was protecting its interests in Syria by flooding the country with well organized Shi'ite militias from Iraq and Iran under the control of Iran's Quds forces.²⁴ By 2013, these militias also included Shi'ites from Afghanistan.²⁵ The Quds forces are a special unit of Iran's Revolutionary Guard who report directly to the Supreme Leader of Iran and are commanded by Major General Qasem Soleimani.

As Iran coordinated the Shi'ite militias to fight in Syria, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey organized radical Sunni Islamist fighters.²⁶ This even included the Pakistani Taliban, which the United States recognizes as a terrorist group. By June 2013, the Saudi Foreign Minister at the time, Saud al-Faisal, told the US Secretary of State that the militants in Syria had to be rearmed with anti-aircraft and anti-tank weapons. The Syrian Information Minister, Omran al-Zoubi, rebutted these claims by saying that Riyadh was "trembling with fear because of the Syrian Army's successes against the militants" and that Faisal Saud, "is lost in the Syrian blood."²⁷

So deep is Riyadh's apathy for Assad that Faisal said in 2013,

[w]e demand that the international community does the action required to stop the bloodshed. We support them in this, and we don't find condemnation and denouncement enough. We instead support the international community to use its resources to stop the aggression on the Syrian people before they're exterminated.²⁸

This statement demonstrates the consistency of the propaganda war against the Syrian state that has persisted since early 2011. The statement made no reference to the hordes of radical Islamist fighters that Saudi Arabia assisted in reaching Syria.

A September 2013 report, compiled by the Syrian military, estimated that at the time almost 54,000 foreign militants from 87 different countries had come to fight in Syria. Of that, it was estimated that 12,000 of the foreign jihadists were Saudi.²⁹ This large number of Saudi fighters in Syria indicated that Riyadh had made no effort in stopping radical Islamists leaving the Wahhabi Kingdom to wage jihad. When considering that Shi'ite militias from Lebanon, Iraq and Iran were fighting on the side of the government in the early stages of the war, while tens of thousands were Salafist jihadists fighting on the opposition side, it is clear that this conflict was never a civil war.

In 2012, former Al-Jazeera journalist Ali Hashem, commented on the channel's policy on covering the news in Syria. He claimed that he quit Al-Jazeera because it refused to publish photos of militants fighting the Syrian Arab Army in Wadi Khaled. For this action he was described as being a regime loyalist by his superiors.³⁰

Further, Tim Anderson states that a "careful study of the independent evidence [...] shows that the Washington-backed 'rebel' story, while widespread, [...] was] part of a strategy to delegitimise the Syrian Government, with the aim of fomenting 'regime change'."³¹ What Anderson suggests is that from the onset of the crisis there has been a systematic propaganda mechanism in place to legitimize the overthrow of Assad.

The media often overlooked how 'supposedly' peaceful protestors killed members of security forces who had not provoked such a reaction during the rallies. It would seem evident that Riyadh, with the backing of Washington and the media, had no interest in the protests achieving their aims through peaceful means. Assad was never meant to fulfil the changes the people were demanding. Rather Riyadh's role was to foment an armed uprising against the Syrian government in the pursuit of regime change. The removal of Iran's sole Arab-state ally was the only goal for Riyadh. In turn, Riyadh would not have expected the Syrian government to have survived.

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Chapter 2

The Rise of the Assad Regime

Any analysis of the Syrian War cannot ignore the origins and rise of Ba'athist rule in Syria. Any attempts to do so would not recognize the political instability of Syria before the rule of Hafez al-Assad, the failed union with Egypt, the supposed Hama uprising in 1982 by the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood, Syria's role in Lebanon and its relations with Tehran and Riyadh. These are all essential issues that help set the framework on the context in which the Syrian War emerged.

The Alawites of Syria are a minority constituting approximately 2 million people or about 12 percent of the population. They have traditionally been a poor and underprivileged Islamic sect often viewed as non-Muslims and heretics by hardline Salafist Muslims. It is for this reason that in 1924, the Alawite leading bodies voted for the complete separation of The Republic of Alawites from the French controlled Syrian Federation, a Sunni majority entity. However, the increasing pressures from Syria's non-Sunni minorities, led to the devolution of the Syrian Federation and to the establishment of the Syrian Republic with the exclusion of Latakia, an Alawite majority state; the Lebanon, a religiously mixed state, and the Jabal al-Druze, a Druze majority state.

The people in the Republic of Alawites benefitted greatly from the French colonialists as education, healthcare and social services increased, with Alawites showing loyalty by providing many recruits to the colonial army. However, this was short lived as the 1936 Franco-Syrian treaty reunited the Syrian state and ended the Republic of the Alawites. An Alawite rebellion against the Sunni majority in 1939 led to an autonomous Latakia, however in 1942 the French colonialists ceded the Republic back to Syria.¹ During the 1950s, many Alawites joined the military as a means of enhancing their lives from poverty and discrimination.

Hafez al-Assad was one such person. He was born in Qardaha on 6 October 1930, in Latakia Governate, the center of the Alawite minority in Syria. Assad, as an Alawite youth, joined the Syrian Air Force in 1950, graduated in 1955 and was commissioned as a lieutenant with distinctions. Despite continuing his training in Egypt with future Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, a promotion in 1957 to squadron commander which was followed by MIG-17 training in

the Soviet Union, Assad was not content with his military career and believed it was only an avenue to a political career.²

Assad had joined the Ba'ath Party at only sixteen years of age in 1946, the same year Syria achieved independence from France. The Ba'ath Party is a secular Arab nationalist's movement founded in 1940 by Syrian Christian Michel Aflaq and Syrian Sunni Muslim Salah al-Din al-Bitar. Their movement amalgamated with Syrian Alawite Zaki al-Arsuzi's movement in 1947, creating a truly secular Party that represented most Arab minorities in Syria. There was a second merger with the Arab Socialist Party amalgamating with the Ba'athist Party in 1952, producing a more powerful political entity.³

The Ba'ath Party emphasized on three principles; Arab unity, freedom from imperialism, and socialism.⁴ The Ba'athist Arab nationalism culminated in the Ba'ath Party's constitution of 1947 in which it stated that 'the Arabs form one nation. This nation has the natural right to live in a single state and to be free to direct its own destiny.'⁵

The socialism espoused by the Ba'athists was not one in the European sense of internationalism, but rather one that would collaborate with Arab nationalism and guarantee justice and equality for all Arabs, and ensure political unity. Article VI of the Ba'athist constitution stated that: 'the Party of the Arab Ba'ath is revolutionary. It believes that its main objectives for the realization of the renaissance of Arab nationalism and for the establishing of socialism cannot be achieved except by means of revolution and struggle. Hence the party decides in favor of a) the struggle against foreign colonialism to completely and finally liberate the Arab fatherland, b) the struggle to bring all the Arabs in a single independent state and c) the overthrow of the present corrupt structure, an overthrow which will include all sectors of life, intellectual, economic, social and political.'⁶

It can be suggested that the Ba'ath Party wanted to revolutionize society and political thinking before changing the political system. Ba'athist socialism rejected class conflict but supported land reform, nationalization of natural resources, transportation, industry and finance whilst advocating the unionization of workers and peasants without fully rejecting private ownership and inheritance.

Colonel Adnan al-Malki, a popular Ba'athist colonel who supported the 1954 coup against the government of Adib al-Shishakli, was murdered by a member of the Syrian Social

Nationalist Party in April 1955. His murder provided the pretext for the Ba'ath Party to launch a crackdown on one of its biggest political rivals. By 1957, the Ba'ath Party reluctantly joined in a partnership with the Syrian Communist Party to weaken the influence and power of conservative parties.⁷

Gamal Abdel Nasser, President of Egypt, emerged as a charismatic leader of Arab nationalism, claiming distinction for his efforts during the Suez Crisis which popularized his ideology of Arab unity.⁸ This was aligned with the Ba'athist ideology. The Ba'ath Party sought unity between Syria and Egypt which was achieved in 1958, creating the United Arab Republic. A new constitution was drafted and Nasser became President of the United Arab Republic with 99.9 percent of the votes.⁹ Thousands greeted Nasser when he visited Damascus shortly after the union's founding.

The influence of Nasser and the growing popularity of his Arab Unity ideology which threatened traditional Arab monarchies led King Saud of Saudi Arabia offering nearly £2 million to Abdel Hamid Sarraj, the Syrian intelligence chief, to assassinate Nasser. Sarraj reported the plot to Nasser and the controversy forced Saud to hand over authority to his brother, Prince Faisal.¹⁰

Because of Nasser's fear and distrust, all political parties in Syria, including Egypt's partner in the union, the Ba'ath Party, were dissolved. This was to ensure there was no effective political rival to Nasser. This spurred Assad, Salah Jadid and Muhammad Umran in 1960 to establish the secret Ba'athist military organization known as the Military Committee, which recruited members mostly from the Syrian armed forces.¹¹ The aim of the Military Committee was to keep any surviving cells of the Ba'athist Party alive and unified.

Syria left the union on 28 September 1961 when Lieutenant-Colonel Abd al-Karim Nahlawi, a right-wing officer backed by Jordan and Saudi Arabia, led a putsch.¹² It was supported mostly by the disgruntled Sunni merchant class who feared Nasser's nationalization policies. Nasser ordered 2,000 Egyptian troops to crush the putsch, but upon realizing that the Syrian army supported the mutineers, he recalled all efforts to crush the revolt. Elections on 1 December 1961 brought Nazim al-Qudsi of the People's Party, a Centre-Left Arab Nationalist Party, to the presidency.

The Military Committee began recruiting lieutenants and captains to overthrow the Qudsi government. Despite impressive recruiting, the Military Committee believed they could not lead a

successful coup without the help of the Nasser sympathizers. A six day crisis of coup and counter coup beginning on 28 March 1962 peaked with the storming of the Aleppo citadel on the 2 April where the Nasserists hoisted the United Arab Republic flag to the shock of the Ba'athists.¹³ This ultimately led to the failure of the coup with the breakdown of Ba'athist and Nasserist relations.

Throughout 1962, Assad conspired with the Military Committee to lead a military coup to overthrow the government. On 8 February 1963, the Syrian Ba'athist network awoke to the news that the Ba'ath Party in Iraq had executed Iraqi dictator al-Karim Qasim, bringing the Party to power in Baghdad.

On the 7 March, the Military Committee was ready to execute a coup but the Syrian Military Intelligence raided the conspirator's sending many to prison or underground. It was up to Assad who avoided the raid to send the message to mutineering units that the coup would be delayed.¹⁴ Jadid launched the coup on the evening of 7 March and took over the Ministry of Defense and Bureau of Officers' Affairs in Damascus.

Assad was one of the last to complete the coup attempt and arrived at Dumayr air base to the east of Damascus shortly after dawn on 8 March.¹⁵ Recalling the event, Assad stated: "I sent someone forward with a warning that I would start shelling if there was any resistance. After a few minutes two of their officers drove up to propose negotiation. I went at once to the base commanders. 'It's all over for you', I said. 'We don't want to kill anyone but unless you surrender we will have to use force.' 'Do you think we will surrender to Nasserists?' one of the officers shouted. The man who put this question had been jailed with me in Cairo at the break-up of the union. 'Only yesterday,' I answered, 'we were in prison together. You know I am a Baathist not a Nasserist.' The atmosphere became very tense, but after a good deal of shouting they gave in. They could have resisted - the forces at their command were stronger than my small unit. But they were cowards."¹⁶ At 8:40AM on 8 March, the Military Committee announced over radio that the Ba'ath Party officers had been reinstated into the Syrian military.

Following the coup, a twenty-member National Council for the Revolutionary Command (NCRC) was created which was dominated by Ba'athists with the Nasserists and Independents only taking up eight positions. Salah Bitar was chosen as the Prime Minister by the NCRC. However, the union between the Ba'athists and Nasserists was short lived as Colonel Jasim Alwan with the

backing of Egyptian Intelligence attempted a coup against the Ba'athist Party on 18 July 1963. Many civilians were killed, but the Ba'athist quickly gained control of the coup attempt, and within hours, 24 mutineers were brought before military courts and were summarily executed immediately.

Disgusted by the hasty executions, President Atassi resigned in protest. Although Alwan managed to avoid arrest, he was eventually caught and brought to military trial where he was sentenced to death, but later released into exile. The failed coup allowed the Ba'athists to take complete control of the NCRC leaving the entire political and military apparatus in Syria under the leadership of the Military Committee.

After the consolidation of power by the Ba'athists, Amin al-Hafiz, a Sunni Muslim, became leader of Syria, whilst Assad was appointed to commander of the Syrian Air Force in 1964. Assad organized the Air Force as his power base, appointing trusted people into important positions and established an Air Force Intelligence network independent from Syria's other intelligence networks.¹⁷

A schism between the Ba'ath Party's old guard of Aflaq, Bitar and Munif al-Razzaz, and the younger factions of the Party such as Salah Jadid and Assad began to emerge. The younger factions were far more radical than the old guard and it was this ideological difference that led to the Syrian coup of 23 February 1966. The younger factions followed a more Marxist-Leninist socialism that focused on the nation-state whilst the old guard still flirted with Arab Unity and another union with Egypt. Launched by the younger factions, the coup overthrew and sent most of the Party's founders into exile in Iraq where they joined the Iraqi Ba'athist Party creating a permanent schism between the Syrian and Iraqi Ba'ath Party branches.

With Jadid's successful coup, he became known as Syria's strongman, despite being out of the public view as the deputy secretary-general of the Ba'ath Party, whilst appointing Atassi as President and eventually Prime Minister, Ibrahim Makhous as Foreign Minister and Assad as Defense Minister. This was to be Assad's first political post.

The defeat of the Syrian military in the 1967 Six Day War against Israel, when Syria lost the Golan Heights, and the 1970 fiasco in Jordan where Jadid sent Syrian-controlled Palestinian and Syrian troops into Jordan to help the Palestinian Liberation

Organization, but Assad refused to supply air cover, was utilized by Assad to undermine Jadid's control of the military and Ba'ath Party.

In November 1970, Assad launched the Correction Movement, staging a coup that ousted Jadid from power in order to prevent the Ba'ath Party from the radical and supposed Communist direction Jadid was taking.¹⁸ Assad consolidated his power by increasing the leadership of security and intelligence to a monopoly of Alawite officers, which provided a stable state foundation, since the previous 25 years in Syria had been marked by political turmoil. He developed a cult of personality, which portrayed him as the champion of Arab nationalism and unity, the opponent of Israel, and a visionary for a Greater Syria.¹⁹

Salafist elements, notably the Muslim Brotherhood, found favor amongst Syrian Sunnis, argues Raymond Hinnesbusch, as they opposed the Ba'athist's combination of statism, supposed sectarian favouritism and corruption.²⁰ Hinnesbusch does not acknowledge that the Muslim Brotherhood's major opposition to Assad was his failure to name Islam as the state religion.

The limited implementation of Shariah law and Assad's personality cult served as a pretext for the Islamist Uprising beginning in 1979.²¹ Despite Assad compromising on the no state religion by reverting from Ba'athist secularism to introduce a clause that Syria's president had to be a Muslim, the Salafists remained dissatisfied and still viewed the regime as overly secular, leftist and non-Islamic. The Saudi-backed Muslim Brotherhood emerged as the principle rival to the Assad regime.

With Nasser's expulsion of the Muslim Brotherhood from Egypt, they found asylum in Saudi Arabia during the 1950s and 1960s. They were employed as imams in mosques, as teachers and officials in the ministry of education, and, as Angel Rabasa explains, "Wahhabism and the Brotherhood were kindred spirits in that they both called for a return to the fundamentals of Islam."²²

The 1970s saw the Saudi oil boom and the diffusion of the Wahhabism as the dominant ideology amongst the older generation of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Saudi regime began aggressively to export its Wahhabi ideology abroad. Saudi Arabia's Grand Mufti asserted "full support to the Syrian Mujahidin's struggle against the heretical and secular Ba'ath regime."²³ Syria demanded that Saudi Arabia should expel the Muslim Brotherhood from its kingdom.

The Fighting Vanguard, an Islamist militia of the Muslim Brotherhood, stormed the Aleppo Artillery School on 16 June 1979. Sunni Captain Ibrahim Yusuf had brought all the cadets, who were mostly young Alawites, into the dining hall, where the Islamists killed 32 cadets, according to official sources.²⁴ Unofficial sources stated the death toll was as high as 83.²⁵

In November 1979, a Muslim Brotherhood leaflet distributed throughout Syria stated that ‘we reject all forms of despotism, out of respect for the very principles of Islam, and we do not demand the fall of Pharaoh so that another one can take his place. Religion is not imposed by force.’²⁶

Patrick Seale concludes that the Aleppo cadet massacre “marked the start of full-scale urban warfare against Alawites, against Ba’ath party officials, party offices, police posts, military vehicles, barracks, factories and any other target the guerrillas could attack.”²⁷ The disintegration of Ba’athist control, the slaughter of civilians and targeted killings of Ba’athists and Alawites culminated in a Ba’athist revenge massacre where between 600 and 1000 Muslim Brotherhood inmates of Palmyra Prison were gunned down. Amnesty International portrayed the murdered inmates as innocent political prisoners, whereas the majority of the incarcerated were responsible for the slaughter of hundreds of innocent civilians.

Assad escaped an assassination attempt in June 1980, proclaiming Law 49 which made membership to the Muslim Brotherhood punishable by death and spurring a massive military effort that quelled the Islamist uprising across Syria, except in its stronghold of Hama. This ultimately led to the supposed Hama Massacre of 1982.²⁸

Seale states that every soldier “knew that this time Islamic militancy had to be torn out of the city, whatever the cost. Some such understanding that this was the final act of a long-drawn-out struggle may serve to explain the terrible savagery of the punishment inflicted on the city.”²⁹ This was to be the final showdown of the six-year conflict between the radical Islamists and the secular Ba’athists.

Before the assault, Assad called for surrender and warned that anyone remaining within the city would be considered a rebel. Despite this warning and many civilians leaving Hama, Islamist resistance within the city was implacable and the whole operation lasted 3 weeks.³⁰ Many surviving Muslim Brotherhood members

fled to Saudi Arabia following the massacre, demonstrating Riyadh's support for the anti-Ba'athist forces.

Amnesty International estimated the total number of dead to be between 10,000 and 25,000 and portrayed the victims as mostly innocent civilians rather than sectarian militant Islamists. Human Rights Watch presented the Hama Massacre as an example of Assad's poor human rights record, failing to mention either the thousands of Ba'athists, Alawites and innocent civilians killed by sectarian Islamist militants, or that from the massacre to 2011, Syria had not experienced another radical Salafist uprising.³¹ It must be noted that Human Rights Watch is heavily connected to the United States Council of Foreign Relations and happily propagates on its behalf.

However, in contradiction to the Amnesty International estimate, the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency confirmed in its report "Syria: Muslim Brotherhood Pressures Intensifies" that 2000 people were killed during 'the massacre' of which 3-400 were members of the Muslim Brotherhood's elite Secret Apparatus.³² The number does not include those who were regular Islamist militants of the Brotherhood. The report states that the uprisings were led by the Muslim Brotherhood and were Islamist in nature. This intelligence report highlights the contradictions and mythology surrounding the supposed Hama Massacre, and the propagation by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

The Iranian revolution in 1979 provided Assad with the opportunity to find a counterweight ally to Israel and Iraq, whilst Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini saw Syria as a useful conduit to the Shia community in Lebanon. With the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war, Syria shut the Kirkuk-Banias pipeline, depriving Iraq of half its oil export.³³ To compensate for the loss of transit fees, Iran provided Syria with millions of free and discounted barrels of oil throughout the 1980s.

Syria's alliance with Iran deepened during the Iran-Iraq war, in which Riyadh funded Saddam's Iraq. This became the first Saudi proxy war against Iran with Assad finding himself at odds with Riyadh.

The Syria-Iran relationship was and is not based on any shared Shi'ite religious ideology as many analysts and commentators try to allude to and simplify the reasons as. Iran is an Islamic Republic that is predominately Persian and Syria is ruled by a secular Arab nationalist party.³⁴ Rather the foundation of the relationship is the

shared, anti-American, anti-Western imperialist and anti-Zionist ideologies between the respective countries. Robert Freedman states that “the Syrian-Iranian friendship has proved to be remarkably durable and flexible, particularly in view of the striking dissimilarities between one of the region’s most secular regimes and one of its most theocratic. The two countries have shown an ability to accept their differences and resolve their conflicts, and in that sense the relationship has a certain maturity and functionality.”³⁵

This anti-American policy shared by Iran and Syria is at odds with Saudi Arabia which has traditionally allied itself with the United States and Western Europe. Saudi Arabia is a powerful oil rich monarchy which is in alliance with the West and does not act independently within the region.³⁶

During the Lebanese Civil War, Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps with the help of Syria, established and armed Hezbollah to help export the Islamic Revolution and serve as a counter force to Israel in southern Lebanon. To Syria and Iran, Hezbollah was a proxy force against Israel and access to greater influence in Lebanese affairs. Syria’s involvement in Lebanese politics began with their intervention in the Lebanese Civil War in 1976 and ended with the Cedar Revolution in 2005 with Hezbollah becoming Syria’s unofficial representative in Lebanon.

However, the post-Lebanese Civil War period in the 1990s may be seen as a ‘Golden Age’ between Damascus and Riyadh: or, if not a ‘Golden Age’, the most positive period in the relationship between the two Arab states. Saudi Arabia and Syria had no reason to undermine each other politically in this period, and Iran was contained by American forces stationed in the Gulf and Middle East. The mutual understanding was proxy power sharing between Damascus and Riyadh in the Lebanon.

It was rumoured as early as 1980 that Assad’s brother, Rifaat Assad, would succeed him. Rifaat’s succession chances were ended when he failed to overthrow his brother in a 1984 coup attempt which effectively finished Rifaat’s influence in the Syrian political system. Assad’s son, Bassel Assad, began to be groomed as president in 1984 and accompanied his father on international visits and meetings with foreign leaders. Bassel had earned a reputation of being incorruptible and honest.

Since the controlled Syrian elections in 1991, Assad began to be referred to as ‘Abu Bassel’, or Father of Bassel. However, on 21

January 1994, Bassel was killed in a high speed car accident on the way to Damascus International Airport.

Assad continued his dynastic approach to succession by immediately preparing his younger son Bashar Assad to the presidency.³⁷ Bashar was recalled from post graduate medical study in London and immediately enrolled in the military academy at Homs in 1994.³⁸ He was quickly promoted to colonel in the Syrian Arab Army. To secure Bashar's power in the military, old commanders were forced into retirement with a new and younger generation of Alawite officers pushed into leading positions ensuring greater loyalty to Bashar.³⁹

Assad died in 2000 bringing a young Bashar to the presidency. The constitution was changed for the sake of the dynastic succession; with 34 year old Bashar becoming president instead of waiting till he had reached 40 years of age. One of the first major reforms by Bashar was releasing hundreds of political prisoners, including a staggering 600 members of the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood.⁴⁰ This amnesty demonstrated Bashar stepping out of his father's shadow and attempting to slowly reform Syria. Most importantly, it was under Bashar's reforms that Syria strengthened its relationship with Iran and Hezbollah. Bergman states that Bashar "made Syria's link with Hezbollah — and its patrons in Tehran — the central component of his security doctrine."⁴¹

The Cedar Revolution and the 2006 Lebanon War were events that brought Tehran and Damascus closer together. A few days into the Lebanon War on 16 June 2006, the Defence Ministers of Iran and Syria signed a military pact against threats by Israel and the United States and on 17 February 2007, Iranian President Ahmadinejad and Bashar met in Tehran with Ahmadinejad stating that the two states would be forming an alliance to counter American and Israeli conspiracies in the Islamic world, and to secure their own independence and sovereignty without outside influence.

Coinciding with improved Tehran-Damascus relations, the relations between Riyadh and Damascus began to deteriorate with the assassination of Rafik Hariri, a politician and billionaire businessman with Saudi-Lebanese citizenship. Hariri was close to the Saudi dictatorship. Hezbollah and Syria were mostly blamed for the killing despite Hezbollah blaming Israel, although there was a lack of evidence from all parties. This propelled the Cedar Revolution which forced the removal of Syria's military presence in the Lebanon in 2005.

A year later in the 2006 Lebanon War, Hezbollah not only survived a 34-day Israeli aggression, but also effectively prevented its military forces from further advancing into Lebanese territory.⁴² Despite the myth of defeating Israel, the popularity of Hezbollah and its leader Nasrallah, and by extension, Bashar Assad and Iran were boosted to the disappointment of Riyadh which wanted Hezbollah to be uprooted from the Lebanon.

In a victory speech after the war, Bashar Assad referred to nameless leaders in the region as “half-men” for supporting imperialist ambitions.⁴³ It is often assumed this was directed towards Saudi Arabia. Following this, Syria was able to reassert itself politically in the Lebanon, and thus allowing Iran greater access into Lebanese politics. This was intolerable to Saudi Arabia.

Despite the strong relations between Tehran and Damascus, Assad still made state visits to Saudi Arabia. His first visit was in 2000, four months after succeeding his father. Bashar visited Saudi Arabia again in January 2010. On 6 and 8 March 2010, Damascus hosted the Saudi-Syrian Business Forum after Saudi investment in Syria reached \$1 billion in 2009.⁴⁴ However this investment was dwarfed by Tehran’s investment in Syria of at least \$3 billion in 2008.⁴⁵ Although at his accession Bashar prioritised a state visit to Riyadh before Tehran, Assad’s relations with the Iranian leadership were always stronger than those with the Saudi regime.

Bashar also began a slow economic reform. In 2001, he legalized private banking with four new banks beginning operations in 2004. This was a strong indication of Bashar’s liberalization and reform process. For the first time in decades, Assad opened the Damascus Stock Exchange in 2009, although under strict conditions of trading. By 2010, 13 private banks had opened, including two Islamic banks.

Although Syria had limited political freedoms, efforts of slowly reintegrating political parties could be seen in Bashar’s liberalization process. The Syrian Social Nationalist Party that was outlawed during Hafez’s rule, began its reintroduction into Syrian politics by being allowed to attend meetings of the Ba’ath-led National Progressive Front as an observer in 2003. By 2005, the party was legalized again in Syria.

In 1962, many of Syria’s Kurdish population had their citizenships revoked. The official reason was that most of these Kurds were originally from Turkey and Iraq, and had illegally entered Syria, particularly into the Al-Hasakah Governorate in

1945.⁴⁶ The Syrian government was especially concerned that the Kurds would be taking advantage of the agricultural reform law allowing them to benefit from land redistribution schemes.⁴⁷

Human Rights Watch stated that the Syrian government committed human rights violations by stripping original inhabitants of their citizenship, despite not providing evidence of the original inhabitants claim.⁴⁸ Stateless Kurds were left in limbo because they could not leave as they had no access to passports. They were not able to take up positions in government, marry Syrian citizens or run for public office.

In the early phases leading to the Syrian War, Bashar repealed Decree 49 which denied citizenship for the stateless Kurds. This was done in April 2011, just a month into the initial peaceful protests that later dissolved into a war. This was a demonstration of Bashar's slow liberalization process and the concessions he made to the demands of peaceful protesters.

This can be argued as the beginning where the Assad dynastic regime slowly began to change into the Assad administration. Consequently, it begs the question why a rebellion began in 2011, despite the economic and political changes that Bashar was making?

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Chapter 3

Strained Iranian-Saudi Relations

Despite Iran and Saudi Arabia being Muslim majority states, strained relations exist over different geopolitical issues such as leadership of the Islamic world, oil exportation, nuclear proliferation, the interpretation of Islam and relations with the United States. Saudi Arabia adheres to a strict Wahhabi theology and has close ties to both the United States and the United Kingdom. Iran, as a pre-dominantly Shi'ite Islamic Republic, was founded on anti-Western rhetoric and has accused Saudi Arabia as serving the interests of the United States rather than what is beneficial for the region and for Islam.

Riyadh and Tehran are rivals in attempting to shape regional order to their own geopolitical advantage. Saudi Arabia fears the exportation of Iran's Islamic revolution which claims that monarchical regimes have no place in Islam.¹ Any sign of Iran's interpretation of Islam across the Islamic world threatens the rule and control that the Saudi regime has on its country.

Tehran's varying degrees of influence in Syria, Iraq, the Lebanon and Yemen threaten Saudi Arabia's legitimacy and influence as a regional power and undermine its radical Wahhabi doctrine. Although there have been periods of improved relations – such as the 2007 visit of President Ahmadinejad to Riyadh, where he was met by King Abdullah at the airport, with the media at the time referring to the respective states as “brotherly nations” – the relationship has been mostly hostile. This was most notable after the Iranian Revolution, the persistence of Iran's nuclear program and Iran's financial and military support of the Assad government and Hezbollah.

Strained relations began with Ayatollah Khomeini's rise to power through the successful Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979. His Islamic ideology opposed any monarchy which was deemed not to be Islamic and any ruler who was not a trained Islamic jurist.² The rulership in Tehran is based on the ‘Guardianship of the Islamic Jurists’, which decrees that jurists should have custodianship over all Muslims. Saudi Arabia adheres to the strict and conservative branch of Sunni Islam, Wahhabism. Its political system, however, is an Absolute Monarchy with the king being referred to as the Custodian

of the Two Holy Mosques (al-Masjid al-Haram Mosque in Mecca and al-Masjid an-Nabawi in Medina).

Saddam Hussein made his first visit to Saudi Arabia in August 1980, at which time where King Khalid said he approved of his plans to invade Iran. Saudi Arabia recognized the greater threat that revolutionary Iran posed to Saudi Arabia, compared to Ba'athist Iraq, and pledged US\$25 billion of aid to the Iraqi war effort, campaigning for other Gulf States to follow suit.³ To cover the costs of the Iraqi war effort, and weaken Iran economically, Saudi Arabia increased its oil production. This, however, proved detrimental to its own revenues as oil prices dropped from \$30 a barrel to less than \$15 a barrel by the mid-1980s.⁴

The death of Ayatollah Khomeini, along with Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, provided an opportunity for reconciliation between Tehran and Riyadh. In 1993, Iranian negotiations at OPEC achieved a 300,000-barrel-per-day increase, which Saudi Arabia supported.⁵ However, this small advancement in relations degenerated with the continuing territorial dispute between Iran and the United Arab Emirates, and in 1996 Iran was accused by Saudi Arabia of orchestrating the Khobar Tower bombings.

The United States' invasion of Iraq, coupled with Saddam Hussein's removal from power in 2003, changed the entire geopolitical landscape of the Middle East. Although not allied, the combination of Ba'athist Iraq and Wahhabi Saudi Arabia provided the counterweight to any Iranian influence in the region. This dynamic was effectively destroyed with the collapse of the Ba'athist government, providing the framework for Iran to support the new Shi'ite-dominated government and for the rise of Shi'ite militias in Iraq. The Iranian influence, in the form of government and militia power in Iraq, threatened to project Iranian ambitions across the entire region.

When Mahmoud Ahmadinejad became Iranian president in 2005, he promised the revival of religious vigour akin to that existent in the earlier years of the Islamic Revolution. Ahmadinejad drew strength from the traditional ideology of the Revolution and drew support from the disillusioned population suffering from Western embargos on Iran. This revival of the Revolution became especially evident with the recommencement of the policy of exporting the Shi'ite Islamic revolution and defending Islamic rhetoric by improving relations with Iraq, Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas. The Iranian support for the Palestinian cause enhanced

Iran's reputation in the Islamic world, compared to Saudi Arabia which was seen to be inactive about this issue.

Although the relationship between Tehran and Riyadh has over time fluctuated between hostility and cooperation, a number of factors such as the politicization of the Hajj pilgrimage and arrangements over oil prices, existed prior to the Iranian Islamic Revolution. The 1979 Islamic Revolution added the complex dynamic of regional leadership which did not exist during the time of the Shah.

Efforts, since the removal of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, towards reconciliation or rapprochement, have never succeeded but instead have fuelled the growth of sectarian proxies and rivalry. These proxy conflicts between Riyadh and Tehran are most notable in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, the Lebanon and in the political uprisings of Egypt and Bahrain. Since 2002 and the exposure of Iran's nuclear program, the Saudis have feared that the nuclearization of Iran will give it an advantage in the region and attract regional states under its security umbrella.

Despite the United States and Iran supporting the post-Ba'athist Iraqi government, Saudi Arabia opposed any Iranian leadership in Baghdad. Riyadh refused to send an ambassador to Baghdad and has declined to wipe out loans given to Saddam Hussein in Iraq's war with Iran. This debt is estimated to be US\$30 billion.⁶ The Iraqi Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki, accused Saudi Arabia of "fomenting sectarian conflict" and of "funding a Sunni army."⁷

The Arab Spring has provided new opportunities for Tehran and Riyadh to spread their influence in the Islamic World. With the fall of dictatorships during the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia has been directly threatened. Riyadh heavily criticised the United States for supporting the revolts and for its continued pressure on Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to step down. Iran, on the other hand, praised the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt and labelled them Islamic awakenings, and leaders in Iran were pleased by the removal of Mubarak from Cairo because he supported anti-Iranian movements in the Arab world.

Iran was quick to resume diplomatic ties with Egypt after years of tense relations, hoping that the Muslim Brotherhood's Islamic re-awakening in Egypt would make the country more sympathetic to Iran. In response, Riyadh pledged US\$4billion in aid to Egypt's military in an effort to prevent any normalization between Cairo and Tehran before the coup in 2013.⁸

If Cairo's Tahrir Square was the icon of the Arab Spring for the supposed new Middle East, Bahrain's Pearl Roundabout was the symbol of the old order reasserting its power. Bahrain, with a predominately Shi'ite population, is separated from Saudi Arabia's oil rich Eastern province which is an enclave of a Shi'ite minority, by a 25 km causeway. It was intolerable for Riyadh to accept a Shi'iteled revolt on its borders. In the midst of the Arab Spring, many Shi'ite demonstrators in Bahrain protested against the Sunni House of Khalifa dynasty, demanding the overthrow of the monarchy and the establishment of a republic. With the fear of an emerging Iranian influence in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia demanded that the House of Khalifa refrain from any negotiations with the protestors and sent Saudi troops to help quash the demonstrations.

In an attempt to justify its military intervention in Bahrain, Riyadh accused the Shi'ites of acting on behalf of Iranian demands to establish a Persian satellite-state in Bahrain. Iran did provide political support for the Shi'ite uprisings and in retaliation accused Saudi Arabia of committing genocide during its intervention.⁹ Protracted mild resistance in the country serves to hinder Saudi Arabia's influence in Bahrain while at the same time it postpones a direct military confrontation with Iran. In this manner Iran continues to spread its influence amongst the majority Shi'ite where previously it had not.

Although the House of Khalifa controls Bahrain, Riyadh has the upper hand in this proxy. Only through reforms can greater rights to the Shi'ite majority lead to stability in Bahrain. It is this conundrum that Riyadh refuses to recognize, especially because by keeping the Shi'ites on the fringes in Bahrain, it risks the possibility of people looking towards Iran.

With military conflict in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, the Saudi-Iranian rivalry over energy, geopolitics and nuclear power will only deepen. With the flow of petrodollars at their disposal, these opposing clerical establishments will continue to reshape the Middle East, to preserve and expand their influence. Riyadh recognizes that once Iran is armed with nuclear technology it will have a clear strategic advantage. Saudi officials have threatened to pursue a nuclear warhead should Iran successfully develop one. The nuclearization of Saudi Arabia has arguably already begun with the development of a civilian nuclear energy program and negotiations with the United States to build sixteen nuclear reactors. Although a signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty, Riyadh insists that its nuclear program is for energy purposes. Tehran also maintains that

its nuclear program is only for peaceful purposes and has, at least publicly, supported Saudi Arabia's nuclear energy program.

Iran is seen to be well positioned to influence Iraq, Syria, and Southern Lebanon through its main proxy, Hezbollah.¹⁰ Although it may not have complete control over these states, it attempts to secure an important nexus through Hezbollah, Iraqi Shi'ite militias and the Assad government. This leads to a greater united influence across the region compared to the fragmented panoply of radical Sunni actors.

Through its actions, Saudi Arabia has demonstrated that it will not allow Iran to extend its influence into Yemen, or any supposed Shi'ite influence. Although it is unlikely that Riyadh will attempt to occupy and control Yemen, the expansion of Houthi control in Yemen's capital city has provided the pretext for Saudi Arabia to stop a Shi'ite militia movement taking full control of its southern borders. The people of Bahrain and Yemen are attempting to negate Riyadh's influence. However this has mostly failed with Houthi forces occupying swathes of Saudi territory in its Najran province.

However, the reality that remains for both Tehran and Riyadh is that this two-tiered Middle East structure will only cause problems for whoever holds the greater influence. Iraq, Syria and Yemen in the foreseeable future will not be stable and the two regional powers will continue their cold war through proxies in order to antagonise each other. The reality is that the people in these countries will continue to suffer.

The role of Israel must also be analysed in relation to the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. Would Israel allow the region to be reconfigured along either Iranian or Saudi lines? With increasing clashes between the Syrian Arab Army and the al-Nusra Front in the Golan Heights, the destabilization of this border region may force Israel into a show of strength which would only increase destabilization and the suffering of people in the region.¹¹ It remains to be seen how Netanyahu will react to any Iranian action in the Golan Heights were this to occur.

There is, however, mounting evidence and acknowledgement that the Israeli Defence Forces have assisted, and even medically treated, Al-Nusra terrorists within Israeli-controlled territory.¹² This would suggest that Tel Aviv and Riyadh have mutual goals in this conflict.

Although never cordial, Riyadh's relations with Syria were never confrontational. This relationship only changed in 2005 following the assassination of the Saudi-approved Lebanese Prime Minister, Rafic Hariri. The Saudis blamed Syria for the assassination and became openly anti-Syrian, forcing the Assad government to withdraw its support for the Lebanon.

This, however, was not successful because by May 2008 the Iranian proxy, Hezbollah, seized Sunni-dominated West Beirut and this culminated in the Doha Agreement. With the rise of Iranian allies dominating Lebanese politics, the Saudis shifted from a policy of containing Syria to one of rapprochement. The peak of this reconciliation was the visit of King Abdullah to Syria in October 2009. This can be interpreted as Riyadh recognizing the importance of Syria to Lebanese politics as well as the country's attempt to weaken the relationship between Assad and Iran.

By the middle of 2011, with the escalation of the anti-Ba'athist protests across Syria, the Saudis reverted from the reconciliation process and supported the demonstrators. With the failure of deals swiftly to resolve the Syrian crisis, King Abdullah took an openly hostile approach against the Assad government. By August 2011 King Abdullah stated that Assad must "stop the killing machine."¹³

The anti-Syrian stance adopted by the Saudi regime was, and still is, motivated by personal, sectarian and political factors. The secular Ba'athist ideology is antithetical to Saudi's theocratic monarchical rule. The crackdown on Sunni political opposition, by the supposed Alawite-dominated regime, was another factor which motivated the Saudi regime to oppose the Assad government. Most significant was Riyadh's view that the Syrian government was on the decline; a situation which presented the Saudis with what they thought was an opportunity to weaken Iran's influence in the Arab world.

The Saudi ambition of rallying the region against Assad can be seen as part of a larger regional rivalry between Tehran and Riyadh. This is why, in the case of Syria, the Saudis are openly supporting regime change in Damascus. The Saudi view of Syria stands in contradiction to its response to the civil demonstrations in Bahrain, Egypt and within its own puritanical kingdom. Saudi Arabia opposed the most popular uprisings knowing that any regional destabilization had, and still has, the potential to destabilize its control over the Kingdom. This is why the House of Saud has

prevented the Arab Spring from spreading to its regional allies, namely Bahrain, Jordan and Qatar.

Because of a combination of personal, sectarian and political factors, Riyadh has been the most vocal regional actor in condemning the Assad regime and has been advocating for recognition of and support for all anti-Assad forces. Although Riyadh envisages Syria after the removal of Assad, the reality on the ground indicates that the conflict between the Syrian Arab Army and the various terrorist groups will continue. Saudi Arabia is faced with a dilemma. Either the Saudis continue to pursue regime change, an action that ignites instability in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and to a lesser extent the Lebanon, or they negotiate a peace deal with Tehran.

King Abdullah and President Ahmadinejad met in Mecca in August 2012 at the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. Ahmadinejad had also visited Saudi Arabia in December 2005 and March 2007, but the 2012 visit was important because of the perception that the two communicate in order to resolve their differences.

Both Riyadh and Tehran acknowledge that they may need each other in Syria. Iranian attempts to influence a post-Assad Syria would require Saudi cooperation, especially when considering the complex relationship between Tehran and the Syrian opposition. Riyadh must negotiate with Iran if they want a new regime in Syria. This is the conundrum of any potential post-Assad Syria.

Regional stability is a key concern for the Saudis because the Syrian war is affecting Saudi Arabia's relationship with its regional ally, Jordan. The Jordanians are struggling with a serious economic crisis that has been further strained by the 620,000 Syrian refugees who have entered its territory.¹⁴ Finding a political solution to the war is becoming more difficult to achieve because the conflict is protracted and the stakes for Iran and Saudi Arabia are becoming greater. Both Tehran and Riyadh have seen the Syrian war as a 'zero-sum prism' by supporting Assad and the terrorist forces respectively. A compromise between the Saudis and Iranians is thus becoming increasingly unlikely.

In this situation Riyadh and Tehran are adding to the sectarian nature of the conflict and leading the region further into instability. The Lebanese Civil War demonstrates the problem of regional powers using a domestic conflict as a proxy battlefield for bigger geopolitical struggles. This effectively makes the war last longer and leads to further suffering of the people. With apparently little

concern, the Saudis seem more interested in halting Iran's influence in Syria through armed opposition than helping to frame a political solution to the war. This can be argued to be the same mentality held by Tehran. Despite calls for international intervention, there seems to be little focus on a unified opposition political force that has a plan to deal with a post-war Syria devastated by terrorist groups.¹⁵

As is clearly visible in Yemen, the regional destabilization continues because of the Saudi-Iranian cold war. The weak government has failed to hold onto power, while simultaneously engaged in a number of conflicts against a variety of actors, most notably the Houthis and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. This has been coupled with secessionist movements in the north and south of Yemen. These conflicts have come to the forefront of domestic and regional politics.

The conflict has culminated in the decade long battle against the Houthi rebels, the Shi'ite minority from the north, who have overthrown the government and taken most of the power in Yemen. With Saudi Arabia initiating air strikes in Yemen, the more significant conflict now appears to be the geopolitical standoff between Saudi Arabia and Iran and this has the potential to engulf the region in the kind of destabilization already seen in Syria and Iraq.

Yemen, located on the south-western tip of the Arabian Peninsula, shares a border with Saudi Arabia. Being a poorly governed and fractious state has allowed smuggling routes to develop into Saudi Arabia. With the population being 35% Shi'ite, the long term interests of Iran in Yemen are simple. Yemen can act as an area where Iran can set up an operational base from which they can undermine Saudi Arabia. It must be questioned however, whether this is truly Iran's intentions. It is questionable at best whether it really wishes to have easier access to Saudi Arabia.

In March 2012, it was reported that the Iranian Quds Force was smuggling large caches of AK-47's, rocket propelled grenades and other arms to the Houthi rebels. In January 2013 it was stated that large quantities of weapons, with Iranian markings, were seized from a ship off the Yemeni coast. Later in 2013 Saudi intelligence officials concluded that Yemen is the weakest security link on the Arabian Peninsula and thus "easy prey for Tehran to penetrate and manipulate."¹⁶

The 1770 kilometre Saudi-Yemen border is also a major infiltration point for Al-Qaeda which is supposedly considered the

biggest terrorist threat to Saudi Arabia. It is this combination of threats from Houthi-Iran and Al-Qaeda that motivates Riyadh to provide financial, political and military support to the Yemeni rival-government based in Aden and to conduct airstrikes against the Houthis within Yemeni territory. From the Saudi point of view, Yemen has been disintegrating since the fall of long-time ally Ali Abdullah Saleh as Yemeni president in 2011. Ibrahim Sharqieh, a researcher at the Brookings Institute in Doha, stated that “in the regional cold war, this has strengthened the position of the Iranians. For the Saudis, the Houthis arriving in Sanaa is definitely not good news.”¹⁷

Reports have been made that Iranian Revolutionary Guards and Lebanese Hezbollah operatives are actively engaged with Houthi rebels to boost their control in Yemen’s capital city of Sanaa.¹⁸ It is imperative to understand that what happens along Saudi Arabia’s border will make the kingdom act in favour of its own vested interests. Riyadh will always undermine any Iranian efforts to gain a foothold in Yemen.

The Houthis are a strategic bargaining chip being used by Iran against Saudi Arabia. The success of the Houthis, therefore, directly affects the proxy conflict in Syria between Tehran and Riyadh. The Iranian threat from Saudi Arabia’s southern border is forcing the Saudis to tread lightly with regards to its Syrian policy because it accepts that Iran has a strong and capable fighting force ready to destabilize Saudi Arabia from the south should it act in a way that it finds displeasing.

Although the Saudis and Iranians have supported their proxy forces in the Lebanon, Bahrain, Iraq, Yemen and Syria, they never directly created the crises. Their involvement, however, has aggravated the crises further. Willian Quandt, states that “the fall of the Shah and the establishment of the militant Islamic Republic of Ruhollah Khomeini came as a particularly rude shock to the Saudi leadership. It brought to power a man who had explicitly argued that Islam and hereditary kingship were incompatible, a threatening message, to say the least, in Riyadh.” In response to this threat, Riyadh and other Gulf monarchies formed the Gulf Cooperation Council, an organization initially designed to counter and contain Iranian influence.

With the overthrow of the pro-Washington Shah in 1979, the new revolutionary Islamic Republic engaged in an aggressive policy of exporting its revolution across the Middle East. This directly

threatened the Saudi regime and its influence in the Middle East. However, with Iran weakened by the Iran-Iraq war, all attempts of exporting its Islamic revolution across the Middle East halted. By this time though, the damage of attempting to export its revolution had been done. Saudi Arabia now views Tehran as attempting to alter the Middle Eastern political landscape whilst the Iranians believe Saudi Arabia is actively undermining Iran's strength and attempting to enhance its vulnerability.

This reciprocal animosity has created a security dilemma in which both Tehran and Riyadh fear a pre-emptive attack: consequently, both have enhanced their defence spending and supported regional proxy forces to halt any perceived attack. This has created a cycle in which both Iran and Saudi Arabia keep acting in ways to secure their country but in doing so only end up antagonizing the other. Daniel Serwer, correlates this directly with the Cold War politics between the United States and the Soviet Union. Serwer continues by stating that the security dilemma "is what really brings us to this point. The rationale the Iranians give themselves is very heavily defensive." Effectively however, the more powerful Iran is, the more vulnerable the Saudis feel.¹⁹

This is why conflict through proxy is important in Syria and Yemen. Saudi Arabia views Iran as supporting the Houthis in Yemen as an attempt to change the regional order, posing a security risk to Saudi Arabia. However, the reality is that Saudi Arabia has created a greater security risk by initiating airstrikes against the Houthis who are now attacking Saudi Arabia directly. Iran, on the other hand, views Saudi Arabia as arming the anti-Assad opposition forces in Syria in an attempt to deprive Tehran of its most important Arab ally and thus to isolate Iran.

In the post Iran-Iraq war period, the Saudi-Iranian rivalry was overshadowed by the Iran-Iraq rivalry. Tehran's main focus was on the threat that Saddam Hussein posed directly to Iran. However, these dynamics changed with the United States-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the toppling of Hussein. This provided an opportunity for Iran to gain a foothold in Iraq by sponsoring and supporting the Shi'ite militia groups and replacing the Ba'athist Party with a friendly Shi'ite-dominated government.

Serwer states that "until the American invasion of Iraq, the door wasn't really open [for Iran to challenge the regional order], except in limited ways like supporting Hezbollah and Hamas. What the

United States did in Iraq, by opening the door to the Shia majority, is part of the story for the Saudis.”²⁰

With the Arab Spring, new opportunities for Iran to expand its influence were created, and in response Saudi Arabia found itself with the difficult task of maintaining the status quo. It became a ‘tit for tat’ game, with Saudi Arabia propping up any Saudi-friendly regime while Iran supported oppositional groups, and then in return Saudi Arabia backing any opposition to an Iranian that was on the brink of collapse.

This is most evident in Syria where Saudi Arabia funded and supplied the terrorists fighting Iran’s ally, Assad. Iran in response sent troops to assist the Syrian Arab Army and has continued to send military aid. On the other hand, in Bahrain, where the majority Shi’ite population has staged demonstrations against the Sunni monarchy, Saudi Arabia was quick to send its soldiers to crush the protests.

Gregory Gause, concludes that “the retreat of the state made it possible for Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other regional states to play an increasing role in the civil conflicts of Lebanon (for some time), Iraq (since 2003), and Syria (since 2011). This is the core, bottom-up dynamic driving the new Middle East cold war.”²¹

Despite Iran being a Shi’ite theocracy and Saudi Arabia a Sunni Wahhabist theocracy, in Gause’s opinion the rivalry is not purely motivated by sectarianism or theology. He states, “I don’t think the Saudis and Iranians are engaged in a sectarian war with each other; I think they’re engaged in a balance of power conflict for regional influence, but they use sectarianism.”²² It is because of this Saudi-Iranian rivalry, however, that sectarian violence has engulfed Syria. Shared religious identities have made political alliances easier in the case of Bahrain, Iraq and Yemen. Sunni-dominated governments and terrorists have naturally turned to Saudi Arabia for help while Shi’ite groups have turned to Iran. As the conflicts continue, sectarianism encourages Saudi and Iranian interventions which further polarises countries on sectarian divisions. The only exception to this case is Syria where, despite the Assad government having the support of Iran and Hezbollah, the majority of the Sunnis in the country have remained loyal to the central government.

The real danger in the Iranian-Saudi geopolitical rivalry is that they will replicate the Syrian conflict across the Middle East by intervening and supporting Sunni and Shi’ite proxies. This has already been seen in Bahrain, Yemen and Iraq, but has the potential

to engulf the Lebanon, Jordan and Kuwait. Consequently, the more entrenched and violent the sectarian Sunni and Shi'ite divide becomes, the less chance there is for a political solution in the short term to resolve these conflicts.

Gause states,

“the retreat of the state ... drove people in these countries to look to sectarian identities and groups for the protection and material sustenance that the state either could or would no longer provide. As sectarianism increasingly defined their struggles, it was natural that they look to co-religionists — Iran for Shia and Saudi Arabia for Sunnis — for that support.”²³

Therefore, although the rivalry has an element of sectarianism this is not the major cause of the hostilities. Rather, as has been presented, the struggle for regional domination has encompassed conflicts about differing views on American imperialism.

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Chapter 4

Proxy War in Syria

Iran and Saudi Arabia are engaged in political and religious struggles throughout the Islamic World, extending from Yemen and Pakistan to Lebanon. This rivalry stems from the struggle for political and religious dominance and hegemony over the region. However, this struggle is most polarized in the Syrian War. The contemporary conflict between Syria and its armed opposition represents another phase of the ongoing conflict in the Middle East. A common misconception is that the Syrian conflict is a part of the Arab Spring, rather than an event that occurred during the Arab Spring.

Syria has become the focal point of the Tehran-Riyadh geopolitical split and how this rivalry has spilt into other conflicts and into other states in the region must be analyzed. In a study on the Syrian conflict, Alexander De Juan and Andre Bank note that the Syrian Conflict is an integral part of the Arab Spring.¹ De Juan and Bank, however, fail to acknowledge how the conflict is implicitly different to the Arab Spring in that the successful revolutions were popular figures supported by the majority of the populace. The need to separate the Arab Spring from the Syrian conflict is essential for understanding the dynamics of the Syrian conflict. One common factor the Arab Spring and the Syrian conflict do in fact share though, is that both have seen the emergence of sectarianism and terrorism.

Curtis Ryan has shown how both the Arab Spring and Syrian Conflict have led to the growth of Sunni-Shi'ite divisions.² These divisions have attracted foreign volunteers to Syria and this has led to the creation of networks of terrorists, mujahedeen's and independent militias. Jabhat al-Nusra had forged links with al-Qaeda to become the official franchise of the terrorist group in Syria, before rebranding itself as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and supposedly cutting links with al-Qaeda. Before the conflict, Syria had no links to Al-Qaeda, but because of this conflict Al-Nusra has emerged as one of the major armed groups opposing the Assad government. What Ryan argues is that foreign interventions from the likes of Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Iran have driven the sectarian element of the conflict.³ Although this is true, and is a critical element of the conflict, Saudi geopolitical interests in the war are to contain an emerging and

potential nuclear Iran rather than just to export its Wahhabi brand of Islam. Funding foreign fighters to go to both Iraq and Syria does make political sense in terms of Riyadh exporting its version of radical Islam.

With foreign jihadists fighting in Syria, it is not surprising that there is international interest in the conflict. This is seen with the Arab Gulf nations, the European Union, and the United States of America all supporting the armed opposition in some way. Assad is supported by Iran, Russia and China. The Cato Institute demonstrates that fundamental disagreements have emerged between the Western powers and Russia and China. These disagreements are not only about Middle Eastern issues but the role of power interventions in international crises in general.⁴

For its part the United States is trying a new approach in its Middle Eastern policy by expanding its neo-colonial web through the production of a proxy war. Rather than a traditional intervention and invasion, such as that which occurred in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States is attempting to covertly sponsor terrorist organisations. It is the expansion of this western imperialistic web that has China and Russia wary of Washington's foreign policy on Syria. Michael Parenti argues that a "Third Worldization of the United States" has emerged.⁵ Effectively this means that there has been acceleration in the impoverishment of civil society due to America serving transnational corporations and in bolstering the security of the national state. The idea that capital expansion is the driving force behind American neo-colonialism is what Parenti argues is the underlying fact behind an American global military empire. This explanation of American imperialism provides a framework in which to understand America's foreign policy towards the Syrian Crisis.

When seen through this perspective, Washington's relation with Tehran becomes paramount in understanding the complexities of the Syrian Crisis. David Barsamian details how Washington's interaction with Iran has seen an escalation of rhetoric that is similar to that evident prior to America's invasion of Iraq.⁶

When American and Saudi foreign policy is examined using the knowledge of America's relationship with Tehran, it is clear that Iran's isolation and encirclement is furthered by the removal of Damascus as its sole Arab ally. Often overlooked in analyses of the Syrian War is the tripartite axis. With Washington labelling Iran and Syria as being part of an 'Axis of Evil', and Hezbollah as being a

terrorist organization it becomes clear that American foreign policy in the Middle East is geared towards the complete encirclement of Iran.⁷

The United States' relationship with Saudi Arabia has been the cornerstone of its foreign policy in the Middle East. Despite differences in history, culture, religion and governance, the countries have expressed a mutual agreement over most political and economic issues. Saudi Arabia has always influenced its neighbours because of its supposed abundance of petrodollars which have been used to finance political allies and to explore Saudi's ideological concept of Wahhabism. However, despite its wealth and religious influence, Saudi Arabia has largely been unsuccessful in making the impact it seeks to make in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia has not been able to counter Iran's influence in post-Saddam Iraq or prevent Iran's ally, Hezbollah, from taking a powerful foothold in the Lebanon.

Saudi Arabia's relationship with its neighbour and its pursuit of regional domination has influenced its foreign policy agenda and determined its means of exporting Wahhabism, that is, through the financing of non-State actors such as terrorist groups. The Islamic Republic of Iran was already one too many Shi'ite regional powers for Riyadh. Allowing elections in an Arab-speaking and Shi'ite majority country like Iraq was a threat to Riyadh's dominance in the Arab world. An undermining of Iraqi democracy, that allowed under-represented Shi'ites to enter parliament, was always a key goal for the Saudi regime. This matched Saudi Arabia's desire to undermine the non-Sunni Muslim governments in Iran and Syria. Although it is easy to see that Riyadh fears an empowered Shi'ite Iraq with the backing of Tehran, the battle arena that is Syria is a more complex example when examining Riyadh-Tehran geopolitical rivalry.

Bashar al-Assad belongs to the Alawite community, an offshoot of Shi'ite Islam. This could offer a simple explanation as to why Riyadh is trying to remove the government from Damascus. However, it would be naive to claim that the Assad government is an Islamic Republic modelled on Shi'ite Iran. On the contrary, the Assad government guarantees the right to religious freedom. This is reflected in Assad's marriage to Asma al-Assad, a British born Syrian Sunni, as well as in the general make-up of the Syrian Arab Army which is comprised mostly of Sunni Muslims.⁸

It therefore cannot be said that Syria is a Shi'ite Islamic Republic like Iran which is ruled by an Ayatollah and a Council of Religious Clerics. Rather, the relationship between Syria and Iran is based on countering American Imperialistic ambitions, Wahhabi influences and hegemonic power across the Middle East, a mutual hatred of Israel and the arming and supply of Hezbollah.

It must be questioned however, whether Tehran views the turmoil occurring in Syria and Iraq as an opportunity to spread its regional hegemonic and anti-Western designs westward across the Middle East. Iran had already attempted to export its Islamic Revolution to Iraq during the bitter Iran-Iraq War, but it was mostly unsuccessful because it failed to engage the Shi'ite Iraqis to revolt against the Ba'athist and Sunni Saddam Hussein. This demonstrates that Arab Nationalism was held in higher esteem than the Sunni-Shi'ite divide and that the Islamic World was not in the state of intense sectarian conflict that is evident today.

Hafez Assad's Ba'athist regime in Syria, however, was one of the few states that supported Iran during the Iran-Iraq conflict; it did not support the Ba'athists in Iraq. Hafez Assad closed the Kirkuk-Banias pipeline that transported Iraq's oil to the Mediterranean, and this reduced Iraq's oil budget by half.⁹ This left Baghdad with only a single pipeline through Turkey as a means of exporting Iraqi oil to the international market. Patrick Brogan wrote, "It appeared for a while that Iraq would be strangled economically before it was defeated militarily. However, that pipeline had a capacity of only 500,000 barrels per day (79,000 m³/d), which was insufficient to pay for the war."¹⁰ Although Iraq had previous hostilities with Gulf States, the risk of Persian fundamentalism was far more threatening and this prompted Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates to save Iraq from complete bankruptcy by providing it with loans and subsidies.¹¹

Saudi Arabia was especially fearful of an Iranian victory after Ayatollah Khomeini declared monarchies to be illegitimate and an un-Islamic form of governance. Riyadh interpreted this declaration as a call for revolution and for the overthrow of the Saudi regime as the holder of power. Journalists John Bulloch and Harvey Morris wrote:

The Iranian government saw the outbreak of war as a chance to strengthen its position and consolidate the Islamic revolution. The war was presented to the Iranian people as an opportunity for jihad with Ayatollah Khomeini stating that 'those who fight in jihad, against the external enemy never fear superior numbers, for the Prophet said that he would never turn back even if all the Arabs

united against him. His cause was the cause of God, and the cause of God can never be defeated, nor is there any turning back from it.’¹²

The very notion of an Islamic jihad and the spread of revolution is what concerned the Saudi regime the most and this forced it to prop up the Hussein regime in the war.

Ba’athism is the ideology of Arab Nationalism that aims to develop a unified Arab State through a socialist approach and under a secular structure. Hafez Assad left the legacy of this ideology in his foreign policy and went against Ba’athism’s partner Party in Iraq to support a Persian-dominated Islamic Republic. The question is whether this ideology is the basis for why Iran supports the Assad regime in Damascus.

Iran’s Parliament Speaker, Ali Larijani, has stated that Tehran will continue to fully support the Syrian government in its battle against terrorism and its efforts to create a successful national dialogue. Larijani also stated that, “the Iranian government and nation are standing by the Syrian people and are prepared to expand all-out cooperation with the Syrian government in order to establish regional stability and security.”¹³

However Riyadh, which views itself as the leader of the Sunni Muslim world, believes Tehran’s support of Syria is an opportunity to stop what it sees as Iran’s plans to encircle Saudi Arabia with hostile Shi’ite-dominated regimes. Prince Saud al-Faisal has described Assad’s supposed onslaught against his own people as “genocide” and Syrian lands as being “under occupation” when referring to the presence of Iranian and Hezbollah forces.¹⁴

The Syrian war has presented the Saudis with a chance to remove all threats to its regional hegemony in one battle arena. But Riyadh’s policy makers are wary that once they are fully committed to the war effort it will be difficult until the war is over.

Sir Richard Dearlove, former head of the British Secret Intelligence Service, the M16, claims that he had a revealing conversation with Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the Saudi ambassador in Washington and head of Saudi intelligence up until April 2014, that is, ambassador since before the events of September 11, 2001. Prince Bandar told him, “the time is not far off in the Middle East, Richard, when it will be literally ‘God help the Shia’. More than a billion Sunnis have simply had enough of them.”¹⁵ It can be claimed that this prediction by Prince Bandar is now coming to fruition given the current events unfolding in Syria and across the Middle East and

in which Saudi Arabia has become the primary supporter of anti-Shi'ite terrorists.

Prince Bandar was Secretary-General of the Saudi National Security Council from 2005 and head of General Intelligence between 2012 and 2014, the two crucial years when al-Qaeda-inspired jihadists took over the armed opposition in Syria. His statement may be questionable to some. Dearlove, who headed the M16 from 1999 to 2000, emphasized the significance of Prince Bandar's words when speaking at the Royal United Services Institute, saying that they constituted "a chilling comment that I remember very well indeed".¹⁶

Speaking in 2014, Dearlove stated that he believes private donors in Saudi Arabia and Qatar played a key role in the rise of ISIS in Syria. He claimed that "such things simply do not happen spontaneously."¹⁷ In support, Riyadh and Doha have turned a blind eye to private donations made to jihadi groups in Syria.

Despite the revelations of Dearlove, the idea that Saudi Arabia is involved in the ISIS-led Sunni uprisings in Iraq and the violence in Syria has attracted little attention. Instead the focus has been on the threat ISIS poses to the West and this has been misleading because the violence is mostly Muslim on Muslim in Iraq and Syria. Christian, Shi'ite and Yazidi holy shrines are continually being desecrated and these minorities are being exterminated in genocidal proportions. An ISIS threat to the West however, could prove devastating when taking into account the damage al-Qaeda perpetrated on 11 September, as well as the devastation caused in Sydney, Germany, France and Belgium by ISIS-inspired jihadists.

The Shi'ite view is that the threat is being magnified by the expanding influence of Wahhabism – the ultra-conservative, puritanical and intolerant version of Sunni Islam –that is state religion in Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Wahhabism labels the Shi'ite and other Islamic sects, including moderate Sunnis, as un-Islamic apostates. Saudi policy-making has been shaped around the belief that there can be no legitimate challenge to the purity of the Wahhabi doctrine and credentials as the guardians of Islam's two holiest mosques, Al-Masjid al-Haram in Mecca and Al-Masjid an-Nabawi in Medina.

Perhaps the biggest mistake made by Western governments has been their failure to recognize the deep and ingrained connection between Wahhabism, the Saudi regime and Saudi society. Of the 19 hijackers on September 11, 15 were Saudi nationals. Bin Laden, the

leader of al-Qaeda in 2011, boasted that there were multitudes of Saudis who privately donated money towards his terrorist group.¹⁸

Saudi Arabia has found themselves in a dangerous position when it has sponsored and encouraged jihadists to export Riyadh's policies and goals across the Islamic world and to foster anti-Shi'ite and anti-Iranian rhetoric. With the extreme radicalization of these Wahhabi indoctrinated jihadists; the Saudi regime has risked their own survival because of the radicals' view that the monarchy is un-Islamic. ISIS has openly stated that they intend to wrest Saudi Arabia from the monarchy.

The Saudi security apparatus has ensured that any dissidents and radical rhetoric against the Saudi regime has been suppressed, so it has not yet materialized as a real threat to the status quo. But for Riyadh it is a juggling act and mishaps have begun to occur through the duration of the Syrian War.

Saudi sympathy for anti-Shi'ite militancy has been identified in leaked US official documents. In December 2009, the then US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, wrote in a cable released by Wikileaks that "Saudi Arabia remains a critical financial support base for al-Qaeda, the Taliban, LeT [Lashkar-e-Taiba in Pakistan] and other terrorist groups."¹⁹

In an attempt to weaken Assad, Riyadh has accelerated the growth of ISIS and as a consequence the group has gained control of many areas that other anti-Assad forces once controlled.²⁰ In Mosul, as happened previously in its Syrian capital Raqqa, potential critics and opponents are disarmed, forced to swear allegiance to the new caliphate and killed if they resist. It is important to remember however, that ISIS has declared the House of Saud as heretical and has many sympathisers and supporters in Saudi Arabia. As it is imperative to remember that the West has been Saudi Arabia's biggest supporter even though the latter has been duplicitous in its Middle Eastern policy and has supported the Arab Spring uprisings in a number of countries.

Western powers have mostly overlooked the Saudi-backed suppression of peaceful democratic protests by the Shi'ite majority in Bahrain in March 2011. 1,500 Saudi troops were sent across the causeway to the island kingdom and as a consequence the demonstrations somewhat ended for a short period with Shi'ite mosques and shrines being systematically destroyed. The AlKhalifa dynasty belongs to Bahrain's Sunni minority and has close ties to the Saudi regime. This Saudi action, therefore, was to stem the Shi'ite

majority of Bahrain, and the Persian minority known as the Ajam, from deposing a Sunni monarch. The fear is that a Shi'ite-ruled Bahrain could align with Iran and then Saudi Arabia would have nothing but a causeway separating it from an Iranian-friendly state.

The West has continued its double standards in the Middle East because it has, for the most part, avoided criticism for reigniting the conflict in Iraq. The majority of the blame for this has fallen on al-Maliki for marginalizing the Sunni minority in the de-Ba'athification process. Although this is true to an extent, this view overlooks the fact that the destabilization in Iraq is a direct result of the takeover of the anti-Assad terrorists in Syria by radical jihadists who are sponsored by Saudi Arabia. Iraqi officials warned that the continued escalation of violence in Syria would have a spill-over effect in Iraq. An Iraqi politician stated, "I guess they just didn't believe us and were fixated on getting rid of [President Bashar al-] Assad."²¹

Iran has dispatched fuel and weapons to its ally in Damascus, as well as hundreds of advisers from its Revolutionary Guards Corps and thousands of fighters from Shi'ite militias that Iran has fostered and trained. Saudi Arabia has limited its involvement in the Syrian War to diplomatic, financial and armament support for anti-Assad terrorists.

Iran was quick to support Basher Assad when demonstrations against the government began in 2011. The Assad government was considered too important an ally for Iran to lose because it allows a physical bridge to exist between Iran and Hezbollah. Iran considers Syria as the centrepiece in its resistance against American hegemony in the region as well as Israel. The Syrian opposition claims that Iran has also spent as much as \$15 billion in aid, much of it in the form of fuel, to prop up the Syrian government.²²

Iran is not a newcomer to being involved in regional conflicts. With the Revolutionary Guards Corps being responsible for the exportation of the Iranian Revolution, Iran takes credit for the establishment of Hezbollah during the 1975-1990 Lebanese Civil War, even though at the time it was embroiled in its own bitter war with Iraq. The Revolutionary Guards Corps was responsible for galvanizing the Shi'ite community in Lebanon to become an effective and powerful fighting force. The Revolutionary Guard Corps was also blamed for the 1983 Beirut Barracks Bombing that killed 241 American military personnel, 58 French servicemen and six civilians.²³ Iran, Syria and Hezbollah denied any responsibility for the attacks, even though the Iranian government in 2004 erected

a monument in Tehran to commemorate the 1983 bombings and its martyrs.

The tripartite alliance between Tehran, Damascus and Hezbollah has influenced regional strategy and policy-making both in Tehran and Riyadh. What Tehran believed to be a successful, low intensity conflict between Hezbollah and Israel in southern Lebanon, gave Iran the confidence to sponsor a similar effort in Iraq to oust American and allied forces. Its proxy forces were Shi'ite militias who launched thousands of deadly attacks against American troops. This tripartite axis is the greatest threat to Israel.

Shiar Youssef, head of the Naame Shaam's Research and Advocacy Team, claims that, "there is sufficient evidence to try the military and political leadership of Iran for complicity in various crimes committed in Syria. This ranges from inciting, endorsing, and adopting specific criminal and terrorist acts to aiding and abetting war crimes and crimes against humanity." Youssef added, "The Syrian regime is little more than a puppet in the hands of the Sepah Pasdaran (Revolutionary Guards Corp), Qassem Soleimani is the de facto ruler of Iranian occupied Syria."²⁴ Youssef has not acknowledged that Iran is just supporting an ally that has had relations for decades with identical ideology on the regional order in resisting western imperialism, Zionism and Wahhabism.

Consistent with this anti-Iranian rhetoric, Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister, Prince Saud al-Faisal, at a meeting with German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier in the Red Sea city of Jeddah on October 13, 2014, pointed out that, "Iran must withdraw its occupying forces from Syria to help resolve the country's conflict."²⁵ He added, "In many conflicts, Iran is part of the problem, not the solution. In this case, we can say that Iranian forces in Syria are occupying forces aiding President Bashar al-Assad who is an 'illegitimate' leader."²⁶

Rather: it is curious that a Saudi Foreign Minister can determine who is an illegitimate leader, when Saudi Arabia remains a puritanical, Absolute Monarchy. The Wahhabist states of Saudi Arabia and Qatar have never conducted national elections since their modern founding. No political parties or national elections are permitted and the Saudi regime is ranked the seventh most authoritarian according to *The Economist's* 2010 Democracy Index.²⁷

Prince Saud al-Faisal does not acknowledge that multi-candidate elections took place in government-held areas of Syria on

3 June 2014.²⁸ Although the United Nations, United States, the European Union and Gulf Cooperation Council dismissed the elections as illegitimate, observers from 30 different countries, including Brazil, India, South Africa and Bolivia claimed, in a joint statement, that the elections were “free, fair and transparent,” and held in a “democratic environment, contrary to Western propaganda.”²⁹ Although some insist the figure to be dubious because of the war, the elections still had a 73.42% turn-out with Assad winning 88.7% of votes. This is much higher turn-out rate than the 2016 elections in the United States which had 57.9% turn-out rate. It is, therefore, irresponsible for Prince Saud al-Faisal to label Assad an illegitimate leader in the light of the political situation in Saudi Arabia and given the fact that there was a free election process in Syria to legitimize the Baathist Party and President Assad.

Writing for the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Andrew Nikolic asserted that:

“Admittedly ISIL [ISIS] cast a long and fearful shadow, but there are potentially worse – albeit quieter threats lurking, which demand urgent attention. They include the maverick trifecta of Iran, Russia and North Korea. Unlike ISIL, each of those international ‘problem-states’ comes disproportionately better armed, including ready-made or emerging nuclear capability, accompanied by an unpredictable senior leadership.”³⁰

Nikolic added, “Replace the ghastly spectre of ISIL’s severed heads and slain thousands with an Iranian nuclear device used somewhere in the Middle East, and the mind is concentrated wonderfully about the broader potential for a worse crisis.”³¹

Nikolic’s view is dangerous because it denotes the threat posed by ISIS and deflects it into hypotheticals that most likely will not occur. There is no evidence to suggest that a nuclear-capable Iran will ever use a nuclear warhead: for Iran, it is deterrence for the multitude of US imperialistic military bases literally on its borders. Although he acknowledges that these ‘maverick’ states are better equipped than ISIS and can therefore potentially cause more devastation, and thus warrant urgent attention, this is a dangerous attempt to shift the focus away from ISIS and onto sovereign states. The greatest threats the Syrian people face are not nuclear warheads from Russia, Iran or North Korea, but from the Wahhabi death squads that are being directly supported by the Saudi regime and are *actually* perpetrating violence. Nikolic’s fear-mongering only serves to deflect attention away from the real issues that are crippling Syria by planting hypothetical and distracting ideas that have virtually no

chance of occurring. The real danger he fails to acknowledge is the exponential growth of radical Sunni Islam that is being sponsored and exported directly by Saudi Arabia.³²

Addressing the United Nations, Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said, "Make no mistake, ISIL [ISIS] must be defeated, but to defeat ISIL and leave Iran as a threshold nuclear power is to win the battle and lose the war."³³ Ron Dermer, Israel's ambassador to the United States, stated that "(Iranians) are not a partner, they were not a partner, and they never will be a partner. Iran as a nuclear power is a thousand times more dangerous than ISIS."³⁴ Dermer was referring to then President Obama's suggestion of cooperating with Iran for the defeat of ISIS. This international fear-mongering towards Iran demonstrates an international and academic effort to deflect the dangers of radical Islam that is supported by Saudi Arabia and the West and place them onto Iran. Perhaps this is to avert the public's attention away from the fact that Washington's principal ally in the Islamic World, Saudi Arabia, has fostered the growth of ISIS and other extremist groups.³⁵

In a further attack, Prince Saud al-Faisal has described Assad's onslaught against his own people as "genocide" and Syria as being "under occupation" by Iranian and Hezbollah forces.³⁶ His suggestion that Syria is under Iranian occupation matches the arguments of Joseph Puder, journalist of the radical Zionist newspaper, *The Jewish Voice*. Puder stresses that:

"the International community led by the U.S. should demand the withdrawal of IRG and Hezbollah forces from Syria, while at the same time arming the Syrian opposition and combatting ISIL. There should be no lifting of economic sanctions on Iran if the Iranian regime fails to provide basic human rights. Nuclear negotiations with Iran should not be extended endlessly, allowing it to buy time in order to consolidate its dominance in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen as well as complete its nuclear weapons program. And finally, the U.S., its European allies, and the media, must clearly acknowledge and protest Iran's occupation of Syria, and end their hypocritical singular focus on Israeli withdrawal."³⁷

This hard-line proposal by the influential Zionist organization falls systematically with what Wahhabi Saudi Arabia is proposing as espoused by Prince Saud al-Faisal. These dangerous suggestions by Zionist organizations and Saudi officials bring into question whether the best interests of the Syrian people are at heart or whether geopolitical gains are the foremost priority. Although there have been no suggestions by the Netanyahu administration that they intend to cooperate with Saudi Arabia, especially since Saudi Arabia does not recognize Israel, these mutual aims between Zionist

organizations and Saudi Arabia are of concern given the powerful influence American Zionist organizations have on the State of Israel.³⁸ It is also disturbing when an ultra-nationalist Zionist newspaper adopts the name *The Jewish Voice* because it insinuates that its editorials are speaking on behalf of all Jewish people, and this effectively marginalizes non-Zionist Jews.

The mutual suspicion of Iran is because Israel would rather remove an Iranian-sympathetic regime from Syria, while Saudi Arabia wants regional hegemonic dominance with the approval of Washington. It must be remembered that Hezbollah is the only force in the Middle East that is directly engaged in conflict with Israel and it is completely supported by Syria and Iran. Radical jihadi groups can curb Hezbollah's power and can effectively remove this threat to Israel without Israel having to get deeply involved. It is well known that the Saudis are supporting the anti-Assad forces in Syria, with Prince Saud al-Faisal stating that "if the international community is not willing to do anything, then they must allow Syrians to defend themselves."³⁹

This open support for the anti-Assad forces aligns Israeli efforts to help jihadi groups. There is irrefutable evidence that the Israeli Defence Force has conducted operations within Syrian territory to retrieve wounded fighters and treat them in Israeli hospitals. Israel has attempted to disguise this as humanitarian effort for Syrian civilians, however, from what has been observed the people rescued have mostly been jihadists.⁴⁰ Reports to the United Nations Security Council by the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force have observed that the Israeli Defence Force have had dealings with "armed members of the opposition" on the Israeli-Syrian border of the Golan Heights: however, they never specified whether they were moderate or extremist forces.⁴¹ Given that Saudi Arabia is funding and arming militant groups and Israel is helping to treat wounded fighters, it can be concluded that Saudi Arabia and Israel are indirectly cooperating with each other in attempting to remove Assad from power. This mutual alignment is mostly overlooked in any analyses of the Syrian conflict.

Although Saudi Arabia will intensify its efforts to fund and arm the jihadi groups, it will also use its media outlets, broadcasted across the entire Arab world, to rally support for a military intervention in Syria. Despite Saudi Arabia using its military sparingly, it has not shied away when it comes to protecting its interests. As explored earlier, Riyadh sent troops to Bahrain to strengthen the power of the Sunni regime to help stem the majority

Shi'ite from gaining power on the island kingdom. Riyadh must be careful however and consider that Syria is not Bahrain. Although Saudi Arabia exerts a much greater influence in Syria than it did in the past, there is no question that, in order to outmanoeuvre Iran and Hezbollah and oust the Assad regime, it will wield that influence forcefully, supporting the terrorist forces with guns and diplomacy.

Contemporary Saudi Arabia actually resembles a growing regional power and this is evident when considering its intervention in Bahrain and Yemen, and sponsorship of jihadi groups. This is not the Saudi Arabia that failed to achieve its goals in Yemen in the 1960s, but Saudi Arabia willing to play a greater role in regional politics.

The Saudis are not naive and recognize that the fighting in Syria will have serious repercussions that will shape the political trajectory of the Middle East. Saudi Arabia does not want to sponsor a losing side as it did when Riyadh attempted to halt the ousting of the centuries-old Yemeni monarchy during the Yemeni Civil War, which began in 1962.

An examination of the events in Bahrain, Iraq and Syria, shows that Riyadh is being careful not to repeat in Syria the failures experienced during the Yemeni Civil War. Recent events in Syria, however, suggest that Saudi Arabia is struggling in its fight. Since the Saudi-led aggression against the Shi'ite Houthis in Yemen began in March 2015, Riyadh has begun conceding land with its military withdrawal in its southern Najran province to Yemeni irregulars. But despite losing territory on its southern borders, Saudi Arabia had begun the rhetoric of invading Syria under the guise of fighting ISIS in early 2016. This has led to Riyadh conducting training exercises, involving another 20 countries, in northern Saudi Arabia.⁴² This training was to prepare for any potential invasion of Syria. The Iranian Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, warned Saudi Arabia not to deploy troops in Syria saying it would violate international law.

Mockingly, the Deputy Chief of Staff of Iran's Armed Forces, Brigadier General Massoud Jazayeri, stated:

“Saudi Arabia has exhausted its military muscles in the Syrian battlefield. It has failed both in Syria and Yemen. If they had the ability, they would have already sent troops to Syria. They claim they will send troops (to Syria) but I don't think they will dare do so. They have a classic army and history tells us such army's stand no chance in fighting irregular resistance forces. This will be like a coup de grâce for them. Apparently, they see no other way but this, and if this is the case, then their fate is sealed.”⁴³

However, despite what is happening in Yemen, Syria is the main battlefield upon which Saudi Arabia and Iran are waging a proxy war, with devastating sectarian repercussions. Although there are peace talks, it is doubtful they can ever produce results without the convening of serious communications between Riyadh and Tehran. While Saudi Arabia exercises considerable influence on jihadi rebels, Iran is crucial to the survival of the Assad government. Both Riyadh and Tehran have much to gain from preventing Syria's implosion.

Few of the jihadi groups, ISIS included, recognize that the western-backed and Istanbul-based political opposition to Assad, the Syrian National Coalition, as the legitimate representative of anti-Assad forces. Furthermore, inter-rebel fighting has emerged among the anti-Assad forces. This disunity amongst the many factions and jihadi groups makes any attempt at peace negotiations untenable and that the Syrian National Coalition is essentially an obsolete organization serving no real purpose.

Because of this inter-rebel conflict, Assad has been quick to repeatedly remind the Syrian National Coalition and moderate rebel forces that he will not hand over power to a transitional government. It must be remembered that the Saudi regime is the principal supporter of these jihadi groups and that it has a strong influence over many of the groups and has the power to make these groups accept a peace proposal. The fact that this has not occurred demonstrates that Saudi Arabia is only interested in peace for Syria under its own terms, that is, a Syria without Assad, without influence from Iran and one that is sympathetic to Saudi Arabia and its Wahhabi doctrine.

Russia's Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, called on the rebels in 2013 to "avoid discord and unite", reflecting Moscow's anxiety that the opposition's fragmentation does not bode well for any peace talks.⁴⁴ Only through a unified opposition can serious talks for peace be held. But as long as Saudi Arabia fosters these jihadi groups and ISIS, there is little chance of serious peace talks in the foreseeable future, as demonstrated by the attempted peace talks in 2016.

From the very beginning of the conflict, the odds were against the supposed "rebel" opposition. This opposition was weak and thus overwhelmingly dependent on regional powers like Saudi Arabia and Turkey for military, financial and diplomatic support. This dependency left the opposition vulnerable to external manipulation, which led to the jihadi takeover of the anti-Assad forces.

To exacerbate the situation, the Obama administration's insistence that Assad step down from power did not complement existing strategic plans and did not take into account the conditions on the ground. This was coupled with Britain and France taking an approach similar to Washington. The ignorance of the Western powers in regards to the situation in Syria allowed them too blindly to support the Free Syrian Army which has effectively become an arms dealer for radical Wahhabi groups as they receive weapons from the West and sell them onto jihadi groups.⁴⁵

Although there were instances of geopolitical rivalry between Tehran and Riyadh prior to the Syrian War, the Arab Spring was the most significant moment when Riyadh attempted to resist the perceived threat of Iran expanding its regional influence. Saudi Arabia has mostly been known as a reactionary regional power. This can be seen in the unfolding Yemeni crisis in which Riyadh took a lead role in organising President Ali Abdullah Saleh to step down in return for a guarantee of immunity from any persecution.⁴⁶ It is also important to remember that Riyadh took a lead role in the Arab world in fostering regional political support for an international intervention to oust Muammar Gaddafi from power in Libya.

However, Riyadh has also played the role of a counter-revolutionary regional power. This was seen when it deployed troops to entrench and secure the al-Khalifa dynasty in Bahrain.⁴⁷ This firm support for counter-revolutionary forces in Bahrain can be cross examined with Riyadh's support for anti-status quo forces in Syria, where again Saudi Arabia has allocated billions in aid to support the political and armed opposition to the Assad government.

This contradictory nature of Saudi foreign policy since the Arab Spring is best explained through the geopolitical rivalry Riyadh has with Tehran. Riyadh has increasingly viewed Tehran as the main military and political rival in the region. The first point of conflict is Tehran's push to promote an alliance and ideological system in the Middle East that is independent from foreign involvement and intervention. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, would rather stem any Shi'ite influence in what it perceives to be its sphere of influence.

ISIS is continually attracting disenfranchised Saudis and thus it remains a major threat to Syria. Frederic Wehrey, of the Middle East Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, states that "the Saudis are in turbulent waters in the region, and have faced a hostile and unknown environment and are still dealing with the aftershocks of the Arab Spring." He continues by claiming that the

Saudi regime is taking seriously the appeal ISIS has amongst Saudi youth.⁴⁸ This appeal can only be blamed upon the ruling elite as it forcibly indoctrinates its entire population in Wahhabism, with some analysts having begun to say Wahhabism and the ideology of ISIS are virtually identical.⁴⁹ Therefore, in Riyadh's desperate attempts to remove Assad, it has polarized some of the most radical terrorist groups that exist. Although other hostile flashpoints have existed, such as that between Iran and Iraq, in these conflicts there was not a spill-over effect equal to that of the rivalry seen between Riyadh and Tehran.

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Chapter 5

Saudi-Iranian Foreign Policy towards the Syrian War

Peaceful protests against the Assad regime, which began during the Arab Spring, were not successfully suppressed and this led to deterioration in relations between Riyadh and Damascus. The revolts in Syria provided Riyadh with the opportunity to change its attitude towards the Assad government.

Relations between Damascus and Riyadh were severed in 2005 with the assassination of Lebanese-born Saudi citizen, Rafik alHariri, the Prime Minister of Lebanon. Hezbollah were accused of the assassination. Riyadh attempted to isolate Syria between 2005 and 2007, but by 2008 relations improved after the Doha Agreement which led to the creation of a national unity government in the Lebanon.

The cooperation displayed during the Doha Agreement triggered a change in Riyadh's policy on Assad's Syria with a shift in focus towards ending Syria's relationship with Tehran. This focus became prominent following Israel's 'Operation Cast Lead', the three week conflict in 2008-2009 between Israel and Hamas. This culminated in Saudi King Abdullah making a historic trip to Syria in October 2009 where he mutually agreed with Assad to create a national unity cabinet in the Lebanon.

Although good communications between Saudi Arabia and Syria continued for the next two years, a solid political alliance based on understanding was never established because Riyadh failed to break up the 'Axis of Resistance', the anti-Israeli and anti-Western alliance between Iran, Syria and Hezbollah.

Assad's suppression of the Arab Spring protests in Syria severed all communication between Damascus and Riyadh. Saudi Arabia shifted from caution to condemnation. The Saudi ambassador in Syria was recalled to Riyadh as early as August 2011. The motives for Saudi Arabia's early recall of its ambassador was questionable given the war had not yet begun in Syria. It can be suggested that the Arab Spring protests offered a new opportunity for Riyadh to destabilize Iran's ally through the sponsorship of terrorist forces.

Riyadh's new anti-Assad policy, along with its military intervention for the al-Khalifa dynasty in Bahrain, sent the message that Saudi Arabia would adopt an aggressive approach towards any perceived Iranian influence in the Arab Middle East. By destroying or weakening the Assad government, the Saudis believed they would eliminate the power of the supposed Shi'ite Axis.

The Wahhabist states, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, contrived the suspension of Syria's membership from the Arab League and provided financial and political support to the anti-Assad opposition forces in Syria. Since the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia has attempted to build political alliances in order to achieve its geopolitical goals in the region. This change in Saudi policy from quiet diplomacy to political activism had been seen before, in the Yemeni Civil War of the 1960s, and failed.

In the Syrian War, Saudi Arabia has realised that it can no longer solely rely on its imperial master, the United States, to help it achieve its geopolitical goals. Strains emerged between Washington and Riyadh as the United States did not take an active enough role in efforts to weaken Assad and Iran like it had in Iraq, in the Saudi view. With the United States taking a limited role in the anti-Assad movement, Riyadh, with its billions of petrodollars, took the lead in the region in funding the extremist anti-Assad forces inside Syria.¹ Although Riyadh failed to break the Damascus-Tehran axis, the rebellion in Syria provided the opportunity for Riyadh to weaken Iranian influence in the Middle East.

Saudi Arabia and its allies in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) called on Syria to stop its "deadly suppression of citizens."² This is contradictory as Saudi Arabia is one of the most suppressive autocracies in the world given that rejection of Islam is punishable by death and all aspects of society and everyday life is sex-segregated. The Saudi King demanded that the "killing machine" in Syria must be stopped.³

The Saudi decision occurred after Alawite Assad refused to step down. Doctrinally the Wahhabist Saudis view Alawites as heretics and this ideology prevented any mediation between the conflicting elements in Syria. Riyadh, through its intervention in Syria hoped to achieve its geopolitical goals in the Middle East by weakening Tehran in the Syrian war. With the extension of the war into Iraq and the emergence of ISIS, the rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran has become both more intense and contradictory.

Saudi Arabia, along with the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, has helped the jihadist forces as their anti-Iranian proxies. If Assad could be overthrown this would weaken Iran and Hezbollah and it would sever the arms and aid route between Tehran and Hezbollah. Along with this approach, by destroying the Assad government, the Saudi and Gulf Arab funded opposition could gain control of what remains of a ruined Syria.

In March 2014 Saudi Arabia officially opposed any funding to the internationally designated terrorist groups al-Nusra, and ISIS. However, it has done very little to halt private donations by Saudi citizens to these terrorist groups.⁴ By condemning these radical groups as terrorist organisations, Saudi Arabia has avoided any criticism from the West because while Saudi individuals continue their support for these groups, the government policy indicates it is not contributing. Riyadh and these radical groups share the Wahhabist creed. ISIS views all the ruling monarchies in the Arabian Peninsula as violators of Islam. A map released by ISIS indicates that the entire Arabian Peninsula is part of their Caliphate.⁵ This is of concern to the Saudi regime, which is becoming increasingly worried about its volatile borders with Yemen and Bahrain and the growing appeal of ISIS within the kingdom. In the middle of 2014 Saudi officials arrested 62 suspected jihadist, 35 of whom were Saudi citizens, for being part of an ISIS cell. They were accused of planning to assassinate officials of the government and to target government buildings.⁶

Along with private donations to ISIS from Saudi Arabia, notable donations have also come from the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait. These donations have intensified conflicts between the jihadist groups operating in Syria, with intense inter-rebel fighting for funds and influence. These donations only strengthen the anti-Assad forces despite their inter-group conflict. It must be stressed however that ISIS is not reliant upon these private donations but the donations send a clear message that there is support for ISIS's ideology amongst the Gulf elite. ISIS sources its wealth from oil, theft, blackmail, selling of antiquities and slaves, taxes and extortion. Saudi Arabia indirectly supports the jihadists as its call for greater international pressure and intervention against the Assad government and encourages Washington to take an active role in deposing of Assad. When the Assad regime was accused of using chemical weapon attacks in August 2013, Riyadh tried to persuade Washington to oust Assad for human right violations and said that

Assad had crossed the supposed 'red line' that President Obama warned about in August 2012 and March 2013.

Obama's warning that the use of chemical weapons would cross a 'red line', which supposedly had been crossed by the Syrian government, have brought Saudi demands for an intervention. Similar accusations were used to justify the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

A United Nations investigator, Carla Del Ponte, claimed that there was "strong, concrete suspicions but not yet incontrovertible proof" that unidentified jihadi forces had used sarin nerve gas in early 2013.⁷ Ponte's suspicions that the supposed rebels had used chemical weapons were ignored as international condemnation from the United States, the United Kingdom, France and Saudi Arabia remained focussed on Assad for the deployment of these weapons. The terrorist use of such weapons, which was blamed on Assad, could have forced Western powers to move against Syria militarily. However, by Washington not sending troops on the ground demonstrates an imperial empire on the decline in the Middle East.

The chemical attacks in Ghouta coincided with the arrival of UN investigators invited by Syria to inspect sites of previous chemical weapon attacks.⁸ The Australian Prime Minister at the time, Kevin Rudd, echoed the major Western powers by stating that "the burden of proof lies with the Syrian regime" to prove they were not responsible for the chemical weapon attacks, rather than others having to prove the Syrian government were responsible.⁹ Washington's refusal to depose Assad led to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States to question the United States as a reliable ally.

An unnamed official from the Syrian National Coalition stated that there is a growing tendency in Riyadh, Ankara, Doha and Abu Dhabi to ignore Washington as they sense the United States will not act decisively against Assad.¹⁰ The adoption of policies initiated by Saudi Arabia, independent of Washington, and taken on by other Middle Eastern states demonstrates that Saudi Arabia is emerging as a recognized regional power. It is taking a leading role in financially and diplomatically supporting the rebel jihadist in Syria.

On 10 September 2013, President Obama stated that he,

"determined that it is in the national security interests of the United States to respond to the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons through a targeted military strike. The purpose of this strike would be to deter Assad from using chemical weapons, to degrade his regime's ability to use them and to make clear to the world that we will not tolerate their use. That's my judgment as commander in chief."¹¹

At this point the United States was clearly prepared to intervene into Syria. This however calls into question the true intent of the current American airstrikes against ISIS in Syria and how effective they are in stemming ISIS militancy. Although Saudi Arabia failed to achieve US or Western intervention to 'punish' Assad for alleged chemical weapon attacks, Washington has found other justifications to militarily intervene in Syria to a certain and limited extent.

Obama has demonstrated that even the threat of force can be an effective diplomatic tool. Threats may prevent further killings with chemical warheads in Syria even if there is little proof that the Assad government was responsible for the Ghouta attacks. Even without such proof, Riyadh, with Washington's help, has forced Syria into removing its chemical weapon stockpiles. Syria also ratified the Chemical Weapons Convention on 23 October 2013, however this was done out of force rather than free will. Neither Washington nor Riyadh is prepared to insist that Israel open its borders for similar United Nations inspections or to ratify the Chemical Weapons Convention.

Riyadh's regional influence also extends into the Lebanon. Saudi Arabia has always been financially and politically vested in the Lebanon, and has also offered to provide \$3 billion in aid to the Lebanese Armed Forces.¹² The Saudis' investment in the Lebanon is to strengthen its fighting capacity as a counter to Hezbollah's military dominance. Hezbollah claim that Riyadh orchestrated an intelligence campaign, led by Prince Bandar bin Sultan, to destroy its organisational network and assets, and to weaken its political position in Lebanon.¹³

Riyadh's contribution of aid to the Lebanese Armed Forces was, and still is, to both stabilize Lebanon and undermine Iran's Lebanese ally. In April 2013, an Israeli Defence Ministry official, Amos Gilad, stated that Al-Qaeda in Syria posed less of a threat than the "Iran-Syria-Hezbollah" axis.¹⁴ Such an assessment would suggest that Riyadh and Tel Aviv have cooperated, or at least mutually accepted that they need to halt further Iranian influence in the region to achieve their own geopolitical goals. This is true given that Israel has been assisting and cooperating with al-Nusra, a Saudi supported jihadi force.¹⁵

Israeli media outlets have revealed direct cooperation between al-Nusra and the Israeli Defence Force, and other media outlets have reported on the lack of animosity between the Israeli state and al-Nusra.¹⁶ Israel forced Hezbollah to evacuate from the Syrian Golan

Heights with al-Nusra and Israel having assumed joint control of this strategically vital area on the Israeli-Syrian border.¹⁷

Assad's political survival was temporarily assured, while rival jihadi forces were engulfed in inter-rebel conflict. With the rise of ISIS and other jihadist groups, who want to destroy the Saudi regime, a change in Saudi policy towards Iran could be detected.

In May 2014 the Saudi Foreign Minister, Prince Saud al-Faisal, said that his Iranian counterpart, Mohammad Javad Zarif, could visit Riyadh "anytime he sees fit."¹⁸ This Saudi invitation occurred after the removal of former Intelligence Chief, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, and former Deputy Defence Minister, Prince Salman bin Sultan, who were anti-Assad proponents in the Saudi regime. This approach to Tehran by Saudi Arabia may indicate a change in their mutual geostrategic rivalry. The timing of the invitation is of mutual interest to Riyadh and Tehran to prevent any open conflict, or perhaps the mutual threat of ISIS to both states.

Although Saudi Arabia and Iran are engaged in a struggle to dominate power and influence in the Middle East, both also seek to limit this struggle through the use of soft power and proxies. By funding proxy forces throughout the Middle East, especially in the case of Syria, and using psychological warfare by means of radio and television propaganda, each are avoiding any direct conflict. Iran exercises limited influence among the Saudi kingdom's Shi'ite minority, while Saudi Arabia has ties with the Baloch's and the Arab minority in Khuzestan. Economic and diplomatic channels of communications have remained open.

The limited communication between Tehran and Riyadh is now occurring as Iran and the West move towards a settlement on the issue of nuclear weapons. Riyadh is concerned that an improvement in US-Iranian relations may result from a permanent agreement on the nuclear issue. Such a settlement would strengthen Iran's future position in the Middle East.¹⁹ Any rapprochement between Washington and Tehran may lead the United States to further disengage from the Middle East. This would increase Riyadh's fear of an 'inevitable' Iranian threat or force it to improve bilateral relations with Tehran. Increasing sectarianism and violence in Syria and Iraq, and the threat of jihadi groups in Syria, may assist Iran to establish a formal relationship with Washington.

With the actions of terrorist organizations leading to greater political instability in Iraq and Syria it is necessary to keep channels of communication open between Tehran, Riyadh and Washington.

Although communication may remain open, in a realistic context it is unlikely that Tehran and Riyadh can or will act in a way to end the conflicts in Syria and Iraq except on their own specific terms. With the assumption of power of the former Deputy Defence Minister, Prince Salman bin Sultan, became King of Saudi Arabia. With this new leader, Riyadh's geopolitical policy objectives to end the war remain unknown. Involvement by Tehran and Riyadh in Syria may make it nearly impossible for them to retreat from their commitments to their respective proxies.

The Iranian–Saudi rivalry may prevent an integrated approach to Syria because the rivalry itself prevents any significant change in strategy by either party. Although Saudi Arabia has no illusions about a jihadi victory in Syria, its support for the anti-Assad opposition remains unchanged. The Gulf kingdom knows the advantage Assad has because of the weaponry, organization, and external support that he has received from Iran. The Saudis support the jihadist groups through their petrodollars and they could financially ruin Syria and Iran without any significant financial or economic loss to themselves, or so was initially thought. In October 2015 the International Monetary Fund predicted that a combination of low oil prices, Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen, its support for jihadist groups in Syria, and its failure to make changes to its economic policy could lead to internal political unrest and leave the autocratic kingdom bankrupt as soon as 2020.²⁰ Given this possibility it is questionably how long Saudi Arabia can viably support jihadist groups in Syria.

While Riyadh is concerned about the possible long-term expansion of ISIS, Iran remains bogged down fighting on two fronts, one in Syria and one in Iraq. The financial loss incurred by Iran as a consequence of Saudi Arabian petrodollars has only heightened Iranian animosity for Riyadh.²¹

Riyadh's funding of the jihadist forces in Syria and Iraq may lead to unexpected consequences throughout the Middle East. ISIS forces who have battle experience have openly stated their plans to operate in the Gulf region to overthrow autocratic monarchies and expand their caliphates. This only further destabilizes relations between Shi'ite and Sunni communities in Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia itself.

Even as this potential destabilization of the entire Arabian Peninsula appears a possibility, tensions have emerged within different Arab autocracies between anti-Iranian hardliners and those

preferring a stable allegiance with the Shi'ite state. This is the case in the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait and even in Saudi Arabia. Hardliners believe that the removal of the Assad government from Syria will end Iranian aid to Hezbollah in the Lebanon and destroy its influence in the Middle East. They believe that removing Assad could lead to the isolation of Tehran without the need for direct conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia. While direct conflict has been averted between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Riyadh is willing to use its power to suppress any perceived threat to its geopolitical interests as the occupation in Bahrain demonstrated.

However, there are opposition forces that believe the overthrow of Assad and the weakening of Iran should not be through the funding of jihadi proxy rebels. These opposition groups fear that the funding of jihadist groups was the principle reason for the growth of extremism and radicalism amongst the rebel factions fighting in Syria. These jihadi groups are seen as a threat to the autocratic kingdom, and there is fear that when they return home they will destabilize Saudi Arabia and carry out terrorist attacks. The jihadist experiences on the Syrian battle arena and their growing financial resources poses a real threat to Saudi Arabia.

The quagmire that is the conflicts in Syria and Iraq create a dilemma for Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf Arab autocracies as they try to determine if the bigger threat is the spread of ISIS or Iran's expanding influence across the Middle East.

If Iran is in a superior demographic, geopolitical and military position, it is difficult to see when or if either party will give up its resolve in Syria. Nevertheless, Riyadh undeniably has the advantage because of its supposed endless amount of petrodollars and because it is in the position as being the 'leader' of the Sunni majority from which radicals are drawn towards or support the jihadi cause.

As the financial and political strains caused by the Syrian war take a toll, the hope of containing the conflict only within Syria has been destroyed as ISIS spread into areas of Iraq, Yemen, Egypt and Libya and continues to destabilize the wider region.²² Riyadh and Tehran must evaluate the long-term effects and costs in their quests to secure a victory. As this chapter has shown, neither Riyadh nor Tehran, are prepared to compromise on their strategic goals in Syria and this is only proving to polarize the conflict further. However, often overlooked by analyses of the conflict is the role that oil, pipelines and nuclear proliferation plays in the war.

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Chapter 6

Nuclear Proliferation, Pipeline Politics and the Saudi Oil Oversupply

Riyadh has a legitimate fear of a powerful Iran given its pursuit of nuclear weapons and the impact that would have on shifting the regional power balance in Tehran's favour. From the Saudi perspective, Iran's ambitions and its military capabilities might be used to further its influence over the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and, potentially, the Shi'ite minority in Saudi Arabia. However, Iran is only making a limited effort to influence or manipulate the Shia minority in Saudi Arabia. Riyadh has always been sceptical and has often blamed Iran for instigating Shi'ite revolts in the kingdom. The Shi'ite minority in Saudi Arabia could disrupt Saudi oil production. This chapter will analyse the role that nuclear proliferation, oil and pipelines play in fuelling the geopolitical rivalry between Tehran and Riyadh in the Syrian war.

The deep ideological divide between Shia Islam and Wahhabist Sunni Islam fuels the competing geostrategic and political interests between Tehran and Riyadh in Syria and incites sectarianism in the secular state. Despite this, the role that oil plays in the rivalry must be considered.

In late 2014, Iranian officials accused Riyadh of conspiring with the West to keep oil prices low in an attempt to weaken Iran's economy and to apply pressure to seal a nuclear deal with the West. In order to keep oil prices low, Riyadh refused to cut production. This allowed it to maintain its share in the oil market but meant that prices fell from \$115 a barrel in June 2014 to below \$50 in late 2014.¹ In a December 2014 visit to Damascus, Ali Larijani announced that Iran "will not forget which countries schemed to lower the price of oil."² Washington has denied any collusion with Riyadh, with an unnamed US official stating that "the Saudis learned their lesson from the past when they curbed production

to help keep oil prices high, only to see Russia and Venezuela grab some of their market share.”³

Because of shale oil, the United States has now become one of the world’s largest producers of oil. Although the United States does not export crude oil, its production of oil has reshaped the world’s energy market, especially given that the United States now imports much less oil. With a downturn in the global oil market and increased efficiencies, the global demand for oil has fallen. It can therefore be suggested that Iran is not the real target of Saudi Arabia’s systematic oil oversupply, but rather Washington.

Oil prices started to decline when the Saudi-dominated OPEC, which controls approximately 40 percent of the world market, did not agree to production cuts during a November 2014 meeting in Vienna.⁴ Considering the regional geopolitical rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran, in the context of their proxy war in Syria, the economic ruination of Iran is the real reason behind Riyadh’s oil strategy, and not the increasing shale oil production in the United States.

Tehran has not been the only government accusing Saudi Arabia of manipulating oil prices for political purposes. Russia, Nigeria and Venezuela, who also heavily depend on oil revenues, have been affected by the Saudi oil output. Venezuela’s president, Nicolas Maduro, believes that Washington and Riyadh have conspired to lower oil prices to attack Russia and Venezuela.⁵ Russian president, Vladimir Putin, stated that “we all see the lowering of oil prices. There’s lots of talk about what’s causing it. Could it be an agreement between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia to punish Iran and affect the economies of Russia and Venezuela? It could.”⁶ This suggestion complements President Maduro’s belief that the oil oversupply is targeting Moscow and Caracas. He continues by stating, “did you know there’s an oil war? And the war has an objective: to destroy Russia. It’s a strategically planned war... also aimed at Venezuela, to try and destroy our revolution and cause an economic collapse.”⁷

Saudi Arabia has denied suggestions of an oil conspiracy. The Saudi Oil Minister, Ali al-Naimi, stated that they “do not

seek to politicize oil. For us it's a question of supply and demands [sic], it's purely business."⁸ Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia attains 80 percent of its budget revenue from oil sales and is the key supplier of global oil.⁹ Russia depends on oil and natural gas exports for 50% of its budget.¹⁰ Through Saudi Arabia's oversupply global prices have fallen.

When considering the downturn of the Russian rouble, the Kremlin claimed that the low oil prices are an anti-Moscow scheme by Washington and Riyadh to destabilise the country. Although unlikely, the Russian view is that the flooding of the global market with cheap Saudi oil is in retaliation for Russia's support of Assad's Syria. A Russian veto vote in the United Nations Security Council stalled any plans for the West to directly intervene in Syria and halted the military intervention that began in September 2015.

The Saudi oil oversupply and the US-Saudi anti-Russian agenda have been condemned by Tehran. In 2012 The Middle East Media Research Institute reported that the Army of Guardians of the Islamic Revolution (IRGC) had threatened revenge on Saudi Arabia "with all the means Iran has at its disposal" if Iranian oil was affected by oversupply. The institute also stated that Amir Mousavi, a former IRGC official and director of Iran's Centre for Strategic and International Studies, had warned:

Saudi Arabia's move is a suicidal step in the struggle against Iran in the region. So far, Tehran has held back and has acted in moderation. Saudi Arabia is certain that Iran will not respond easily, but it seems that this time the situation is different, and if necessary Saudi Arabia's economic interests in the region and in the world will be harmed..."¹¹

Mousavi did not describe the nature of Iran's potential retaliation, but an IRGC-affiliated Twitter account on December 20, 2014 posted, "people must defend themselves against the repeated military attacks by the al-Saud regime."¹² Although Iranian threats towards Riyadh are not uncommon, given the armed conflict in Syria and Iraq and the threat of instability in the Lebanon and Bahrain, statements like this one on Twitter only deepen the sectarian division between Shi'ites and Sunnis.

Tehran's anti-Saudi rhetoric is at odds with then US president Obama's conciliatory comments about Iran. In an interview with US National Public Radio, Obama said Iran has an opportunity, through talks about a nuclear deal, "to get right with the world." He held out on the possibility of opening a U.S. embassy in Tehran but suggested that Iran could be accepted as a "successful regional power."¹³ Although Saudi Arabia is Washington's principal Arab and Islamic ally, Obama's suggestion that Iran could become a successful regional power undermines the Saudi regime's confidence in Washington.

While Tehran claims its nuclear program is meant for energy purposes, Western governments, Riyadh and Tel Aviv insist that Iran's development of nuclear power is to produce nuclear weapons. Nuclear talks between Tehran and the P5 + 1 – the United States, China, France, Russia and the United Kingdom, plus Germany – were held in October 2014 in Geneva. Earlier, in November 2013, Iran had made a one year deal with world powers to halt its nuclear program in exchange for the easing of international sanctions against the country, in which the deal was later extended.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani stated that Tehran needs to end its political isolation so its economy can grow.¹⁴ Although viewed as a 'moderate', he has been criticized by 'hardliners' within the Islamic Republic for his determination to strike a deal on a nuclear program. Iranian leaders more generally are wary of making any compromise with the West in regards to its nuclear program. This tends to suggest that Iran's 'nuclear program' is about nuclear weapons and not just nuclear power. This view of Iran, however, can lead to its political and economic isolation which has more potential to harm its economic growth than the benefits accrued through the development of nuclear power.

Russia is a strong ally of Iran and supports its nuclear program. Russian companies are contracted to construct eight nuclear reactors in Iran and supply them with enriched uranium. Russia is also Syria's largest weapon supplier with an estimated \$4 billion in defence contracts.¹⁵ The Saudi oil

oversupply is not ‘purely business’ but a response to Tehran’s efforts to develop a nuclear energy program and to potentially produce nuclear weapons. The oversupply has the potential to devastate Iran’s economy given that it needs continual high oil prices to balance its budget and overcome the imposition of international sanctions.

A former adviser to the Saudi regime, Mohammad al-Sabban, stated that the Gulf Kingdom could survive an extended period of time with low oil prices because of its reserves. He states that “Saudi Arabia can sustain these low oil prices for at least eight years. First, we have huge financial reserves of about 3tn Saudi riyals (\$800 billion USD). Second, Saudi Arabia is embarking now on rationalising its expenditure, trying to take all the fat out of the budget.”¹⁶ Sabban’s comments demonstrate that Riyadh is prepared to maintain low oil prices to force Iran to change its regional policies.

Iran’s deputy minister for Arab and African Affairs, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, said that the meeting between the foreign ministers of Iran and Saudi Arabia was delayed in January 2015 because of the falling oil prices. Amir-Abdollahian also stated that Saudi Arabia is “expected to make efforts to stop the fall in oil prices and not let the decline have a lasting impact on oil producing nations [sic] economies.” He urged Riyadh to adhere to policies that are in the interest of the region.¹⁷ From an economic and geopolitical standpoint however, the Saudi oil strategy may be its most powerful weapon because it denies the United States of any market share for the export of shale oil and it weakens Iran and Russia, and thus as a follow-on the Assad government and Hezbollah. The oil strategy may allow the Saudis to expand its influence in the Middle East.

Iran produced 2.77 million barrels of oil a day in December 2014, down from an average of 3.58 million in 2011.¹⁸ Amir-Abdollahian has informed Saudi officials that “enemies of the region must be prevented from harming the developing economies of regional countries” and that Iran expects “Saudi Arabia to play its role on the issue of oil prices

to help regional countries. Unfortunately, in past years, we have witnessed a series of strategic mistakes in the region,” such as the “intentional or unintentional cooperation with some countries outside the region to decrease oil prices.”¹⁹

The repercussions of the Saudi oil strategy has forced Hezbollah to impose salary cuts on personnel, defer payments to suppliers and reduce monthly stipends to its political allies in the Lebanon. However, the Saudi oil strategy has not, in the short or medium term, threatened the militant group’s survival. This is astounding given that Hezbollah are financially reliant upon Tehran to pay its militia and to fund its social welfare network of schools and hospitals for the most impoverished Shi’ites of the Lebanon. And yet, as Randa Slim, a Hezbollah expert and director of the Washington-based Middle East Institute, argues “salvaging the regime in Syria and fighting ISIS in Iraq have forced Iran to divert more resources away from Hezbollah at a time when the resource base in Iran is shrinking” because of lower oil revenues and international sanctions.²⁰ Hezbollah, however, is not entirely reliant on Iran for its finances. When Hezbollah first emerged, in the midst of the Lebanese Civil War, Iran was its principal ally and sponsor. Since then though, the group has diversified its finances by establishing a network of businesses in the Lebanon and overseas.

Although traders claim the global oversupply of oil is the reason for the financial downturn, it is not difficult to see that there has been a deliberate manipulation of prices to cripple Iran. The Iranian economy is reliant on oil to be sold at \$100 a barrel.²¹ Any decrease in Iranian oil revenues will directly affect Hezbollah’s fighting capabilities in Syria. It must be remembered that Hezbollah are a military ally of the Assad government and have been at war against the Wahhabi jihadist groups who are directly and/or indirectly supported by Riyadh.

In December 2014 Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani, alleged that there was a “conspiracy against the Muslim world.”²² Iran’s deputy foreign minister, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, told Reuters that if Saudi Arabia does not intervene to reverse the slump it would be a “serious mistake

that will have a negative result on all countries in the region.”²³

Tehran’s continuing support for the Assad regime ensures its survival and frustrates Saudi efforts to destroy Assad. The survival of the Assad government preserves the ‘axis of resistance’ that unites Iran, Syria and Hezbollah in their struggle against Israel, Western hegemony in the Middle East and the spread and growth of Wahhabism. It is claimed that the Islamic Republic provides between \$1 billion and \$2 billion a month to Assad to ensure the regime’s survival in Syria.²⁴ Of that sum, approximately \$500 million is spent on assisting the National Defence Force, an 80,000 to 100,000 strong loyalist militia that acts on a part-time basis.²⁵ The National Defence Force is commanded by the IRGC.

Karim Sadjadpour argues that Tehran has “officially given around \$5 billion in credit, and when you consider the financial aid, military aid, discounted oil, and man hours of IRGC officials, the numbers are well beyond \$10 billion. Absent Iranian largesse, Assad would not be financially solvent today.” When evaluating the Saudi over supply of oil, it can be seen that lowering oil prices is not for market dominance but to destabilize Iran’s fragile economy. Sadjadpour believes that “people will go hungry in Tehran before Iran will cease its investment in this so-called ‘axis of resistance’.”²⁶ Iran has spent billions of dollars, endured financial hardship, economic embargoes and supported the Assad government and Hezbollah in its resistance to Saudi Arabia’s regional influence, Western hegemony in the Middle East and Israeli aggression.

In the case of Hezbollah, its main source of income from Iran is from the multi-billion dollar private resources at the disposal of Ayatollah Ali Khomeini. These institutions accumulate wealth from religious donations and investments in property and commerce. This is almost identical to the means by which ISIS and other Jihadi groups receive their funding from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, a Lebanese oil industry expert, with extensive contacts in Iran, claimed that

although Iran's institutions will be indirectly affected by international sanctions and the Saudi oil glut, the Islamic Republic has money reserves running into billions of dollars.²⁷ Although the credentials of this anonymous 'expert' are unknown, in mid-2012 Reuters reported that the governor of Iran's central bank stated that the bank had built up \$150 billion in foreign reserves to protect itself against tightening punitive measures on the country.²⁸ Therefore, the attempts to worsen the economy in Iran will not threaten the existence or survival of Hezbollah or Assad. The Lebanese 'expert' claimed that Hezbollah "are kind of sacred and the Iranian clerical leaders are even ready to cut off any internal budget but not to touch those allocated budgets to Hezbollah."²⁹

Hezbollah's rapid growth after its 2006 war with Israel has added large responsibilities to what was traditionally a small but effective fighting force.³⁰ This though, is a burden Hezbollah is willing to carry given that it is strengthening its governance and military prowess and thus allowing it to remain an effective fighting force in Syria, the Lebanon and in its symbolic resistance to Israel.

The Saudi oil conspiracy directly affects Tehran, Damascus and Hezbollah. Iran's oil minister, Bijan Zanganeh, posted on the Iranian oil ministry's website Shana that "Iran has no plan to hold an emergency OPEC meeting and is currently in consultations with other OPEC member states in a bid to prevent the sharp fall in the oil price, but these consultations have yet to bear fruit." Iran has claimed it could ride out a further price drop, as low as \$25 a barrel, however this is very optimistic and it can only be interpreted as Tehran attempting to maintain a brave face against Saudi Arabia's undeclared oil war.³¹

OPEC has chosen to maintain production levels despite opposition from non-Arab members such as Iran, Venezuela and Nigeria. Saudi Arabia, which supplies up to one-third of global oil, argued that OPEC needed to defend itself against market share from American shale oil.³² This claim, of defending market share against American shale oil, is only an attempt to disguise Saudi measures to cripple the economies of

Iran and Russia, and therefore Syria. According to Zanhaneh, Iran's budget should be based on receiving \$72 per barrel of oil, but it could survive on lower oil prices and the country had no plans to cut oil production. Iran held no further meetings with the Saudi delegation.

The Saudi oil war will have a direct effect on Iran's quest for nuclear power as well as its support for Assad's Syria and Hezbollah. A weakened Iran may not be able to continue its support for the Assad government, counter Saudi influences and jihadi forces fighting within Syria. Such a possible outcome indicates Riyadh's lack of understanding about Iran's regional intentions. Iran assisted the Hezbollah movement in the Lebanon even during its decade long bitter war against Saddam's Iraq in the 1980s. The economic weakening of Tehran by the Saudi oil war may prove insufficient to end its direct support for the Assad regime.

What Riyadh fears the most is the future nuclearization of Iran. Despite current attempts by the United States and Iran to improve relations, even though a Republican Congress in Washington demands increased sanctions, a future nuclear Iran could weaken Saudi Arabia's position as a regional power.

ISIS controls the oil producing eastern region of Syria and northern Iraq.³³ Through its control of oil infrastructure in Syria and Iraq it has become financially self-sufficient and one of the richest insurgency groups in the world. According to Luay al-Khatteeb, ISIS sell oil at the discounted price of \$25 to \$60 a barrel for what is normally \$100 in legitimate international markets, creating \$3 million in profits a day for the terrorist group.³⁴ These profits allow ISIS to pay \$500 a month to its fighters and \$1200 a month to its commanders. The oil is smuggled through intricate networks to Turkey, Jordan and Iran. It is ironic that most of the oil is going to Turkey and Iran, via Iraqi Kurdistan, and is being sold by Kurdish traders.³⁵

According to Ali Ediboglu,

“\$800 million worth of oil that ISIS obtained from regions it occupied this year [the Rumeilan oil fields in northern Syria — and most recently Mosul] is being sold in Turkey. They have laid pipes from villages near the Turkish border at Hatay. Similar pipes exist also at [the

Turkish border regions of Kilis, Urfa and Gaziantep. They transfer the oil to Turkey and parlay it into cash. They take the oil from the refineries at zero cost. Using primitive means, they refine the oil in areas close to the Turkish border and then sell it via Turkey. This is worth \$800 million.”³⁶

What this suggests is that Turkey was turning a blind eye to these border transactions in its pursuit for cheap oil prices. The scale of these makeshift pipelines, and the politics associated with them, however, are dwarfed by the much larger pipeline politics at play in the Syrian War.

The Qatar-Turkey pipeline is a gas pipeline proposed to run from the shared Iranian-Qatari South Pars/North Dome Gas Condensate field. It is planned to pass through Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Syria and connect to the proposed Nabucco pipeline in Turkey. In competition with this is the proposed Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline, known as the Friendship Pipeline or Islamic Pipeline, which would run from the South Pars/North Dome Gas Condensate field to Europe via Iran, Iraq, Syria and the Lebanon and then continue under the Mediterranean to a European country, most likely Greece.

Both proposed pipelines bring Syria to the forefront of resource competition between Qatar, an ally of Saudi Arabia and the only other Wahhabist state, and Iran. It was suggested by Agence France-Presse that Assad refused to sign a pipeline deal with Qatar “to protect the interests of his Russian ally, which is Europe’s top supplier of natural gas.”³⁷ Although this is possible, it does not explain why Assad signed a deal with Tehran, because this would lead to Iran competing in Europe with Russian resources. A preliminary agreement for the \$10 billion gas pipeline was signed by Iranian oil minister Mohammad Alibadi, Iraq’s oil minister Abdul Kareem Luaiby and Syrian oil minister Sufian Alow.³⁸ This was a blow to the interests of Qatar and Saudi Arabia and in an attempt to change Russia’s perspective on the Syrian war, Saudi Prince Bandar bin Sultan told President Vladimir Putin that “whatever regime comes after” Assad’s will be in the control of Saudi Arabia because they will “not sign any agreement allowing any Gulf country to transport its gas across Syria to Europe and (will) compete with Russian gas exports.”³⁹

It can therefore be deduced that Assad did not sign a deal with Qatar to protect its Russian allies but to protect its Iranian

allies and create more obstacles preventing Qatari gas from reaching European markets. The Islamic Pipeline would also rival the proposed Nabucco pipeline that would run from Azerbaijan to Europe.

Asia Times correspondent Pepe Escobar states that “The Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline – if it’s ever built – would solidify a predominantly Shi’ite axis through an economic, steel umbilical cord.”⁴⁰ The union of Iran, Iraq and Syria is not through religious identity but through economic ties, however it would counter the power balance currently held by the Wahhabist states of Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Qatar, being the largest exporter of Liquefied Natural Gas, most of which goes to Asia, wants to expand into the same European market sought after by Iran.⁴¹

With the outbreak of the Syrian War, Qatar funnelled up to \$3 billion to jihadi groups and offered a \$50,000 reward to Syrian government defectors. The Syrian war presents an opportunity for Qatar to destroy the Islamic Pipeline proposal and install its own pipeline to European markets via its ally Saudi Arabia, as well as Syria and Turkey. Therefore, it is reasonable to say that dual pipelines from Iran and Qatar through Syria could alleviate one proxy battle being fought in the Syrian war. However, this solution could be blocked by Saudi Arabia if it does not allow Qatari pipelines through its territory, a move which would prevent a diplomatic resolution to geopolitical differences. This, however, can only be speculated.

In October 2015 US Company, Genie Energy, confirmed the discovery of oil and natural gas in Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.⁴² There have also been suggestions that Golani oil and gas could be brought to European markets via Turkey and these have been coupled with discussions of the possibility of the Israeli Leviathan gas being delivered to Europe, again via Turkey. Another oil discovery was that announced by Syrian Oil Minister Sufian Allawi in August 2011, a few months after the outbreak of the Syrian destabilisation, of natural gas in Homs governorate with a flow rate of 400,000 cubic metres a

day. Allawi added that Syria's gas reserves are an estimated 284 billion cubic metres.⁴³

These gas and oil reserves discovered in Syria, including in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, would suggest that any Qatari pipeline through Syria would be able to tap into these reserves. From the Qatari point of view this adds a greater incentive for the removal of Assad.

Escobar states,

“it's clear what Qatar is aiming at: to kill the US\$10 billion Iran-Iraq-Syria gas pipeline, a deal that was clinched even as the Syria uprising was already underway. Here we see Qatar in direct competition with both Iran (as a producer) and Syria (as a destination), and to a lesser extent, Iraq (as a transit country). It's useful to remember that Tehran and Baghdad are adamantly against regime change in Damascus. If there's regime change in Syria – helped by the Qatari-proposed invasion – things get much easier in Pipelineistan terms. A more than probable Muslim Brotherhood post-Assad regime would more than welcome a Qatari pipeline. And that would make an extension to Turkey much easier.”⁴⁴

As this statement demonstrates the conundrum of the pipeline is intricately linked to Turkey and offers an explanation for Turkey's Syria policy.

Turkey has begun positioning itself as a major gas transit hub with the proposal of the Nabucco Pipeline which would bring Azeri gas through Turkey and onwards to Austria, and the proposed Turkish stream that would bring Russian gas to Turkey's European Eastern Thrace region and onwards to Europe. The US Energy Information Administration describes Turkey as a strategic gas hub because of its geographical location wedged in between continental Europe – which is the world's second largest gas market after Asia – the Caspian basin and the Middle East, the latter two which are both rich in gas reserves.⁴⁵ However, these projects have failed to materialise. Alongside this is the problems with the Blue Stream gas pipeline that transports Russian gas to Turkish Anatolia and which has failed to reach expected capacities.

This leaves the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) as the sole pipeline project to position Turkey as a major gas transit hub. This pipeline will bring Azeri gas from the Shah Deniz field to European markets and there is the potential to expand the pipeline to tap into gas fields in

Turkmenistan. However, to be a true gas transportation hub, Turkey must have more than one line crossing the country. The proposed Qatar-Turkey pipeline was planned to bring gas from the world's third largest gas reserve to European markets via Turkey. With the Assad government remaining in power and favouring a proposed Iranian pipeline, along with the ongoing Syrian war, this pipeline dream cannot be realised.

Analysts have questioned why US-led coalition airstrikes have never targeted ISIS oil convoys. Since Turkey downed a Russian jet on 24 November 2015, Moscow began to claim that Turkey has direct deals with ISIS in regards to obtaining Syrian oil. This would explain why the US-led coalition, which also comprises of Saudi Arabia, has not been targeting ISIS oil tanker convoys. Russian President Vladimir Putin stated:

IS [ISIS] has big money, hundreds of millions or even billions of dollars, from selling oil. In addition they are protected by the military of an entire nation. One can understand why they are acting so boldly and blatantly. Why they kill people in such atrocious ways. Why they commit terrorist acts across the world, including in the heart of Europe.⁴⁶

In support, Syrian Information Minister, Omran al-Zoubi, went on to claim that the reason for the downing of the jet was that it was a response to Russia targeting the oil convoys reaching Turkey, with Bilal Erdogan, the son of Turkey's President, being accused as the main facilitator of the blood oil.⁴⁷

In recognizing that Saudi Arabia did not purposefully target ISIS oil convoys in a bid to support its Russian and Syrian allies, Expediency Council Secretary of Iran Mohsen Rezaie stated, *"If the government of Turkey is not informed of Daesh [derogatory term for ISIS] oil trade in the country, we are ready to put the information at its disposal."* This statement was said sarcastically and demonstrates Iran's willingness to highlight the ISIS-Turkey oil connection. This was spurred by Turkey's failure to become a pipeline hub.

Qatar's failure to transport its gas to European markets and the potential success of an Iranian pipeline serves to weaken Saudi Arabia's position. Should the Iranian pipeline be built, Tehran would be economically strengthened while

Saudi's close ally, Qatar, would need to find alternative routes to Europe that would be far costlier. Turkey via Iraq is not an option for Qatar because ISIS continues to run rampant and the Shi'ite dominated government in Baghdad continues to have pro-Iranian tendencies.

Major Rob Taylor states, "Saudi Arabia and Qatar, as well as al-Qaeda and other groups, are manoeuvring to depose Assad and capitalize on their hoped-for Sunni conquest in Damascus. By doing this, they hope to gain a share of control over the 'new' Syrian government, and a share in the pipeline wealth."⁴⁸ This would suggest that the Syrian war is about the control of energy supply from Saudi Arabia and Qatar to Turkey. Major Rob Taylor continues by stating that Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey need Assad removed "so they can control Syria and run their own pipeline through Turkey."⁴⁹ Therefore, the proposed Qatar-Turkey pipeline and Islamic pipeline has only increased the geopolitical rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Syria.

Successful nuclear negotiations could lead to Iran being able to trade with European Union (EU) members. If this were the case the EU could reduce their over reliance on Russian gas. Nuclear negotiations could provide an opportunity for Tehran to set some of the terms of an agreement made and this in turn would weaken Moscow's leverage over the EU. Russia has always been a strong supporter of Iran's nuclear deals and together the two countries have negotiated the construction of eight new nuclear reactors by Russian companies.⁵⁰ Put simply, coalitions are formed by mutual interests but nation-states are ultimately driven by self-interests.

Turkey and Syria consolidated their relationship in their mutual criticism of Israel during the 2008-2009 Gaza War. This was to such an extent that Assad attempted to restructure the regional system by introducing the Tripartite Front in bringing Syria, Iran and Turkey together. Assad also endeavoured to reduce Israel's influence by facilitating the 'Four Seas' policy which presented Syria to the international community as being in the geographic centre of the Mediterranean Sea, the Black Sea, the Persian Gulf and the

Caspian Sea.⁵¹ Really this policy does hold true given the competition between Qatar and Iran to build a pipeline through Syria.

The Tripartite was ultimately not realized because of the outbreak of the Syrian war and the announcement that Iran's pipeline will bypass Turkey and that the Qatari-Turkey pipeline would not proceed because Assad refused to cooperate. It is therefore reasonable to deduce that this provoked Qatar's and Turkey's support for anti-Assad forces, while Iran continued its support for the Assad government.

Iran's sustained support for Assad is set to only increase if a nuclear deal is finalised. This is because such a deal would free Iran from sanctions and allow it to trade with the international community. With the sanctions lifted, Iran would have access to \$100 billion worth of assets that to date have been frozen internationally.

Aron Lund states,

“Simultaneously supporting Assad, Hezbollah, the Iraqi government, and various Kurdish, Palestinian, and other allies is an exceedingly costly project for Iran. In particular, Syria has emerged since 2011 as a bottomless pit into which Iran is shovelling its own hard-earned oil and taxpayer money by the billions. During the past few years of sanctions-induced economic distress, many ordinary Iranians seem to have begun grumbling over these costs. That's why financial and oil sanctions relief matter so much to Assad. More money for Iran means more money for Syria, or at least less Iranian domestic pressure to trim the current level of funding”.⁵²

It is for this reason that Assad lauds the Nuclear Deal as a “great victory” and a “historic achievement.”⁵³

It can be reasonable to speculate that after years of sanctions, Western countries could soften their approach towards Iranian foreign policy in the hope that it would lead to investment and construction opportunities in Iran. Not only would a nuclear deal concern Saudi Arabia and its regional allies, the economic prospects of a diversified Iranian economy would cause concern because of their over reliance on petrodollars. Although in the short term Iran will not be able to rival the economic might of Saudi Arabia, the freeing up of \$100 billion worth of assets and the opening of its economy to the world will most likely mean that Hezbollah,

the Iraqi Shi'ite militias and the Assad government will reap benefits from this. How Saudi Arabia will react to this reality is yet to be seen.

In October 2015 the International Monetary Fund (IMF) declared that if Saudi Arabia kept up its spending it would be bankrupt as soon as 2020.⁵⁴ The IMF's Middle East and Central Asia Department Director Masood Ahmed told journalists after the report's unveiling in Dubai that,

“[a]chieving fiscal sustainability over the medium-term will be especially challenging given the need to create jobs for the more than 10 million people anticipated to be looking for work by 2020 in the region's oil exporting countries. For the region's oil exporters, the fall in prices has led to large fall in revenue, amounting to a staggering \$360 billion this year alone.”⁵⁵

It can therefore be suggested that Riyadh's attempts to hurt the economies of Russia and Iran by systematically oversupplying oil has inadvertently backfired.

Despite the role of oil, pipelines and nuclear proliferation plays in fuelling the geopolitical rivalry between Tehran and Riyadh in the Syrian war, it is often overlooked as one of the primary causes of this conflict. As suggested here, the Saudi regimes oversupply of oil, which attempted to weaken Tehran and its support for Assad, has failed. The Assad government has blocked Qatari gas from reaching European markets which in turn has halted the building of a new pipeline through Saudi Arabia. As the nuclear deal is realized, Riyadh has to come to terms with the fact that this will massively undermine its position as a regional power. A study of all these factors leads to an understanding of this geopolitical split and how it has polarized the Syrian war.

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Conclusion

The Syrian War encompasses asymmetric warfare unseen before in history. This has been coupled with distorted facts about why the war is occurring and about the events surrounding it. Stephen Kinzer stated that the “coverage of the Syrian war will be remembered as one of the most shameful episodes in the history of the American press.”¹ This coverage that he terms as ‘shameful’ has been consistent across most Western and Middle Eastern media.

Headlines persisted about a brutal crackdown by the government when the initial peaceful protests began: in fact, as the first chapter explored, this coverage was made misleading by corporate media. Anderson states, “[c]o-opted mass media and human rights ‘watchdogs’ have been essential to the propaganda war against Syria. Indeed, it is not possible, in the 21st century, to run a sustained proxy war dependent on public support without the backing of a veritable army of such collaborators.”² The systematic targeting of Syria by propagandists has allowed the public discourse to view the war as one between the majority Sunni in Syria uprising against the brutal Alawite minority establishment in Damascus, or a struggle between Sunnis and Shi’ites.

This however is a simplistic approach to an understanding of Syria as a secular predominately Arab nationalist state. Although academics and commentators have contextualised the war as being one of sectarian hatred between Shi’ites and Sunnis, and as one polarized by the involvement of Iran and Saudi Arabia, these analyses overlook another most likely reason for the geopolitical rivalry unfolding in Syria.

As explored through this book, the complexity of the Syrian war cannot be simplified to the Sunni-Shi’ite schism, but needs to be understood as encompassing the struggle for hegemonic domination between Riyadh and Tehran, that is, between anti-Western imperialist and pro-Western ideologies, and as concerning resources, pipelines and oil diplomacy between the two Islamic states. The Axis of Resistance, comprising Hezbollah, Syria and Iran, has acted in the Middle East as a powerful anti-imperialist, anti-Western and anti-Zionist force. This is often mistaken as a Shi’ite axis because Iran is a Shi’ite Islamic Republic, Syria is governed by an Alawite

president and Hezbollah is a Shi'ite paramilitary force in the Lebanon. This, however, overlooks the fact that Iran is a multi-ethnic Islamic Republic whilst Syria is a secular predominantly Arab nationalist state. Interestingly these forms of government are normally at odds with each other but in this tripartite relationship, they cooperate with each other.

Conceptualizing the Axis of Resistance as simply being a Shi'ite axis leads to an over simplification of the Syrian war as a struggle between Sunni and Shi'ite and shifts the focus away from it being about Iranian anti-Western imperialism verses pro-western Saudi Arabia. Although Foreign Policy magazine has alluded to a Washington-Tehran rapprochement in response to the anger of Riyadh, which prompted the Saudis to act somewhat independently of Washington in its Syria policy, this has in no way hampered the relationship between Washington and Riyadh.³ Nor does this mean that Tehran is becoming an ally of Washington, as was demonstrated in January 2016 when Iran, without hesitation, detained 10 US Marines who illegally entered Iranian waters in the Persian Gulf.

Since the deposition of the pro-Washington Shah, Tehran, unlike Riyadh, has acted independently in its foreign policy. Therefore, as explored through this book, a major reason for the Saudi-Iranian geopolitical rivalry in the Syrian war is the struggle to preserve or topple the Assad government which is a major part of the anti-Western imperialist and anti-Zionist force in the Middle East. This reasoning explains why Iran has made every effort to preserve the government in Damascus and why Hezbollah has committed thousands of its paramilitary fighters to the war effort. It also explains why Riyadh is intent on breaking this alliance, given that Saudi Arabia is a key ally to Washington and a regional power.

The struggle for hegemonic power between Tehran and Riyadh is explained by most commentators through the prism of a Sunni-Shi'ite divide.⁴ Con Coughlin stated that,

“Institutional concerns in Riyadh’s defence establishment over the threat posed by Iran have already resulted in Saudi Arabia having the world’s fourth largest defence budget. A recent study by London’s International Institute for Strategic Studies think tank conservatively estimated Riyadh’s defence spend for 2014 at \$59.6 billion, although other assessments have suggested it rose by 17 percent to \$80.8 billion.”⁵

This suggests that the struggle for hegemonic power in the region has forced Saudi Arabia to become one of the world’s top military spenders.

However, the rivalry when seen through this scope of power and imperialism, allows one to look beyond the simple explanation of sectarian divisions. Using this reasoning it is possible to understand why Riyadh has been willing to arm and finance jihadi forces whilst overlooking private donations to Al-Qaeda and ISIS coming from the puritanical kingdom. Riyadh is only using Sunni jihadi forces to project its own hegemonic designs on the region and to undermine allies of Iran such as Syria. Although the jihadi forces arrive with sectarian ambitions, their paymasters in Saudi Arabia use the mujahedeen in the hope of toppling an Iranian-sympathetic leadership in Damascus and to break supposed Iranian power projections in the Levant.

Often overlooked in analyses of the Syrian war is the role resource rivalry has played in polarizing the conflict. Pipelines, oil and nuclear proliferation are further reasons why the Saudi-Iranian geopolitical rivalry in Syria is occurring along with the struggle for hegemonic domination and imperialism. Riyadh fears that a nuclear Iran will be able to shift the regional power balance in its favour and extend greater influence over OPEC. However, even more important than oil is pipeline diplomacy. With Assad refusing to sign a pipeline deal with Qatar to protect the interests of his Russian ally in having a gas competitor in Europe; it becomes clear why Doha seeks the overthrow of Assad in Damascus.

In 2011, Syria, Iraq and Iran signed a preliminary deal that would bring Iranian gas through Syria and onwards to Europe. In doing so, Assad approved an Iranian pipeline but stopped the development of a Qatari pipeline that would run through Saudi Arabia and onto Syria. An understanding of pipeline diplomacy offers a second explanation outside that of the Sunni-Shi'ite divide, for why the removal of Assad is essential to Saudi Arabia.

F. William Engdahl stated “that [the Qatari pipeline] refusal combined with the Iran-Iraq-Syria gas pipeline agreement in 2011 ignited the full-scale Saudi and Qatari assault on Assad’s power, financing al-Qaeda terrorists, recruits of Jihadist fanatics willing to kill Alawite and Shi’ite ‘infidels’ for \$100 a month and a Kalishnikov.”⁶ He suggests that sectarian terrorists are being used by Riyadh and Doha to overthrow Assad because of his refusal to allow a Qatari pipeline while approving an Iranian one.

The Syrian war therefore, is another example of Great Power Imperialism. The refusal of the Assad government to capitulate to Washington’s neo-Imperialism has strengthened Riyadh’s policy of

overthrowing Assad at any cost. Hezbollah and Iran had no option but to support the Syrian government as it is the bulwark of the Axis of Resistance. Without Syria in the axis, Iran would lose influence in the Levant while Hezbollah would lose a bridge to receive arms and funds from Iran to continue its struggle against Zionism and Wahhabi elements in the Lebanon. Saudi Arabia on the other hand needs the Assad government to fall in order to project its own hegemonic ambitions on the region. The prize of Syria would allow Saudi Arabia to exert greater influence in the Lebanon, to weaken Iran and allow for the construction of pipelines to reach Europe.

In understanding these issues, it is clear why the conflict is not a 'civil war' but rather a struggle between two regional powers attempting to project greater influence across the Middle East. Although sectarian forces are being used by Riyadh and Tehran, the complexity of the Syrian War goes beyond a struggle between Shi'ism and Sunnism. What this book has offered is an explanation of the war as a struggle between two regional powers vying between imperialism and anti-imperialism, as well as resource diplomacy.

The conflict in Syria has also led to the destabilization in Iraq and in the border areas of the Lebanon. Syria marks the biggest flashpoint of this geopolitical rivalry. However, as events in Bahrain and Yemen have demonstrated, Syria marks the beginning of a cold war between the two Islamic states that previous to the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, was undermined by the Tehran-Baghdad rivalry.

The Tehran-Baghdad rivalry, however, never exerted its influence into foreign states, while the current 'cold war' between Riyadh and Tehran resembles the Washington-Moscow Cold War because neither rival is willing to go to war with each other directly, but rather uses proxy forces to undermine the other. This is most evident in Syria and such a view allows one to look beyond the notion that the conflict is a civil war between the supposedly oppressed Sunni majority and the suppressive Alawite establishment in Damascus as is often argued by mainstream discourse.

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- 2 Tim Anderson, *The Dirty War on Syria* (Montreal: Global Research, 2016), 141.
- 3 Kim Ghattas, "The Saudi-Iran War Is America's Fault," *Foreign Policy*, January 13, 2016.
- 4 David Motadel, "'Defending the Faith' in the Middle East," *The New York Times*, May 23, 2015; "Saudi Arabia v Iran; Sunni v Shia – Zakaria GPS," *Saudi-US Relations Information Service*, January 10, 2016.
- 5 Con Coughlin, "Saudi Arabia: The Region's New Superpower," *Gatestone Institute*, September 4, 2015.

- 6 F. William Engdahl, "The Secret Stupid Saudi-US Deal on Syria. Oil Gas Pipeline War," *Global Research*, October 26, 2014.

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