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IRAN'S ARAB POLICIES: RESURRECTING ANCIENT GLORY

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ABSTRACT
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Since the establishment of the Persian civilization several thousand years ago, the Persian leadership has consistently striven to control the Gulf Peninsula and the Fertile Crescent. In addition, it always sought to establish a foothold in the Mediterranean Sea, while maintaining a sense of unique national identity. This applies equally well to the Elamites, the Medes, the Persians, the Achaemenes, the Parthians and the Sassanians.

Following a thousand years of decadence, starting with the Arab Muslim conquest of Iran in the seventh century and ending with the rise of the Safavids in the sixteenth century, with the exception of the Buyid interlude, the Iranians became Shiites under the rule of Shah Ismail I. It is essential to highlight this because the Islamic Republic of Iran is presently using Pan-Shiism as a means to achieve its imperialist ends in the Arab world. Concurrent with the mass conversion of Iranians to Shiism in the sixteenth century, the ulama in Iran in particular began to yield and accumulate an increasing amount of power from the time of the Safavids, to Khomeini's revolution in 1979, passing through the Qajars and the Pahlavis. It is important to underscore this development because it directly facilitated the ascendance of clergymen as a central force in Iranian politics.

Since the toppling of the Shah's regime and the unfolding of the Iranian Revolution in 1979 under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, the Middle East has been facing the rising threat of Iran's theocratic regime. The Islamic Republic's ambitions for the region, which were centered on exporting the revolution of "Wilayat al-Faqih" beyond its borders and across the Middle East, were reined in by Saddam Hussein during the following vicious eight-year war between Iraq and Iran. Although the Mullah regime was not capable of penetrating the area as it saw fit during the war, it was nevertheless able to consolidate its grip on power internally. Throughout the same time period, the regime was simultaneously interfering in the course of the Palestine Question to establish a foothold in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea. In fact, in 1982, it laid the groundwork of the embryonic Islamic Jihad which later became known as the Lebanese Hezbollah, and it allied itself with Baathist Alawite Syria. It is at this stage that the Mullah's regime began to develop their Arab policies in the Middle East.

After the end of the Second Gulf War and the defeat of Saddam Hussein in 1991, Iran began promoting its "Axis of Resistance" front to counter United States' influence, by culturally penetrating under-developed societies in Yemen, Iraq and Bahrain and presenting itself as a genuine and credible partner. Indeed, throughout the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Iranian regime was able to cultivate genuine relationships with the Iraqi dissidents to the Baathist regime in Baghdad, it was able to sponsor Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza, and it succeeded in allying itself with the

Houthis in Yemen. Notably, it is at this stage that the clergymen in Tehran were aptly capable of transforming Iran into a regional power.

In the aftermath of the so-called "Arab Spring" that erupted in 2011, the Iranian theocracy is exponentially expanding and enlarging its reach and scope of influence in the Fertile Crescent. This is demonstrated in its intervention in the Syrian Civil War, with the aim of protecting Bashar al Assad's regime from collapsing at the hands of Syrian insurgents. With the official Russian intervention in the Syrian civil conflict in 2015, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps was able to turn the tide of the war to their advantage, thus erecting a land corridor from Tehran all the way to Beirut. Furthermore, the Iranian regime in Tehran is conducting a regional competition with its main rival in the Middle East, namely the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, for supremacy and hegemony over the entire Arab and Muslim world. In fact, Saudi Arabia along with the other Gulf monarchies are the only countries which are capable of counterbalancing Iranian influence and power projection in the Middle East thus far. Ultimately, it remains to be seen whether the Islamic Republic of Iran will be able to transform itself into the undisputed hegemon of the Middle East in the upcoming few decades, taking into account that it is arming itself with its own arsenal of nuclear weapons with long range ballistic missiles.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AGTM	Anti-Tank Guided Missile
AIOC	Anglo-Iranian Oil Company
AL	Arab League
ALF	Arab Liberation Front
AMAL	Afwaj al Muqawama al Lubnaniya
ANM	Arab Nationalist Movement
ANSA	Armed Non State Actor
A2/AD	Anti-Access, Area-Denial
BO	Badr Organization
BY	Believing Youth
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
COVID	CoronaVirus Disease of 2019
DUP	Democratic Union Party
EU	European Union
FKO	Fedayeen-e Khalq Organization
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
HAMAS	Harakat al-Muqawama al Islamiyya
HB	Hezbollah Battalions
KPF	Kurdish Patriotic Front
IDF	Israeli Defense Forces
IJO	Islamic Jihad Organization
IRGC	Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps
IRI	Islamic Republic of Iran

IRP	Islamic Republican party
IS	Islamic State
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
LCP	Lebanese Communist Party
LF	Lebanese Front
LNM	Lebanese National Movement
MB	Muslim Brotherhood
MESA	Middle East Strategic Alliance
MKO	Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDC	National Dialogue Conference
NDF	National Defense Forces
OIC	Organization of the Islamic Conference
OPEC	Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
PA	Palestinian Authority
PFLP	Palestinian Front for the Liberation of Palestine
PIJ	Palestinian Islamic Jihad
PJAK	Partiya Jiyana Azad A Kurdistane
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party
PLC	Palestinian Legislative Council
PLO	Palestinian Liberation Organization
PMU	Popular Mobilization Units
PNM	Palestinian National Movement
PSF	Peninsula Shield Force

PYD	Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat
QF	Quds Force
SAVAK	Sāzmān-e Ettelā'āt va Amniyat-e Keshvar
SCIRI	Supreme Council of the Iranian Revolution in Iraq
SEALs	Sea Air Land
SSC	Shiite Supreme Council
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
USA	United States of America
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
UAV	Unmanned Aerial Vehicle
4GW	Fourth Generation Warfare

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Iran is an ancient nation-state founded over 3,000 years ago, originating from Indo-European Civilizations, and is often considered the oldest in the Middle Eastern region.[1] The history of modern-day Iran is marked by a number of ancient civilizations, beginning with the Elamite empire, which was replaced with the Achaemenid empire, and followed by the Sasanian empire. With the subsequent expansion of Islam across the Near East between 640 A.D. and 1500 A.D., the Persian people were ruled by Arabs and the Turco-Mongol tribes. From 1501 A.D. until 1736 A.D., the Persians were then ruled by the Safavids, during which they were converted en masse to Twelver-Imami Shiism, a process the author will focus on later in this section of his work. The end of the Safavid dynasty brought on Qajar dynasty rule, which lasted from 1786 until 1924. In the ensuing era, which began in 1925 and concluded 1979, Persia was officially renamed as Iran in 1935 under Pahlavi dynasty rule.

Present-day Iran is a multiethnic and multicultural country, with Farsi as a primary language. Iranian nationalism and sense of identity has been forged by a host of historical events, such as the end of nomadism, the integration of populations, the loss of territory to different entities including Russia and the Ottoman empire, the British and subsequent American intervention and meddling in national affairs, and ultimately the more recent war with Iraq. It is worth noting that local populations with different origins identify as Iranian first, which is a manifestation of Iranian national pride and belonging.

[1] Michael Axworthy, A History of Iran: Empire of the Mind (New York, USA: Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Books Group, 2016), p 2.

Iran is located at the crossroads of several geographic junctions which are: The Slavic and Russian world at the north; the Arab Muslim world at the South; India at the east and the Turkic states to its west. Throughout different historical phases, ethnic minorities always had the propensity to proclaim independence, which has the power to break up Iran or seriously unsettle the regime's political authority and legitimacy. In addition, these several different ethnicities are located at the outskirts of the Iranian plateau which constitute not only internal threats but also entry points for outsiders.[2] Historically, nationalism has been used as a tool to unite specific ethnic communities such as in Germany or in Italy, but it has also been used as an instrument to break-up certain countries such as Yugoslavia or the Soviet Union. Therefore, nationalism is a very important aspect of a population's identity and unity, but could also be a volatile and destructive element internally. Nationalism can thus simultaneously be seen as a centripetal concept, in the sense that it could be employed at times of crises as a uniting element, and a centrifugal concept, which means it could be employed in the face of political crises by producing scapegoats or evoking certain societal components which are usually located at the periphery in order to diffuse tensions. For example, during the militarized conflict with Iraq, central authorities in Tehran were able to develop an extremely powerful sense of Iranian nationalism, which later on enabled them to unite all of the opposition parties along with the clergy, while also making sure to liquidate existing political parties that were deemed a threat to the revolution's success. This way the clergymen were able to make use of the momentum surrounding Iranian nationalism to unite the country against a common external threat. Consequently, Iranian politicians view every neighboring country as both a potential ally, and also a source of threat. Thus,

[2] 1. Hervé Ghannad, Identité et Politique Extérieure de l'iran (Levallois-Perret, France: Studyrama, 2013), 229.

Iranian experts have instilled a diplomacy of counter-encirclement which allows them to distance the source of danger from their borders, while also allowing them to disturb their adversary in its own territory. This is mainly because the Iranian leadership fears losing its borders, since foreigners have attempted to invade and partition Iranian territory in the past. Notably, Iran is the only country which has been conquered and invaded several times without ever being colonized.

Since the establishment of the Persian civilization several thousand years ago, the Persian leadership has consistently striven to control the Gulf Peninsula and the Fertile Crescent. In addition, it always sought a foothold in the Mediterranean Sea. The Sassanid kings' relentless attempts to invade ancient Greece, particularly Athens and Sparta are the most notable examples demonstrating the veracity of this proposition. Iranian society generally considers itself culturally and traditionally rich with a unique history dating back to several thousand years ago, and often tends to distinguish itself from its Arab counterparts.

1.1. Problem Statement

At present, the Middle East is the cradle of three main civilizations, which are the Arab civilization, the Persian civilization and the Turkish one. Since time immemorial, the Middle East is generally classified as unstable, especially after the end of the First World War. For the sake of clarity, the author will solely focus on the second half of the twentieth century and onwards. In fact, this period of time, from 1945 until the present moment, consisted of wars between the Arab states and Israel (1948, 1956, 1967, 1973, 2006), the Lebanese civil war, the eight-year long Iran-Iraq war of 1980, among other conflicts. As the paper will demonstrate, gradually but certainly, the primary conflict in

the Middle East has shifted from being a conflict between Arabs and Israelis to becoming a conflict between Arabs and Iranians. In addition, this regional conflict is being transformed into an international conflict because of the Iranian military nuclear program, thus including great powers like China, Russia, the P3 of the European Union before Brexit, and not only the United States.

The Iranian revolution of 1979 has reinstated Pan-Shiism as a new geopolitical consideration in the Greater Middle East, and made it a destabilizing political force to Iran's advantage. There are around 1.9 billion Muslims around the world in 2022[3], twelve percent of whom are Shiites;[4] approximately 200 million in total. Of the 200 million Shiites, eighty-five percent are Twelver Imami Shiites. Iran is the only country where more than ninety percent of the population is Shiite irrespective of ethnicity.[5] Contemporaneously, the Iranian theocracy promotes a Pan-Shiite policy in the Greater Middle East, namely in the Arab region as well as in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India. The Iranian government follows this policy in order to portray itself as the true and original follower of prophet Mohammed, to counterbalance and be able to fight the Sunni majority, and to prevent Iran from being encircled by hostile neighboring countries. The overarching aim is therefore to employ this web of connections as a means of achieving Iran's geopolitical ends, specifically to dominate the region and ensure that Iran will be able to influence and shape these countries' internal affairs and policies.

[3] "Religious Composition by Country, 2010-2050." Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, December 21, 2022. https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/interactives/religious-composition-by-country-2010-2050/.

[4] "Shiʿi." Encyclopædia Britannica, March 9, 2024. https://www.britannica.com/topic/Shii/Shii-dynasties.

[5] "Religion of Iran." Encyclopædia Britannica, March 20, 2024. https://www.britannica.com/place/Iran/Religion.

1.2. Research Question

Now that a brief introduction on Iran and its unfavorable role in the Middle East has been outlined, the research question is: To what extent have the Iranian regime's Arab Policies contributed to the emergence of a new geopolitical order in the Middle East that is substantially destabilizing the region? In order to be able to answer the research question, the author will begin by defining the objectives of Iran's Arab policy. In the second part of this paper, the author will be outlining the components of Iran's Arab policy, followed by a discussion on Iran's actions and behavior aimed at achieving its regional goals.

Iran's Arab policy objectives were generally threefold. Its first objective was to become the de facto leader of the region since it considers itself a key nation in the Middle East. Indeed, Iran is one of the oldest civilizations in the Middle East, it is a culturally rich country, and it was the policeman of the Middle East during the Shah rule era. Therefore, Iran believes it is entitled to be the leader of the Near East.

The second objective of Iran's Arab policy was to export its own revolution and spread out Islamist republics similar to its own across the entirety of the Arab countries. In fact, Iran considered them despotic and totalitarian. Iran's Mullahs believed the Gulf monarchies to be derived from Wahhabi Islam, a trend in Sunni Islam that tends to be more fanatical and rigid, which is in sharp contradiction to Islam's true and proper precepts. Iran was also adamant on transforming neighboring Iraq into an Islamic country that will follow the former's path because the Baath party ruling over Iraq was secular and Iraq was governed by the Sunni minority in the country.

Lastly, the third objective of Iran's Arab policy was to topple the corrupted pro-American political regimes. Iran aspired to remove Saddam Hussein's Baathist secular

party from power in Iraq, in which Shiites constituted by far the largest sect in the country. In addition, Iran saw the Gulf monarchies as allies to “Greater Satan”, the United States of America, which are protecting the latter’s national interests and the preservation of their own regimes, rather than looking after their populations’ welfare and security.

Iran's approach to foreign policy and diplomatic relations has more recently been informed by its aim of producing nuclear bombs in order to allow the regime to protect and safeguard itself from foreign intervention or invasion. Iran’s ultimate objective is to exercise control and influence over Arab countries. This illuminates an attempt at redeeming lost power and influence, which seems to inform the majority of Iran’s policy. Therefore, even a regime change would not necessarily translate to a radical shift in Iranian foreign policy, because the aim of exercising control over the whole region has always been the overriding principle in Iranian foreign policy-making.

1.3. Research objective

Shortly after the revolution succeeded in Iran, a vicious war that lasted eight years, erupted between the latter and Iraq. Meanwhile, from 1980 until end of hostilities, the Mullah regime in Iran consolidated its grip on power internally. The war ended with Operation Desert Storm, whereby the Iraqi army was defeated by the United Nations forces under the leadership of the United States, and continues to represent a crucial turning point in Middle Eastern politics. Indeed, since the undertaking of Operation Desert Storm in 1991, the Middle East is facing the rising threat of the Iranian theocratic regime. Additionally, Iran started expanding its scope of influence in the region by forging alliances with other countries like Syria, and supporting Hezbollah in Lebanon. They’ve also provided support to communities like the Houthis in Yemen in order to

secure their allegiance, and aided pro-Iranian parties in Iraq. The Iranian role is thus developing exponentially. Furthermore, the Mullah regime is pursuing an ambitious nuclear and ballistic military program to deter its opponents from invading Iran. The objective of this research is to explain the reasoning behind the hegemonic ascendance of the Iranian regime in the Middle East over the past couple of decades. The explanation will be outlined first through Iran's Arab policies, which are formulated on the basis of its ultimate goal of controlling the region. This has led to adverse, dramatic, and irreversible consequences for the region's stability. In order to verify the veracity of his claim, the author will highlight several local and modern examples like Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen. Thus, this research will mainly focus on Iran's Arab policies and the countries surrounding Iran, with the exception of non-Arab states such as Afghanistan and Pakistan, although their populations include significant Shiite minorities. Because of the Persian theocracy's expansionist objective, it is important and beneficial to study this area of the world in general and Iran in particular. The research will therefore focus on Iran, its negative role in the greater Middle East and its Arab policies. This area of research is crucial to examine, as a way of documenting the adverse and dangerous impact Iran's policy could have on the region. In addition, the author believes that this is a central issue at this time, especially in light of Iran's attempts at growing its nuclear military program and the threat this imposes on the international world order, peace and stability.

1.4. Methodology

In order to be able to answer the research question, the author will make use of the Comparative-Historical approach. It consists of a research method in Social Science that examines historical events to create explanations that are valid beyond a particular

time and place, either by direct comparison to other historical events, or reference to the present day. In general, this method of social science involves comparisons of social processes across times and places, and overlaps with historical sociology. Researchers have identified three waves of historical comparative approach. The first one is concerned with the way societies came to be modern, and was adopted by notable figures including Karl Marx and Max Weber. The second wave of the historical comparative approach consists of a response to a perceived ahistorical body of theory, thus attempting to demonstrate that social systems are not static but develop over time. Finally, the third and last wave of the historical comparative approach focuses on post-structuralism. Major experts in this field include James Mahoney, whose work illuminates this research method in social science.[6] Finally, in order to complete the research for this paper, the author will go over and make use of primary as well as secondary sources.

1.5. Literature Review

So far, the problem statement, the research question, the research objective, as well as the methodology have been outlined. Therefore, this section will address the literature review. The literature review will be extensive, including a number of books, articles, and reviews, and will also rely on the author's general knowledge on the subject. The author will begin by highlighting the existing literature on Iran's Arab policies in the Middle East, the main debates surrounding the Iranian revolution, the first, second and third Gulf wars, as well as the Arab Spring. The author will attempt to weave all these historical events together in relation to Iran's Arab policies and their impact, which is

[6]James Mahoney, "Comparative-Historical Methodology," https://www.jstor.org/stable/29737686., 2004, https://www.jstor.org/stable/29737686, 1.

what will distinguish this research from others. In contrast, existing research tends to narrate one aspect of Iran's Arab policies such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, or the Houthis in Yemen, or the Dawa, SCIRI, Kataeb Hezbollah and Asaeb Ahl al Haq in Iraq or the Assad regime in Syria, all separately. The following books or articles discuss Iran's Arab policies explicitly while examining its aims and particularities, its unity and diversity, but also its contradictions and limits: "La Politique Arabe de l'Iran" by Mohammed-Reza Djalili, *Iran, Revolution, and Proxy Wars* by Ofira Seliktar and Farhad Rezaei, "Iran's Foreign Policy in the Middle East: A Grand Strategy" by Seyed Hossein Mousavian and Mohammad Reza Chitsazian, "The Axis of Resistance: Iran's Expansion in the Middle East Is Hitting a Wall" by Guido Steinberg, and to a lesser extent "Hezbollah's Regional Activities in Support of Iran's Proxy Networks" by Matthew Levitt. As for the other elements linked to the research stated above, there are dense and varied sources covering the subject matter. The author will begin the literature review with the Iranian revolution of 1979, and the author will then move by chronological order to the three Gulf armed conflicts, concluding with the Arab Spring and its impact on enlarging and reinforcing Iran's firm takeover of the Middle East, despite Qassem Suleimani's death in January 2020.

Most authors like Michael Axworthy, Pierre-Jean Luizard,[7] and most notably Gary Sick,[8] among others, agree that the United States lost a crucial ally in the Middle East when the revolution in Iran succeeded, because the Shah was a key ally in containing the Soviet threat in the region. Sick describes this situation by narrating the shift in United

[7] Luizard, Pierre-Jean. *La question Irakienne*. Paris, France: Le Grand livre du mois, 2004.

[8] Lesch, David W., and Mark L. Haas. *The Middle East and the United States: History, politics, and Ideologies*. London, UK: Routledge, 2019.

States policy in the Persian Gulf, from the Twin Pillars policy (Pahlavi Iran and Saudi Arabia) to the policy of Dual Containment (Iraq and Iran after the First Gulf War of 1991 until the Second Gulf War of 2003).

Most authors like Itamar Rabinovich assert that, unlike most other revolutions, the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran did not remain confined within Iran's borders, as is the case with the French and Russian revolutions of 1789 and 1917 respectively.[9] On the contrary, Iran's new leaders were obstinate to export their revolution abroad, although Iranian leaders did not immediately express these ambitions overtly in order to ensure the success of their plans and objectives. In the aftermath of the revolution, the radical wing of Iran's leaders was especially determined to neutralize domestic opponents who had united with them in ousting the Shah. These opponents were leftist, liberals, seculars and communists. This is what Mark Gasiorowski[10] and Michael Axworthy[11] address in their respective chapters and books. Other authors like Hilal Khashan[12] and Jeffrey Feltman[13] contend that despite the fact that the Iranian revolution was still in its initial phase of consolidation, it managed to seize and readily took advantage of the Israeli invasion of South Lebanon in 1982 to come to the rescue of their Shiite downtrodden counterparts. According to these authors and to several other political analysts, Hezbollah is

[9] Suzanne Maloney, *The Iranian Revolution at Forty* (Washington, D.C., USA: Brookings Institution Press, 2020), 86.

[10] Sean Yom, *Government and Politics of the Middle East and North Africa* (London, UK: Routledge, 2019), 60.

[11] Axworthy, Michael. *Revolutionary iran: A history of the islamic republic*. London, UK: Penguin Books, 2019.

[12] Khashan, Hilal. *Hizbullah: A mission to nowhere*. Lanham, Md, USA: Lexington Books, 2021.

[13] Suzanne Maloney, *The Iranian Revolution at Forty* (Washington, D.C., USA: Brookings Institution Press, 2020), 100.

revolutionary Iran's most successful export. In fact, Iran has attempted to emulate this model in other parts of the Middle East, if to no similar avail. While most authors like Rabinovich, Axworthy, Gasiorowski, as well as others, implicate revolutionary Iran in destabilizing the Middle East from 1979 onward, other authors like Bruce Riedel[14] accuse Saddam Hussein of being the main culprit for setting in motion three wars in the Middle East.

Riedel's argument has certain merit in deeming Saddam Hussein's 1978 expulsion of Rouhallah Khoumeini to France a mistake, who went on to spearhead the Islamic revolution and lead the Wilayat al Faqih doctrine a few months later. However, it can be argued that Khomeini would have attempted to export the revolution irrespective of this instance, beginning with Iraq since a majority of Twelver Imami Shiites have Iranian origins. Without the expulsion, the Iraq-Iran war might have been delayed at most. Another point of contention is Riedel's assertion that Saddam Hussein perpetrated the war with Iran in 1980. Although Saddam Hussein did initiate the conflict, as authors like Pierre Razoux,[15] Williamson Murray and Kevim M. Woods[16] point out in their works, it is important to shed light on Iran's attempts at subverting the secular regime of Saddam Hussein. Additionally, Iran was responsible for sponsoring waves of terror attacks on Iraqi land in an attempt to topple Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime to bring about a Shia republic in Baghdad. Saddam Hussein was unprepared for achieving victory over Iran. In

[14] Suzanne Maloney, *The Iranian Revolution at Forty* (Washington, D.C., USA: Brookings Institution Press, 2020), 97.

[15] Razoux, Pierre. *La guerre Iran-Irak: Première Guerre du Golfe, 1980-1988*. Paris, France: Perrin, 2013.

[16] Williamson, Murray, and Kevin Woods. *The iran-iraq war: A military and strategic history*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

fact, the war served Iranian interests by reigniting Iranian nationalism, thus uniting Iranian society against a common enemy. This permitted the revolutionary Islamic elite to ascertain itself domestically, as Judith S. Yaphe explains in her research as well.[17]

According to Khashan, Saddam Hussein warned Arabs: "I am the Eastern Gate of the Arab World, don't let me fall", a statement that was largely disregarded by Arab leaders and later proven to hold truth. The impact of Iraq's defeat continues to reverberate across the Arab world, especially since the Iraqi state's strength stood as a bulwark and a deterrent to Iran, and to a lesser extent, to Israel. Moreover, most experts on Iran agree that the last two Gulf wars, including the 'Dual Containment Policy' from 1991 to 2003, paved the way for Iran to become the main rising regional power with hegemonic aspirations in the Middle East.

The literature review has so far covered the Iranian revolution, the Iran-Iraq war, the Second Gulf War, the Dual Containment Policy and the Third Gulf war. Thereafter, it is important to trace the literature on the Arab Spring and how it helped Iran assert itself and enhance its foothold in the Fertile Crescent. To that end, it is crucial to credit Jubin M. Goodarzi,[18] who discusses the alliance enacted in 1979 between Syria and Iran. David W. Lesch's work,[19] and Evangelos Venetis working paper[20] both provide valuable insights as well. All these academic entries discuss the relations built between the two

[17] Yom, Sean. *Government and politics of the Middle East and North Africa*. London, UK: Routledge, 2019.

[18] Goodarzi, Jubin. *Syria and Iran: Diplomatic alliance and power politics in the Middle East*. London, UK: Tauris, 2009.

[19] Lesch, David W., and Mark L. Haas. *The Middle East and the United States: History, politics, and Ideologies*. London, UK: Routledge, 2019.

[20] Evangelos, Venetis. "The Rising Power of Iran in the Middle East: Forming an Axis with Iraq, Syria and Lebanon." ΕΛΙΑΜΕΠ, July 18, 2011. https://www.eliamep.gr/en/publication/η-ανατέλλουσα-ισχύς-του-ιράν-στη-μέση-α/

countries over the past few decades. The rise of Hezbollah in 1982 especially cemented the partnership, specifically in the aftermath of Hezbollah's decisive showdown against Israel in 2006. In 2008, the Shiite Crescent was formed stretching out from Iran to the Mediterranean Sea, thereby transcending Iraq and Syria, and including Gaza as well. The birth of Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Islamic revolution's first and most successful project undertaken outside its frontiers, is well documented in Hilal Khashan's book.[21] However, the aforementioned works were published prior to the civil, regional, and proxy war that occurred in Syria starting 2011, with the exception of Khashan's work. It is important to highlight pre-2011 research in order to link this to Iran's intervention in Syria beginning 2012, in which Iran came to the rescue of its oldest ally in the region to preserve its strategic footing in the Fertile Crescent, and to maintain its land corridor through Lebanon.

Iran intervened at a key point when Syrian rebels were on the verge of a decisive breakthrough in defeating the loyalist regime forces, Hezbollah, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, pro-Iranian Iraqi militias, and Shiite mercenaries from Pakistan and Afghanistan. This forced Iran to respond, and Qassem Suleimani, the Quds Force leader, sought assistance from Putin, which saved Bashar al Assad's regime. Russian intervention in Syria therefore commenced in September 2015, and proved to be existential for the regime. This strengthened the alliance and coordination between Russia and Iran in the Fertile Crescent, and widened the land corridor from Tehran to Beirut. Other relevant pieces of literature include a report by International Crisis Group[22] and a

[21] Khashan, Hilal. *Hizbullah: A mission to nowhere*. Lanham, Md, USA: Lexington Books, 2021.

[22] "Iran's Priorities in a Turbulent Middle East." Crisis Group, April 23, 2018. https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran/184-irans-priorities-turbulent-middle-east.

book by the International Institute for Strategic Studies.[23] These works discuss the Yemeni civil war and the growing connections looming between Iran and the Houthis, particularly after the Arab Spring made its way to Yemen in 2011, on the basis of Realpolitik. The article "Iran and the Arab Spring: Ascendancy Frustrated" by Shahram Chubin also provides valuable insights.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that as a result of Russia's recent invasion of Ukraine, most political analysts agree that Iran and its Shiite militias will begin to have the upper hand in Syria. Consequently, Israel will increase its air strikes aimed at Iran's supporters, which might augment the already acute tension between the two protagonists. Another important determinant is the reactivation of the Iranian nuclear deal, which might shift the situation in favor of Iran's expansionary interventionist motives in the Middle East. This will be contingent on whether the Biden Administration agrees to remove the IRGC and its affiliated Quds Force from the list of terrorist organizations in exchange for Iran to halt its nuclear program.

1.6. Outline

Now that an overview of the research topic has been provided, the author will devote this section to the content of the research.

In Chapter II, the author aims to demonstrate that the ultimate objective of all Iranian empires, the Elamites, the Medes, the Persians, the Achamenes, the Parthians and the Sassanians has consistently been to attain control over the Fertile Crescent and its adjacent areas. Chapter II demonstrates that even prior to the implementation of its Arab

[23] *Iran's networks of influence in the Middle East*. London, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2020.

policies, Iranian empires always strove to shape the geopolitical order to their advantage, regardless of whether it had a destabilizing impact on the region.

In Chapter III, the author will be addressing the Arab conquests that sought to spread out Islam in the seventh century AD, after the death of the prophet Muhammed. From this stage onward, and until the rise of the Safavid dynasty almost nine hundred years later, the Persians witnessed a political decline, with the exception of the Buyid dynasty period. Chapter III is important because it outlines how the Iranian population converted to Islam in the seventh century A.D. after the Arab conquest of Iran, which ultimately facilitated Iran's current Arab policies. Indeed, as stated above, exporting the Islamic revolution across the Arab World is among Iran's Arab policy objectives.

In Chapter IV, the author will be describing the rise of the Buyids in the first place, and narrating the subsequent conquest of modern Iran by the Turkic Safavids in the sixteenth century, who later on obliged the Persians to become Shiites during the reign of Shah Ismail the first. After recounting the rule of the Safavid dynasty, which remained in power until the beginning of the eighteenth century, Chapter IV will be describing the rule of the Qajar, the movement of the constitutional revolution in the early twentieth century. This will be followed by an overview of the reign of Reza Pahlavi and his son Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, which ended abruptly with the Iranian revolution of 1979. In the sixth and last section of the paper, the author will describe the driving forces behind the 1979 revolution, as well as the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979 with the emergence of grand Ayatollah Khomeini. Chapter IV covers several important historical events, beginning with the Buyids' relentless attempts at dominating the Fertile Crescent, the Gulf and its adjacent areas. Chapter IV will also go over how the ulama in Iran in particular yielded great power from the time of the Safavids, to Khomeini's

revolution in 1979 which is crucial because it illustrates the background of their political power today. Addressing the Iranian revolution is important because it is at this juncture in time that Iran's Arab policies were being enacted. Ultimately, Chapter IV will narrate the circumstances that lead to the emergence of a new geopolitical order in the Middle East which in turn substantially destabilized the region.

In Chapter V, the author will be highlighting the early phases of the implementation and development of Iran's Arab policies. It is essential because it sheds light on Imam Musa al Sadr's role in mobilizing the Lebanese Shiites from 1958 until his disappearance in Libya in 1978. This paved the way for Khomeini, who came to power in 1979, to take advantage of this development and create Hezbollah in 1985. Chapter V is also crucial because it addresses the geo-strategic alliance between Baathist Syria and theocratic Iran, which allowed the latter to have an important ally in the region when it was isolated, surrounded, and threatened. This alliance, enacted in 1979, was decisive in shaping the outcome of the revolution, and hence Iran's capacity to play a pivotal role in the Middle East, because Iran was out-balanced by Baathist Iraq in the west, the Gulf monarchies in the south, and the Soviet Union in the north. Chapter V also covers the Iraq-Iran war, which was one of the bloodiest and most destructive conflicts that took place in the Middle East. Despite revolutionary Iran's defeat and inability to topple the secular regime in Baghdad, it was able to consolidate the revolution at home by getting rid of its rivals in Iraq, and by strengthening the loyalty of the Iranian population. Significantly, Chapter V outlines the creation of Hezbollah, which is the first non-Iranian entity to pledge allegiance to the Wilayat al-Faqih doctrine. Hezbollah's creation marks the most successful exported model of the Iranian revolution in the Arab world. The author will therefore argue that the conflict in the Arab world is gradually but certainly

shifting from being an Arab-Israeli conflict, to becoming an Arab-Iranian conflict. Additionally, Chapter V reveals how the new Iranian revolution contributed to the emergence of a new geopolitical order in the Middle East, which will begin destabilizing the region substantially in the upcoming few decades. Chapter V also aims to prove that it is at the same juncture that the Mullahs in Iran began to implement their Arab policies, as a means of dominating the region unilaterally. This has led to various unfavorable and irreversible consequences on the region. In 1980, theocratic Iran had tried to portray itself as a cooperative, altruistic state which aims to co-exist harmoniously in the Middle East. However, theocratic Iran has consistently threatened the power dynamics, stability, and security of the region as well as the international order, and has proven itself to be a revisionist state. It is also at this point in time that the Islamic Republic of Iran started using its Pan-Shiism policy in the Middle East, namely in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Bahrain, and elsewhere like in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

In the Chapter VI of his work, the author will be discussing how Iran transformed itself from a standard state with minimal influence, into a regional power in the Middle East. In the first part of Chapter VI, the author intends to discuss how Iran was able to establish control over Iraq after the U.S. invasion of 2003. This will be followed by a discussion on Iran's sponsorship of Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad in the second part of Chapter VI. The third portion of Chapter VI will be dedicated to discussing the Iranian alliance with the Houthis in Yemen. Chapter VI is pivotal because it describes how Iran, by virtue of the implementation of its Arab policies, was capable of turning itself into the quasi-hegemon of the Near East. Chapter V demonstrates that by aspiring to become the uncontested regional power of the Middle East, Iran is modifying the

balance of power to its advantage, thus destabilizing the geopolitical order of the Near East.

In Chapter VII of this work, the author will be discussing how Iran interfered in the course of the Syrian civil war to assist al Assad's regime and prevent it from collapsing. Chapter VII will be tackling several issues: Syria before its alliance with the Islamic Republic of Iran; Syria at the outset of the Arab Spring in 2010; the intervention of Iran in the course of the Syrian civil conflict (2011-2023); the intervention of Russia in the course of the Syrian civil conflict (2015-2023); and the victory of Iran in the course of the Syrian civil war (2017-2023). Chapter VII is important because it explains how Iran needed to prove to its proxies that it was a reliable ally, particularly to its oldest strategic partner in the Middle East since the Iranian revolution. In addition, Iran had a vested interest in safeguarding the land corridor of the Shiite Crescent which ran from Tehran to Beirut, passing through Baghdad and Damascus. Iran was interested in maintaining its logistical axes of communication with its proxies and allies in the Fertile Crescent, namely Hezbollah, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Hamas. This would have been substantially threatened by the toppling of the Syrian regime by the rebels, which explains the importance of Iran's intervention in favor of the regime during the Arab Spring. Chapter VII demonstrates that by seeking to shore up al Assad's regime, Iran is modifying the balance of power in the Fertile Crescent to its own, sole advantage, thus becoming the uncontested regional power of the Middle East and destabilizing the geopolitical order.

In Chapter VIII of this work, the author will be presenting the standoff between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Chapter VIII will be tackling four main issues. Section one will describe the historical background of the standoff between the Islamic Republic of Iran

and Saudi Arabia. Section two will be narrating the nature of the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, as well as the factors that dictate the severity of this rivalry. Section three will lay out Iran's numerous links with the Shiite communities of the Gulf, encompassing Saudi Arabia, as well as Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar in order of importance, despite the absence of a Shiite community in the latter country. However, it is worth highlighting the cordial relationship between Qatar and Iran, in contrast with most of the other Gulf Cooperation Council countries, which the author will expand on later in Chapter VIII. Section four will be outlining the Trump administration's failed initiative of creating a Middle Eastern Strategic Alliance – an Arab NATO in 2019 with Saudi Arabia, as an attempt to counter the aggressive, expansionist, and hegemonic aspirations of Iran. Chapter VIII is important because it highlights several important issues. Chapter VIII addresses the objectives of Iran's Arab policy, which are outlined above. As Chapter VIII will explain, the aim of this policy is to topple the Arab world's corrupt pro-American political regimes, to overthrow the al Saud monarchy and to establish a subservient political regime in its place. This would also serve Iran's interest in establishing itself as the leader of the Middle East, especially since Saudi Arabia is currently the only Arab Muslim country able to counterbalance the Iranian threat in the Middle East. Chapter VIII will also be explaining the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, as it is fundamental in understanding the modern political dynamics of the Middle East. Chapter VIII demonstrates that by seeking to overturn Saudi Arabia and its allies in the GCC and seize control of the Gulf region, Iran is modifying the balance of power in the Middle East to its own advantage. This would pave the way for Iran to become the uncontested regional power of the Middle East, and would destabilize the geopolitical order of the Near East. Indeed, the Islamic Republic of Iran has the characteristics of a

revisionist state, as it seeks to entirely modify the balance of power in the Gulf to its own benefit.

Lastly, Chapter IX will conclude this work, through which the author will summarize each section in this paper, followed by a summary of the findings. Afterwards, the author will examine whether the Islamic Republic of Iran will fundamentally change its policy with Saudi Arabia and abandon its regional ambitions. Finally, in the last section of Chapter IX, the author will comment on the future of the two countries' relations.

CHAPTER 2

IRANIAN HISTORY AND EMPIRE BUILDING

2.1. Introduction

The objective of chapter I is to demonstrate that the ultimate objective of all of the Iranian empires, including the Elamites, the Medes, the Persians, the Achamenes, the Parthians and the Sassanians, was to dominate the Fertile Crescent and its adjacent areas. In other words, the aforementioned Iranian empires have consistently attempted to re-attain the powerful status of their predecessors, an objective that has endured for centuries until today. Chapter II is significant because by describing Iranian history, it demonstrates how the Iranian monarchs had always aspired to build empires, conquer new lands, and subdue every entity they deemed threatening. This pattern has persisted throughout history, beginning with the empire of Elam which dates back to more than seven thousand years ago, as will be discussed in the upcoming section. Chapter II contributes to addressing the thesis' central question by showing that even without the implementation of its Arab policies, the Iranian empires always attempted to shape the geo-political order to their advantage, in spite of the destabilizing effect it entails for the entire region.

Now that a brief introduction on Iran and its destabilizing role in the Middle East has been provided, the author would like to state his research question. To what extent has the Iranian regime's Arab Policies contributed to the emergence of a new geopolitical order in the Middle East that is substantially destabilizing the region? In order to be able to answer this research question, the author will have to first of all define the objectives of Iran's Arab policy. Iran's Arab policy objectives can be identified as threefold: its first objective was to become the de facto leader of the region since it considers itself a key

nation in the Middle East. The second objective of Iran's Arab policy was to export its own revolution and spread Islamist republics similar to its own across the entirety of the Arab countries, which it considered despotic and totalitarian. The third objective of Iran's Arab policy was to topple the corrupt pro-American political regimes.

Thus, the objective of this research is to explain the reasons behind the hegemonic ascendance of the Iranian regime in the Middle East over the last couple of decades. Iran has been able to achieve this first through its Arab policies, with the underlying objective of dominating the region, which has irreversibly and substantially disrupted the stability of the region.

2.2. The Empire of Elam

The Iranians represent a branch of the Indo-European family of peoples. However, before the arrival of Iranian migrants from the north, there was a different population inhabiting the land of modern Iran. Those people lived as early as 100 000 BC during the Old Stone Age period. By 5 000 BC, modern archaeologists had discovered that these people became sedentary because they practiced agriculture near the Zagros mountains. These people were living near the Sumerians who were inhabiting the land of Mesopotamia. The sedentary people founded the empire of Elam which came about in the provinces of Khuzestan and Fars, based in the cities of Susa and Anshan.[24] The Elamites, as modern historians refer to them, didn't speak an Iranian language per se. Nonetheless, the subsequent Iranian dynasties inherited parts of the Elamites' culture and traditions. Throughout the next couple of centuries, Iranians migrated to the Iranian

[24] Hervé Ghannad, Identité et Politique Extérieure de l'iran (Levallois-Perret, France: Studyrama, 2013), p 38.

plateau and intermingled with the Elamites. From then onwards, the notion of Iran as a separate entity, as well as a distinctive identity was beginning to arise.

2.3. The Empire of Medes

The Iranian migrants who settled into the territory that was to become Iran in the years before 1 000 BC didn't consist of a single tribe. They constituted different groups of Iranians, such as the Medes, the Persians, the Parthians, and the Sogdians among others, even if the former two were the most prominent. The Medes were inhabiting the northwest, in present-day provinces of Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, Hamadan, and Tehran, whereas the Persians were inhabiting the southern portion of present-day Iranian territory, known ever since in history as Pars or Fars.[25] Both the Medes and the Persians were, for a period of time, tributaries of the more powerful Assyrian people. In fact, it is through Assyrian historical sources that modern historians were able to unravel and discover Iranian history. By 700 BC, the Medes were able to found a local state, which evolved later on as the first Iranian empire.[26] In 612 BC, the Medes put an end to the Assyrian civilization and, at their peak, their empire stretched from west to east, from Asia Minor to the Hindi Kush, and from south to north - from modern Azerbaijan to the Persian Gulf.[27] It is worth mentioning that the Medes were ruling their Persian counterparts as their vassals, among other tribes.

[25] Michael Axworthy, A History of Iran: Empire of the Mind (New York, USA: Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Books Group, 2016), p 4.

[26] Ibid, p 5.

[27] Ibid.

2.4. The Empire of Persia and Achaemenes

In 559 BC, prince Cyrus, who had Persian and Achaemenidian descent, took control of Persia and Anshan, which were still provinces administered by the Median Empire. A decade later, in 549 BC, Cyrus invaded and sacked the Median capital and imposed himself as the de facto king of Persia, transforming it into the center of his newly established empire, while downgrading Media to secondary partner.[28] Nevertheless, Cyrus was very ambitious with his conquests, as he was able to capture Lydia in Asia Minor, as well as Phoenicia, Judaea, and Babylonia in the fertile crescent. Therefore, Cyrus ruled over a huge empire that encompassed the Greek cities on the eastern coast of the Aegean Sea to the banks of the river Indus. Cyrus was succeeded by his son Cambyses who further aggrandized his Persian empire by annexing Egypt.

2.4.1. The Persian and Greek internecine conflicts:

After a series of revolts and turnovers in power, the Persian empire was led by king Darius, who was only able to maintain the Achaemenid empire. Yet, a few years before his death in 512 BC, Darius was able to conquer Thrace and Macedonia.[29] However, following a revolt by the Ionian Greeks of the Aegean coast of Asia Minor, Darius' generals initiated a conflict with their Athenian Greek enemies, which concluded with a Persian defeat at the Battle of Marathon in 490 BC.[30] This Persian defeat was the beginning of a long and strenuous struggle characterized by bloody wars between, on one

[28] Hervé Ghannad, Identité et Politique Extérieure de l'iran (Levallois-Perret, France: Studyrama, 2013), p 39.

[29] Michael Axworthy, A History of Iran: Empire of the Mind (New York, USA: Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Books Group, 2016), p 23.

[30] Ibid.

hand, the Greeks, and, on the other hand, the Persians who aspired to subdue and annex Greece to their empire. Eventually, Darius was succeeded by his son Xerxes, who is famous for planning the large expedition to sanction Athens and its allies, for aiding in the Ionian revolt towards 480 BC.[31] Contemporaneously, historians believe that Xerxes' army amounted to more than two million, whose objective was to destroy Athens. Xerxes' army was successfully able to defeat the Spartan rearguard at Thermopylae, whereby king Leonidas was killed. Afterwards, Xerxes' soldiers captured Athens and burned it down.

Nonetheless, during the series of events that unfolded later on, and after having accomplished his mission, Xerxes' fleet lost at Salamis and his army was defeated at Plataea and Mycale in 479 BC.[32] In fact, his army was drained and became fragile. But, a truce was achieved between the Persians and the Greeks with the enactment of the peace of Callias in 449 BC. It is worth noting that it is around this period of time that the Peloponnesian wars between multiple Greek city states started, led, on the one hand, by Athens, and its allies, and, on the other hand, by Sparta and its allies. The Persians were thus backing the spartans throughout this conflict. Ultimately, the conflict which arose between the Persians and the Greeks paved the way for the eventual rise of Macedon.

2.4.2. The rise of Macedonia

According to historians, Macedonians were not Greeks but most likely Thracians. Furthermore, even under the rule of Philip and his son Alexander, Macedonians distinguished themselves from their Greek counterparts. For example, during the fifth

[31] Ibid, p 25.

[32] Ibid.

century BC, Macedonians were not authorized to participate in the Olympic games. However, king Philip of Macedon's ascent to power changed things dramatically. In 359 BC, king Philip embarked on the mission of expanding his small kingdom. Through a series of wars, king Philip was able to subdue all of northern Greece and Thrace. Afterwards, Philip won over both Athens and its alliance with Thebes in 338 BC. Following this victory, Philip organized the League of Corinth which permitted him to ascertain Macedonian preeminence over the entirety of the Greek peninsula, except Sparta. Ultimately, king Philip united Greece under Macedonian leadership. Philip had another main goal, namely defeating the Persian empire. This aim materialized through Pan-Hellenic slogans and appeals in order to be able to mobilize a maximum number of Greek and Macedonian fighters. However, in 336 BC, king Philip was assassinated, slightly before he could achieve his objective.

2.4.3. The Seleucid interlude

However, king Philip's son Alexander, was adamant in pursuing his father's ambitions. In 334 BC, Alexander crossed into Asia Minor.[33] He then fought the Persian king in three main consecutive battles successfully: one at the Granicus river; the second at the battle of Issus; and the third at Gaugamela near modern day Mosul and Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan. The Persian king was then slaughtered by his own generals. Alexander then built on this adventure by passing through all of the important cities in the Persian empire like Babylon, Susa and Persepolis. He even extended his military campaigns by

[33] Ibid, p 28.

fighting in India. However, Alexander died prematurely in Babylon in 323 BC.[34] After the latter's death, the empire was divided among his multiple generals. The Persian empire, for instance, was governed by Seleucus, who was one of Alexander's generals, and his descendant.

2.5. The Empire of Parthia

Almost a few generations after Seleucus's death in 281 BC, a tribe called the Parni imposed itself in Parthia and other portions of land east of the Caspian Sea. It is worth noting that the Parthians consisted of warrior horsemen who lived in north-eastern Iran, and spoke the Iranian language. They posed problems for the Achaemenids and for Alexander, because they were difficult to control. Gradually, however, the Parthians expanded their kingdom in the eastern empire of the Seleucids who were preoccupied fighting in the western sphere of their empire. Eventually, during the reign of the Parthian king Mithridates I, from 171 to 138 BC, the Parthians captured Sistan, Elam, Media, Babylon and finally Seleucia itself.[35] By doing so, the Parthians were able to re-impose their authority over what was once the Persian empire, ruled by the Achaemenid a few centuries earlier, before Alexander's campaigns in western Asia. Ultimately, Mithradates I's successors founded a new city, Ctesiphon, in modern Mesopotamia. This was going to be the Parthians' and the Sassanians' capital for the next couple of centuries, until the Arabs conquered the entirety of the Middle East to spread Islam beyond the Arabian Peninsula after prophet Muhammed's death. For the next several hundreds of years, the

[34] Ibid, p 29.

[35] Ibid, p 33.

Parthians were going to face off the Romans in Armenia, Syria and northern Mesopotamia, in a number of deadly conflicts, until their downfall in 224 AD, when the Sassanians took over Persia.[36]

2.6. The Empire of the Sassanid

Towards the beginning of the third century AD, a new center of power was consolidating in the province of Persis-Fars, the area in which the Achaemenids had ascended a few centuries earlier. The local ruler, Ardashir, began to expand his fief by taking over Kerman and Isfahan, and in 224 AD, killed the Parthian king Artabanus IV in present-day Khuzestan. Ardashir claimed he was of Achaemenidian descent, which was later debunked. In 226 AD, Ardashir invaded Ctesiphon and became the new king of the former Parthian empire.[37] The Parthian empire therefore witnessed a change of dynasty without much resistance. The new Persian empire was now administered under the leadership of the Sassanians. From this period onwards, the Sassanian empire remained relatively intact in terms of size. The next four centuries involved a number of skirmishes along the border between the Sassanian and the Roman empires.

2.7. Conclusion

As the author has shown throughout Chapter II, the ultimate objective of all the aforementioned Iranian empires was to dominate the Fertile Crescent and its adjacent areas. In other words, these Iranian empires were attempting to re-claim the powerful

[36] Hervé Ghannad, Identité et Politique Extérieure de l'iran (Levallois-Perret, France: Studyrama, 2013), p 42.

[37] Michael Axworthy, A History of Iran: Empire of the Mind (New York, USA: Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Books Group, 2016), p 44.

status of their predecessors, which has remained constant in Iran's policy objectives until today. Therefore, a change in political regime is unlikely to lead to a radical shift in Iran's foreign policy, because the goal of dominating the region has always been at the forefront of Iran's aims.

Here in chapter II, the author has demonstrated by describing Iranian history, how the Iranian kings had always sought and strove to build empires, conquer new lands, and subdue every opposing population, starting with the empire of Elam which dates back to more than seven thousand years ago, passing through the empire of Medes, the empire of Persia, the empire of Parthia, and ending with the empire of the Sassanians. In chapter III, the author will describe the Arab conquests that sought to spread Islam in the seventh century AD after the death of the prophet Muhammed. From this stage onwards and until the rise of the Safavid dynasty almost nine hundred years later, the Persians will witness a tremendous political decline, except perhaps with the establishment of the Buyid dynasty in the tenth and in the eleventh centuries.

CHAPTER 3

THE ARAB MUSLIM CONQUEST AND THE PERSIAN POLITICAL DECLINE

3.1. Introduction

In chapter II, the author demonstrated, by describing Iranian history, how Iranian kings had always sought to build empires, conquer new lands, and subdue opponents, starting with the empire of Elam which dates back to more than seven thousand years ago, passing through the empire of Medes, Persia, Parthia, and ending with the empire of the Sassanians.

Iran's Arab policy objectives can be identified as threefold: its first objective was to become the de facto leader of the region, since it considers itself a key nation in the Middle East. The second objective of Iran's Arab policy was to export its own revolution and instill Islamist republics similar to its own across the entirety of the Arab countries, which Iran considered despotic and totalitarian. The third objective of Iran's Arab policy was to topple the corrupt pro-American political regimes.

In chapter III, the author will describe the Arab conquests that sought to spread out Islam in the seventh century AD, after the death of prophet Muhammed. From this stage onwards, and until the rise of the Safavid dynasty almost nine hundred years later, the Persians will witness a tremendous political decline, except during the Buyid dynasty era in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Chapter III is significant because it traces Iran's conversion to Islam after the Arab conquest of Iran in the seventh century AD. Chapter III contributes to addressing the central question of the thesis, by demonstrating that Iran's

current Arab policies are contingent on its historical conversion from polytheism to Islam, since the second objective is to export its Islamic revolution across the Arab world.

3.2. Persians and Arabs before the onset of Islam

Since ancient history, Arabs and Persians had been well-acquainted. During the Sasanian rule of modern Iran, from 226 to 651 AD, the Persians were in control of the western side of the Persian Gulf, and had subjugated Qatif in present-day Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Oman.[38] The Persians had instilled the Lakhmid kings of al Hira as their representatives in the areas of the Fertile Crescent adjacent to the Byzantine Empire, the Arabian Peninsula and Egypt. These specific Arab tribes were under the protection of the Sasanian crown, as there were other Arab tribes, namely the Ghassanids, who inhabited the lands bordering the Byzantine Empire, and who were under the latter's supervision and control as well.[39] It is worth mentioning that the amical ties between Arab tribes and Persians had fostered the creation of a Sasanian navy which subdued the whole maritime zone from the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean, including Yemen.[40] It is also important to highlight that there was an adviser responsible for the management of Arab affairs at the Sasanian court.

Notwithstanding the cooperation between the Lakhmid tribes of Hira and the Sasanian kings which endured for a long period of time, and which proved to be beneficial for both entities, this relationship ultimately ended due to treason committed on behalf of

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[38] Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates: The Islamic near East from the Sixth to the Eleventh Century* (New York, USA: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 7.

[39] Ibid, p 10.

[40] Abd Al-Husain Zarrinkūb, "The Arab Conquest of Iran and Its Aftermath (Chapter 1) - the Cambridge History of Iran," Cambridge Core, 2008, https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/cambridge-history-of-iran/arab-conquest-of-iran-and-its-aftermath/6AB6C254CCD1E6D299449CD836500498, 2.

the Lakhmid vassal against his Persian master, during the reign of Khusrau II Aparviz (591-628).[41] Ultimately, a Persian secretary was called upon to handle this near-abroad of the Sasanian empire. This tactical mistake proved costly to the Sasanian empire a few years later, when Arab tribes of the Arabian Peninsula began to conquer the Middle East to spread Islam.[42] The first case in point was the battle of Dhuqar which occurred next to contemporary Kufa, in the year 604.[43] During this conflict, the Arab tribes, displeased with the appointment of a Persian secretary to deal with their local affairs in Hira, mounted an armed rebellion and defeated the Persian soldiers in this area. Simultaneously, due to several internal factors, and because of the draining and continuous wars with the Byzantine Empire, the Sasanian empire was entering a period of political decline and instability.

3.3. The capture of Ctesiphon

Following the death of the prophet Mohammed in June 632, Abu Bakr (632-4) was the successor in leading the nascent Muslim community. It was during his reign that the main military clash happened to take place between the Muslim Arabs and the pagan Persians. At the outset, Abu Bakr ordered Muthanna b. Haritha under the leadership of Khalid bin al Walid, who was referred to as "Sword of God"[44] to convert the pagan and Christian Arabs located in the southern portions of Mesopotamia to Islam, which was

[41] Ibid, p 3.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Hilal Khashan, "Arab-Iranian Relations Burdened by History," Geopolitical Futures, February 23, 2023, https://geopoliticalfutures.com/arab-iranian-relations-burdened-by-history/, 2.

[44] Abd Al-Husain Zarrinkūb, "The Arab Conquest of Iran and Its Aftermath (Chapter 1) - the Cambridge History of Iran," Cambridge Core, 2008, https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/cambridge-history-of-iran/arab-conquest-of-iran-and-its-aftermath/6AB6C254CCD1E6D299449CD836500498, 6.

successfully achieved. Simultaneously, and while converting those Arab tribes to Islam, Khalid bin al Walid encountered Persian frontier forces which he routed at the battle of Dhat al Salasil, in the area between Bahrain and Basra.[45] Soon after, another armed clash occurred between the two entities in Madhar,[46] and the Arab Muslims triumphed again. A third battle ensued at Walaja in the proximity of Hira, and the Muslims were declared victorious.[47] At the end of the engagement, the Arab Muslims took control of Hira. A fourth and last conflict occurred near Anbar, whereby the Persian army fled in disarray, which allowed the Arab Muslims to advance and to expand their territory.[48]

Meanwhile, the Muslim Arabs were also conducting another warfare campaign against the Byzantine empire. Khalid bin al Walid was recalled to Syria by Abu Bakr to liberate Damascus, which was duly accomplished.[49] Following Abu Bakr's death in 634 AD, Omar ibn al Khattab succeeded him as caliph. Taking advantage of the situation, the Persian shah Yazdgerd mounted a counter offensive to recapture Hira. The fifth battle between the two belligerents materialized near modern day Kufa, on the banks of the Euphrates in 634. The encounter was named "Battle of the Bridge".[50] According to historical sources, it appears that Persians has the upper hand during the course of the strife and in its aftermath. Nonetheless, it appears that they were not intent on furthering

[45] Ibid, p 7.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates: The Islamic near East from the Sixth to the Eleventh Century* (New York, USA: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 55.

[50] Hugh Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquests: How the Spread of Islam Changed the World We Live In* (London, USA: Phoenix, 2008), 106.

their gains by pursuing the retreating Arab Muslim forces. Thus, the clash ended in a stalemate, more or less. A few years later in October 635, a sixth engagement took place near Kufa, during which the Arabs had an advantage even though the hostilities terminated in a protracted stalemate.[51] At the same period of time, the Arab Muslims were able to defeat the Byzantine Empire's army in the second battle of the Yarmuk, and therefore liberate Syria.[52] At this critical juncture in time, the second Muslim caliph ordered his troops to shift their attention to the Persian battlefront immediately.

In June 637 AD, the decisive battle of Qadisiya occurred, which lasted between three to four days.[53] Qadisiya was a small town located around twenty kilometers away from Kufa. Despite the Persians' advantage in terms of the number of soldiers, the Arab Muslims won the war, but only after the arrival of the Syrian garrison which turned the tide in their favor. Indeed, they proved to be extremely valuable. Nonetheless, the Muslim Arabs paid a heavy price because they suffered from substantial human losses. A few months after this, the Muslim Arabs pursued their march towards the Sasanian capital, namely Ctesiphon or Madain.[54] However, before their arrival, Yazdgard, the Sasanian monarch, had evaded Ctesiphon to head eastwards, towards the Zagros Mountains, or the Persian mainland.

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[51] Abd Al-Husain Zarrinkūb, "The Arab Conquest of Iran and Its Aftermath (Chapter 1) - the Cambridge History of Iran," Cambridge Core, 2008, https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/cambridge-history-of-iran/arab-conquest-of-iran-and-its-aftermath/6AB6C254CCD1E6D299449CD836500498, 9.

[52] Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates: The Islamic near East from the Sixth to the Eleventh Century* (New York, USA: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 55.

[53] Hugh Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquests: How the Spread of Islam Changed the World We Live In* (London, USA: Phoenix, 2008), 108.

[54] Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates: The Islamic near East from the Sixth to the Eleventh Century* (New York, USA: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 61.

3.4. "Arab Muslim" conquest of Persia

Even though the Arab Muslims had been able to free Iraq from Persian rule, and slowly began settling and inhabiting these lands, they were still required to prepare for their next mission, which was to invade the Persian mainland. After all, their mission was to spread Islam across the Middle East, and perhaps beyond at a later time. However, the Muslim Arabs feared a Persian counter-attack that could spoil their newly acquired territory. Therefore, they were obliged to pursue their conquest eastward, crossing the border between the Semitic world of the Fertile Crescent, and entering the Aryan world which encompassed Khuzestan, Media, Fars, Khorasan and Transoxiana.[55] Meanwhile, at the orders of the caliph Omar, the Arabs built two new cities in Mesopotamia, namely Basra and Kufa.

During the reign of Omar, additional battles occurred at Khuzestan, Fars, Ray and Nahavand, whereby the remaining Persian forces were slaughtered, thus eliminating the Sasanian empire. Yazdgard fled eastwards after each defeat of his forces, before finally being assassinated. At this point, it is important to address the question of how such an old, strong empire which had been resilient across different ages, dissipated in less than fifteen years after the Arab Muslim conquests? There are several factors which explain the fall of the last great pagan Persian empire. For the sake of clarity and scope, the author will only briefly lay out the main reasons for the collapse of the Sasanian empire. The Sasanian empire was largely impacted by the political chaos and instability of the ruling elite in Persia during the last few years before the Arab conquests; the corruption of the ruling elite; the depletion of the Persian treasury; the heterogeneous makeup of the

[55] Hugh Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquests: How the Spread of Islam Changed the World We Live In* (London, USA: Phoenix, 2008), 169.

Sasanian society and its lack of cooperation and solidarity thereof.[56] Furthermore, on behalf of the Muslim Arabs, certainly religion, the rise of Islam, and the duty to spread this newly revealed faith across the world, played a crucial role in the downfall of the Sasanian empire. In addition, the aforementioned factors were compounded by poverty and hunger among the Muslim Arabs, which contributed to the demise of the Persian empire. Altogether, these motives encouraged the Arab tribesmen to fight both their Persian and Byzantine enemies with ardor, before defeating both of them in battle.[57]

3.5. The aftermath of the conquest

Shortly after the defeat of the Sasanian empire, Omar ibn al Khattab, the second caliph was murdered by an Iranian servant, Firuz Abu Lulu.[58] This is a testament to the hostility that existed between Arabs and Persians. It is worth noting that during the course of their initial interactions in the fifth century BC, the Arabs were subjected to Persian control and they had to pay tributes to the latter in the form of gifts.[59] Persian shahs were prejudiced and constantly expressed contempt towards Arabs' character, lifestyles, and habitat (the desert).[60] After the Arab conquests, the relationship between both ethnic

[56] Abd Al-Husain Zarrinkūb, "The Arab Conquest of Iran and Its Aftermath (Chapter 1) - the Cambridge History of Iran," Cambridge Core, 2008, https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/cambridge-history-of-iran/arab-conquest-of-iran-and-its-aftermath/6AB6C254CCD1E6D299449CD836500498, 17.

[57] Ibid, p 18.

[58] Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates: The Islamic near East from the Sixth to the Eleventh Century* (New York, USA: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 63.

[59] Hilal Khashan, "Arab-Iranian Relations Burdened by History," Geopolitical Futures, February 23, 2023, https://geopoliticalfutures.com/arab-iranian-relations-burdened-by-history/, 1.

[60] Ibid.

populations changed radically because the Arabs became their superiors. This divide between Arabs and Iranians remains present up to this very day.[61]

During the reigns of the last two Rashidun caliphs, namely Othman bin Affan and Ali bin Abi Taleb, some former Persian aristocrats began to rebel against Arab rule, most notably in Khorasan, Sistan and Transoxiana, which represented provinces located far from the Arab military garrisons stationed in Kufa and Basra.[62] In addition, those Persian princes took advantage of the Arab Muslim civil wars during Ali's reign to launch their uprisings in the eastern Iranian area. Furthermore, the western and southern provinces of Iran also saw disturbances, but to a lower extent and intensity. In addition, the Persian populace had to pay the jizya and the kharaj which consisted of taxes and polls.[63] During the Umayyad caliphate, the Arab governors of modern Iran began to practice the conquer and divide tactical policy to better administer these alien territories.[64] Almost a hundred years after the Arab conquest, the Arab Muslims were starting to settle across the whole Iranian plateau, reaching areas at the outskirts of modern Azerbaijan, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. These Arab migrants included many Shias and Kharijites who were fleeing Arab lands out of fear of persecution.[65] Across the centuries, Iranians were also starting to convert to Islam.[66]

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[61] Ibid.

[62] Abd Al-Husain Zarrinkūb, "The Arab Conquest of Iran and Its Aftermath (Chapter 1) - the Cambridge History of Iran," Cambridge Core, 2008, https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/cambridge-history-of-iran/arab-conquest-of-iran-and-its-aftermath/6AB6C254CCD1E6D299449CD836500498, 26.

[63] Ibid, p 27.

[64] Ibid.

[65] Ibid, p 28.

[66] Ibid.

3.6. Conclusion

In chapter III, the author described the Arab conquests that sought to spread Islam in the seventh century AD after the death of prophet Muhammed. From this stage onwards, and until the rise of the Safavid dynasty almost nine hundred years later, the Persians would witness a tremendous political decline, especially during the "two centuries of silence"[67], which transcended the four Rashidun caliphs, the Umayyad dynasty, and the start of the Abbasid dynasty. However, during the reign of Harun al Rashid, the Persian Barmakids earned important positions in the administration, but were later eliminated for conspiring to assassinate al Rashid out of their hatred for Arabs.[68] While it is true that there was a surge in Persian pride during the reign of the caliph al Mamum under Abbasid rule,[69] it is only during the establishment of the Buyids in the tenth and the eleventh centuries, that there was a considerable Persian revival.

By extension, the objective of chapter IV is to describe the rise of the Buyids, as well as narrating the conquest of modern-day Iran by the Turkic Safavids in the sixteenth century, who later on obliged the Persians to become Shiites during the reign of Shah Ismail the first. After recounting the rule of the Safavid dynasty, which remained in power until the beginning of the eighteenth century, chapter IV will set out to describe the rule of the Qajar, the constitutional revolution movement of the early twentieth century. Chapter IV will conclude with an overview of the reign of Reza Pahlavi and his son

[67] Hilal Khashan, "Arab-Iranian Relations Burdened by History," Geopolitical Futures, February 23, 2023, https://geopoliticalfutures.com/arab-iranian-relations-burdened-by-history/, 2.

[68] Ibid.

[69] Ibid, p 3.

Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, which ended abruptly with the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, following the emergence of Ayatollah Khomeini.

CHAPTER 4

THE RESURGENCE OF PERSIA

4.1. Introduction

In Chapter III, the author outlined the Arab conquests that sought to spread Islam in the seventh century AD, after the death of prophet Muhammed. From this stage onwards, and until the rise of the Safavid dynasty almost nine hundred years later, the Persians would witness a tremendous political decline, especially during the "two centuries of silence"[70], which transcended the four Rashidun caliphs, the Umayyad dynasty, and the start of the Abbasid dynasty. However, during the reign of Harun al Rashid, the Persian Barmakids earned important positions in the administration, but were later eliminated for conspiring to assassinate al Rashid out of their hatred for Arabs.[71] While it is true that there was a surge in Persian pride during the reign of the caliph al Mamum under Abbasid rule,[72] it is only during the establishment of the Buyids in the tenth and the eleventh centuries, that there was a considerable Persian revival.

Iran's Arab policy objectives can be identified as threefold: its first objective was to become the de facto leader of the region since it considers itself a key nation in the Middle East. The second objective of Iran's Arab policy was to export its own revolution and spread Islamist republics similar to its own across the entirety of the Arab countries,

[70] Hilal Khashan, "Arab-Iranian Relations Burdened by History," Geopolitical Futures, February 23, 2023, https://geopoliticalfutures.com/arab-iranian-relations-burdened-by-history/, 2.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Ibid, p 3.

which it considered despotic and totalitarian. The third objective of Iran's Arab policy was to topple the corrupt pro-American political regimes.

By extension, the objective of chapter IV is to describe the rise of the Buyids, before narrating the conquest of modern Iran by the Turkic Safavids in the sixteenth century, who later on obliged the Persians to become Shiites during the reign of Shah Ismail the first. After recounting the rule of the Safavid dynasty, which remained in power until the beginning of the eighteenth century, Chapter IV will focus on Qajar rule, the constitutional revolution movement of the early twentieth century. This will be followed by an overview of the reign of Reza Pahlavi and his son Mohammed Reza Pahlavi which ended abruptly with the Iranian revolution of 1979. In the last section of this work, the author will be describing the driving forces behind the revolution, as well as the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, following the emergence of grand Ayatollah Khomeini. Chapter IV is significant because it looks into the Buyids' relentless attempts at regaining control of the Fertile Crescent, the Gulf, and its adjacent areas in the first section. In other words, the Buyids were attempting to re-claim the powerful status of their predecessors, which has remained constant in Iran's policy objectives until today. In the second section, chapter IV importantly highlights the Iranians' conversion to Shiism during the sixteenth century under the rule of Shah Ismail the first. This provides the background for Iran's modern-day use of Pan-Shiism as a means to achieve its imperialist aims in the Arab world. The third section describes how the ulama in Iran in particular yielded immense power from the time of the Safavids to Khomeini's revolution in 1979. This development is crucial because it paved the way for the ulama becoming a central force in Iranian politics. In the fourth section, the author will be addressing the Iranian revolution, which is crucial because Iran's Arab policies were

being formulated during this period of time. Chapter IV contributes to addressing the thesis' central question by tracing the circumstances that will lead to the emergence of a new geopolitical order in the Middle East, substantially destabilizing the region.

4.2. The Buyid Interlude

Throughout the second half of the ninth century AD, the Abbasid's grip on its Muslim empire began to loosen,[73] a phenomenon that paved the way for local dynasties to arise. The establishment of the Buyid dynasty which ruled over Iraq and large portions of Western Iran from 934 to 1062 illustrates this diffusion of power from the center.[74] The Buyid dynasty consisted of an Iranian Shiite Muslim confederation of Daylamite origins, who were essentially Iranian tribesmen living in Gilan, a region located in northern Iran surrounding the Caspian Sea. Since the Arab conquest of Iran, the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties were never able to fully subjugate the people living in such remote areas of the empire. The Daylamites were Muslims of the Shiite denomination, mainly because members of the Alid sect were capable of convincing them to sympathize with their cause, but also because this constituted a way for these Iranian people to defy and protest the Arab Abbasid rule centered in Baghdad. Buyid rule is generally perceived as a surge in Iranian identity and character, spanning from the period of the Arab Muslim conquest of Iran and the subsequent Umayyad and Abbasid rule, until the period of the Turkic Seljuk rule which lasted until 1258 when Baghdad was sacked by the Mongol

[73] Heribert Busse, "Iran under the BŪYIDS (Chapter 7) - the Cambridge History of Iran," Cambridge Core, 2008, http://www.cambridge.org/core/books/cambridge-history-of-iran/iran-under-the-buyids/25689DDCE23637D43EC90920188DD215, 250.

[74] Cl. Cahen, "Buwayhids or Būyids," Brill, April 24, 2012, https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/buwayhids-or-buyids-SIM_1569, 2.

invader Chingiz Khan. It is only until the rise of the Safavids at the beginning of the sixteenth century, that the Iranians regained control of their own political destiny.

4.2.1. The Foundation of the Buyid Empire: (932-945)

The founders of the Buyid dynasty Ali ibn Buya, along with his two other brothers, namely, Hassan and Ahmad.[75] Their father was a fisherman from Daylam in Gilan. The Buyid brothers started off as warriors under the command of the Daylamite general Makan-e Kaki.[76] However, later on in time, they shifted their allegiance to the Iranian leader Mardavij who had assigned Ali ibn Buya to take charge of the district of Kara to the southeast of Hamadan.[77] However, because Ali was able to enlist a substantial amount of Daylamites into his army, he began to pose a threat to his master, Mardavij who planned on getting rid of him. Ali then learned of Mardavij's plans and moved to Fars, defeated the caliphal governor, Yaqut, and entered Shiraz which became the capital of his fief. In 935, Mardavij was assassinated by his Turkish slaves.[78] The Buyid brothers took advantage of the situation to further their ambitions and acquire new land. Subsequently, in the next ten years, Hasan took control of Media whereby his capital became Ray, whereas Ahmad gained Khuzestan and Iraq whereby his capital became

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[75] Heribert Busse, "Iran under the BŪYIDS (Chapter 7) - the Cambridge History of Iran," Cambridge Core, 2008, http://www.cambridge.org/core/books/cambridge-history-of-iran/iran-under-the-buyids/25689DDCE23637D43EC90920188DD215, 254.

[76] Cl. Cahen, "Buwayhids or Būyids," Brill, April 24, 2012, https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/buwayhids-or-buyids-SIM_1569, 1.

[77] Ibid.

[78] Heribert Busse, "Iran under the BŪYIDS (Chapter 7) - the Cambridge History of Iran," Cambridge Core, 2008, http://www.cambridge.org/core/books/cambridge-history-of-iran/iran-under-the-buyids/25689DDCE23637D43EC90920188DD215, 256.

Baghdad.[79] In 945, Ali was honored as Imad al Dawla which translates to "support of the state"; Hassan was honored as Rukn al Dawla which translates to "pillar of the state"; and Ahmad was called Muizz al Dawla which translates to "fortifier of the state".[80] Furthermore, because Ahmad was governing Baghdad, the capital of the Abbasid Empire and the seat of the caliph, he was given the title of Amir al Umara.[81]

4.2.2. The Golden Age of the Buyid Empire: (945-983)

Throughout the rise of the Buyid dynasty, the Buyid brothers' army was mainly made up of Daylamites who were former peasants, transformed through harsh training into foot soldiers.[82] As the Buyid brothers expanded their territory, they also started recruiting Turkish cavalrymen.[83] The Buyid brothers annexed Kerman and Oman in 967, the Jazira in 979, Tabaristan in 980 and Gorgan in 981.[84] There was frequent tension between the Daylamite foot soldiers and the Turkish cavalrymen because the former were Shiites, whereas the latter were Sunnis.[85] However, the Buyids were pragmatic politicians as they never imposed Shiism on subjects living within their territories, who were mainly

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[79] Ibid, p 258.

[80] Cl. Cahen, "Buwayhids or Būyids," Brill, April 24, 2012, https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/buwayhids-or-buyids-SIM_1569, 2.

[81] Ibid.

[82] Encyclopaedia Iranica Foundation, "Welcome to Encyclopaedia Iranica," RSS, 2008, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/buyids, 12.

[83] Ibid.

[84] Cl. Cahen, "Buwayhids or Būyids," Brill, April 24, 2012, https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/buwayhids-or-buyids-SIM_1569, 9.

[85] Encyclopaedia Iranica Foundation, "Welcome to Encyclopaedia Iranica," RSS, 2008, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/buyids, 13.

Sunni. Indeed, the Buyids knew that if they tried to convert those Sunni masses into Shiism, they would have alienated the former, who represented the majority. Nonetheless, the Sunni Abbasid caliph was deprived of all his secular prerogatives, his rule being largely symbolic. Although the Daylamite brothers had Arabic names, the upcoming generations of Buyid leaders had Persian names. As Daylamite Iranians, the Buyids attempted to resuscitate symbols, habits and practices of Persia's Achaemenid and Sasanian Empires.[86] Indeed, a large number of the Buyid rulers called themselves Shahanshah which signifies "king of kings" in english.[87] The Buyid kings also made it a point to celebrate Nowruz as well, which represents the Persian new year, according to their solar calendar.

At the zenith of their power, the Buyid brothers instituted a confederation in Iraq and in western Iran. This confederation consisted of three dominions: one in Fars with Shiraz as its capital; one in Media with Ray as its capital; and one in Iraq with Baghdad as its capital.[88] Yet, during the subsequent generations of leaders, these dominions were further divided into smaller territories because succession was hereditary, since rulers carved up their land among their sons. The Buyid dynasty reached its peak under Adud al Dawla who governed his empire from 949 up till 983.[89] Towards the end of his rule, the Buyid confederation encompassed all of the areas from the Byzantine border in Syria

[86] Ibid.

[87] Heribert Busse, "Iran under the BŪYIDS (Chapter 7) - the Cambridge History of Iran," Cambridge Core, 2008, http://www.cambridge.org/core/books/cambridge-history-of-iran/iran-under-the-buyids/25689DDCE23637D43EC90920188DD215, 275.

[88]Encyclopaedia Iranica Foundation, "Welcome to Encyclopaedia Iranica," RSS, 2008, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/buyids, 2.

[89] Heribert Busse, "Iran under the BŪYIDS (Chapter 7) - the Cambridge History of Iran," Cambridge Core, 2008, http://www.cambridge.org/core/books/cambridge-history-of-iran/iran-under-the-buyids/25689DDCE23637D43EC90920188DD215, 270.

in the west, to the borders of the Samanid empire in the east. This however did not last very long due to internal conflict over control among his sons.

4.2.3. The Decline and Fall of the Buyid Empire (983-1055)

It is assumed that with the death of Adud al Dawla in 983, the decline of the Buyid dynasty started.[90] In spite of the power, stability and considerable achievements the Buyid dynasty exhibited since its inauguration, it still had several weaknesses. Some of these weaknesses were common among other regimes, some were unique, while others were paramount to external factors and circumstances.[91] For the sake of clarity and scope, the author will only briefly go over the reasons for the downfall of the Buyid Empire. The first weak point can be identified as the Buyids' decentralization of power and the break-up of territory after one ruler's death.[92] The second weakness, which had been typical of the other Middle Eastern political regimes of the period, was the composition of the army. The army was made up mainly of Daylamites, but also of Turkish horsemen slaves among others, and wound up taking advantage of the situation to further their own objectives, as they were the backbone of the political regime. Despite the army being paid and rewarded for the acquisition of new land, it still revolted against its Buyid overlords, which proved to be disastrous in the longer term.[93] The third factor behind the downfall of the Buyids was the maritime trading crisis that had a substantial negative impact on the sustenance

[90] Ibid, p 289.

[91] Cl. Cahen, "Buwayhids or Būyids," Brill, April 24, 2012, https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/buwayhids-or-buyids-SIM_1569, 10.

[92] Ibid, p 11.

[93] Ibid.

of the Buyid dynasty. The Buyid Empire consisted of the crossroads of trade between the East and the West through the Indian Ocean, passing through the Persian Gulf. Towards the year 1000, this channel of trade was rerouted from the Persian Gulf to the Red Sea. This shift in direction occurred due to the constant unrest in Iraq, the presence of pirates in Bahrain, whom the Buyids were never able to subdue, and the separation of Syria from the Buyid Empire because of Fatimid and Byzantine seizure of land.[94]

After multiple mutinies and internal strife between the Buyid princes throughout the course of the eleventh century, the Buyid principalities were gradually captured by the Ghaznavids and the Seljuk Turks. In 1029, Majd al Dawla was trying to counter a revolt initiated by his Daylami troops in Ray,[95] and therefore asked Mahmud of Ghazna for assistance. The latter responded by removing Majd al Dawla from power and replacing him with a Ghaznavid governor, thus terminating the Buyid dynasty in Ray. In 1055, Tughril, the Seljuk Bey captured Baghdad and expelled the last Buyid prince.[96] Thus by 1055, the Buyid Empire had collapsed.

Now that the author has highlighted the surge in Persian identity which took place from 934 to 1055, materialized by the foundation of the Buyid Empire for slightly more than a century, he will now outline the Safavid empire's history, which was established in 1501 and dissolved in 1736, during which Persia became Shiite. The author will not be outlining the period of time stretching from the end of the Buyid empire in 1055 to the rise of the Safavid empire in 1501, because during this period of time Persia was governed by Turkic and Mongol rulers. Therefore, the Buyid empire was an interregnum stretching

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[94] Ibid.

[95] Encyclopaedia Iranica Foundation, "Welcome to Encyclopaedia Iranica," RSS, 2008, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/buyids, 9.

[96] Ibid.

from the end of the Sasanian Empire with the Arab Muslim conquest of Persia, to the end of the Timurid empire in the late fifteenth century and the beginning of the Safavid empire in the very early sixteenth century.

4.3. The rise of the Safavids

Historians and political scientists alike were perplexed with the ascent of the Safavid empire, from being a less-impactful Sufi order in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, to becoming the governing family of Persia in 1501 and onwards.[97] For the sake of clarity and scope, the author will solely focus on the formation of the Safavid empire from 1501 onwards, and how the Safavids laid the groundwork for the emergence of the Iranian nation-state we know today, in the twenty-first century. In other words, this section will narrate the reigns of Shah Ismail, who founded the Safavid dynasty, and his son Tahmasp I, who pursued his father's policies to strengthen the dynasty's control over the empire. This is followed by the reign of Abbas I, whose rule marked the apogee of the Safavid empire, and who was followed by a few of his decadent descendants, who represented the decline of the Safavid lineage before its abrogation in 1722.

4.3.1. The reign of Shah Ismail

In 1501, Shah Ismail invaded Tabriz following his victory over the Aq-Qoyunlu tribe leader Alwand at Sharur.[98] However, Shah Ismail needed to impose himself as the de-facto ruler of Persia over the course of thirteen years. In fact, until 1501, Shah Ismail

[97] Hervé Ghannad, Identité et Politique Extérieure de l'iran (Levallois-Perret, France: Studyrama, 2013), p 46.

[98] David Morgan, Medieval Persia 1040-1797 (London ; Philadelphia, USA: Taylor & Francis, 2016), p 110.

was only a successor to the Aq-Qoyunlu tribe in Azerbaijan, with the geographical configuration of his new empire still being undefined. Shah Ismail likely set out with the aim of building a state that would only encompass Anatolia, Azerbaijan, Iraq and portions of Persia. Nonetheless, Shah Ismail decided to march south whereby he defeated another Aq-Qoyunlu lord at Hamadan in 1503.[99] After having secured western Persia, shah Ismail invaded eastern Anatolia, but without provoking the Ottoman Empire in order to avoid any retaliation on their behalf. In 1508, Baghdad was captured by shah Ismail.[100] Finally, in 1510, shah Ismail annexed Khurasan, defeating the Uzbeks in the process.[101] Shah Ismail was set on expanding further eastwards to incorporate Transoxiana, but strategically stopped at the Oxus river, which ended up being the eastern frontier of his new empire. It is worth mentioning that the Buyids had failed at subjugating Khorasan.

Now that shah Ismail accomplished his mission in the East, he attempted to tackle the Ottoman threat looming in the West. It is important to note that a substantial number of the adherents to the Safavid cause were living in eastern and central Anatolia, which was in the Ottoman empire. This represented a dangerous strategic threat to the survival of the Ottoman Empire, because the Qizilbash tribes were not reliable in case of war with the Safavid empire.[102] Therefore, the Sultan governing from Constantinople tried to deport them to Greece, which led to a mass revolt by the tribes in 1511 in Ottoman Anatolia, largely sanctioned by the Safavids.[103] Consequently, Sultan Salim the Grim

[99] Ibid.

[100] Ibid, p 111.

[101] Ibid.

[102] Ibid, p 113.

[103] Ibid.

implemented drastic repressive measures and declared war on the Safavids. The military encounter took place in 1514 at Chaldiran, whereby the Ottomans were declared victorious.[104] An important implication in the aftermath of this battle was that the eastern Anatolian principalities, the native land of the Qara-Qoyunlu and the Aq-Qoyunlu, as well as the headquarters of the Qizilbash tribes, persisted as Ottoman territory. It is important to highlight that the border between the former Ottoman and Safavid empires is the same present-day border between Turkey and Iran, although during his rule, shah Ismail held Iraq and parts of the Caucasus, which Persia later on lost following its defeat against the Ottomans and the Russians. In addition, shah Ismail considered changing the location of his capital, Tabriz, which was at the outskirts of the new Persian-Ottoman frontier, to Qazwin, but to no avail. Despite the Turkic constituency's paramount importance to the formation of the Safavid empire, the relocation of the Safavid capital further eastwards entailed that the new incumbent nation-state was becoming more Persian in character, and less Turkic.[105]

In order to preserve control over his throne, shah Ismail depended on three crucial factors to institute the Safavid state, which lasted until 1722. The first key factor was the fidelity of the Qizilbash tribes to shah Ismail, because they provided the military capabilities necessary for the Safavids to prevail, and were therefore rewarded with grazing lands in northwestern Persia.[106] The second key element was the establishment of a local bureaucracy made up of urban Persians, almost solely tasked with running the

[104] William L. Cleveland and Martin P. Bunton, A History of the Modern Middle East (New York, NY, USA: Routledge, an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 52.

[105]David Morgan, Medieval Persia 1040-1797 (London ; Philadelphia, USA: Taylor & Francis, 2016), p 115.

[106] Ibid, p 116.

government machinery.[107] The third determining factor was the forcible conversion of all Persian and Turkic people within Persia to Twelver Shiism.[108] It is worth noting at this stage that until 1501, the Twelver Imami Shiites represented a scattered sect, often seen as a less prominent ideology with adherents in southern Mesopotamia, central Persia around Qom, northeastern Persia, Central Asia, Lebanon, and along the southern coastal shore of the Persian Gulf. This was changed dramatically after shah Ismail inaugurated this decree principally for political aims, in order to differentiate his empire from its Sunni neighbors, both Ottoman and Uzbek.

4.3.2. The reign of shah Tahmasp I

In 1524, shah Ismail passed away[109] with formidable achievements and was succeeded by his son Tahmasp I. From 1524 to 1533, Persia witnessed a decade of internal Qizilbash warfare.[110] It is only toward the end of these divisive conflicts that Tahmasp was able to rule over Persia effectively. However, in 1535, Suleiman the Magnificent declared war on the Safavid empire, whereby he was able to gain Baghdad and Mesopotamia, but simultaneously lost control over contemporary Azerbaijan.[111] The most essential innovation during the reign of Shah Tahmasp was the introduction of a third ethnic race into his kingdom in addition to the existing Turks and Persian ethnicities.

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[107] Ibid, p 117.

[108] Hervé Ghannad, Identité et Politique Extérieure de l'iran (Levallois-Perret, France: Studyrama, 2013), p 47.

[109] David Morgan, Medieval Persia 1040-1797 (London ; Philadelphia, USA: Taylor & Francis, 2016), p 121.

[110] Ibid.

[111] Ibid, p 123.

This ethnic race consisted of Georgians and Armenians who were slaves and prisoners of war,[112] and shah Tahmasp permitted them entry to the bureaucracy, the court and the army. Shah Tahmasp was effectively attempting to institute a potential trustworthy and faithful counterweight to the recalcitrant Qizilbash tribes, who were becoming a liability and posing dangers to the stability and continuity of the empire they had previously fought to build. The shah's grandson Abbas I was responsible for developing this counterbalance to the Turkic and Persian dual burden threatening the survival of the Safavid kingdom. After Shah Tahmasp's death in 1576, Persia experienced another round of internal struggle between the multiple Qizilbash factions.[113]

4.3.3. The reign of shah Abbas I

In 1588, Shah Abbas I ascended to power.[114] During the decade-long internal civil war in Persia, the Ottomans and the Uzbeks were able to occupy almost half of the Safavid Empire. It took Shah Abbas I almost the entirety of his reign, which lasted around forty-two years, to reconquer all of the Safavid empire that Persia had before the death of Tahmasp in 1576. Although this marked a tremendous achievement, it was largely facilitated by the internal reorganization Shah Abbas authorized. In fact, during his rule, Shah Abbas I oversaw a radical social transformation, which permitted the Safavid dynasty to stay in power for another century after his death, despite the corruption of his successors. Shah Abbas' first course of action was to overpower his lawless Qizilbash

[112] Ibid, p 125.

[113] Ibid, p 126.

[114] Hervé Ghannad, Identité et Politique Extérieure de l'iran (Levallois-Perret, France: Studyrama, 2013), p 47.

princes, and to assassinate those who revolted against him.[115] Shah Abbas I then proceeded to build an army that was answerable only to him.[116] As the author has previously shown, this tactical endeavor was already initiated earlier by Tahmasp during his reign. This new army was constituted of Caucasian military slaves. While the Qizilbash soldiers were paid for by the land provinces' revenues which were offered to their tribal lords in exchange for supplying a certain amount of fighters when required, the new military units were paid by the shah in person. In order for the shah to be able to pay his new troops directly, he had to centralize power, and appropriate land to the royal household, which was subsequently administered by him. This way, by appropriating for himself new land and taxing them, Abbas I was able to garner enough revenues to keep up his new army. In addition, this new administrative and fiscal policy paved the way for Abbas I to modify the balance of power between him and the Qizilbash princes to his favor. As a result, the new shah and his descendants had and would have enough leverage to prevent and defeat any internal defiance. Simultaneously, in 1598, Shah Abbas I moved his empire's capital from Qazvin to Isfahan.[117] Shah Abbas I passed away in 1629.[118] For many historians and political scientists alike, his death was observed as the start of the end of the Safavid dynasty, which began to decline and regress progressively, before disappearing in 1722.

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[115] David Morgan, Medieval Persia 1040-1797 (London ; Philadelphia, USA: Taylor & Francis, 2016), p 131.

[116] Ibid.

[117] Ibid, p 134.

[118] Hervé Ghannad, Identité et Politique Extérieure de l'iran (Levallois-Perret, France: Studyrama, 2013), p 47.

4.3.4. The reigns of Safi I, Abbas II and Suleiman

In 1629, Safi I succeeded Shah Abbas I.[119] That same year, and along the next decade, a conflict erupted between the Safavids and the Ottomans again. In 1638, Baghdad was recaptured by the Ottomans, and remained a portion of the Ottoman Empire until the end of World War One.[120] Indeed, in terms of geographical boundaries, modern Iraq had been within the confines of the Ottoman Empire. Safi I passed away in 1642, and was succeeded by his son Abbas II who remained in power until 1666,[121] whose reign didn't witness any changes in the state of affairs, and represented a continuation of the status quo. In 1666, Shah Abbas II died and was replaced by his son Suleiman who governed Persia until his death in 1694.[122] By extension, Suleiman's rule didn't experience any major shifts in the prevailing situation in Persia. The Safavid kingdom has persevered, however it marked the end of ordinary succession processes because Shah Sultan Hussein, Suleiman's successor, was the last Safavid autocrat.[123] Aside from experiencing the growing and increasing role of the ulama in politics, Shah Sultan Hussein faced many different challenges at the fringes of his empire in 1720: for example, in the Caucasus in Kurdistan, Khuzestan, and in the province of Oman.[124] In addition, a Ghilzai prince, Mahmud, embarked from Kandahar on a mission to depose his

[119] David Morgan, Medieval Persia 1040-1797 (London ; Philadelphia, USA: Taylor & Francis, 2016), p 142.

[120] William L. Cleveland and Martin P. Bunton, A History of the Modern Middle East (New York, NY, USA: Routledge, an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 55.

[121] David Morgan, Medieval Persia 1040-1797 (London ; Philadelphia, USA: Taylor & Francis, 2016), p 142.

[122] Ibid, p 147.

[123] Ibid, p 146.

[124] Ibid, p 147.

neighboring enemy in Isfahan, which he encountered in battle in March 1722.[125] It is worth noting that the Ghilzai people are Pashtun tribes residing in Afghanistan. Despite the Persian army's advantage in strength and numbers, it was nevertheless outmaneuvered by its enemy, due to a lack of unified command which proved to be catastrophic. Shah Sultan Hussein was killed, thereby putting to an end the Safavid dynastic empire.

Throughout this section of Chapter IV, the author has described the rise and decline of the Safavids whose leaders governed over Persia for a period of two hundred and twenty-one years. It is worth noting that it is under the Safavids that Persia became a Shiite country. In the next section, the author will discuss how this conversion occurred. Meanwhile, the author would like to emphasize that when observed in retrospect, there are several factors explaining the ineluctable collapse of the Safavid lineage. The first factor was the regression in the performances of the governing shahs due to lack of experience. The second reason can be attributed to the impact of harem women on the ruling elites. The third factor can be identified as the deteriorating quality of the armed forces' prowess.[126]

4.4. Shiism from its origins to its rise, and the role of the ulama

In this section, the author will be addressing the origins of Shiism, its successful propagation in Iran, its diffusion with the rise to power of the Safavids, its evolution with the rise of the Qajar dynasty, and the author will conclude by listing the offshoots of Shiism. The author finds that this section is extremely relevant for understanding Iran's

[125] Ibid.

[126] Hervé Ghannad, Identité et Politique Extérieure de l'iran (Levallois-Perret, France: Studyrama, 2013), p 49.

current Arab policies in the Middle East. Indeed, the Shiite clergymen contribute substantially more to their respective societies when compared with their Sunni counterparts. Shiism started as a less prominent sect of Islam with a small number of followers, to become the official religion of Iran towards 1501. Furthermore, it is clear that from the outset, the mullahs in Shiite Islam have played a very active role socially with their believers, which has allowed them to shape and formulate national policy making. As the next few chapters will demonstrate, the ulama have gradually transformed themselves from solely being the interpreters of God's will, to becoming rulers and enforcers of this will. In addition, it is essential to understand the mechanisms and the makings of Shiite politics, because the present ulama in Iran are primarily making use of Shiism to project their power across the Arab world for political objectives.

4.4.1. The origins of Shiism

With the death of prophet Mohammed, dissent arose between tribes and clans regarding who should become the successor.[127] A lot of Muslims supported Abu Bakr, while a minority supported Ali, the prophet's son-in-law and cousin. Ultimately, Ali became the fourth caliph to lead the Muslim community, but was subsequently murdered by one of Muawiya's partisans, a descendent of the Umayyad family, who was seeking to become the Muslim leader as well. Hassan bin Ali, the latter's elder son, accepted Muawiya as the new caliph. However, upon Hassan's death in 670, Hussein, his younger brother, rejected Muawiya's quest for hegemony and power, and attempted to assert himself as the leader of the Muslim community. However, his endeavors failed as he was

[127] Pierre-Jean Luizard, *Histoire Politique Du Clergé Chiite: XVIIIe-XXIE SIÈCLE* (Paris, France: Fayard, 2014), 13.

also assassinated in 680 at Karbala. Shiism's foundations are very similar to those of Sunnism. Yet, there are major differences in terms of doctrine and the individual conveying the religious message. For instance, Shiites believe in the Imamat who take charge and responsibility of the Shiite community.[128] For most of the Shiites, there are twelve Imams whereby the last Imam will reappear towards the end of time, which is the Imam Mehdi theory. Indeed, the Twelver Imami-Shiites believe that the awaited Imam Mahdi will reappear as the ultimate savior of humankind along with prophet Jesus, to bring peace and justice to the world. Muhammad ibn Hasan al Mahdi was born during the ninth century, and assumed the status of Imam at the age of five. In his early regime which lasted seventy-two years, Muhammed disappeared but still contacted his followers through four deputies. His early regime is known as the Minor Occultation. Following the death of his fourth deputies, the last link between him and his believers, the Major Occultation regime is said to have begun.[129] There is also a hierarchy among the Shiite clergy. For the sake of clarity and scope, the author will not detail the Shiite doctrine. However, it is important to highlight that Shiite clergymen have the ability to issue deductive reasoning called 'ijtihad', and the capacity to declare a fatwa, elements that are nonexistent in Sunnism.[130]

4.4.2. The successful propagation of Shiism in Iran

It is important to answer the question of how Shiism was propagated in the Iranian plateaus and how it became an official state-religion. This can first be attributed to the

[128] Ibid.

[129] Ibid, p 14.

[130] Ibid, p 17.

persecution of Shiites by Sunni populations, a trend that pushed local Arab Shiites to emigrate to Persia starting from the ninth century onwards. The second factor that led to the rise of Shiism in Iran is that many Persian populations adopted Shiism as a way of distinguishing themselves from their Arab rivals and conquerors and resisting their marginalization. The way this series of events unfolded paved the way for the Safavids to take advantage of the situation and convert the local Persians into the Twelver branch of Shiism. Originally, the Safavids were a Sunni Turkic tribe who emigrated from central Asia and governed all of modern Azerbaijan, and then took control of modern Iran. In order for the Safavids to differentiate themselves from the Uzbeks to their East, and the Ottomans to their West, they decided to convert the local Persians into Shiism for primarily geopolitical reasons. Thus, the Safavids brought clerics from Jabal Amel in Lebanon, and from Najaf in Iraq, to teach their peers the Shiite confession.[131] Nowadays, Shiism is the official religion of Iran.

4.4.3. Shiism and its diffusion with the rise of the Safavids

Under the Safavids, Shia religious learning flourished. The scholarly ulama and legal experts, the faqihs or mujtahids, became the functional replacements for the authority of the imams, and were the forerunners of today's ayatollahs.[132] Thus, since the Safavid era, the Shia religious establishment has been closely tied to Iran. These scholars and experts in religious law took over some of the functions the Imams had performed until the tenth century, but were also considered to be the guardians of the Shiite faith,

[131] William L. Cleveland and Martin P. Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East* (New York, NY, USA: Routledge, an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 52.

[132] Nasr Seyyed Vali Reza, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York, USA: Norton, 2016), 67.

and the successors to the twelfth Imam in managing the affairs of the community and expressing its will. Because the Shia ulama were considered the Twelfth Imam's successors, they enjoyed a privileged spiritual status their Sunni counterparts did not benefit from. In sharp contrast to Sunni ulama who are merely religious functionaries, true experts in religious doctrine though not different from the rest of believers, the Shia ulama are highly esteemed for their link to the Twelfth Imam.[133] However, Shias have disagreed within their community on the type of role their ulama were to play in the religious life of their community. On one hand, the Usuli, or fundamentalist Shias, expect the ulama to interpret religion, to come up with new rulings, to respond to new challenges, to push the limits of Shia law in new directions, to protect the Shia community's interests, and if the need arises to interfere in politics. On the other hand, in sharp contrast, there are the Akhbaris, or traditionalist Shias, who solely accept the Quran, the prophet Mohammed's sayings, and the recorded opinions of the Imams, as the sources of Shia law, thereby dismissing the notion that reasoning can lead to new laws or new legal opinions.[134] Thus, the two Shiite schools rivaled between the seventeenth and the nineteenth century. However, gradually, the Usuli Shia overcame their Akhbari competitors.[135] Otherwise, Shia ulama not only fulfill their spiritual and religious duties, but they also try to meet the social and political needs of their community. The Shia clergy are taught at seminaries, where the most prestigious centers of learning are located at Najaf and at Qom. In order to become a member of the Shiite clergy, students must achieve a regimen composed of lectures in law, jurisprudence, theology among many

[133] Ibid, p 68.

[134] Ibid.

[135] Ibid.

other elements, so as to be granted the authorization to become a mujtahid. At this stage, this mujtahid can practice ijtihad, can collect religious taxes, and can serve as the leader of a certain Shiite community. The rank of Shia clerics is determined by the stature of his former instructors at the seminaries, the quality of their publications, and their contribution to their community. The most senior clergymen are a source of emulation for the Shia in general. Every Shiite follows a marja'a. At the top of this hierarchical pyramid resides the most senior ulama who usually lives in Najaf or Qom.

Simultaneously, under the Safavids, a new Shia political doctrine was crafted. Following the Twelfth Imam's occultation, the Shia community was leaderless. Additionally, the ascendance of a Shia monarchy governing over Shia territory was a new development. It is important to examine the nature of the relationship between the Shiites and the Safavids. Indeed, the Safavid rulers weren't Sunni caliphs, however they weren't the Twelfth Imam either, which led the Shia clergymen to lay down and enact a new system of government. Because the Safavid monarchs elevated Shiism especially in Iran, the Shia clergy accepted the Safavid dynasty as legitimate, and saw it as the most suitable type of government until the Imam Mahdi or the Hidden Imam would reappear towards the end of time.[136] In order for the Persian shahs to preserve their monarchy, they had to protect and safeguard Shiism from any danger or external threat, which was the basis of the religious contract the Persian shahs had enacted with their Shia clergy counterparts in order to remain in power and receive religious backing.[137]

[136] William L. Cleveland and Martin P. Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East* (New York, NY, USA: Routledge, an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 32.

[137] Nasr Seyyed Vali Reza, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York, USA: Norton, 2016), 75.

4.4.4. Shiism and its evolution with the rise of the Qajar

With the ouster of the Safavids from power, and the rise of the Qajar shahs during the late eighteenth century who never made any claims to divine prerogatives, the Shia clergymen assumed that because the Qajar monarchs were solely temporal rulers, in sharp contrast to their Safavid predecessors, only they were authorized to provide interpretations in legal issues and religious practice.[138] Thus, the Shia ulama considered themselves to be the only legitimate interpreters of the Hidden Imam's will, thus permitting themselves the prerogative to exercise ijtihad. During the eighteenth century, there weren't more than a handful of mujtahids at any given time. Nevertheless, this trend dramatically changed during the nineteenth century, because the Shiite ulama were able to convince their followers of two crucial concepts: First, that all Shiite believers should attach themselves to a mujtahid; and second, a mujahid's rulings were superior to all other rulings. These two innovations in Shiite religious doctrine entailed that there was a need for an augmentation of mujtahids' numbers. Throughout the nineteenth century, and with the increase in number and in quality of mujtahids, a common understanding among the Shiite religious establishment stipulated that certain mujtahids possessed a better, and a more solid understanding of Shiite religious faith, and thus should be favored over their other contemporary peers. Thus, with the end of the Safavid rule over Persia, and the ascent to power of a dynasty which had no divine qualifications, the antecedently tight bond between Shia Islam and the state was terminated.[139] Since this rupture, towards the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Shia clerics

[138] William L. Cleveland and Martin P. Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East* (New York, NY, USA: Routledge, an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 110.

[139] Nasr Seyyed Vali Reza, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York, USA: Norton, 2016), 75.

worked independently of the government, and because they were supported by a population that afforded them a substantial amount of authority in religious and legal spheres, the Shiite religious establishment could act as an assertive force of assistance, or otherwise, as a remarkable force of dissent to the shah's policies.[140] Consequently, it was customarily held across the Shiite Muslim community that a certain mujtahid's rulings could be more authoritative than the declarations of the shahs, because the former emanated from the will of the Hidden Imam. As a result, if a certain mujtahid criticized and proclaimed a royal decree as incompatible with Islam, Shiite believers were obliged and constrained to follow the mujtahid's verdict.[141] This is mainly how the ulama gained a strong leverage in Iranian politics. It is therefore unsurprising that when the Pahlavi dynasty was brought about, in 1925, and when it tried to distance the religious sphere from daily life and politics, that the Iranian clergymen broke their contract with their lay monarchs, and tried to impose their theocratic doctrine of Wilayat al Faqih in 1979, with the rise to power of Ruhollah Khomeini.

4.4.5. Shiism and its offshoots

It is also worth mentioning that throughout history, Shiism became more culturally diverse and varied as it spread out beyond its roots in the Arab heartland of Islam. Following the fourth Imam's death, in the eighth century, a minority of Shiites ceased following his heir. They are known as the Zaydis, or Fiver Shiites, and most of them currently live in Yemen,[142] and are much closer to Sunnism in their practice of

[140] Ibid, p 122.

[141] Ibid, p 70.

[142] Ibid, p 75.

Islam. Another succession crisis followed the death of the sixth Imam, whose eldest son passed away before his father. This dispute led to another offshoot that broke away from the main body of Shiism, also known as Twelver Shiism. A group of Shias asserted that Ismail had inherited his father's religious authority while they were alive. Other groups of Shias disagreed and claimed that the succession lay with another younger son. Those groups of Shias who considered Ismail as their true leader are known nowadays as Ismaili or Seveners.[143]

Finally, the author has successfully explained the origins, rise, and development of Shiism as another confession of Islam, demonstrated how the religious establishment in Iran ascended to power, and the political role it plays in society as well as other spheres. The author's main objective in the next section will therefore be to narrate the recent political history of Iran, and the interventionist policies of the Iranian clergymen in shaping events at large. Specifically, the next section will address the Tobacco Protest of 1892, the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-11, the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1978) and its repudiation of the Iranian religious establishment which had a blowback effect on Mohammed Reza Shah, who was ultimately overthrown, followed by the Mossadiq experiment (1950-53).

4.5. The rise of the Qajar dynasty and the eighteenth century interregnum

Following the inevitable fall of the Safavid dynasty, Persia witnessed almost seven decades of instability, chaos and anarchy[144] before the Qajars' ascent to power in 1796, who were able to restore order. In this section, the author will begin by describing

[143] Ibid.

[144] David Morgan, *Medieval Persia 1040-1797* (London ; Philadelphia, USA: Taylor & Francis, 2016), 149.

the rule of Nader Shah, then he will briefly go over the rule of Karim Khan Zand due to the lack of crucial developments between 1751 and 1779. This will cover the eighteenth century interregnum, between the fall of the Safavids and the emergence of the Qajars. Afterwards, in the third part of section three of Chapter IV, the author will narrate all the relevant events that occurred between the reign of the first Qajar ruler, Agha Mohammed Khan Qajar, and the last Qajar ruler, Ahmed Qajar, passing through the rest of Qajar autocrats. Towards the end of this section, the author will summarize briefly the pertinence of Qajar rule to the history of Persia nowadays.

4.5.1. The rule of Nader Shah

After the surrender of Isfahan, Russians and Ottomans alike took advantage of the opportunity to invade parts of Persia.[145] Meanwhile, Mahmud Ghilzai was killed in 1725, along with his successor in 1730.[146] Simultaneously, Nadir Khan Afshar from the renowned Qizilbash tribes began preparing an army to regain authority and supremacy over the entirety of the Persian territory.[147] He first re-conquered western and northern Persia from the Ottomans, before shifting his focus to the Russians, both of whom he defeated.[148] Then, in 1738 and in 1739, Nader Shah began to move toward the Afghans and the Mughal Empire of India, both of whom were defeated, as he also sacked Delhi.[149]

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[145] Michael Axworthy, *A History of Iran: Empire of the Mind* (New York, USA: Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Books Group, 2016), 150.

[146]David Morgan, *Medieval Persia 1040-1797* (London ; Philadelphia, USA: Taylor & Francis, 2016), 150.

[147] Michael Axworthy, *A History of Iran: Empire of the Mind* (New York, USA: Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Books Group, 2016), 151.

[148] Ibid.

[149] Ibid.

Afterwards, Nader Shah shifted his attention to the Uzbeks of Transoxiana whom he also beat and routed.[150] Despite his groundbreaking military performance on the field as a competent general, Nader Shah didn't pay much attention to the overall welfare of his subjects, whom he taxed immensely and above their capacities. In addition, he exhibited despotic tendencies by centralizing all power under his jurisdiction. Consequently, he was executed by members of his fellow tribesmen in 1747.[151] In the aftermath of Nader Shah's murder, his army disintegrated altogether.

4.5.2. The very brief rule of Karim Khan Zand

Following the death of Nader Shah, Karim Khan, who was part of the Zand tribe, emerged to rule over Persia from 1751, until his death in 1779.[152] The Zands were ethnic Persians who inhabited the town of Malayir, next to the Zagros mountains. He made Shiraz his capital. When he passed away, Persia endured another civil war. As highlighted in this section's introduction, the author will avoid outlining the rule of Karim Khan Zand in detail because it does not include any major developments. Ultimately, after taking charge of Persia, Karim Khan Zand maintained the status-quo, and rehabilitated order.

[150] Ibid.

[151] Ibid, p 152.

[152] Ibid, p 166.

4.5.3. The ascent of the Qajars to power in Persia

4.5.3.1. The rule of the shah Agha Mohammed Khan Qajar

The civil war occurred between the multiple Zand princes and the Qajar princes. The Qajar princes were led by Agha Mohammed Khan, who marched on Isfahan in 1785, and took control of Tehran in 1786, which became the capital of his newly formed empire.[153] From this period of time until the present, Tehran remained the capital of Iran. Despite Agha Mohammed Khan's successes, assuming the role of sole monarch of Persia involved multiple challenges.[154] Khan fought and triumphed over the last vestiges of Zand influence and resistance in Shiraz. In 1796 by massacring the last Zand prince, he became the undisputed leader of Persia.[155] At that juncture in time, Agha Mohammed Khan instituted the Qajar monarchy which was to remain until 1925. Agha Mohammed Khan passed away in 1797.[156] He was succeeded by his nephew Fath Ali Shah in 1798.[157]

4.5.3.2. The rule of the shah Fath Ali Qajar

Fath Ali Shah ruled Persia from 1798 until 1834,[158] and was not interested in reforming or improving Persia's state of affairs. Instead, he focused on purchasing art, jewelry, and clothing. Poor leadership therefore led Persia to lose two wars against Tsarist

[153] Ibid, p 169.

[154] Ibid.

[155] Hervé Ghannad, Identité et Politique Extérieure de l'iran (Levallois-Perret, France: Studyrama, 2013), p 49.

[156] Michael Axworthy, A History of Iran: Empire of the Mind (New York, USA: Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Books Group, 2016), p 172.

[157] Ibid, p 176.

[158] Nikki R. Keddie and Farrokh Ghaffary, *Qajar Iran and the Rise of Reza Khan 1796-1925* (Costa Mesa, CA, USA: Mazda Publishers, 1999), 20.

Russia, in 1825 and in 1828, known as the treaties of Gulistan and Turkmanchai.[159] In retaliation, crown prince Abbas Mirza, the only true reformer among the ruling elite, tried to compensate for these Persian losses by trying to wrest Herat from Afghanistan, even though he ultimately failed. Present-day Herat town is located in western Afghanistan, and is the residing place of many Persian-speaking Shiites, which was previously a part of the Iranian territory.

4.5.3.3. The rule of the shah Mohammed Qajar

At the death of Fath Ali Shah in 1834, Mohammed Shah, his grandson acceded to power.[160] The latter ruled Persia for the next fourteen years. It is important to highlight that although many contenders sought the Persian crown, British and Russian diplomatic and armed forces always sustained the survival of the Qajar dynasty, with whom they had friendly and opportunistic ties. Therefore, from a certain perspective, the Qajar dynasty was indebted to the British and Russian governments for staying in power. Eventually in 1841, Great Britain received a commercial treaty from Persia, marking the start of the application of the concessions.[161] The remainder of Mohammed Shah's reign saw little changes or major events, and he passed away in 1848.[162]

[159] Hervé Ghannad, Identité et Politique Extérieure de l'iran (Levallois-Perret, France: Studyrama, 2013), p 49.

[160] Nikki R. Keddie and Farrokh Ghaffary, Qajar Iran and the Rise of Reza Khan 1796-1925 (Costa Mesa, CA, USA: Mazda Publishers, 1999), p 25.

[161] Ibid.

[162] Ibid.

4.5.3.4. The rule of the shah Nasir al-Din Qajar

In 1848, Nasir al Din Shah succeeded Mohammed Shah as the new Persian despot, with British and Russian backing. In 1851, Nasir al Din Shah with the help of his court minister, Amir Kabir, constructed the first westernized higher education school in Tehran, Dar al-Fonun, whereby military as well as technical-scientific studies were taught.[163] However, Dar al-Fonun persisted as the sole government-sponsored westernized educational center for many years, because the tyrannical shah Nasir al-Din feared the impact of enlightenment on his subjects and the prospects of a revolt. In 1862, the first telegraph line concession was given to the British government, which was erected soon afterwards.[164] This helped the central government to better communicate with its provinces and the external world. In 1872, Nasir al-Din Shah along with his recently appointed court minister, decided to grant a concession to Baron Julius de Reuter, a naturalized British citizen with German origins, who had just created the Reuters news agency.[165] This concession consisted of offering Reuters the right to construct a railway from the Caspian Sea to the southern shores of Persia, along with the exclusive prerogatives to build factories, agricultural irrigation systems, axis of transportation along the entirety of Persia, among other elements. However, because of domestic pressure and hostilities from all strata of Persian society in response to granting this concession to a foreigner, and because of a British fear of Russian backlash, this concession was ultimately halted.

[163] Hervé Ghannad, Identité et Politique Extérieure de l'iran (Levallois-Perret, France: Studyrama, 2013), p 50.

[164] Nikki R. Keddie and Farrokh Ghaffary, Qajar Iran and the Rise of Reza Khan 1796-1925 (Costa Mesa, CA, USA: Mazda Publishers, 1999) , p 34.

[165] Ibid, p 37.

In 1879, Shah Nasir al-Din founded the Persian Cossack Brigade directed by Russian officers.[166] This military academy graduated the best armed forces of Persia for a long period of time afterwards. However, it also proved to be a liability, because it authorized Russia to project influence in Persia and to further its own interests. Notwithstanding all of these factors, external economic concessions before 1889 were still rare because of Anglo-Russian competition and mutual checkmates. This trend changed dramatically in the upcoming few decades. The first example of this new development was illustrated by the grant to a British citizen, the monopoly over the production, sale and export of Iranian tobacco, in 1891[167], which wound up failing. In 1896, Shah Nasir al-Din was murdered, which abruptly ended his forty-eight-year rule.[168]

Essentially, Nasir al-Din failed to initiate necessary socio-economic and political reforms, largely due to corruption, and because he didn't want to risk losing British and Russian support for maintaining his power. However, he substantially feared the clergymen's harsh opposition to reforming the educational and judicial ministries, because that would harm the ulama's own interests. By extension, he did not substantially modernize the military forces, which proved to be a weakness in the long run for his remaining three Qajar successors. However, when compared with previous or upcoming Qajar monarchs, Nasir al-Din Shah was nonetheless capable of diffusing threats and revolts, and proved to be a firm ruler. Notably, he instituted a modern police force in

[166]Ibid, p 41.

[167] William L. Cleveland and Martin P. Bunton, A History of the Modern Middle East (New York, NY, USA: Routledge, an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 115.

[168] Nikki R. Keddie and Farrokh Ghaffary, Qajar Iran and the Rise of Reza Khan 1796-1925 (Costa Mesa, CA, USA: Mazda Publishers, 1999), p 50.

Persia with Austrian guidance in 1879,[169] introduced the Imperial Bank of Persia, and authorized the printing of the first Persian newspapers.

4.5.4. The inexorable decline and end of the Qajar dynasty in Persia

Mozaffar al-Din was announced the new shah of Persia in 1896,[170] and remained in office until his death in 1907. He proved to be an ineffective and corrupt shah because he was solely interested in traveling and investing in his harems. His tenure in power was catastrophic in terms of performance and achievement. He was succeeded by his tyrannical son Mohammed Ali, in 1907, who was pro-Russian.[171] Shah Mohammed Ali was deposed in 1909 by the constitutional revolutionaries in favor of his son, Ahmed Shah, who became the last Qajar autocrat before the establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty by Reza Khan in 1926.

To conclude this section of chapter four, during the period of Qajar rule, the Qajar monarchy was capable of reuniting Persian territory, after the collapse of the Safavid monarchy in 1722, which paved the way for a series of upheavals and revolts until the establishment of the Qajar lineage in Persia. Furthermore, during Qajar rule, despite Western encroachment, characterized by Russian and British capitulations, there was a certain amount of economic recovery and development. Centralization augmented, but nonetheless, stayed very restrained in the periphery. The same abides for modernization. Nevertheless, during Qajar rule, Persia was defeated in several battles against the

[169] Ibid, p 51.

[170] William L. Cleveland and Martin P. Bunton, A History of the Modern Middle East (New York, NY, USA: Routledge, an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 144.

[171] Nikki R. Keddie and Farrokh Ghaffary, Qajar Iran and the Rise of Reza Khan 1796-1925 (Costa Mesa, CA, USA: Mazda Publishers, 1999), p 58.

Russians in the northwest and in the northeast, against the British in the south and east, and against the Ottomans in the west. Notably, tribal activity and nomadism were still present under Qajar rule. Despite various political threats and several military defeats at the hands of the Western powers, the Qajar monarchs didn't initiate many reforms, unlike the Ottoman Empire and Egypt which during the same period of time inaugurated more ameliorative amendments to state institutions. During Qajar rule, however, literacy remained high, and the state maintained one modern army unit. Indeed, there were many impediments to reform implementation, such as the flagrant political and financial weaknesses of the central government despite centralization. Reform attempts mainly failed because of the threat they posed for the influence practiced by notables, tribal figures, ulama, and the bazaar merchants, at the expense of Persian society.

Now that the author has described in detail the evolution of Qajar rule, from 1796 till 1925, his next objective is to trace Iran's political evolution from the nineteenth century until Khomeini's 1979 revolution, which will be covered in the next section of chapter four. In a nutshell, Qajar rule proved to be ineffectual to Iran.

4.6. Iran's political evolution from the nineteenth century till the eve of the 1979 revolution

The author has so far outlined the origins, rise, and development of Shiism, and demonstrated how the ulama in Iran play a pivotal role religiously, socially, and politically. In this section of chapter four, the author's objective is to narrate the recent political history of Iran, and the contribution of the mullahs in shaping the following events: the Tobacco Protest of 1892, the Constitutional Revolution of Iran (1905-11), the reign of Reza Khan (1925-1941), the Mossadiq failed experiment (1950-53) and the reign of Mohammed Reza until the end of the White Revolution (1953-1978). This will

demonstrate how the religious establishment was gradually able to garner more political power at the expense of other power holders in Iranian society. This chapter will pave the way for the rise of Khomeini in 1979, and the subsequent transformation of the clergymen in Iran, from interpreters of God's will, to rulers and enforcers of God's will.[172]

4.6.1. Iran and the Tobacco Protest of 1892

In 1890, Nasir al Din Shah granted an English company the exclusive right of producing, selling, and exporting Iran's tobacco crop[173]. It is worth noting that tobacco crops at the time were a hugely consumed product in Iran. This newly granted concession to major G.F. Talbot stirred a widespread wave of discontent among the totality of Iranians against the concession, and Nasir al Din Shah specifically. The Shiite religious establishment objected to this sort of capitulation granted to a foreigner, and pushed the Iranians to protest in masses against the enactment of such a concession in order to preserve Islam's dignity. Furthermore, in 1891, a Shiraz mujtahid issued a fatwa claiming that the use of tobacco was unlawful, illegitimate, and essentially an insult to the Hidden Imam, urging his followers to boycott its use, which led the Qajar shah to halt the concession.[174] The unfolding events therefore obliged the shah to terminate the concession in 1892. This experience demonstrates the extent to which Iranians are receptive to their ulama in terms of applying their fatwas, even if it entails taking political action and contradicting the monarch's edicts.

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[172] William L. Cleveland and Martin P. Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East* (New York, NY, USA: Routledge, an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 110.

[173] Pierre-Jean Luizard, *Histoire Politique Du Clergé Chiite: XVIIIe-XXIE SIÈCLE* (Paris, France: Fayard, 2014), 84.

[174] Ibid.

4.6.2. Iran and the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-11

From 1905 to 1911, Iran experienced a series of political upheavals, known now as the period of constitutional revolution.[175] Similar to the Young Turks revolt of 1908 in the neighboring Ottoman Empire, the introduction of a constitutional government in Iran was employed to reduce royal tyranny. However, in Iran, the movement was directed by a loose coalition of the traditional bazaar merchants, the ulama, and a small group of radical reformers. It is worth indicating that all three of these political entities had a different understanding of what a constitutional regime ought to represent and how it should function. Nonetheless, they were all adamant on countering the shah's autocracy.

Due to financial shortages, Muzaffar al Din re-imposed the practice of concession granting to receive funding from abroad in 1901. He then awarded a British subject, William d'Arcy, the right to explore and extract oil across the country excluding a number of provinces in northern Iran, in exchange for the Iranian government to receive sixteen percent of the company's annual profits.[176] In 1908, oil was discovered in huge amounts, and by 1914, the British government became the major shareholder in the company. Muzaffar al Din also received a significant amount of money from Great Britain, France and Russia. However, the fund was not invested in developing the Iranian economy and military apparatus. Instead, Muzaffar al Din used the sum to repay previously held loans, and to finance expensive and luxurious trips to Europe. By reopening the Iranian market and capital to foreigners, Muzaffar al Din committed the same error as his father in 1891. The re-introduction of foreign economic activity, and this concession in particular affected bazaars the most, which included the urban class of merchants, the guild masters

[175] Ibid, p 92.

[176] William L. Cleveland and Martin P. Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East* (New York, NY, USA: Routledge, an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 144.

and the moneylenders, and which represented the stepping-stone of Iranian economic life. For example, by offering foreigners decreased custom rates in the import and export of products, Muzaffar al Din's capitulations made it almost impossible for local bazaars to compete successfully, thus putting at stake their economic survival.

In addition, an active but small circle of European oriented reformers from all segments of Iranian society were opposed to the shah's corruption and autocracy. They believed Iran was regressing under the Qajar, and that clear-cut reforms had to be implemented to restore Iran's position across the world. Even though their experiences of the West were varied, this small circle of European oriented reformers perceived a constitutional government to be the remedy for establishing a powerful, progressive Iran, and to put Iran back on track. Last but not least, by reopening Iran to external economic activity, and thus serving Christian economic and financial interests and aspirations, Muzaffar al Din shah was defying the ulama.[177] Although the ulama did not appear to be united in their struggle against the shah, some religious figures contributed to the anti-government protests of 1906. The religious establishment was closely tied to the bazaars, which indicates that some mujtahids were likely suffering from the influx of foreign money-oriented projects. Indeed, Muzaffar al Din's policies were putting into motion the circumstances that had triggered the protest of 1891. To further aggravate the tense relationship between the shah and its constituency, the ulama largely supported the constitutional revolution because they believed it would enhance their influence and leverage over Iranian society.

[177] Pierre-Jean Luizard, *Histoire Politique Du Clergé Chiite: XVIIIe-XXIE SIÈCLE* (Paris, France: Fayard, 2014), 90.

The first phase of the constitutional revolution took place in August 1906 with a massive wave of anti-government protests led by the bazaars, the reformers and the ulama. The shah acceded to the demonstrators' demands and passed a decree convening a constituent assembly.[178] The first assembly was formed in October 1906, and it drafted two constitutional provisions that totally reorganized the framework of political authority within Iran. The first provision, also titled the Fundamental Law, limited the shah's prerogatives by allocating the popularly elected legislature final authority over concessions, capitulations, and loans among other similar issues.[179] Muzaffar al Din signed the first constitutional provision a few days before passing away. The second constitutional provision, also called the Supplementary Fundamental Law, recognized Iranian citizens' rights, and allocated additional prerogatives to the legislative branch, such as the freedom to appoint or dismiss ministers.[180] Because the ulama participated in the huge demonstrations against the shah, they were also rewarded by inserting in both constitutional provisions clauses that stipulated that Twelver Shiism was the official state religion, and established a supreme committee of mujtahids to make ensure all newly enacted laws were in conformity with the sharia.[181]

When the newly erected Shah Muhammed Ali consented to the Supplementary Fundamental Laws in 1907, it appeared that Iran's political regime was heading towards a constitutional monarchy. However, later on in the course of the year, the Iranian

[178] Ibid, p 94.

[179] Ibid, p 95.

[180] Ibid.

[181] William L. Cleveland and Martin P. Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East* (New York, NY, USA: Routledge, an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 146.

economy declined, and inflation increased, which nurtured anger and frustration among the lower classes of Iranian society towards the Majlis government in response, and thus they supported a Qajar restoration. At this stage of the on-going constitutional revolution, the royalists took advantage of the opportunity and made use of ulama faithful to the shah to proclaim the constitutionalists as atheists, and to spark mass protests in favor of the restoration of the Qajar dynasty.[182]

Most importantly, external entities' actions contributed to the collapse of the febrile and temporary constitutional experiment. In fact, in August 1907, Great Britain and Russia approved an agreement which divided Iran into three spheres of influence: the southeast would be administered by Great Britain, the north would be dominated by Russia, and a neutral buffer zone would exist somewhere in the center.[183] Since the constitutional government wasn't capable of preserving the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Iran as per the royalists' argument, restoring the shah was the best available option. With popular dissatisfaction and unrest mounting, more members of the Shia clergymen started criticizing the constitutional movement. At this crucial point in time, Muhammed Ali mounted a counter-revolution in June 1908.[184] He ordered the Cossack brigade to destroy the Majlis, to arrest, and kill the constitutionalists. A civil war erupted subsequently in Iran, for the next eleven months. The shah was powerful enough to control Tehran, but other localities in Iran, which were more pro-constitutional, refused

[182] Pierre-Jean Luizard, *Histoire Politique Du Clergé Chiite: XVIIIe-XXIE SIÈCLE* (Paris, France: Fayard, 2014), 98.

[183] William L. Cleveland and Martin P. Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East* (New York, NY, USA: Routledge, an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 147.

[184] Pierre-Jean Luizard, *Histoire Politique Du Clergé Chiite: XVIIIe-XXIE SIÈCLE* (Paris, France: Fayard, 2014), 100.

to submit their allegiance. Nonetheless, during the summer of 1909, rebels from Azerbaijan moved to Tehran from the north, while tribesmen from the south joined them in Tehran as well. The two armed forces entered Tehran victoriously, restored the constitution, and deposed Muhammed Ali Shah in favor of his son, Ahmed. The second Majlis reunited in August 1909.[185]

Throughout the next two years, the Majlis witnessed continuous disputes between the reformers on one side, and an alliance between the bazaars and the ulama on the other side, over several issues which would resurface following Khomeini's 1979 revolution. The verbal conflicts which erupted in the Majlis materialized into armed confrontations inside Tehran between supporters of the different political groups. This phenomenon paralyzed the government, while chaos and anarchy spread across the rural areas of Iran. Since oil was discovered in commercial quantities in 1908, the British military forces invaded southern Iran in 1911, and Russia occupied the north of Iran, while threatening to march to Tehran as well should the constitutional assembly fail to meet its ultimatums.[186] Subsequently, and in order to prevent another fallout, the prime minister and the cabinet dissolved the assembly. The Russian requests were fulfilled. At this period of time, the Iranian constitutional experiment was discontinued.

At the start of the First World War, Iran was ruled by conservative ministers who were either British or Russian vassals. If we examine the achievements of the constitutional period in Iran, we find that a constitution was inaugurated for a certain limited amount of time, and the Qajar dynasty was distanced from power, but at the cost of having Iran partitioned between two imperial powers again. Therefore, this experiment

[185] Ibid, p 103.

[186] Ibid, p 104.

proved to be a failure, mainly because the religious establishment, the liberal reformers, and the merchant class failed to agree and sustain their coalition in the long term.

4.6.3. Iran during the interwar period under the reign of Reza Khan Pahlavi

Following the end of World War One, the Qajar dynasty was cast out and replaced by the Pahlavi dynasty, under the leadership of Reza Shah, a previous Cossack officer. Despite Reza Khan Pahlavi attempting to secularize Iranian public life, to introduce new symbols of Iranian national identity, as well as separate state and religious institutions, he pursued the despotic traditions of his predecessors, and strove to establish a hereditary monarchy, which was always short-lived.[187] Indeed, Reza Pahlavi tried to emulate his Turkish counterpart, namely Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, but he failed in many respects by comparison.

Towards the end of the First World War, Ahmad Shah was still governing Iran. However, his political authority was nominal, because the true power holders were the British in the south, and the Russians in the north. Yet, with the proclamation of the Russian Bolshevik revolution in 1917, the Russian forces moved away temporarily. Meanwhile, from 1918 until 1921, the British who were obstinate to safeguard their oil installations and interests, as well as anxious to contain the new emerging threat of communism, augmented their meddling in Iranian political affairs. In 1921, Reza Khan entered Tehran with a Cossack brigade, and slowly imposed himself throughout the next five years as the de facto ruler of Iran, until he deposed Ahmad Shah in 1925, and crowned himself king of kings, in 1926.[188]

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[187] William L. Cleveland and Martin P. Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East* (New York, NY, USA: Routledge, an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 186.

[188] Ibid.

Reza Khan Pahlavi put in place a conscription law that obliged every Iranian man to serve two years in the military. In the civilian sphere, Reza Khan expanded the state bureaucracy and created a cadre of civil servants. Because he was able to acquire huge pieces of land, he built hotels, casinos, and more. Reza Khan also attempted to Westernize Iran and to centralize state authority, especially regarding tribal areas. Following the Turkish model, Reza Khan secularized the legal and the judicial spheres. In 1928, the Iranian parliament put in place a new civil code inspired by the one in France. In addition, the ulama were almost entirely excluded from the recently established judicial system. Reza Shah also abolished the financial independence of the religious establishment. For example, in 1939, the state seized from the religious establishment all waqf lands. Ultimately, even though the clergymen's influence on Iranian society was not dismantled, Reza Khan was able to erode it substantially. Another important element in Reza Khan's reforms is his imposed program of secularization and Westernization in Iran. For instance, in 1928, he issued a law obliging men to dress in a European way. Women were authorized to participate in national life, and Reza Khan ordered the interdiction of wearing the veil starting 1936. The educational system was exponentially developed and improved. Following the footsteps of Turkey, Reza Khan focused on the pre-Islamic civilization of Iran, and changed the country's name from Persia to Iran in 1935. He also enhanced the country's infrastructure, especially the internal transportation system. Reza Khan industrialized Iran as well. However, agricultural development was neglected, and landowners were encouraged to purchase more land instead at the expense of the peasants who were exploited. Overall, Reza Khan was successful in liberating Iran from the scourges of Western capitulations. Reza Khan attempted to take control of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) which was extracting oil from Khuzestan in Iran, situated

on the shores of the Persian Gulf, but to no avail. In fact, he tried to revise the d'Arcy concession of 1901, but also failed. Thus, Iran at this stage of its history was still incapable of utilizing its oil resources and it wasn't able to proclaim its jurisdiction over these lands either, because they were administered and occupied by an external power. After World War Two, Iran and Great-Britain were embroiled over this issue.

At the outbreak of World War Two, because Iran declared its neutrality and had some affinities to Nazi Germany, Great-Britain and the USSR invaded Iran. Reza Khan was obliged to abdicate in favor of his son Mohammed Reza. Thus Iran was once again occupied and partitioned by foreign countries. However, when the USA became party to the war in 1941, it also sent troops to Iran in order to help the Soviet Union in the war effort against the Axis powers. Furthermore, American personnel started taking charge of administering Iran in certain areas. Thus, this series of events laid the ground for the US to begin interfering in Iranian domestic political affairs later on, after the end of World War Two.

4.6.4. Iran during the early Cold War from 1945 up till 1950

Following the end of the Second World War, and with the onset of the Cold War, Soviet ambitions to spread communism across the world grew, especially in the Middle East, given its wealthy resources in minerals, oil, and gas. In response, the U.S. enacted a strategic doctrine of containment to prevent the newly independent states of the Middle East, Iran included, from falling under the clutch of Soviet influence. US policymakers especially feared the Soviet Union taking control of Turkey, Greece, or Iran, as the other countries of the Near East would follow suit as per the domino theory. Therefore, the Americans were determined to prevent this from occurring. One prime example is when

the Soviet Union remained in the Iranian province of Azerbaijan after the termination of hostilities, which was a violation of the 1941 treaty. With Moscow's tacit assent, the provincial government of Azerbaijan declared its autonomy in 1945.[189] Shortly after, Kurdish separatists declared their autonomy, and created the independent Kurdish Republic of Mahabad in southwestern Azerbaijan.[190] The Iranian government was obliged to request assistance from the recently inaugurated United Nations Security Council in evicting the Soviet army from Iran. Only following the Soviet departure were the Iranian troops capable of defeating the dissenters and separatists. The US offered examples of similar tactical help with other countries in the broader Middle East as well. In fact, the US had replaced Great Britain's role as the main Western imperialist power in the region. While most of the nation-states were grateful for American economic aid and for its security umbrella, some nationalists were dismayed about American interference in their internal political affairs, which was the case in Iran. This will be expanded on in the next paragraphs.

Following Reza Khan's abdication, and for the next twelve years, the monarchy was not very safe, and it had to coexist with other institutions and power holders to govern Iran. For example, the tribal leaders, the ulama, and the traditional landowning elite aspired to regain the status they had enjoyed before 1925, whereas, in sharp contrast, the military was steadfast in sustaining the benefits they had possessed since 1925. Simultaneously, new actors in the Iranian political front were appearing, and were demanding reforms in the system. This included the Tudeh party which was pro-Soviet, although it did not refer to itself as a Communist party in order to remain allied with the

[189] Ibid, p 289.

[190] Ibid.

clergymen. It was the most organized and well-structured political party, thus it was widely held by analysts that the party might be capable of subduing the Iranian government in the foreseeable decades. In addition, from 1941 until 1953, Great Britain, the US and the USSR interfered in Iranian domestic politics, and each of these countries supported its favored faction, so as to be able to further its own interests in Iran. For example, the Soviet Union helped the Tudeh party, the U.S. had special ties with the Iranian officer corps, and Great Britain had cultivated close ties with the monarchy, the tribes, and the landowners in order to preserve the ongoing status quo. In the late 1940s, and the beginning of the 1950s, it was briefly presumed that a constitutional monarchy would be instituted, because Mohammed Reza was too weak to impose a dictatorship.

4.6.5. Iran and the Mossadiq experiment

At this point in time, Mohammed Mossadiq and his National Front made their political appearance. During the 1940s, Mossadiq was publicly criticizing Iran's lack of independence and sovereignty, and pushed for the establishment of a democracy in Iran in lieu of the dictatorial regime. In 1949, Mossadiq was able to garner a wide range of political parties, political entities, and interest groups, under his leadership to form the National Front.[191] The common element that bound this polity together was their radical sensitivity to external influence, and the return of autocracy in Iran. What brought Mossadiq to the fore was his opposition to the British-owned Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC), which controlled the Iranian oil industry, and which was acting as a state within a state. Mossadiq was willing to abrogate the concession and nationalize it. At the time,

[191] Pierre-Jean Luizard, *Histoire Politique Du Clergé Chiite: XVIIIe-XXIE SIÈCLE* (Paris, France: Fayard, 2014), 177.

one mujtahid inside the National Front decreed Iranian Muslims and nationalists to join the nationalization struggle against the AIOC.[192] This galvanized popular sentiment in Iran, and emboldened Mossadiq until he was elected Prime Minister by the Majles, which in the same vein nationalized the oil industry. In reaction, the AIOC called for a boycott of Iranian oil, and the British government imposed economic sanctions on Iran. Additionally, in 1952, when the U.S. effectively joined the boycott, Iran was denied the possibility of selling its oil on the market, which proved to be catastrophic for oil revenue. However, Mossadiq did not surrender, in spite of the difficulties, and even tried to restore the parliamentary institutions of the 1906 constitution. This ultimately provoked the U.S. since it became the shah's most recent patron. Other reforms included wresting control of the armed forces from the shah and placing them under the auspices of the parliament, as per constitutional systems. In addition, he established land reforms, seizing land from the aristocracy and redistributing it to the peasants and the poor. However, the government suffered from a lack of funds. This notwithstanding, and as unemployment and inflation increased, it paved the way for leftist organizations and the Tudeh party, particularly, to gain in popularity, which aroused American suspicions and worries. Because Mossadiq was also conducting secular reforms, this discontented the religious establishment. Over the next few months, the National Front coalition under his leadership began to crumble.

At this juncture of the turmoil, a group of officer corps orchestrated a coup d'état in order to isolate Mossadiq, and to re-establish the monarchy.[193] Their objectives

[192] Ibid, p 178.

[193] William L. Cleveland and Martin P. Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East* (New York, NY, USA: Routledge, an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 292.

matched those of the CIA, and those of the MI6 who were determined to forcefully avoid Iran from switching allegiance to the Soviet camp. On August 16, 1953, the first coup d'état codenamed Operation Ajax was put into motion.[194] However, three days later, the military officers acted again, imprisoning Mossadiq and putting him under permanent house arrest. This was the end of the brief Mossadiq experiment. Indeed, Mohammed Reza re-proclaimed himself shah of Iran, and until the 1979 revolution, American meddling in Iranian's internal affairs didn't cease.[195] In fact, when the Shah returned to Iran, he attempted to consolidate his grip on power by dismantling the Tudeh party and the National Front, founding the SAVAK, and allying himself with the U.S. to whom he owed his power. Consequently, the AIOC was relabeled British Petroleum, whereby Iran was offered a fifty/fifty share of the profits.[196]

4.6.6. Iran during the reign of Mohammed Reza until the revolution of 1979

In 1963, an ayatollah named Ruhollah Khomeini began denouncing the Shah's regime and the US for corruption, for disrespecting human rights, for compromising Iran's sovereignty, for ignoring Iran's Islamic beliefs, as well as, for ceding economic concessions to the US.[197] In the same year, Khomeini was arrested and exiled to Turkey the following year. In 1965, he was deported to Najaf, where he would stay until 1978. The 1963 massive uprisings against the shah demonstrated how much leverage the

[194] Ibid.

[195] Ibid.

[196] Ibid, p 294.

[197] Pierre-Jean Luizard, *Histoire Politique Du Clergé Chiite: XVIIIe-XXIE SIÈCLE* (Paris, France: Fayard, 2014), 182.

clergymen possessed on the Iranian people by synchronizing Islamic tenets and doctrines with modern problems. In addition, these demonstrations reveal the resentment the Iranian population felt towards their shah, because he was privileging American interests at the expense of Iran's own national interests.

In 1963, the shah initiated the White Revolution, which consisted of implementing reforms without shedding blood to modernize Iran, although inspired by Western models.[198] However, in trying to improve Iranians' economic and social conditions, Mohammed Reza unknowingly would have to liberalize his authoritarian political system, which he was unwilling to undergo. The White Revolution, which implied reforms enacted from above, contained twelve points. One of those points addressed land reform which was problematic from the outset, as it had underlying political and social objectives. In terms of the political sphere, the shah succeeded in establishing state jurisdiction in rural areas and subduing the power of the landed elite. However, even though by 1971 every farmer in Iran possessed a portion of land, it was unclear whether these farmers were accumulating any wealth from their recent ownership of land. Indeed, it turned out that three-quarters of those farmers weren't able to sustain themselves, which is why they had to migrate to the urban centers. To make matters worse, the shah bought advanced mechanized farming equipment for Iranian farmers, which decreased their need for labor. This had an adverse impact as it forced laborers to migrate to the metropoles as well. Another crucial point contained in the White Revolution was industrializing Iran. This entailed a rise in the number of workers and laborers. The discrepancy is that because there weren't any labor unions, the workers' wages remained stagnant, while the price of basic commodities augmented, which was counterproductive in the next decade. Other

[198] Ibid, p 181.

components of the White Revolution were intended to ameliorate education and health care. The increase in the amount of hospitals and doctors enabled a population boom, which overcrowded the capital and the main urban cities across Iran. In addition, opening up Iran's economy to foreign investors downgraded the power and influence of the traditional bazaar economy. While the shah may have introduced measures aimed at improving the livelihoods of Iranians, the oil revenue returns were only beneficial to the privileged minority. Additionally, the shah often hosted costly parties and ceremonies, which illuminates the wealth gap between general Iranian society and the ruling elite. An important aspect to highlight is the shah's focus on the achievements of the pre-Islamic Iranian empires, as he considered himself to be the heir of these historical dynasties and shunned Iran's Islamic past and heritage, which was frowned upon by devout Iranian believers.[199] Taking these factors and historical events into account, the White Revolution proved to be a dramatic failure, which Mohammed Reza didn't grasp. He was intent on reaping the benefits of his aspirations from 1963 until 1978, in the 1979 Islamic revolution.[200] Indeed, the Pahlavi shah failed to preserve the interests of his state and its people, which cost him political legitimacy in the eyes of his constituency.

During the 1970s, political repression by the secret police, the SAVAK, was very prevalent, which prevented Iranians from organizing and formulating opposition against the regime. Consequently, citizens channeled their resentment through violence, which was the case with the Marxist Fedayeen-e Khalq and the Islamic Leftist Mujahedin-e Khalq who planned terror operations against state representatives and American citizens

[199] William L. Cleveland and Martin P. Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East* (New York, NY, USA: Routledge, an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 297.

[200] Pierre-Jean Luizard, *Histoire Politique Du Clergé Chiite: XVIIIe-XXIE SIÈCLE* (Paris, France: Fayard, 2014), 181.

in Iran. This showcases the immense grievances harbored by the clergymen towards the shah and his policies. In fact, the shah appropriated the land of the religious establishment, depriving them from earning the revenues from waqf lands, which were employed to upkeep and preserve mosques and seminaries. The shah also attempted to improve primary education, which was exclusively under the control of the clergymen, especially in the rural areas, which proved to be problematic. Shah rule also saw the enfranchisement of women as stipulated in the White Revolution goals, which was controversial from a religious standpoint.[201]

In section four of chapter IV, the author has successfully outlined the political history of Iran from 1892 with the Tobacco Protest, until the end of Mohammed Reza Pahlavi's dictatorial rule in 1978. In the next section, the author will focus on how events unfolded from the mid-1970s, in the years preceding the revolution, until 1982, when militant clergymen, under the leadership of Ruhollah Khomeini, destroyed all factions of opposition to the power of the religious establishment, and instituted a theocracy that controls Iran today.

4.7. The Driving Force behind the 1979 Iranian Revolution

In this section, the author will describe how events unfolded from the mid-1970s, in the years preceding the revolution, until 1982, when militant clergymen, under the leadership of Ruhollah Khomeini, destroyed all factions of opposition to the power of the religious establishment, and instituted a theocracy. Throughout the section, the author will also highlight the events which unfolded during the Iranian revolution of 1979,

[201] William L. Cleveland and Martin P. Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East* (New York, NY, USA: Routledge, an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 295.

terminating with the deposition and the ouster of the shah, and the triumphant return of Khomeini to Tehran.

4.7.1. The shah's political liberalization following the White Revolution and its negative repercussions on Iranian society overall

Throughout the mid-1970s, the shah attempted to further restrict political life, by repressing the entities that still possessed a certain margin of autonomy, such as the clergymen and the bazaar merchants. These measures produced the opposite of the intended effect because it pushed the ulama and the bazaar merchants to ally against Mohammed Reza.[202] Additionally, after the surge in prices of hydrocarbons in 1973 following the Ramadan War, inflation in Iran increased substantially which increased the cost of living, especially for the middle and lower classes. This new development threatened their survivability, economically and financially.

In 1976, Jimmy Carter was elected president of the US. The following year, the Carter administration obliged the shah to liberalize his policies.[203] This pressure by the American administration led the shah to acquiesce in order to avoid risking his relationship with Washington, which proved costly for the shah. The shah released hundreds of political prisoners and reformed the judicial branch of his government. This minor liberalization strengthened his political opponents, namely the urban professionals and university students, but also the religious establishment and the bazaar merchants. They began protesting against the regime and demanding an end to human rights violations, as well as measures to protect freedom of speech and freedom of assembly.

[202] Ibid.

[203] Pierre Cyril Pahlavi and Christian Joachim Pahlavi, *Le Marécage Des Ayatollahs: Une Histoire de La Révolution Iranienne* (Paris, France: Perrin, 2017), 94.

The two most important political movements leading the demonstrations were the Freedom Movement of Iran, and the militant wing of the clergymen.

The Freedom Movement was created in 1961 by Mehdi Bazargan. He represented the liberal opposition, and was a proponent of a secular political system which didn't compromise the Islamic identity of Iran. However, he didn't advocate for a political system emulating the West. At the first stage of the revolution, Bazargan called for establishing a constitutional monarchy led by the shah. However, he was overshadowed soon after. It is worth noting that the main ideologue in Bazargan's Freedom Movement was Ali Shariati. The intellectual figure proposed a political doctrine that combined Marxism, Shiism, revolutionist, and Iranian patriotism. Although his political convictions had a religious component, he was against both the apolitical ulama, and the traditional religious establishment. Shariati passed away in 1977.

There were three main currents among the Iranian clergymen. The first current, known as the quietest ulama in Shiite Islam, believed they did not have the jurisdiction to participate in politics, and were not interested in incorporating their beliefs into politics. The second current was constituted of moderate reformers who shared Bazargan and the Freedom Movement's perspective. However, the third current represented the militant section of the Iranian ulama who were led and guided by Khomeini. They strongly favored the abrogation of the monarchy and the establishment of a theocracy.[204]

During his exile in Iraq, Khomeini continued to criticize the shah, and recorded his lectures on tapes and secretly sent them to Iran. Khomeini was highly credited for his brave stance against the despotic, corrupted and criminal regime of the shah. While

[204] William L. Cleveland and Martin P. Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East* (New York, NY, USA: Routledge, an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 430.

Khomeini was residing in neighboring Najaf, he was still able to teach his followers, and remained in contact with his disciples in Iran. This allowed him to spread his sermons widely across Iran, while avoiding being exiled completely. In addition, his former pupils were able to ascend in the hierarchy of the Iranian religious establishment. Therefore, Khomeini was very well known and well- connected in these religious circles.[205]

4.7.2. The Successful Iranian revolution of 1979 and its evolution until the demise of the shah

Throughout 1978, the revolution erupted and was transformed from minimal action such as sit-ins and demonstrations against the shah to a massive, populist Islamic uprising led by Khomeini, with the aim of overturning the shah's dynasty. It began when a pro-regime satirical newspaper ridiculed Khomeini.[206] This provocation pushed students and other members of the opposition to protest widely in Qom. In response, armed forces intervened and killed several scores of demonstrators during the ongoing turmoil. To commemorate the death of these students, and at the orders of the ayatollah in Qom, these students and other members of the opposition met and protested forty days later, but across all of Iran this time. The government's response in this instance was more violent and repressive, as it ordered the military to use tanks in order to diffuse the situation. To commemorate the death of the new victims, a third round of uprisings was organized around Iran, and this cycle continued. By ingeniously employing Islamic customary rituals upon the death of an individual, the opposition under the leadership of the ulama, was successfully able to keep up the processions and the uprisings on-going,

[205] Ibid, p 431.

[206] Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic* (London, UK: Penguin Books, 2019), 133.

thereby defying the government, and further inciting opposition for the massacres committed.[207]

During the summer of 1978, Iran experienced a recession. This new development provoked the urban working classes who were most affected by the White Revolution, and who subsequently joined the uprisings along with students, merchants, and the religious establishment.[208] Martial law was proclaimed, however protestors continued to challenge the shah's law. In response, the military was mobilized to re-impose order through the use of violence, which led to a devastating massacre. In light of the shah's increasingly aggressive response to the protests, the masses overwhelmingly supported Khomeini and voiced their hopes of seeing the regime fall. Even the Freedom Movement was faced with the inevitability of siding with the grand ayatollah, thereby foregoing their programs of transforming Iran into a constitutional monarchy. Following this, strikes were organized in critical industries such as the oilfields and the oil refineries, which further impacted Iran's economy

By 1978 fall, the shah was hesitant, indecisive, and terminally ill with lymphatic cancer. His uncertainty about how to handle the revolutionaries further aggravated the crisis. In some instances, he conceded to his enemies, however he still resorted to the use of force in order to quell the ongoing revolution. The situation reached peak violence during the month of Muharram in December 1978, which is a holy month in the Shia calendar, as it marks the memory of Imam Hussein's assassination. The protesters were able to take advantage of the opportunity to conduct their anti-regime demonstrations within a religious configuration. In fact, many were prepared to sacrifice themselves

[207] Ibid, p 104.

[208] William L. Cleveland and Martin P. Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East* (New York, NY, USA: Routledge, an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 429.

against the tyrannical shah, mirroring the religious background of Ali and Hussein's actions against Muawiya.[209] Simultaneously, it is during this period of time that the military institution began to erode. Soldiers began refusing to kill civilians and even deserted their units. The armed forces represented the spine of the regime, without whom the shah was powerless, thus his abdication was envisaged to be closer.

This led Mohammed Reza Pahlavi to leave his throne on January 16, 1979, never returning to Iran before his passing a year later in Egypt. On February 1, 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran after having spent over a year in France, in exile.[210] He was intent on building an Islamic republic in due time. Although the shah was successfully deposed, political organizations from the extreme right to the extreme left were fighting to impose their preferred system for Iran.

4.7.3. The return of Khomeini and the instauration of a theocracy in Iran few years afterwards

In the first few months of 1979, Khomeini appointed Bazargan, the Freedom Movement leader and founder, as prime minister. Since the prevailing situation, after the demise of the shah, was chaotic and precarious in Iran, Bazargan's mission was to re-establish order and stability in Iranian society. Bazargan and his colleagues believed for a while that being appointed to sensitive posts in the revolutionary institutions meant they would be able to subdue the extremists somehow. They were, however, defeated in their aims. Khomeini instated a council of the Islamic Republic, a parallel revolutionary

[209] Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic* (London, UK: Penguin Books, 2019), 120.

[210] James Buchan, *Days of God: The Revolution in Iran and Its Consequences* (New York, USA: Simon & Schuster, 2013), 275.

organization, that was made up of clergymen solely, and possessed within their prerogatives the executive, legislative, and judiciary branches of government. This council of the Islamic Republic had the power to overrule Bazargan's policies, which is why he ultimately resigned in November 1979.[211]

In May 1979, Khomeini formed the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, known nowadays as the IRGC, which consists of a military force different from the regular army, called the Artesh. It is worth noting that starting in February 1979, the Iranian people put in place revolutionary tribunals to trial officials belonging to the shah's regime who were accused of murder, rape, and torture. These officials consisted mainly of SAVAK agents and spies, government ministers, and army officers.

Despite the fact that the shah's fall paved the way for a multitude of political parties that spread out across the whole political spectrum, the principal rivals for power were the militant ulama, and the Freedom Movement, which consisted of members of the bazaar, technocrats, liberals, Westernized reformers, middle class professionals, and all segments of society who rejected the militant clerics' hijack of the revolution. Indeed, during the 1979 summer, Khomeini and his ayatollah associates converged to create their own political party, which they entitled the Islamic Republican Party or IRP, to face their opponents more assertively.[212]

For the sake of clarity and scope, and because it is beyond the intent of this work, the author will not go through all of the procedures that were implemented to form the Iranian theocracy in its current state. The author will instead list the most important dates

[211] William L. Cleveland and Martin P. Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East* (New York, NY, USA: Routledge, an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 431.

[212] Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic* (London, UK: Penguin Books, 2019), 142.

and advancements. In March 1979, a nation-wide referendum was held which consented to abolish the monarchy, replacing it with an Islamic Republic. In June 1979, a constitution was drafted which was founded on Islamic tenets, but still didn't grant enough powers to the militant clerics for it to qualify as a theocracy. Afterwards, a popularly elected Assembly of Experts reunited to discuss and deliberate on the constitution, which represented the critical stage of the process. This Assembly of Experts was constituted almost solely of ulama, guided by Khomeini. During the negotiations, the constitution was amended in a way to give the religious establishment the upper hand within state matters. Although the constitution conferred the right to the Iranians to directly elect the president, assembly or Majlis, and the municipal councils, it still placed most of the state powers within the prerogatives of the ulama, who were not elected, and possessed an influence over all three branches of the government. Furthermore, a controversial clause was inserted in the constitution, called the principle of vilayet al faqih, known today as the governance of the Islamic jurist, on behalf of the Hidden Imam.[213] Khomeini's role was designed to fulfill this position, as the leader of the Muslims in the absence of the Hidden Twelfth Imam, which granted him a tremendous amount of power. Finally, the revised constitution was endorsed by a national referendum organized near the end of 1979. This was a clear victory for Khomeini because the Iranian revolution elevated the ulama from being the interpreters of God's will, to becoming rulers and enforcers of God's will.[214]

Following Bazargan's resignation, Bani-Sadr was appointed. Shortly after his presidency began, Bani-Sadr had to deal with internal conflict and two external crises.

[213] William L. Cleveland and Martin P. Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East* (New York, NY, USA: Routledge, an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 433.

[214] Ibid.

The first crisis was the occupation of the American embassy in Tehran by university students supportive of Khomeini, who held hostage fifty-seven US foreign servicemen for a period of 444 days. The second crisis centered on Iraq's invasion of Iran, and the subsequent conflict that arose for a period of eight years. Ultimately, Bani-Sadr also resigned, which left room for Khomeini and his religious partisans to reign over Iran. Although the Islamic Republican Party was able to eliminate the secular Freedom Movement and its affiliates, they still had to deal with opposition from the militant Islamic Left, namely the Mujahedin-e Khalq, who attacked the militant ulama through terrorist bombing attacks. The Islamic Republican party was, however, still capable of restoring order in Iranian society by conducting a reign of intense and acute terror. By 1982, Khomeini had triumphed domestically, and could finally start focusing on how best to export his revolution abroad, especially in the Arab world, while simultaneously trying to defeat Saddam Hussein in Iraq.

4.8. Conclusion

Chapter IV sought to address the resurgence of Iran, in the sixteenth century between the end of the Sasanian Empire and the Muslim Arab invasion of Persia in the seventh century, followed by almost nine centuries of political inactivity, except for the century of Buyid rule over Persia. For this reason, the first section of the chapter was dedicated to describing the rise and fall of the Buyids in the tenth and eleventh centuries; the rise and fall of the Safavids accompanied by the transformation of Iran from a Sunni to a Shiite country in the second and third sections; the rise and fall of the Qajar dynasty including the eighteenth century interregnum in section four; Iran's political evolution from the nineteenth century until the 1979 revolution in section five; and lastly, section

six covered the driving force behind the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the subsequent establishment of Khomeini's theocracy.

Finally, the objective of chapter V is to describe the implementation and development of Iran's Arab policies. The author will begin by narrating Imam Musa al Sadr's role in mobilizing the Lebanese Shiites from 1957 until his disappearance in 1978. The author will then address the alliance of the Islamic Republic of Iran with Baathist Syria under the leadership of Hafez al Assad in the 1980 until today. The author will then move to the Iran-Iraq eight-year armed conflict from 1980 until 1988, and he will conclude with the creation of the Lebanese Hezbollah in 1982.

CHAPTER 5

THE DEVELOPMENT OF IRAN'S ARAB POLICIES

5.1. Introduction

Chapter IV, “The Resurgence of Persia”, sought to address the resurgence of Iran, in the sixteenth century between the end of the Sasanian Empire and the Muslim Arab invasion of Persia in the seventh century, followed by almost nine centuries of political inactivity, except for the century of Buyid rule over Persia. For this reason, the first section of the chapter was dedicated to describing the rise and fall of the Buyids in the tenth and eleventh centuries; the rise and fall of the Safavids accompanied by the transformation of Iran from a Sunni to a Shiite country in the second and third sections; the rise and fall of the Qajar dynasty including the eighteenth century interregnum in section four; Iran’s political evolution from the nineteenth century until the 1979 revolution in section five; and lastly, section six covered the driving force behind the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the subsequent establishment of Khomeini’s theocracy.

Iran’s Arab policy objectives can be identified as threefold: its first objective was to become the de facto leader of the region, since it considers itself a key nation in the Middle East. The second objective of Iran’s Arab policy was to export its own revolution and instill Islamist republics similar to its own across the entirety of the Arab countries, which Iran considered despotic and totalitarian. The third objective of Iran’s Arab policy was to topple the corrupt pro-American political regimes.

The objective of chapter V is to narrate the early phases of the implementation and development of Iran’s Arab policies. Chapter V is essential because it sheds light on Imam Musa al Sadr’s role in mobilizing the Lebanese Shiites from 1958 until his

disappearance in Libya in 1978. This paved the way for Khomeini, who came to power in 1979, to take advantage of this development and create Hezbollah in 1985. Chapter V is also crucial because it addresses the geo-strategic alliance between Baathist Syria and theocratic Iran, which allowed the latter to have an important ally in the region when it was isolated, surrounded, and threatened. This alliance, enacted in 1979, was decisive in shaping the outcome of the revolution, and hence Iran's capacity to play a pivotal role in the Middle East, because Iran was out-balanced by Baathist Iraq in the west, the Gulf monarchies in the south, and the Soviet Union in the north. Chapter V also covers the Iraq-Iran war, which was one of the bloodiest and most destructive conflicts that took place in the Middle East. Despite revolutionary Iran's defeat and inability to topple the secular regime in Baghdad, it was able to consolidate the revolution at home by getting rid of its rivals in Iran, and by strengthening the loyalty of the Iranian population. Significantly, chapter V outlines the creation of Hezbollah, which is the first non-Iranian entity to pledge allegiance to the Wilayat al-Faqih doctrine. Hezbollah's creation marks the most successful exported model of the Iranian revolution in the Arab world.

The author will therefore argue that the conflict in the Arab world is gradually but certainly shifting from being an Arab-Israeli conflict, to becoming an Arab-Iranian conflict. Additionally, chapter V reveals how the new Iranian revolution contributed to the emergence of a new geopolitical order in the Middle East, which will begin destabilizing the region substantially in the upcoming few decades. Chapter V also aims to prove that it is at the same juncture that the Mullahs in Iran began to implement their Arab policies, as a means of dominating the region unilaterally. This has led to various unfavorable and irreversible consequences on the region. In 1980, theocratic Iran had tried to portray itself as a cooperative, altruistic state which aims to co-exist harmoniously

in the Middle East. However, theocratic Iran has consistently threatened the power dynamics, stability, and security of the region as well as the international order, and has proven itself to be a revisionist state. It is also at this point in time that the Islamic Republic of Iran started using its Pan-Shiism policy in the Middle East, namely in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Bahrain, and elsewhere like in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

5.2. Musa al Sadr, the Movement of the Deprived and the Shia of Lebanon from 1920 until 1985

Since the early days of Islam, the Shias of Jabal Amel represented a sidelined and politically isolated community that has remained on the fringes of Lebanese economic and social life since the creation of modern-day Lebanon in 1920. Because the Shias of Lebanon were poor, underprivileged socially, and underrepresented politically, they rarely seemed to attract serious attention by the Lebanese political system and Shiite feudal leaders. The Shias' political leverage was very minimal relative to their demographic size.

In 1920, when the French mandatory power incorporated Jabal Amil and the Bekaa region to Mont-Liban along with the Sunni populations living on the coast, the Shiites made up seventeen percent of the newly established state's population.[215] Greater Lebanon was conceived in a way to safeguard the predominance of the Maronites inside the recently created state. In 1926, the Shiites were recognized as a Muslim sect of their own, distinct from the Sunni confession who had previously represented the Muslims altogether during the Ottoman era.[216] The last and only Lebanese demographic census

[215] Pierre-Jean Luizard, *Histoire Politique Du Clergé Chiite: XVIIIe-XXIE SIÈCLE* (Paris, France: Fayard, 2014), 233.

[216] Ibid.

was conducted in 1932 because Maronite leaders wanted to avoid revealing the shrinking size of their demography relative to the overall Lebanese population, whereas in contrast the Muslim and in particular the Shiite population was increasing steadily.[217]

In 1943, the National Pact, an unwritten compromise between the leaders of each sect, was agreed upon by the major political communities of Lebanon.[218] All the Lebanese institutions including the state positions aimed to reflect the demographic weight of each Lebanese community. At the time, the Maronite were still the strongest community in Lebanon, followed by the Sunnis, while the Shiites still lagged behind. This is mainly how political communalism was instituted in Lebanon to avoid sectarian conflicts which would still happen to take place later on in the foreseeable decades. According to the National Pact, the Maronites obtained the presidency and command of the army; the Sunnis obtained the office of the prime minister, whereas the Shiites obtained the post of Speaker of the National Assembly.

Unlike Iraq and Iran, Lebanon does not host any sacred Shiite shrines within its territory. The Shiite clergymen in Lebanon are linked to their Iraqi and Iranian counterparts through familial ties. As the author explained earlier, the Shiite community in Lebanon was distinguishable in terms of poverty, low levels of education, and its feudal system of governance. Historically, the Shiites of Lebanon were spread out across two regions: some were in Jabal Amil in the South, while others were in Bekaa and Hermel in the north. In the South, several feudal families like the Osseiran of Saida, the Khalil of Tyr and the Zein of Nabatiyya were in total and effective control of their Shiite subjects,

[217] Ibid.

[218] Ibid.

who were mainly peasants.[219] However, in Bekaa and Hermel, because of the dry and hot climate, Shiite subjects consisted of semi-nomadic Bedouin tribes. In this region, families like the al Asads of al Tayybi or the Hamadas of Baalbek represented the Shiites.[220] During this period, and until the early 1950s, the Shiite community of Lebanon was hardly politically conscious, and their traditional political leaders acted as their unchallenged power brokers.

5.2.1. The social mobilization of the Shias of Lebanon

The current Shia community in Lebanon has transformed significantly since the Lebanese states' creation by France, in 1920. This section's objective is to list the series of factors that have led to the social mobilization of the Lebanese Shiites from the 1920s until the mid-1960s.[221]

The first factor which can be attributed to the mobilization of Shias is the situation they had to contend with. In fact, by the 1960s, the Shiite community of Lebanon was witnessing large economic shifts and severe social disruption. The second set of factors which overturned the community's isolation involved modifications to agricultural techniques, access to the media, improved infrastructure for domestic transportation, an internal migration to the suburbs of South Beirut, and an external migration to the Gulf, West Africa, Europe and the United States. This was accompanied by a deteriorating security situation in light of the Arab-Israeli conflict, which had a spillover effect on the South of Lebanon. Additionally, the feudal political leaders of the Shiite community were

[219] Fouad Ajami, *Vanished Imam* (New York, USA: Cornell University Press, 2012), 71.

[220] Augustus Richard Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a: Struggle for the Soul of Lebanon* (Austin, USA: University of Texas Press, 1988), 15.

[221] Ibid, p 16.

no longer able to fulfill the expanding aspirations of their voters. The third factor is the wide variety of secular political recruiting many of the increasingly politicized Shias, despite the persistent sectarian identity of the Shias. The fourth factor is the transformation of both cities and villages into hubs for political action due to the changing socio-economic system, which was eroding the isolation of the Shiite community. The fifth and primary factor affecting the Shias' mobilization was the chain of events across the region, in which a confessional reform movement manifested as the stepping stone for the political mobilization of the Lebanese Shias.

5.2.2. The Shias of Lebanon's political awakening

Throughout the 1960s, extremely large swathes of Lebanese Shiites were being recruited into political parties which offered them equality, an upgrade in social and health services, and a higher chance of employment, as well as housing. For instance, a large number of Shiites joined the Lebanese Communist Party, and other anti-establishment groups such as the Arab Nationalist Movement, the pro-Iraqi and pro-Syrian Baath parties, among others.[222] In addition, many Lebanese Shias shared their problematic and difficult situation with that of the Palestinian refugees who moved to Lebanon after the Nakba of 1948. This led a number of Shias to become acquainted with several Fedayeen organizations affiliated with the Palestinian resistance movement. The latter consisted of the Arab Liberation Front, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and Fatah among others. Yet, notwithstanding this development, their politicization was still premature. Nonetheless, this encouraging trend represented the

[222] Fouad Ajami, *Vanished Imam* (New York, USA: Cornell University Press, 2012), 72.

initiation of the Shias' political awakening, which had a divisive impact on the fate of Lebanon in the upcoming decades.

After the 1957-58 civil sectarian war in Lebanon, a cleric by the name of Musa al Sadr founded a new sectarian Shiite political party. Even though the party was still in its formative stage, in the early 1960s it consolidated itself exponentially in order to become the main Shite movement in Lebanon. This lasted until the 1980s, when it was overshadowed by another revolutionary rival Shiite party. As a result of Imam Musa al-Sadr's leadership and strategic outlook, the party, named Harakat al Mahrumin in 1974, was able to sink most of its rivals.[223] Sayed Musa al Sadr's initial impact on the politicization of the Shiite community of Lebanon is undeniable, therefore the following paragraph will briefly cover his biography.

5.2.3. Who is Sayed Musa al Sadr?

Musa al Sadr was the first Shiite cleric who attempted to emancipate his community in Lebanon. This emancipation entailed the acknowledgment and recognition of the importance of the Shiite community inside Lebanon, since it was going to become the largest and most populous Lebanese community given its growing birth rates. Furthermore, this emancipation was meant to be accompanied by a socio-political revolution. It is therefore important to look into the figure behind this emancipation plan. Initially, the Sadr family originates from Jabal Amil in southern Lebanon, but it is also present in Iran and in Iraq.[224] Musa al Sadr was born in Qom, Iran, in 1928. He is the son of a well-known religious leader, Ayatollah Sadr al Din al Sadr. He attended college at

[223] Augustus Richard Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a: Struggle for the Soul of Lebanon* (Austin, USA: University of Texas Press, 1988), 36.

[224] Fouad Ajami, *Vanished Imam* (New York, USA: Cornell University Press, 2012), 33.

the Tehran Faculty of Law and Political Economy thereby receiving a bachelor of arts in law from Tehran University. He decided to pursue a secular career. However, following his father's concerns that Iran's Shiite institutions were at stake, Musa al Sadr changed his mind and undertook an education in Islamic jurisprudence in Qom. Afterwards, al Sadr pursued his religious formation in Najaf, Iraq, in the second half of the 1950s, under the Marja al Kabir Muhsin al Hakim.[225]

Since the al Sadr family has roots in Lebanon, one of his cousins, Sayed Abed al Hussein Sharaf al Din, who was mufti of Tyr invited Musa al Sadr to Lebanon in 1957.[226] Imam Musa al Sadr accepted the invitation and made a positive impression on his peers. The invitation's objective was to ensure that Musa al Sadr would become Sayed Abed al Hussein Sharaf al Din's successor, who passed away the following year, in 1958. At the time, Musa al Sadr spoke minimal Arabic. However, he accepted the role with the explicit backing of his mentor in Najaf, Muhsin al Hakim. The former even obtained Lebanese citizenship in 1963, awarded by the Lebanese president, Fouad Shehab, at the time. [227]

5.2.4. The contribution of Imam Musa al Sadr to the Shias of Lebanon

5.2.4.1. The Shias of Lebanon: A minority in the region

Just like the Maronites and the Druze, the Lebanese Shiites represent a minority in the midst of a majority of Sunni Arabs across almost the entirety of the Middle East. For the three sects altogether, Lebanon consists of a haven whereby sectarian identity and

[225] Pierre-Jean Luizard, *Histoire Politique Du Clergé Chiite: XVIIIe-XXIE SIÈCLE* (Paris, France: Fayard, 2014), 237.

[226] Fouad Ajami, *Vanished Imam* (New York, USA: Cornell University Press, 2012), 39.

[227] Pierre-Jean Luizard, *Histoire Politique Du Clergé Chiite: XVIIIe-XXIE SIÈCLE* (Paris, France: Fayard, 2014), 237.

expression can be safeguarded from danger. For this reason, many Maronite leaders viewed Musa al Sadr and his followers as their natural allies, in sharp contrast to the Sunni Muslims. Although Imam Musa understood the insecurity of the Maronites and thereby supported their plans of maintaining their hold on the presidential seat and the armed forces, he still condemned their superior attitude towards the Shiites in particular. He therefore frequently criticized Lebanon's Maronite led government, which had always neglected the South, the Bekaa and Hermel regions of the Lebanese territory among other areas. Nevertheless, Musa al Sadr was a reformer who strove to ameliorate the living conditions of the Shias, among many other elements within a Lebanese background.

5.2.4.2. Uniting the Shias of Lebanon under one umbrella

Musa al Sadr wound up proving himself to be a stepping-stone for the emancipation of the Shiites in Lebanon. In fact, he strove to modify the equilibrium on behalf of the Shiite Lebanese population, who were represented by feudal and corrupt notable families monopolizing power in the Lebanese parliament. Furthermore, Musa al Sadr was also capable of giving the Shiite clergymen a pivotal role in Lebanese society and in Lebanese politics. Musa al Sadr also worked on improving the fate of his coreligionists, especially socio-economically. In addition, Musa al Sadr also ordered the construction of several schools, clinics and hospitals in Southern Lebanon, some of which are still operating until today.[228]

The Iranian cleric sought to become the undisputed leader of the Lebanese Shiites. Musa al Sadr's arrival to Lebanon coincided with a very important juncture. As mentioned earlier, the Lebanese Shiites were starting to be politicized. Although the

[228] Ibid.

Iranian cleric was not solely responsible for invigorating the Shiite community politically, he was able to successfully fuel and extend it. For example, Sayed Musa had been capable of uniting the Lebanese Shias in their entirety, from the city dwellers of Beirut, to the countrymen of the South, to the tribesmen of the Beqaa. Furthermore, the Imam managed to give the Shiites of Lebanon a comprehensive communal identity. In addition to these achievements, al Sadr began celebrating religious commemorations whereby he took advantage of these opportunities to enhance communal solidarity and political consciousness.[229]

5.2.4.3. The establishment of the Supreme Shiite Council

In 1969, al-Sadr founded the Shiite Supreme Council. It is important to reiterate that the community previously lacked a political voice in Lebanese politics, as it was denied to them until then by the state authorities. Al Sadr's ascendance therefore introduced a new dynamic in the allocation of political power.[230] The Shiite Supreme Council was meant to represent at last the Shiite community officially, on behalf of the Lebanese state, and it was charged with managing Shiites' internal affairs. Musa al Sadr was elected as its first president for a mandate of six years which is a clear indication of his remarkable performance in the country on behalf of the Shiites. The council rapidly made itself heard with petitions ranging from the military domain, to the social, economic, and political spheres, including improved measures for the defense of the South, the provision of developmental funds and an augmentation in the number of Shiites appointed to senior governmental positions.

[229] Augustus Richard Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a: Struggle for the Soul of Lebanon* (Austin, USA: University of Texas Press, 1988), 41.

[230] Fouad Ajami, *Vanished Imam* (New York, USA: Cornell University Press, 2012), 115.

5.2.5. The arrival of the Palestinians in the 1960s and early 1970s

Following the devastating civil war that ended in the defeat and expulsion of the Palestinian guerillas from Jordan in 1970, the latter decided under the leadership of Yasser Arafat to move their headquarters to Lebanon. The Lebanese Shiites of the South who were already suffering substantially socio-economically, had to start enduring a dwindling security configuration in their areas. Therefore, the Cairo Agreements of 1969 which were promulgated in order to cut down the Fedayeen military activities in and from Lebanon, were instead made use of to authorize the establishment of a Palestinian state within the Lebanese territory. Because of the chaotic and anarchical situation in the South, due to the presence of the PLO, the Shiite Supreme Council wasn't able to further and advance the community's interests and ambitions anymore. Since the Lebanese state wasn't able to fulfill its basic duties such as protecting its constituencies, particularly in the South, the Iranian cleric decided to mobilize the Shias, and arm them so that they can defend themselves from aggression, specifically following the 1973 October War.[231]

Publicly, al Sadr declared that he endeavored to aid the Palestinian Liberation Organization. However, his interactions with them were tenuous and critical. Simultaneously, during the armed skirmishes that took place between the PLO and the Lebanese army, the Imam criticized the Lebanese government for falling short of defending the South, while also condemning the Fedayeen for attacking Northern Israel, and thus spurring Israeli reprisal on the Shiite villages. Although al Sadr was empathetic towards Palestinians' plight, he rejected their transgressions against Shiite inhabitants of the South. Inevitably, the relationship between the Fedayeen and the Shiite community of the South was marked by conflict.

[231] Ibid, p 168.

5.2.6. The establishment of Harakat al Mahrumin (the Movement of the Dispossessed) in 1974

In March 1974, following all of the events which unfolded since the early 1970s, and while fearing for the fate of the community he represented, the Imam decided to create a mass popular political movement titled Haraket al Mahrumin.[232] By undertaking such a sweeping strategic move, al Sadr was determined to conduct a struggle against the Lebanese government, so the latter would guarantee the security needs and the social injustices of the Shias in Lebanon. Musa al Sadr proved to be correct in his assessment, as a year later in April 1975, civil war erupted once again in Lebanon. Subsequently, later on in the course of that same year, the Imam ordered the creation of an armed militia called Afwaj al Muqawama al Lubnaniya, known in Lebanon by its acronym AMAL, trained by Fatah initially and juxtaposed to the movement of the disinherited or the deprived.[233]

The Iranian cleric was apt to appeal to a large chunk of his constituency before the eruption of the civil conflict in Lebanon which lasted for fifteen years, demonstrating the extent to which the Shias of Lebanon had become politicized. Nonetheless, it is important to stress that this considerable amount represented only a portion of the Shias carrying arms. A large number of Shia militiamen were still affiliated with other multi-confessional parties which took advantage of the opportunity to use them as cannon-fodder.

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[232] Augustus Richard Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a: Struggle for the Soul of Lebanon* (Austin, USA: University of Texas Press, 1988), 47.

[233] Fouad Ajami, *Vanished Imam* (New York, USA: Cornell University Press, 2012), 168.

5.2.7. The inception of the Lebanese civil war

When the civil war in Lebanon erupted in April 1975, the Imam refused to engage and attempted, unsuccessfully, to appease the situation by mediating between the different belligerents.[234] Amal even received logistic, military, and economic aid from the Shah of Iran followed by the Islamic Republic of Iran once the shah was toppled in 1979. This auto-defense militia was the origin of Hezbollah. The movement of the disinherited, known as Amal, was one of the most important and strongest Muslim militias throughout the course of the Lebanese civil war. Towards the end of the Lebanese civil strife, it integrated itself in the Lebanese political system.

During the course of the first rounds of the Lebanese civil war, Amal was siding with the Lebanese National Movement (LNM), despite condemning the Druze leader, Kamal Jumblat's exploitation of the Shia. Once Syria under Hafez al Assad interfered in Lebanese politics and invaded Lebanon in 1976 to protect the Maronite-dominated Lebanese Front, who were being defeated by the LNM and its Palestinian allies, the Imam betrayed his alliance with the LNM.[235] Since Amal was still weakly armed and inexperienced in battle, especially among the leftist militias, al Sadr withdrew to the South. Nonetheless, Musa al Sadr still did not trust Hafez al Assad's true ambitions for Lebanon. According to the Imam, the only reason that Syria had not yet incorporated Lebanon into its own national territory was because it was not viable. Yet, al-Sadr relied on the Syrians to calm the PLO particularly in South Lebanon, as he didn't wish to jeopardize his ties with the Syrian president. It is worth noting that Musa al Sadr was

[234] Pierre-Jean Luizard, *Histoire Politique Du Clergé Chiite: XVIIIe-XXIE SIÈCLE* (Paris, France: Fayard, 2014), 239.

[235] Augustus Richard Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a: Struggle for the Soul of Lebanon* (Austin, USA: University of Texas Press, 1988), 48.

essentially a pragmatist, and a practitioner of Realpolitik. Several Lebanese political analysts were not aware of where he stood in terms of political alliances.

5.2.8. The threefold coups de theater

From March 1978 to January 1979, three events coincided successively that sped up the Lebanese Shias' mobilization and participation in the strengthening of their political leverage, thus reinvigorating the Amal movement. These three major events are the Israel's invasion of Lebanon in March 1978 under the military operation codenamed Operation Litani, the mysterious disappearance of Musa al Sadr during a trip to Libya in August 1978, and the overthrow of the shah of Iran in January 1979 through an Islamic revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini.[236]

5.2.8.1. Israel's Operation Litani

As the civil war in Lebanon evolved, the Shias were becoming more and more secluded. In addition, because a large proportion of the Shias were still affiliated with the PLO, or the leftist political organizations, they were taken advantage of during the war. In fact, they were perceived as the natural allies of the Palestinians. However, it is worth stressing that this perception starting from the early 1970s, started becoming false because the Lebanese Shias of the South became the communal victims of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Because the Shias of the South were in proximity of the Israeli retaliation vis-à-vis the Palestinians, they were being targeted as well. Thus, in order to prevent such incidents, the Shias began distancing themselves from the Palestinian fighters. As a result, the Palestinians were becoming unpopular. Consequently, the Palestinians began to also view the Shiites suspiciously, which in turn made it easier for the Israeli Defense Forces

[236] Ibid, p 49.

to kill Palestinians. Operation Litani catalyzed these events. The main beneficiary of this series of events was the Movement of the Deprived, who took advantage of the situation to rally more members to its cause, and to provide security for its new adherents. By the early 1980s, skirmishes were occurring on one hand, between Amal and, on the other hand, the Palestinian fighters along with their Lebanese allies. PLO agents were attempting to implement a cease-fire between the different protagonists in the South but to no avail.

5.2.8.2. The mysterious disappearance of Imam Musa al Sadr

On the 28th of August of 1978, while he was on an official visit to Libya to meet colonel Muammar al Qaddafi, Imam Musa al Sadr disappeared and was not heard from anymore. However, his mysterious vanishing had huge symbolic importance to his political party, the Movement of the Deprived. Musa al Sadr thus represented a national hero as well as a martyr for most of the Lebanese Shias. Furthermore, his occultation can be compared with the Shiite dogma of the Hidden Imam.[237]

5.2.8.3. The Iranian Islamic Revolution

During January 1979, the shah of Iran, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, was deposed by the Iranian people. In February 1979, Grand Ayatollah Khomeini came back to Tehran after more than fifteen years of absence. Throughout the next few years, he instituted a theocracy in Iran. Undoubtedly, the establishment of an Islamic Republic in Iran particularly counterfeited the Shias across the whole Islamic world, and in particular those

[237] Pierre-Jean Luizard, *Histoire Politique Du Clergé Chiite: XVIIIe-XXIE SIÈCLE* (Paris, France: Fayard, 2014), 239.

in Lebanon. In addition, the new leadership in Tehran vowed to aid the movement of the deprived politically and financially.[238]

5.2.9. Amal as a vehicle for communal security

As mentioned earlier, in 1974, almost one year before the eruption of the Lebanese civil war, Musa al Sadr established a military branch for his movement of the disinherited called AMAL to protect his Shiite community from internal aggression. It is worth noting that the Lebanese Shia, specifically those of the South, were exasperated by the burdens they had to endure on behalf of the Palestinians, particularly since the latter were being negligent about the South. This represented another factor in Amal's creation. In other words, the insecurity of southern Lebanon paved the way for Amal to become the de facto organization responsible for the protection of the Shias. It should be remembered that the South of Lebanon is the spiritual epicenter of the Shiite community, and that any development taking place in the South echoes across the Bekaa, Hermel, and the Beirut slums.[239]

5.2.10. Operation Peace for Galilee

In 1982, Israel launched Operation Peace for Galilee to eradicate the PLO and its infrastructure in Lebanon. From 1978 until 1982, the movement of the disinherited was exponentially growing in number and was eclipsing its rivals in recruiting Shias to its cause. However, after the operation Peace for Galilee, the political mobilization of the

[238] Ibid, p 240.

[239] Augustus Richard Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a: Struggle for the Soul of Lebanon* (Austin, USA: University of Texas Press, 1988), 59.

Shia proved to be a centrifugal rather than a centripetal process, which the author will elaborate on below.

Prior to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, many of the Shias living in south of Lebanon were ready to nurture peaceful and even perhaps friendly relations with the Zionist state. There was consensus among the Amal officials that an arrangement between them and the Israelis could be achieved effectively. Both factions were determined to prevent the Palestinians from re-imposing themselves in the south, and they were adamant about re-establishing order in the area. However, because of Israeli's aggression towards the Shiite inhabitants of the South, hostility between Israeli armed forces and Shias arose substantially, between 1982 and 1985. The relationship between both parties deteriorated remarkably since then.

After 1985, when it was becoming clear that Israel was planning to remain in the south of Lebanon indefinitely, Shiite resistance to Israeli occupation was gaining traction. It is worth noting that many of the Shias who were fighting against the presence of Palestinian guerillas in the south were also becoming the primary proponents of anti-Israeli presence in the south. Indeed, by refusing to permit any external power to govern them, whether Palestinian, Israeli or otherwise, the Shias of Lebanon were becoming more politically conscious.

Now that the author has explained throughout this chapter how the Shias of Lebanon became socially mobilized, and later politically awakened, as well as how Musa al Sadr proselytized them by creating a political party for Shias, among other factors, he will now shift attention to the rise of Hezbollah. It is worth stating that following the Imam's disappearance in 1978, the movement of the deprived now known as Amal has been led by Nabih Berri, who in 1979 allied himself with Baathist Syria. Subsequently

and until 1990, when the Taif Agreement was promulgated to put an end to the Lebanese civil war, Berri authorized his political party to participate in the Lebanese civil war, thus breaking completely with the pragmatic legacy of his predecessor. Since then, Harakat Amal became a primarily confessional political party in the Lebanese sectarian configuration. It is worth noting that the Amal party's integration into the Lebanese political system was a main factor in the emergence of a much more radical, hardline and revolutionary new Shiite political movement, namely Hezbollah. The latter established themselves as a more capable movement aimed at fully emancipating the Shiites of Lebanon first initiated by Amal. Until now, Amal represents a centrist political organization, unlike Hezbollah. As the author will demonstrate in subsequent chapters, both of these parties will fight for the political soul of the Shiite community. Hezbollah will be declared victorious and its leadership will successfully liberate southern Lebanon, a struggle which lasted until the year 2000.

5.3. The alliance of the Islamic Republic of Iran with Baathist Syria

The end of the 1970s was critical to Hafez al Assad for several reasons: first, Anwar al Sadat had concluded a peace treaty with Israel separately; second, the Sunni Islamist rebellion in Syria was intensifying which was threatening the stability of the regime; third, the PLO was distancing itself from Baathist Syria; fourth, the bilateral relations between Syria and Iraq were at their worst because after a brief reconciliation which led to the unification of the Baathist countries, in 1978, both countries' leaderships were skeptical of one another's motives. Therefore, the bilateral relations between the countries deteriorated to an unprecedented level.[240] The fall of Mohammed Reza Shah

[240] Xavier Baron, *Aux Origines Du Drame Syrien: 1918-2013* (Paris, France: Tallandier, 2013), 201.

and his replacement with a Shiite theocratic regime led by Khomeini was welcomed by the Syrian president, because the former represented a pillar of American influence in the region, along with Israel. Ultimately, the removal of a pro-American regime in the area could re-equilibrate the balance of power in the Middle East. A priori, the regional situation stood in the way of an alliance between a secular and socialist Syria, who was allied to the Soviet Union, and a theocratic Iran, enemy of communism and atheism altogether.

5.3.1. The enactment of the Iranian and Syrian alliance

Nonetheless, a durable alliance was forged between the two countries due to shared interests and common enemies, which shook the geo-political and geo-strategic configuration of the area. Together, these two countries were intent on reducing Iraqi influence, failing Israeli plans in Lebanon, ousting American and French multinational armed forces in Lebanon, and creating Hezbollah. From Hafez al Assad's point of view, his alliance with Iran represented a risk because he portrayed himself as a fervent Arab nationalist and was allying himself with a non-Arab state which was seeking to spread its revolution across the Arab world. The links between Hafez al Assad and Shiism were more retroactive because, in 1973, Imam Moussa al Sadr issued a fatwa certifying that the Alawites were Shiites and therefore true Muslims.[241] Without its strategic alliance with Syria, the Islamic Republic of Iran could have never implemented its Arab policies in the region because it would not have been able to shape events in Lebanon and Palestine. Furthermore, the Islamic Republic of Iran came to the rescue of its ally after

[241] Ibid, p 203.

the revolts started mounting in Syria, largely because without its Syrian ally, most of Iran's political achievements in the last thirty years would not have succeeded.

5.3.2. The different phases of the Iranian and Syrian alliance

The evolution of the alliance between Iran and Syria has undergone seven different phases: first, the enactment of the Syrian-Iranian alliance between 1979 and 1982; second, the accomplishments and constraints of Syrian-Iranian power from 1982 till 1985; third, the intra-alliance animosities and solidification of the axis from 1985 till 1988; fourth, the containment of Saddam's Iraq in the Middle East from 1988 till 1991; fifth, the pursuit of this alliance in the post-cold war era; sixth, the strengthening of this alliance after the 2003 invasion of Iraq by the United States; and seventh, the interference of Iran in the Syrian civil war to save the Syrian regime and preserve its so-called axis of resistance from 2011 until now in 2023.[242]

5.3.3. The balance of power and the power structure of the Syrian-Iranian alliance

The balance of power and the power structure in the Syrian-Iranian nexus has evolved quite substantially and dramatically since its emergence in 1979. In the 1980s, Syria had the upper hand, and represented the dominant partner because Syria had a military presence in neighboring Lebanon since 1976. Syria also had the upper hand because it spearheaded the Arab nationalist movement, since Egypt's exclusion from the Arab League from 1979 until 1987 due to its peace treaty with Israel in 1979, and because Iraq was drawn into a vicious armed conflict with Iran from 1980 till 1988. Syria also had more power because it was receiving support from the Soviets in the political, economic

[242] Jubin Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East* (London, UK: Tauris, 2009), XII.

and military realms. Syria's power also came from presenting a pathway for arms shipment and delivery to Iran, and it used to receive oil shipments from Iran at a very low and discounted price, which reveals how important Syria was to Iran. Additionally, Iran was at a disadvantage due to its war with Iraq for eight long years. Finally, Iran was isolated in the Arab world, and its alliance with Syria enabled it to ease the Arab-Iranian rifts and tensions.[243]

However, in the 1990s, political analysts observed a transition in the balance of power and the power structure in the Syrian-Iranian alliance for several reasons. The first reason was the collapse of the Soviet Union, Syria's patron since and during the entirety of the Cold War and the rise of a unipolar world order. The second factor affecting the shift in the power structure was the development of an indigenous Iranian arms industry. The third factor can be linked to Iran's conciliation with a substantial number of Arab states, following the Kuwait crisis and the weakening of Iraq ever since.[244]

Nonetheless from the year 2000 until now in 2023, Iran has solidified its position as the dominant partner because first, the Syrian military had to withdraw from Lebanon in 2005, following the assassination of the Lebanese prime minister. Second, Iran funded Syria's foreign arms purchases, and third, Iran exported military weapons to Syria. The fourth factor is Iran being currently on the verge of possessing nuclear bombs. The fifth reason is that pro-Iranian Hezbollah has proved to be of a huge importance in expelling Israel from Lebanon in 2000, in defeating Israel in 2006, in contributing substantially to maintaining the alliance and the subsequent Axis of Resistance between Iran and Syria during the Syrian civil war, and in playing a huge role in Lebanese internal politics

[243] Ibid, p XVI.

[244] Ibid.

without the assistance of Syria since 2012. The sixth factor is Iran becoming the most powerful actor in the Persian gulf compared with its neighbors, while taking into account that the United States had benefited Iran by getting it rid of its two main rivals on its west and on its east, Saddam Hussein in Iraq since 2003, and the Taliban in Afghanistan since 2001.[245]

Overall, the Syrian and Iranian alliance is based on realpolitik and on mutual strategic interests between the two countries. The author believes it is important to discuss this alliance because this nexus between Iran and Syria had an important effect on Middle Eastern politics since 1979 and it demonstrated continuity, up until now lasting for forty years. Additionally, this nexus between Iran and Syria is still misunderstood in many areas.[246]

There are several reasons that explain the nature and the continuation of this strategic alliance between Syria and Iran. For example, some Political Studies experts have framed this alliance as a short-term, opportunistic partnership against Saddam Hussein's Iraq. The fact that this alliance is still running with Saddam Hussein's fall in 2003 shows that this theory is fallacious.[247] Another illustration is the fact that the alliance between these two countries is largely based on the Syrian dictators (Hafez and Bashar al Assad alike) Alawite origins and the Iranian theocracy's Shiite origins, which makes this coalition inevitable. However, at least in theory, the Syrian regime is secular, and its alignment with Iran is rather based on mutual and common political, economic and strategic objectives and interests. In addition, just as a high number of Sunni Muslims

[245] Ibid.

[246] Ibid, p XI.

[247] Ibid, p XIII.

consider Alawites to be heretics, a high number of Shiite Muslims do not perceive Alawites to be true Muslims. Therefore, this theory explaining the alliance between Iran and Syria also more or less fails.[248] Nonetheless, the author cannot deny the presence of religious and sectarian affinities between the two countries.

In the author's point of view, the alliance between Baathist Syria and the Islamic Republic of Iran is founded on a number of premises. To begin with, both countries wish to guarantee regime survival because of the authoritarian nature of their political systems.[249] In addition, both countries aim to maintain their territorial integrity and their independence in terms of national security policies. In the case of Syria, this is translated in being able to regain the Golan heights and controlling Lebanese internal politics to make sure that the government in Beirut does not stand in the way of Syrian interests in the region.[250] In the case of Iran, this is mainly translated in being able to become the leader of the Persian Gulf and to safeguard the so-called Axis of Resistance that runs through Syria, and acts against American hegemony and imperialism in the Middle East.[251] This is why the Islamic Republic of Iran came to the rescue of Baathist Syria in 2012, as it was aware that the Syrian regime's collapse would entail the collapse of its regional ambitions as well. In fact, this would disrupt the geographical continuity between Iran and Iraq, on one hand, and Syria, Lebanon and Palestine, on the other hand.

Despite all the positive points of convergence between both Iran and Syria, there were some points of divergence at certain stages, especially in Lebanon. For example, the

[248] Ibid, p XIV.

[249] Ibid, p XII.

[250] Ibid.

[251] Ibid.

surge of Hezbollah in Lebanon worried Hafez al Assad, which is why he tightened his bonds with the other Shiite political movement, namely Amal, to limit and control Hezbollah. Another example was the war of the camps that erupted between Amal and the Palestinians from 1985 till 1988, which denied Hezbollah crucial allies in its fight against Israel. Furthermore, another important example was the brutal execution of Hezbollah members in Beirut in 1987 by the Syrian army, as Hafez al Assad intended to remain the master of the Lebanese file alone. Nonetheless, despite these tactical disagreements, the strategic alliance between both countries remained unchanged. On the contrary, it fortified itself and strengthened over the years.

5.4. The Iran-Iraq armed conflict (1980-88)

On the 22nd of September 1980, the war between Iraq and Iran started.[252] Although Saddam Hussein initiated the conflict, the newly established clerical regime in Iran was initiating provokation. In fact, the mullahs in Iran were encouraging the Iraqi Shiites to topple the Baathist regime in Bagdad and establish a theocracy based on the doctrine of "Wilayat al-Faqih". It is worth noting that Khomeini's rise to power was the determining factor of the armed conflict occurring. This is because, for a period of five years since the agreement of Algiers in 1975[253] between Saddam Hussein and the shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, there was relative peace on the borders. Additionally, Pahlavi Iran was an ally of the United States of America in the Middle East, and a tool of power projection for it in the Gulf and in countering Soviet influence. Meanwhile Iraq was considered to be a

[252] Williamson Murray and Kevin M. Woods, *The Iran-Iraq War: A Military and Strategic History* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 93.

[253] Pierre Razoux, *La Guerre Iran-Irak: Première Guerre Du Golfe, 1980-1988* (Paris, France: Perrin, 2013), p 69.

client of the USSR, which meant that Iraq would not have had the capacity to initiate war against a much stronger country and would not have been able to defeat Iran.

5.4.1. The first stage of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1982)

5.4.1.1. The geopolitical context behind the Iran-Iraq War

In addition to the aforementioned details, Iran is a very large country in terms of territorial size, and its population was larger than that of Iraq, which made it very difficult to invade Iran geographically. In other words, should any conflict arise between Iraq or any other country in this area, Iran would definitely be the victor. However, since the shah was toppled and since Iran was in a state of disarray, and because Iran wasn't in cordial diplomatic relations with the United States, Saddam Hussein seized the opportunity to invade Iran, believing that he would come from a position of strength to impose his terms on the mullahs in Tehran. But, as events will demonstrate later on, Saddam Hussein miscalculated, because even though the Islamic Republican Party wasn't fully established yet due to competition, Saddam Hussein's declaration of war on Iran on the 22nd of September, 1980, favored Khomeini because the entire population united behind Khomeini to defend their land and the revolution. In the author's opinion, a conflict between theocratic Iran and Baathist Iraq was inevitable because Iran was striving to export its revolution in the Arab world, particularly in Iraq whereby a majority of disenfranchised Shiites were residing, some of whom were sensitive to Khomeini's call, to try to remove the secular Baathist regime in Baghdad. Certainly, Saddam Hussein and the Gulf monarchies would not have allowed such a scenario to materialize. Indeed, Saddam Hussein represented the bulwark or the eastern shield of the Arab world, protecting the Arabs from Iranian incursions and motivations to dominate the region.

Therefore, Saddam Hussein launched his war against Iran, which was labeled Qadisiya, the same name the caliph Omar ibn al Khattab called his expedition when he strove to conquer Persia, in the seventh century A.D., to spread Islam.

5.4.1.2. The launching of Operation Qadisiya

The war Iraq initiated against Iran started with an aerial attack on several Iranian cities,[254] followed by a ground offensive operation[255] to try to reconquer Khuzestan,[256] whereby a very dense amount of the Arab population lived. Khuzestan is also a region that is rich in hydrocarbons. Saddam Hussein believed the inhabitants of Khuzestan would turn against the regime in Tehran because of their Arab ancestry. But this wishful scenario never concretized, partly because of the retribution these populations would suffer from the Iranian authorities after the termination of hostilities. The war caught the Iranian population and the newly established regime in Tehran both off guard. The authorities in Tehran did not expect a war to break out, and were not fully ready for it as a substantial number of the higher command of the Iranian army were still in prison due to their loyalty to the shah.

5.4.1.3. The surge of the Iranian nationalism and the unification of the Iranian population behind Khomeini

Saddam Hussein's miscalculated decision to attack Iran failed to destroy the newly established theocratic regime, and in fact galvanized the Iranian population and

[254] Ibid, p 36.

[255] Williamson Murray and Kevin M. Woods, The Iran-Iraq War: A Military and Strategic History (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 108.

[256] Pierre Razoux, La Guerre Iran-Irak: Première Guerre Du Golfe, 1980-1988 (Paris, France: Perrin, 2013), p 52.

motivated it to side with their recently elected and imposed leaders.[257] It is also worth mentioning that the clerics had to face the Mujahedeen Khalq and the Fedayeen Khalq internally, two leftist organizations that vowed to eradicate the theocracy to establish a democracy in its place, as they believed they were duped by Khomeini and his associates. In addition, the provinces of Kurdistan, Azerbaijan and Baluchistan were attempting to take advantage of the turmoil, to wrest and declare their independence from Iran. Ultimately, these centrifugal tendencies did not succeed, but they diverted and frustrated the Iranian regime's existential war against Iraq.[258] It is at this stage of the war that the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, or IRGC, and known also as the Pasdaran, were created.[259] In fact, Khomeini didn't trust the Iranian regular army, because of its devotion and loyalty to the former shah. Thus, the recently established leaders of Iran decided to put in place a new army, devoted to the revolution solely, and that was ready to sacrifice itself for Khomeini and his associates only.

5.4.1.4. The failed mediations to end the Iraq-Iran War of 1982

Throughout the 1982 year, the Organization of the Islamic Conference, the United Nations, and the Arab League tried at several instances to mediate the conflict and put an end to hostilities, but to no avail.[260] For example, the Tunisian Habib Chatti suggested to the two belligerents the retreat of the Iraqi forces from Iran, the installation of a peace-keeping buffer zone on the Iranian-Iraqi border, the establishment of an international

[257] Ibid, p 134.

[258] Ibid, p 136.

[259] Ibid, p 137.

[260] Ibid, p 217.

comity charged with finding a just and durable solution to the Chatt al-Arab canal, and finally, to establish an investigative team to evaluate the damages undergone by Iran. In fact, the GCC was even ready to compensate Iran with billions of dollars to put an end to the war.[261] However, Iran refused all of these propositions, which shows that it is also responsible for prolonging the conflict in the Gulf. Therefore, contrary to what it claims, Iran was also contributing to the continuation of hostilities. Otherwise, it would have accepted the four, or five-points mediation plan. Instead, grand Ayatollah Khomeini demanded that Saddam Hussein resign from power, that Iraq recognize its responsibility for declaring war on Iran, and repatriate the several thousand dozens of Iraqi and Iranian Shiites expelled to Iran from Iraq in 1980.[262]

5.4.2. The middle stage of the Iran-Iraq War (1982-1987)

5.4.2.1. Iran takes the lead

From 1982 until 1987, it was mainly Iran undertaking offensive operations, not only to liberate its occupied territories, but also to capture Iraqi pieces of land across the frontiers.[263] The Mullahs regime was aiming high, because it obstinately wanted to subdue the Iraqi regime, and to transform it into a vassal state, which ultimately happened, but only after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 at the hands of the American military forces under the administration of George Bush junior. This proved to be a disastrous decision, because it paved the way for Iran to take control of Iraq and further its

[261] Ibid, p 216.

[262] Williamson Murray and Kevin M. Woods, The Iran-Iraq War: A Military and Strategic History (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 190.

[263] Pierre Razoux, La Guerre Iran-Irak: Première Guerre Du Golfe, 1980-1988 (Paris, France: Perrin, 2013), p 224.

imperialist objectives in the region. It is worth indicating that Iran tried to utilize the sectarian dimension of the conflict in order to arouse the Iraqi Shiites to stop fighting with their Sunni dictator, Saddam Hussein, but to no avail. In 1982, Khorramshahr was finally liberated by the Pasdaran.[264] The fall of Khorramshahr buried Saddam Hussein's hopes of toppling the recently established regime of clerics in Tehran. He therefore underestimated the resolve of the Iranian people to defend their land from an aggressor, and he overestimated the capabilities of his military forces in achieving the extremely ambitious political and military targets. This is mainly why Saddam Hussein decided to undertake a strategic retreat, back to Iraq, and forgo the conquered pieces of land, in Iran.[265] This time, Saddam Hussein suggested to the Iranian clergymen to put an end to the war, however his efforts proved to be fruitless.

In July 1982, during Ramadan, the Iranian regime launched military operations to penetrate Iraqi national territory.[266] Meanwhile, the great powers started to modify their stances towards the Iranian-Iraqi armed conflict. For example, the Kremlin started to assist the Iraqi armed forces, by delivering advanced weaponry.[267] The author will not detail the reasons for Moscow's change in alliance because it is beyond the scope of this work. However, since the Soviet Union was preoccupied fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan, Iran was arming the latter, to the disappointment of Moscow. Meanwhile, China took advantage of the opportunity to fill in the gap by replacing the Soviet Union,

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[264] Williamson Murray and Kevin M. Woods, The Iran-Iraq War: A Military and Strategic History (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 185.

[265] Pierre Razoux, La Guerre Iran-Irak: Première Guerre Du Golfe, 1980-1988 (Paris, France: Perrin, 2013), p 229.

[266] Ibid, p 238.

[267] Ibid, p 254.

through the intermediary of North Korea, by arming Iran with weapons. Indeed, China was arming, at this stage of the war, both countries simultaneously.[268]

5.4.2.2. The beginning of the use of chemical weapons

In February 1984, the IRGC took control of the Iraqi Majnoun islands located in Iraqi territory.[269] It was the first battle of the swamps during the course of the war. At this stage of the conflict, the Iraqi regime, under the orders of Saddam Hussein, started using chemical and biological weaponry to stop the advances of the Iranian troops.[270] This trend continued throughout the entirety of the war, even though the Iranian regime retaliated with less vigor and less success, as the Iraqi troops would be better trained in protecting themselves.

5.4.2.3. The Iran-Gate affair

It was during 1984, that mainly American, French, and British citizens were taken hostage by the Islamic Jihad, an offshoot of Hezbollah, in Lebanon.[271] Some of these hostages died in captivity, some were shortly released, while others were freed at the end of the war. The French government decided to negotiate with the Iranian authorities to release their captives, but they had to meet the exigencies and demands of Iran, such as decreasing its support for Iraq, and taking a more balanced and nuanced stance for the

[268] Ibid, p 255.

[269] Ibid, p 278.

[270] Williamson Murray and Kevin M. Woods, The Iran-Iraq War: A Military and Strategic History (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p 221.

[271] Pierre Razoux, La Guerre Iran-Irak: Première Guerre Du Golfe, 1980-1988 (Paris, France: Perrin, 2013), p 286.

rest of the war, for instance. As a counterexample, the British government refused to bow to Iranian requests, regardless of what would happen to their citizens. Some of the British captives were executed as a result. However, the American administration of Ronald Reagan adopted a more balanced position, or a middle ground. It agreed to negotiate with the hostage-takers, but within limits, and with the threat of using military action should the negotiations meet a dead-end. It is worth highlighting that the Iranian regime made use of this strategy again, in 1987, but with less impact and less success. Indeed, it released the hostages but, at the same time, it recaptured many other Western citizens later on, believing that this tactic will pay off dividends. It is towards this period of time that the American and Iraqi authorities started meeting regularly, to re-develop their bilateral ties. In fact, the United States of America began aiding the Iraqi military forces with intelligence information, along with advanced weaponry.[272] Although the Iran-Gate or Iran-Contra affair was disclosed only in 1986, it is during this period of time that the United States of America authorized Israel to give Iranian forces the needed and extremely performant military equipment to face the Iraqi army, in exchange for releasing the American hostages. In other words, at this juncture of the war, the United States government was helping out both countries, in different ways, in a war of attrition.[273]

5.4.2.4. The War of the Cities and the War of the petroleum tankers in the Persian Gulf

At the beginning of 1984, the war of the cities began.[274] Saddam Hussein initiated

[272] Ibid, p 295.

[273] Ibid, p 393.

[274] Williamson Murray and Kevin M. Woods, The Iran-Iraq War: A Military and Strategic History (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 234.

this form of war by bombarding all of the major cities and towns located on the periphery of the frontiers between the two countries, and beyond as well. The Iraqi dictator incorrectly assessed that if he attacked Iran's civilian population, they would abandon the Iranian regime and pressure the government to end the war. However, this miscalculation only fused the Iranian population with the recently established theocracy officials. In 1984, the war of the petroleum tankers started as well.[275] Saddam Hussein was striving to attack Iranian tankers transporting oil and gas from Iran's coastline in the Persian Gulf to the rest of the world. This way, Saddam Hussein would have complicated the war, by opening up a new front on the seas, but most importantly, he would reduce Iran's ability to fund and finance the war by decreasing its revenues from selling its hydrocarbons to global markets. This trend of the armed conflict between Iran and Iraq persisted indefinitely, until the termination of hostilities in 1988. On the contrary, the war of the tankers intensified in the last couple of years of the strife.

5.4.2.5. The economic and financial dimensions of the Iran-Iraq War

Meanwhile, in 1985, the Iranian regime re-initiated the war of the swamps. In reaction, Saddam Hussein began striking industrial manufactories and economic enterprises, to harm the Iranian war effort at a maximum level. As a direct response to this new warfare strategy, and in order to stretch out the Iraqi army along the 1,200 kilometers wide border between Iraq and Iran, the clergymen in Tehran awakened Kurdish irredentist dreams to secede from Iraq, and form a new autonomous, independent country in the north of Iraq. However, this innovative tactic triggered Ankara's wrath, because this would have made it easier for the PKK to move between Iraq and Turkey,

[275] Ibid, p 235.

making it harder and more complicated for the Turkish army to track and kill its insurgents. Prior to this, Turkey wasn't envisaging taking sides, as it was imperative for it to remain neutral. Similarly, neither Iraq nor Iran could afford to upset Turkey and, therefore, change the balance of power to their disadvantage.[276] That same year, sensing that this strife would never cease, which was draining the finances of the Gulf petro monarchies on whom Saddam Hussein depended to pursue his military activities against Iran, Washington and Riyadh devised a new plan to weaken the Iranian theocracy along with the Soviet Union, economically and financially.[277] In fact, in mid-1985, the Saudi Kingdom with the tacit consent, backing and approval of the Reagan administration, started pumping more oil to international markets. By doing so, and because Saudi Arabia was and still is a swing state within OPEC, the oil barrel's prices decreased, which, as a consequence, affected the performance of the Iranian economy, and the amount of liquidity it generated thereof to invest in its war against Iraq. This in turn reduced its capability to pursue the war to its own advantage, and at its own convenience. Additionally, Riyadh started taking away Iranian oil customers, thereby frustrating the political elite in Tehran. By the same token, given the Cold War circumstances prevailing at the time, by encouraging the Saudi Arabian monarchy to pursue this aggressive policy on the oil markets, Washington was aiming to ruin and devastate the Soviet economy, which was already in poor condition. This was made worse by Moscow's involvement in the Afghanistan quagmire, thereby depriving the Kremlin from generating high revenues by selling its hydrocarbons and minerals to the world. A few years later, the Soviet Union collapsed, giving birth to several new countries. In response to this new development, the

[276]Pierre Razoux, La Guerre Iran-Irak: Première Guerre Du Golfe, 1980-1988 (Paris, France: Perrin, 2013), p 331.

[277] Ibid, p 346.

Soviet Union started backing up Iran again for geopolitical, geo-economic and geo-strategic considerations and imperatives.

5.4.3. The last stage of the Iran-Iraq War (1987-1988):

5.4.3.1. The "Mother of All Battles": The failed Iranian military offensive on Bassora:

In 1987, the Iranian military command decided to launch a devastating offensive on Bassora in the South, the second largest city in Iraq after the capital Baghdad.[278] It was labeled the "Mother of All Battles", because its aftermath was detrimental and pivotal to the final outcome of this war.[279] However, despite reaching the outskirts of Bassora, the Iranians were badly defeated.[280] Saddam Hussein had ordered his generals to use all weapons available to them, including chemical and biological agents to defend their country. Indeed, at this stage of this militarized strife, which had lasted so far seven years, the territorial integrity of Iraq, its sovereignty, its independence, and, perhaps even its existence, as well as the survival of the regime, were at stake. Therefore, the Iraqis had everything to lose if they were to be defeated in this battle. The battle of Bassora can be compared to the battle of Stalingrad during world war two, when the Russians managed to defeat the advancing Germans and turn the tide of the war in their favor, before marching to Berlin. Indeed, the battle of Bassora represented a turning-point in the course of the war, because at this stage, the Iranian political and military elites were starting to feel that overthrowing the Baathist government in Baghdad was an unreachable

[278] Ibid, p 402.

[279] Ibid, p 404.

[280] Ibid, p 414.

objective.[281] Furthermore, the Iranian population was seriously beginning to get frustrated with the pointless war.[282] In fact, Iran saw defections, protests and demonstrations after the Bassora defeat of the Pasdaran. At this point in time, every Middle Eastern country, including Israel, despite its intense animosity towards the Iraqi regime, as well as the great powers, no longer had an interest in contemplating a radical and fanatical Iran win over Iraq. Iraq was seen as the last standing fortress capable of curbing the expansion and the spread of Iranian influence, both in terms of hard and soft power, across the region. Moreover, it was perceived to be mandatory for every rational country to assist Iraq in defeating Iran, short of paving the way for a destabilization of the region. The consequence of an Iraqi loss would have been at the benefit of the clergymen in Tehran, who were still interested in exporting their revolution across the Middle East, and more specifically in the Arab world. While it is true that the Iranian Thermidor was almost over, Khomeini's objectives of transforming Iran into the preeminent hegemon of the Middle East, were still unchanged.

5.4.3.2. The intervention of the United States of America and its allies in the course of the war

The formidable Bassora victory offered the Iraqis huge momentum to retake the initiative in mounting offensives against their enemy in order to liberate their national territory.[283] Indeed, the Iraqis had been on the defensive since 1982. In 1987 following their defeat at Bassora, the Iranian military higher command was obliged to modify its

[281] Ibid.

[282] Ibid.

[283] Ibid, p 416.

war strategies drastically.[284] First of all, it started planting maritime mines in the Persian Gulf to disrupt navigation, and it started bombarding oil tankers circulating this maritime zone, while making sure to target the Gulf monarchies' supertankers in order to attempt to intimidate them out of helping Saddam Hussein in the war.[285] In a countervailing reaction, the Gulf monarchies requested the help of the United States in accompanying their vessels by the American Navy, to avoid being dragged into the conflict, which they couldn't afford.[286] The American administration thus decided to assist its Gulf allies by deploying several battleships to the Persian Gulf, at the displeasure of the Soviet Union. This way, American forces could advance deeper and more firmly into this crucial zone. At the expense of its arch-enemy the USSR, the U.S. was able to better safeguard the sea lanes transporting hydrocarbons to the rest of the world, and it imposed itself as a reliable and staunch ally of the petro-monarchies. However, the U.S. deployment of maritime armed forces in the Gulf provoked Iran, which led it to confront the United States unilaterally, which proved to be a fatal mistake.[287] In addition, the Iranian authorities threatened to close the strait of Hormuz should the need arise. Iran assumed that it would be able to blackmail the great powers by threatening to disrupt the maritime communication lanes, however this threat had the opposite effect. This is what Saddam Hussein hoped to achieve, because he was aware that the great powers, and the US in specific, would not allow this scenario to materialize, regardless of the cost.

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[284] Ibid, p 415.

[285] Williamson Murray and Kevin M. Woods, The Iran-Iraq War: A Military and Strategic History (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p 306.

[286] Pierre Razoux, La Guerre Iran-Irak: Première Guerre Du Golfe, 1980-1988 (Paris, France: Perrin, 2013), p 433.

[287] Ibid, p 434.

A few weeks later, in September 1987, the US Navy SEALS filmed a group of Pasdaran mining the international waters of the Persian Gulf.[288] A military confrontation between both parties ensued for several days, whereby the Iranian navy was crushed by the Americans. This confrontation represented a devastating blow to the Iranian regime, which knew that it could not afford to wage a war against both Iraq and the US.[289] Meanwhile, the Iranian land forces triggered a massive rebellion inside Iraqi Kurdistan. Fearing the looming threat and the complicity of the Kurdish population, Saddam Hussein ordered the annihilation of Halabja, by whatever means possible,[290] during which the civilian population was not spared as the Iraqi military made use of chemical and biological gasses to kill all dissidents. Ultimately, the Iraqi army was able to recapture the Fao peninsula towards the beginning of 1988.[291] During the same period of time, the Iraqi army managed to take back all of its national territory.[292] The Iranian political elite ultimately became conscious of Iran's inability to fight both the Iraqi and American armies. That led Khomeini, eventually, to sign an armistice to end hostilities on the 20th of August, 1988.[293]

[288] Ibid, p 440.

[289] Ibid, p 443.

[290] Williamson Murray and Kevin M. Woods, The Iran-Iraq War: A Military and Strategic History (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 333.

[291] Pierre Razoux, La Guerre Iran-Irak: Première Guerre Du Golfe, 1980-1988 (Paris, France: Perrin, 2013), p 452.

[292] Ibid, p 463.

[293] Williamson Murray and Kevin M. Woods, The Iran-Iraq War: A Military and Strategic History (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 347.

5.4.3.3. The termination of hostilities

This deadly war cost Iraq 180 000 casualties, and Iran 500 000, as well as more than 1.5 million injuries and mutilations.[294] The Iraq-Iran war remains the most costly and murderous war of the Middle East. The military losses of both the Iraqi and the Iranian armies are overall equivalent to the military losses of Israel and its Arab adversaries during the Six-Day War of 1967, and the Ramadan War of 1973.[295] Iraq and Iran have lost 1.3 per cent of their populations during this eight-year war.[296] It is also worth noting that the rhythm of the military operations had followed the cost of the barrel of petrol: when the latter was expensive, the course of the military operations was intensive, whereas, when it was cheap, the course of the military operations was low.[297] Financially, the cost of this conflict was around 100 billion dollars. Iraq had to bear forty per cent of the war costs, whereas Iran had to bear 60 per cent.[298] While, on the one hand, the Iranian Islamic Republic had to bear the costs of the war at its own expense, Iraq had conducted the war on credit with the help of the petro-monarchies most of the time, but also with the debts allocated by the Americans, the Europeans, and the Soviets. This war disrupted the social and economic development of both countries. Following the end of the conflict, Saddam Hussein had to decide whether to disband the Iraqi army, or to keep

[294] Pierre Razoux, La Guerre Iran-Irak: Première Guerre Du Golfe, 1980-1988 (Paris, France: Perrin, 201, p 484.

[295] Ibid.

[296] Ibid.

[297] Ibid, p 485.

[298] Ibid.

it standing for the next conflict. Indeed, throughout the eight-year war with Iran, the size of the Iraqi army had quadrupled, but the Iraqi oil revenues had decreased by half.[299]

Militarily, the Iran-Iraq war was pointless, because both belligerents returned to the exact same national frontiers before the start of the hostilities, even though Iraq possessed a strong and experienced army at the time, unlike in 1980. However, politically, it was an Iraqi victory, because the mullahs in Iran weren't able to topple the Iraqi regime in Bagdad and establish instead a Shiite government influenced by the Wilayat al Faqih doctrine, subservient to Tehran. On the contrary, Saddam Hussein with the help of the Gulf monarchies, was able to put an end to the Iranian Thermidor. It is clear that Iraq or any other country, would not have been able to remove the clerics from power in Tehran, because Khomeini's ascent to power was supported by almost the entire Iranian population, who wished to get rid of the shah. On the contrary, the Iran-Iraq armed conflict paved the way for the radicalization of the Iranian regime, the renewal of the Iranian nuclear military program, and the bonding of the Iranian population with the Iranian regime.[300] Nonetheless, the clergymen in Iran took advantage of the war with Iraq to overpower their political rivals and opponents. Therefore, the war's occurrence was unlikely to affect Iranian leadership, whereas the Iraqi regime could have been wiped out if the Iraqis were not committed to protecting their state with external assistance. This ended up occurring in 2003 when the American army, under George Bush junior's administration, invaded Iraq to institute a democracy, which ultimately put Iraq under Iranian control after the American departure in 2011.

[299] Ibid, p 487.

[300] Ibid, p 496.

5.5. The creation of Hezbollah

With the death or disappearance of Musa al Sadr in 1978, it was the integration of the Amal political party into the Lebanese confessional system that triggered the creation of Hezbollah in 1982. Hezbollah split from Amal in 1982 and created Islamic Amal, before establishing Hezbollah that same year.[301] The Iranian revolution was interested in exporting its revolution across the Arab world. The Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 aimed at tackling the PLO provided the clergymen in Iran the perfect opportunity to achieve their ambitions and pursue the political emancipation of the Shiites initiated by Musa al Sadr. Until today, Hezbollah is the most successful model of Iran's efforts in emulating its revolution abroad, especially in the Arab world.

5.5.1. The emergence of Hezbollah

5.5.1.1. The Iranian mentor

In June 1982, some 800 to 1 200 Revolutionary Guards were sent to Lebanon in the Bekaa Valley through Syria to form Hezbollah.[302] There, they prepared prospective Hezbollah members by providing them political and religious indoctrination, military training, and instructing them on how to conduct terrorist attacks against foreign objectives. In 1987, a CIA analysis predicted that an Islamic radical movement would have most probably emerged in Lebanon even without external backing.[303] However, Iranian proselytism and support had stimulated this Islamic extremist movement.

[301] Aurélie Daher, *Hezbollah: Mobilisation and Power* (London, UK: Hurst & Company, 2019), 44.

[302] Ibid, p 47.

[303] Matthew Levitt, "Hezbollah's Regional Activities in Support of Iran's Proxy Networks," Middle East Institute, 2021, https://www.mei.edu/publications/hezbollahs-regional-activities-support-irans-proxy-networks, 5.

Nowadays, it is estimated that Iran provides Hezbollah with around 700 million to one billion dollars of financial aid every year ever since 1982.[304] In 1982, Hezbollah first called itself the Islamic Jihad Organization.[305] In fact, in 1983, a CIA report stated that the Islamic Jihad Organization was most likely to be a screen for Iran to conduct terrorist attacks against Western interests. This way Iran, by making use of Lebanese Shias as surrogates, could shield itself from harm. The Islamic Jihad Organization began as an ill-defined association of Lebanese Shiites, but with Iranian backing, it coalesced into what is today known as Hezbollah. Hezbollah follows the ideological, cultural and religious principles of the Iranian revolution.[306] Yet, despite Hezbollah's extreme pro-Iranian inclinations, its leaders strove to leave for themselves an exclusive margin of maneuver, independent of Iran. For example, Hezbollah's existence does not rely solely on Iran; nonetheless, Hezbollah would morph into a standard Lebanese party without Iran's support. Iran provides Hezbollah with strategic guidance, while at the same time, authorizing the party to conduct its day-to-day tactics.

5.5.1.2. The Syrian connection

Another external influence on Hezbollah was Syria, although the dynamics of that bilateral relationship have profoundly changed in the past twenty-three years, after Hafez

[304] Nicholas Blanford, "Hezbollah's Evolution: From Lebanese Militia to Regional Player," Middle East Institute, 2017, https://education.mei.edu/files/publications/PP4_Blanford_Hezbollah.pdf, 3.

[305] Matthew Levitt, "Hezbollah's Regional Activities in Support of Iran's Proxy Networks," Middle East Institute, 2021, https://www.mei.edu/publications/hezbollahs-regional-activities-support-irans-proxy-networks, 6.

[306] Pierre-Jean Luizard, *Histoire Politique Du Clergé Chiite: XVIIIe-XXIE SIÈCLE* (Paris, France: Fayard, 2014), 242.

al Assad's death.[307] Hezbollah was perceived as no more than an important tool to pressure Israel in south Lebanon, during the Middle Eastern peace negotiation in the 1990s. Yet, when Bashar al Assad acceded to power in 2000, he had a more comfortable relationship with Hezbollah, permitting the latter to have more leverage in Lebanon. By the same token, Syria began procuring military equipment for Hezbollah. Simultaneously, Hezbollah's military intervention in Syria to shore up the Assad regime since 2012, against the opposition, has transformed the Lebanese political party from a subordinate player to Damascus, to a partner.

5.5.1.3. Hezbollah's Modus Operandi

By virtue of its ideological commitment to Ayatollah Khomeini's revolutionary doctrine, Hezbollah is thus entitled to implement the Iranian clergymen's instructions to serve the Lebanese state, its sectarian Shia community in the country, and its fellow Shia abroad, mainly in the Arab world like Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. Hezbollah's other competing objectives have transcended resisting Israeli occupation of Lebanese territory and liberating historic Palestine, to include promoting the standing of the other Shia communities in the Arab world, undermining Arab states central governments' authorities to export the Iranian revolution, and serving itself as being the long arm of Iran, in juxtaposition with the Quds Force. [308]

[307] Nicholas Blanford, "Hezbollah's Evolution: From Lebanese Militia to Regional Player," Middle East Institute, 2017, https://education.mei.edu/files/publications/PP4_Blanford_Hezbollah.pdf, 1.

[308] Matthew Levitt, "Hezbollah's Regional Activities in Support of Iran's Proxy Networks," Middle East Institute, 2021, https://www.mei.edu/publications/hezbollahs-regional-activities-support-irans-proxy-networks, 9.

5.5.2. The Axis of Resistance: Hezbollah and Iran's proxy networks in the Middle East

5.5.2.1. Hezbollah: Junior Partner of al Quds Force

Up until now, Hezbollah is the Islamic Republic of Iran's most crucial non-state ally in the region.[309] The importance of Hezbollah to the Islamic Republic has augmented in the past few decades, because Hezbollah has not only been fighting Israel, but also been supporting the Quds Force for the past twenty years in mobilizing and training Shiites from across the world to fight in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. This way, Hezbollah became the junior partner of the Quds Force in the execution of the Axis of Resistance. It is important to highlight that Hezbollah is the first non-Iranian institution to swear its allegiance to the Wilayat al-Faqih doctrine. Hezbollah's intervention in Syria, Iraq and Yemen has shown that this organization became a tool for Iran to project its influence and power across the Middle East. Following the Israeli retreat from Lebanon in 2000, Hezbollah had only a few thousand armed men. After the 33-Days war, it is noted that Hezbollah had around 15 000 armed combatants.[310] But, after its intervention in Syria, Hezbollah's armed personnel reached around 20 000 to 30 000.[311] However, the number of dead and injured in Syria were very high, so Hezbollah had to recruit from within the pool of the Shiite community in Lebanon extensively, even if it was obliged to facilitate the religious, ideological and physical requirements it puts on its graduating fighters. Furthermore, after its involvement in Syria, Hezbollah started to send military advisers

[309] Guido Steinberg, "The 'Axis of Resistance': Iran's Expansion in the Middle East IS Hitting a Wall," swp-berlin, 2021, https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/research_papers/2021RP06_Axis_of_Resistance.pdf, 12.

[310] Ibid, p 13.

[311] Ibid.

and fighters alike into Iraq and Yemen, thus becoming a leeway for Iran, among Arabs. The fact that Hezbollah shares with these Iraqis, Syrians, Yemenis and other Arabs, from different nationalities, the same culture and language, made it much easier for Hezbollah members to train them. For example, during the conflict in Iraq from 2003 until 2011, and even afterwards, the Quds Force had ordered the deployment of Hezbollah combatants to fight Americans. Another illustration is their involvement in the Yemeni armed strife, whereby Hezbollah personnel are said to have provided expertise to the Houthis on how to make use of ballistic and cruise missiles as well as drones supplied by Iran. Before the 2006 War with Israel, Hezbollah was said to possess around 13 000 to 14 000 missiles of various types.[312] After the war, Iran began re-investing and rearming Hezbollah's apparatus with tens of thousands of missiles of the latest models, whose reach, power and accuracy exceed by far those of the previous generations. A substantial number of sources claim that Hezbollah currently possesses around 150 000 missiles and rockets.[313]

5.5.2.2. Lebanon: 'Forward Defense' platform

After having defeated Iraq's invading forces in 1982, and following Israel's invasion of Lebanon, the IRGC found that the country had a substantial number of Shiites, which represented a fertile ground for augmenting Iran's strategic depth inside the Middle East, and as a place to face Israel by proxy. Over time, the patron-client relationship between Hezbollah and the IRGC evolved into one of mutual interdependence, even if it

[312] Ibid, p 14.

[313] Ibid.

is asymmetrical.[314] This systematic reliance on Iran by Hezbollah should not be regarded as if the latter complies diligently with the Islamic Republic's preferences and orders on all fronts. However, after the unfolding of the Syrian conflict, both parties proclaimed that they now share a common destiny. Hezbollah's survival is acknowledged as of utmost importance to Iran's regional posture vis-à-vis Israel and the US. In addition, Hezbollah's intervention in Syria was also observed as a matter of self-preservation. Nevertheless, internally, Hezbollah's rivals blame Hezbollah for sacrificing Lebanon's interests in favor of those of Iran. Hezbollah was regarded as an asset in deterring Israel and American willingness to attack Iran's nuclear facilities at the peak of the nuclear crisis between the US and Israel, versus Iran. Iran mainly perceives Hezbollah to fulfill the role of 'Forward Defense', because the Islamic Republic is aware that it cannot substantially harm Israel from its territory. During the conflict in Syria, it is believed that Ayatollah Khamenei had requested Hezbollah's top political and military commanders to execute the grand Syrian strategy, on behalf of the so called Axis of Resistance, while Iran would lead only indirectly. In fact, as an Arab force, Hezbollah had more affinities in dealing and managing day-to-day operations and battles with the Syrian army than Iran does.

5.5.2.3. Hezbollah's participation in the Syrian civil war

Hezbollah's entry into Syria in 2011 was the biggest military operation it had ever conducted, even larger in scope and size than its resistance campaigns against Israeli

[314] "Iran's Priorities in a Turbulent Middle East," Crisis Group, April 23, 2018, https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran/184-irans-priorities-turbulent-middle-east, 13.

troops occupying southern Lebanon in the 1980s and 1990s.[315] According to several studies, Hezbollah deployed an average of 8 000 fighters in Syria at any given time.[316] Usually, Hezbollah was employed as the spearhead in new offensive military operations in Syria, because of its discipline, integrity, cohesion and high performance. Yet, Hezbollah was also employed to train and command Liwa Fatemiyoun, the Afghani Shiite volunteers, and Liwa Zainabiyoun, the Pakistani Shiite volunteers. Hezbollah justifies its presence in Syria for two different reasons. First, according to Hezbollah, Syria under al Assad represents the backbone of the resistance, and its demise would weaken the anti-Israel front and represent the definitive loss of the Palestinian cause. The resistance cannot remain neutral while its backbone is under attack, and in danger.[317] Second, according to Hezbollah, the Assad regime's fall would facilitate the rise of Sunni extremist groups like Hayat Tahrir al Sham, or terrorist affiliated groups like Jabhat al Nusra whom Hezbollah called Takfirists, which would threaten the existence of Hezbollah, because the former consider Shiites to be apostates.[318] In 2014, Hezbollah started working on a defensive infrastructure in the northern Golan that was unrelated to the actual war against the anti-Assad forces.[319] Indeed, Hezbollah was preparing itself for future operations against Israel, as they are aware of Iranian ambitions for the Golan, and have stated that their activities there represent a red line for Tel Aviv. So far, Russia has acquiesced to Israeli

[315] Nicholas Blanford, "Hezbollah's Evolution: From Lebanese Militia to Regional Player," Middle East Institute, 2017, https://education.mei.edu/files/publications/PP4_Blanford_Hezbollah.pdf, 7.

[316] Ibid.

[317] Ibid, p 8.

[318] Ibid.

[319] Ibid.

demands, who requested to keep a buffer zone of 10 to 15 kilometers between the strategic Golan Heights, and the Iranian and Hezbollah forces.[320] Nonetheless, on the longer run, it is unclear if Russia could or will be able to oblige Iran and Hezbollah to give up their Golan Heights agenda. The Golan Heights could witness the next theater of armed strife, between Hezbollah and the Zionist state. Furthermore, another pivotal role Hezbollah could play is its contribution to rebuilding the Syrian army in the post-war era.[321] The Syrian armed forces were traditionally schooled in Soviet military doctrine, with a focus on swift mass armored assaults. Taking into account that Israel will remain Syria's primary threat, the Syrian military apparatus will lack the capabilities to build a conventional army, which could endanger the IDF. A probable outcome is that the Syrian military elite could decide to adopt or be inspired by Hezbollah's hybrid-warfare doctrine, with an added focus on anti-tank missiles, air defense systems and surface-to-surface rockets, then on tanks and aircraft. This is possible because it would pose a larger danger to the IDF.

The outbreak of violence in Syria in March 2011 posed a dilemma for Hezbollah. Syria is considered to be the rear through which its armaments, weaponry and ammunition flow from Iran and through which its combatants travel to Iran for intensive training.[322] Despite Hezbollah's secretary general proclaiming unqualified support for Bashar al Assad in his war against the Syrian rebels and the Syrian population, fighting in Syria proved to be a risky political endeavor, and a dangerous military campaign for Hezbollah.

[320] Ibid, p 9.

[321] Ibid.

[322] Yiftah Shapir, "Hezbollah as an Army," Inss.org.il, 2017, http://www.inss.org.il/strategic_assessment/hezbollah-as-an-army/, 68.

Fighting in Syria would detract Hezbollah from its raison d'être, which is destroying the Israeli nation-state. In addition, there was no ideological common denominator between Hezbollah and the secular Baathist Syrian regime. Furthermore, interfering in the Syrian quagmire on behalf of the Syrian regime would entail fighting against other Muslims, whereas Hezbollah prefers to reflect itself as a Pan-Islamic organization, and not necessarily a Pan-Shiite entity.[323] Yet, Syria represents the Islamic Republic of Iran's most pivotal ally in the region, because it permits the latter to gain a considerable foothold in the Fertile Crescent, and it connects Tehran and Baghdad to Beirut and Gaza passing through Damascus. However, Hezbollah's realist political interests overrode its ideological affinities and beliefs.[324] In the Fall of 2011, the media began to report that Hezbollah soldiers were committing themselves in the Syrian civil and regional war.[325] Nevertheless, it was only in April 2013 that Hassan Nasrallah publicly declared that his peers were fighting in neighboring Syria.[326] In May 2013, Hezbollah's first major test was its battle in al Qusayr whereby around 1 500 elite al Radwan combatants were assisting the pro-regime forces. Another famous battle took place in Damascus' neighborhoods, in Rif Damascus, known as East Ghouta. Simultaneously, Hezbollah undertook a military campaign along the Syrian-Lebanese borders, in the mountainous Qalamoun zone. In September 2015, at Hajj Qassem Suleimani's behest, Russia intervened in the course of the war for three main strategic reasons. It adamantly wasn't prepared to lose its most ancient ally in the region; it desired to project its power back

[323] Ibid.

[324] Ibid.

[325] Ibid.

[326] Ibid, p 69.

into the Middle East after decades of absence; and it was determined to have access to naval military ports in hot waters, like those it built or revitalized in Tartus and Latakia. In fact, Russian intervention through mainly air force firepower, proved to be detrimental. Without Russia's interference, it is very likely that the Syrian regime would have been toppled, and the Iranian Axis of Resistance would have most probably been discontinued and partially annihilated. Then, Hezbollah's existence would be at stake. While Russian forces were conducting air sorties to bomb the Syrian rebels and opposition groups, Iran and its allies were deploying their boots on the ground. It is widely held that the Russians equipped Hezbollah and requested it to carry out a substantial amount of operations. Fighting together with the Russian army exposed Hezbollah to the very high technology weapon systems and institutional methods of a powerful army, trained to operate in large size formations, and with coordination between several varied military branches.[327] With this precious amount of experience, Hezbollah developed and transformed itself one step closer to looking like a modern strong army. In November 2016, Hezbollah deployed a military parade in the Syrian town of al Qussayr, in which it staged its latest very advanced weaponry. Deputy secretary general Naim Qassem stressed on the fact that, Hezbollah through its intervention in Syria, has transformed itself into a regular army, and was no longer a guerilla force.[328]

Committing high ranking commanders and strategists to crucial war zones enabled Hezbollah to provide added value to its allies and to Iran in these armed

[327] Ibid.

[328] Ibid.

confrontations.[329] Hezbollah's participation in these war zones consisted of military deployments, training local militias, capacity building efforts limited to weapons or technology transfer, propaganda and disinformation, cyber training, illicit financial activities, intelligence collection efforts and pre-operational surveillance in the designated area.[330] Aware of the internal and external difficulties its fighting in Syria would create, Hezbollah first hid its massive deployments in Syria.[331] But, as of April 2013, the Islamic Resistance was committing itself in fighting across the whole Syrian mainland from areas next to the Lebanese frontier up north to Aleppo, down south near the border with Jordan and the Golan Heights, and in eastern Syria next to the Iraqi border.[332] However, Hezbollah had to suffer a very high number of dead and injured, more than it lost in all of its combined battles with the Zionist entity. Indeed, Hezbollah lost around 2 000 of its battle hardened units in addition to an approximate 5 000 to 6 000 injured, paralyzed or mutilated.[333] In addition, as of 2014, the Party of God pursued its aid to Shia militias in Iraq, in order for them to be able to repel and defeat the Islamic State, and to protect Shia shrines especially in Karbala and in Najaf.[334] Reflecting the creation of Unit 1800, a unit whose task is to support Palestinian groups against Israel, the Islamic Resistance was behind the creation of Unit 3800 in Iraq. Similarly, as of 2014,

[329] Matthew Levitt, "Hezbollah's Regional Activities in Support of Iran's Proxy Networks," Middle East Institute, 2021, https://www.mei.edu/publications/hezbollahs-regional-activities-support-irans-proxy-networks, 11.

[330] Ibid.

[331] Ibid.

[332] Ibid.

[333] Ibid.

[334] Ibid, p 12.

United Nations experts have emphasized that Hezbollah members were training Houthis in infantry tactics, ATGM anti-tank guided missile operations, offensive mine warfare and anti-shipping attacks. It is worth highlighting that Hezbollah's mentoring exercises to the Houthis in Yemen date back to as far as 2005.[335]

What are the repercussions of Hezbollah's intervention in Syria on Lebanon? Lebanon's sectarian schism was historically founded between Christians and Muslims. But, in the past few decades, this schism has moved to become an intra-Muslim antagonism between Sunnis and Shiites, with Christians splitting themselves between the two communal groups.[336] Hezbollah's entrance into the Syrian quagmire has only exacerbated these tensions, because it not only alienated Lebanese Sunnis, but wholesale Sunnis across the Middle East.[337] Hezbollah's interference in the course of the Syrian civil war sparked a countervailing response in Lebanon, with dozens of rockets fired by Syrian militant groups into the Bekaa valley, starting 2013 onwards, and with a wave of suicidal vehicle-borne improvised explosive device attacks between July 2013 and the end of June 2014, which was behind the death of more than one hundred Lebanese citizens.[338]

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[335] Ibid, p 14.

[336] Nicholas Blanford, "Hezbollah's Evolution: From Lebanese Militia to Regional Player," Middle East Institute, 2017, https://education.mei.edu/files/publications/PP4_Blanford_Hezbollah.pdf, 14.

[337] Ibid.

[338] Ibid, p 13.

5.5.3. Hezbollah's transition from a national political party into a regional actor

The series of conflicts that have raged the last couple of decades in the Middle East, in which Iran has some sort of leverage and influence have authorized Hezbollah to spread-out its sphere of action, from the very limited Arab-Israeli conflict, to mold itself into becoming a regional actor.[339] From Hezbollah's standpoint, the struggle against Israel and the willingness to liberate occupied Palestine remains its focal point and ultimate objective, and is embedded in its resistance narrative and rhetoric. However, Hezbollah's military help in Syria, Iraq and Yemen have proved it to be a force-multiplier, for groups affiliated to, or allied with Iran.[340] Similarly, the cold war between Iran and Saudi Arabia and their respective allies has reached new heights in the past few decades, and therefore this new development has permitted Hezbollah to play a regional role, facilitating Iranian power projection in the Near East.[341]

Hezbollah's transformation into a regional actor was translated by the redeployment of key military personnel from the group's Southern Command, along the borders with the Zionist state, to new battle frontiers that involved countries like Syria, Iraq and Yemen.[342] Even before Hezbollah's 2006 war with the Jewish state, the resistance complied with Iranian demands regarding training Iraqi Shia militant groups such as Jaish al Mahdi and Asaib Ahl al Haq infighting Coalition Forces in Iraq, under

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[339] Ibid.

[340] Ibid.

[341] Matthew Levitt, "Hezbollah's Regional Activities in Support of Iran's Proxy Networks," Middle East Institute, 2021, https://www.mei.edu/publications/hezbollahs-regional-activities-support-irans-proxy-networks, 10.

[342] Ibid.

Unit 3800.[343] Then, with the looming crisis in Syria, Hezbollah added two new military commands to monitor its troops there, in addition to the pre-existing military commands in southern and eastern Lebanon. The first one was located on the Lebanese Syrian border, whereas the second one was situated within the Syrian mainland itself.[344] It is worth mentioning that Hezbollah's secretary general hesitated before deploying its veteran armed forces to Syria in order to defend Bashar al Assad's regime.[345] Nasrallah only accepted the request after he received a personal appeal from Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.[346]

Hezbollah's role as a regional actor did not begin with its deployment to Syria, but was present in Iraq and Yemen at an earlier time. However, Hezbollah's armed undertakings are still subservient to Tehran. The nature of the relationship between Hezbollah and Iran is a partnership in which the IRGC-QF is the senior partner, whereas Hezbollah is the junior partner. This strategic bilateral relationship is the fruit of more than four decades of cooperation and coordination. Within this strategic partnership, one of the Islamic Resistance's important prerogatives and responsibilities was to oversee Tehran's proxy networks, especially in the Arab world but through close coordination with Qassem Suleimani, who before his death was considered to be Iran's fighter without borders. This proxy alliance configuration which authorized Hezbollah to play a regional role in the Middle East has evolved into becoming a solidified Axis of Resistance, especially after the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, the unfolding of the Arab Spring, the

[343] Ibid.

[344] Ibid.

[345] Ibid.

[346] Ibid, p 11.

eruption of the Syrian civil war, and the rise of the Islamic State in both Iraq and Syria. However, after Suleimani's assassination with one of his deputies, Abu Mahdi al Muhandis, the management of Iran's enlarging and extensive proxy networks became a more complicated and difficult task to fulfill. However, since January 2020, marking the death of Quds Force general Sulaimani, it is Hezbollah personnel that are mainly attempting to replace the former's leadership role and responsibilities.

Initially reduced in scope, Hezbollah's interference in the Syrian civil war gradually expanded into a full-scale undertaking across the entirety of the Syrian territory with Hezbollah using its sectarian Shia identity to justify its intervention. Sect-centric narratives and victimhood were only means used by Hezbollah's political leadership to encourage their followers to contribute to the war efforts, for what was actually a geopolitical struggle initially between Saudi, Qatari and Turkish backed opposition and rebel groups, against the so-called Axis of Resistance, encompassing Hezbollah, the Syrian regime, Iraq and the Islamic Republic of Iran.[347] However, although the Islamic Resistance described this war in terms of sect-centric narratives, and possible Shiite victimhood and persecution in case Hezbollah did not interfere against the so-called Takfirists, the conflict in Syria was a war of utmost necessity for Hezbollah. Hezbollah's intervention was aimed at preventing its decline, and safeguarding its axes of communication and logistics with Iran, through mainly Syria, but also Iraq.[348] Hezbollah's engagement in Syria transformed the former from a guerilla militia, to an ANSA – or an armed non-state actor.[349] This evolution and metamorphosis of Hezbollah

[347] Hadi Wahab, *Hezbollah: A Regional Armed Non-State Actor* (S.l., UK: Routledge, 2024), iv.

[348] Ibid.

[349] Ibid.

into an ANSA was made possible by the interaction of three intertwined elements, which are Hezbollah's sectarian mobilization and the use of its sectarian identity; Hezbollah's transition into a quasi-army juxtaposing guerilla tactics with classical army formation; and its embedding as a partner with an equal footing in the decision-making of the so-called Resistance Axis that stretches from Tehran to Beirut.[350] Despite the fact that the so-called Axis of Resistance, including Hezbollah, was hitting a wall as of 2019 with the financial, social, political and economic crisis in Lebanon, and the appearance of the COVID-19 pandemic across the world, the interplay of these three features paved the way for Hezbollah to meet its apex on both the internal and external levels. Currently, ANSAs are key tools for the projection of power in the regional order of the Near East. [351]

Around twenty-three years ago, Hezbollah was a small organization that projected very little political influence in Lebanon and was solely devoted to the resistance campaign aiming to force Israel to retreat from south Lebanon.[352] Most of the time, it avoided getting embroiled in Lebanese politics, except that it kept only a few parliamentarians representing it. When it was able to oust Israel from the South of Lebanon in May 2000, it was congratulated by the entirety of the sectarian spectrum for its notable military achievements.[353] The range of its largest rocket was a mere twenty kilometers and its military wing, the Islamic Resistance, consisted of 3 000 fighters both full and part timers.[354] However, Hezbollah in its current form is quite different from the

[350] Ibid.

[351] Ibid.

[352] Nicholas Blanford, "Hezbollah's Evolution: From Lebanese Militia to Regional Player," Middle East Institute, 2017, https://education.mei.edu/files/publications/PP4_Blanford_Hezbollah.pdf, 22.

[353] Ibid.

[354] Ibid.

one depicted above, in the year 2000. Hezbollah is currently the most influential political party, and the most powerful military actor inside Lebanon, with tens of thousands of well trained and equipped combatants.[355] Contemporaneously, Hezbollah has spread out across every outlet of Lebanon's political, military, administrative, economic, financial and even social structures, and has a say on any government decree or selection transcending all factions.[356] Yet, despite its leverages and power projection inside Lebanese society, Hezbollah has suffered lately from setbacks that might endanger its unity in the longer run.[357] These problems are mainly corruption, domestic cash flow shortages to finance its foreign military operations, and the large number of casualties during the ongoing war in Syria, among other elements.[358] As stated previously, if Syria's war continues, Hezbollah will confront hardships in maintaining its support base's morale. Safeguarding the backing of the Lebanese Shiite community is paramount to Hezbollah's survival and existence. Without this backing, Hezbollah's influence will decrease in Lebanon and across the region, as Iran's foremost power projector. Simultaneously, while tighter European and American sanctions will certainly constrain the party financially, these developments could have an irreversible and an undesirable impact on Lebanon's shaky economy, which could trigger a new civil war or political instability.[359] The most probable method of eroding Hezbollah's influence may come

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[355] Ibid.

[356] Ibid.

[357] Ibid.

[358] Ibid.

[359] Ibid, p 23.

from within, rather than from external plans and strategies.[360] Ultimately, the disentanglement of the social contract between Hezbollah and the Lebanese Shiite community may be the only way to eradicate Hezbollah as a political party.[361] Since the liberation of south Lebanon, Hezbollah has attempted to find some compromise between its resistance rhetoric and the aspirations and interests of its backers. Yet, with the onset of the Syrian civil and regional conflict, Hezbollah has become a regional actor and a power projector of Iranian influence in the Middle East, which slightly lies at odds with its other role, as protector of Lebanese Shiites.[362] Those contrasting points of interest are increasing, and it remains to be seen whether or not Hezbollah will be able to harmonize the two.[363]

Iran was able to take advantage of the situation to expand its reach in the Middle East, and to attain its zenith in 2018, despite the onset of the Arab Spring in 2011.[364] However, as of 2018, even though it has not suffered any strategic military defeat, Iran's expansion in this area is facing severe impediments.[365] The crux lies in the fact that its proxy networks in the Arab world are incapable of guaranteeing the basic minimum of political and economic stability, despite their usual ability to vanquish their opponents in military conflict.[366] This is particularly the case in Lebanon, for example, whereby

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[360] Ibid.

[361] Ibid.

[362] Ibid.

[363] Ibid.

[364] Guido Steinberg, "The 'Axis of Resistance': Iran's Expansion in the Middle East IS Hitting a Wall," swp-berlin, 2021, https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/research_papers/2021RP06_Axis_of_Resistance.pdf, 6.

[365] Ibid.

[366] Ibid.

Hezbollah has a de-facto veto in the Lebanese political arena, and makes use of the country's resources, but without being interested in establishing a functional state. Hezbollah's military power shields it from exclusion or defeat in any armed confrontation. Yet, Lebanon is currently at risk of being labeled as a failed state. Additionally, Hezbollah's rivals have not been able to counterbalance it effectively, which leads to an unstable chronic stalemate. Despite the 2019 protest movements directed partially at Hezbollah among other political parties due to corruption and mismanagement, the Shiite organization's influence did not cease. On the contrary, Hezbollah had impeded any policy reforms that might harm it in Beirut. Currently, the United States is looking for initiatives to curtail the power of Hezbollah, but given the organization's deep immersion within Lebanon's political, economic and social landscapes, the amount of realistic options for external powers to dismantle Hezbollah, or convince it to give up its military wing, are nearly null.

5.6. Conclusion

Finally, in chapter V titled "The development of Iran's Arab policy", the author began by talking about the crucial role of Musa al Sadr in Lebanon in section one which started with his arrival in 1957 by awakening the Shiites in Lebanon who were politically, socially and economically marginalized. In other words, his legacy in Lebanon among the Shiites is legendary because he successfully emancipated them before he mysteriously and suddenly disappeared in Libya in 1978. Then, in the second section of chapter V, the author talked about the geo-strategic alliance between Baathist secular Syria and theocratic fundamentalist Iran. Syria under Hafez al Assad needed to counterbalance Israel after Egypt signed a peace treaty with the Zionist state whereas Iran was isolated

and threatened by its neighbors. Therefore, against all odds, for pragmatic and imperative national interests as well as for the sake of regime survival, both political regimes signed an alliance. Afterwards, in section three of chapter V, the author described the Iran-Iraq war. This was one of the most intensive and costly armed strife in the Middle East. Even though Iran was defeated militarily, it guaranteed its territorial integrity and sovereignty, while succeeding in maintaining the revolution's momentum. Indeed, the war strengthened the bonds between the political elite and the Iranian population. In other terms, the Mullahs were able to consolidate their gains previously acquired. In section four, the author described the creation, the rise and the galvanic evolution of Hezbollah in Lebanon. In fact, Hezbollah is the most successful undertaking of the Islamic Republic of Iran since the revolution of 1979. Nowadays, it contributes positively to the regional hegemonic aspirations and ambitions of the Iranian theocracy by leading the latter's network of proxies in Syria, Iraq and Yemen.

Finally, in chapter VI, titled "Turning into a regional power", the author will seek to address the Iranian domination of Iraq, the Iranian alliance with the Houthis in Yemen and the Iranian sponsorship of Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza and the occupied territories of historic Palestine.

CHAPTER 6

TURNING INTO A REGIONAL POWER

6.1. Introduction

In Chapter V, titled “The development of Iran’s Arab Policy”, the author talked about the crucial role of Musa al Sadr in Lebanon in section one, which began with his arrival in 1957 by awakening the Shiites in Lebanon who were politically, socially and economically marginalized. Then, in the second section of chapter V, the author talked about the geo-strategic alliance between Baathist secular Syria and theocratic fundamentalist Iran. Afterwards, in section three of chapter V, the author described the Iran-Iraq war. In section four of Chapter V, the author addressed the creation, the rise and the galvanic evolution of Hezbollah in Lebanon. Nowadays, it contributes positively to the regional hegemonic aspirations and ambitions of the Iranian theocracy by leading the latter’s network of proxies in Syria, Iraq and Yemen.

Iran’s Arab policy objectives can be identified as threefold: its first objective was to become the de facto leader of the region since it considers itself a key nation in the Middle East. The second objective of Iran’s Arab policy was to export its own revolution and spread Islamist republics similar to its own across the entirety of the Arab countries, which it considered despotic and totalitarian. The third objective of Iran’s Arab policy was to topple the corrupt pro-American political regimes.

The objective of Chapter VI is to describe how Iran transformed itself from a normal country with almost no influence in the area into a regional power in the Middle East. That is why in Chapter VI, the author intends to talk in the first section about Iraq, which Iran was able to dominate after the American invasion in 2003. Then, in the second

section of Chapter VI, the author will talk about the Iranian sponsorship of Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Finally, in the third section of Chapter VI, the author will address the Iranian alliance with the Houthis in Yemen. Chapter VI is significant because it describes to the reader how Iran, by virtue of the implementation of its Arab policies, was capable of turning itself into the quasi-hegemon of the Near East. Chapter VI contributes to the thesis central question by demonstrating that Iran, by seeking to become the uncontested regional power of the Middle East, is modifying the balance of power in the Fertile Crescent to its advantage, thus destabilizing the geopolitical order of the Near East.

6.2. The Iranian domination of Iraq

Iraq's territory is situated in what is known as Mesopotamia, which is where the world's first civilizations emerged.[367] Up until 633 A.D., Iraq was part of the Sassanian Empire.[368] However, with the onset of the Arab Muslim conquests from the Arabian Peninsula, Iraq was subject to Arab rule from 633 A.D. through 1258 A.D. thus encompassing Umayyad and then Abbasid caliphates.[369] Then, from 1258, the year Hulagu Khan took Baghdad until 1534, Iraq was ruled by Turkic tribes.[370] By the turn of the sixteenth century, from around 1534, the year Suleiman the Magnificent conquered Baghdad, until 1914, Iraq represented a borderland between the Ottoman and the Safavid

[367] Mark Gasiorowski, Sean L. Yom, and Ariel I Ahram, "Republic of Iraq," essay, in *The Government and Politics of the Middle East and North Africa* (Boulder, CO, New York: Westview Press, 2016), p 159.

[368] Ibid, p 160.

[369] Ibid.

[370] Ibid.

Empires.[371] The Ottoman sultans and the Safavid shahs fought many wars against each other to earn control of the land of contemporary Iraq. However, usually, if not most of the time, the Ottomans prevailed over the Safavids. With the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire in 1918, the British Empire took control of Mesopotamia and created the state of modern Iraq in 1920.[372] British occupation of modern Iraq lasted until 1932 with the proclamation of the independence of Iraq, which was ruled by the Hashemite dynasty until 1958, overthrown by a bloody coup conducted by Abdel Karim Qasim.[373] For the next ten years, Iraq was proclaimed to be a republic until the Baath political party took control over the country from 1968 up until 2003, taking into account that Saddam Hussein governed Iraq with an iron fist from 1979 until the American invasion.[374]

6.2.1. The vested interests of Iran in Iraq post-2003

The invasion of Iraq by the United States and its British ally in March 2003 did not surprise the clergymen in Iran.[375] On the contrary, the latter were expecting it and had already laid the groundwork for the post-Saddam Hussein era. The Mullah in Tehran were not worried about the invasion of Iraq by external armies, but were preoccupied with the moment these occupying forces would leave the country. Ever since the proclamation of the Iranian theocracy by Khomeini in 1979, the clerics in Tehran had envisioned taking

[371] Ibid, p 161.

[372] Ibid.

[373] Ibid, p 162.

[374] Ibid, p 163.

[375] Keiko Sakai, Philip Marfleet, and Ali Granmayeh, "Iranian-Iraqi Relations 2003-2013: Iran's Influence in Post-Saddam Iraq," essay, in *Iraq since the Invasion: People and Politics in a State of Conflict* (Abingdon, Oxon, New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2020), 206–18, 206.

advantage of the presence of Iraqi Shiites to further their ambitions in Iraq. A substantial number of Iraqi Shia religious men, first among them the leader of Dawa, Ayatollah Baqir al Sadr, were assassinated by Saddam Hussein's secret services for their alleged conspiracy in this plan in 1979. Upon the demise of the Baathist political regime in Baghdad, the Iranian leaders in Tehran pursued their objective of subduing Iraq. A few years after the invasion of Iraq by Anglo-American forces, it became clear that the Anglo-American decision to occupy Iraq, which was for a long period of time, the Arab Eastern gate against Iranian expansionism, was a geo-political and geo-strategic mistake, because it paved the way for Iran to impose itself in Iraq. The Iranian political regime had many crucial interests to safeguard in Iraq. Therefore, its interference in its neighboring country should be perceived as a logical step. These interests are geo-political, geo-strategic, and geo-economic.

6.2.1.1. The Geo-political partnership

Generally, the Iranian people still remember the troublesome eight-year long war with Iraq. Therefore, Iranian security officials are currently making sure that Iraq does not pose a military threat to Iran. Indeed, Iran and Iraq share a long border, and continued border disputes between both countries always provided a source of anxiety for the Iranian regime, who believed that Iraq could be used as a springboard for attacking Iran especially after 2003. In fact, the Islamic Republic of Iran was surrounded in a pincer movement of American forces on its eastern border in Afghanistan since 2001, and on its western border in Iraq since 2003. As such, when the American forces became visible on the Iraqi-Iranian border, Iranian military commanders decided to try to push American armed forces out of their neighboring country, but without having to risk a direct standoff.

Overall, the Iranian political leaders consent in conceiving Iraq as Iran's most important security priority outside of its frontiers. Indeed, Iraq bears a particular place in Iran's strategic thinking. First, Iranian clergymen agree that they must ensure the presence of a strong central Iraqi government capable of keeping the country together and securing Iran's western flank, without transforming into a plausible political and military threat and competitor to Tehran.[376] Second, Iranian Mullahs agree that they must preserve Iraq's territorial integrity, because they fear that Iraq's collapse could have a domino effect on Iran, which is made up of a mosaic of ethnic and religious communities.[377] Third, Iranian political experts agree that they must not permit Iranian dissidents or foreign forces to construct military bases inside Iraqi territory to push Iran back, or eventually attack it. Iran's goal in Iraq in the forthcoming years, despite the local instability wreaked by weak governance, endemic corruption, and the lack of intercommunal reconciliation, is to disallow the rise of new threats whether from the US, Israel, Saudi Arabia or their proxies.[378] To prevail, Iran must make sure that Iraq is governed by Shiite politicians loyal to Iran, back the PMU, and increase its military leverage, as well as safeguard its sway over the levers of Iraqi security and intelligence apparatuses.

[376] "Iran's Priorities in a Turbulent Middle East | Crisis Group," International Crisis Group, April 13, 2018, https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran/184-irans-priorities-turbulent-middle-east, 9.

[377] Ibid.

[378] Ibid.

6.2.1.2. The Geo-strategic Alliance

Most importantly, Iran has a vested interest in keeping a strategic partnership with Iraq.[379] The ouster of Saddam Hussein from power paved the way for the rise of a new kind of rivalry over regional supremacy between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The latter was the main benefactor from the fall of the Baathist Sunni political regime in Baghdad, which led to the rise of Shia politicians in Iraq, many of whom had close ties with Tehran. Some Iranian officials claimed that their objectives are to strengthen Iraq's Shiite factions and to keep it within a larger Shia orbit. Saudi Arabia attempted to sabotage this Iranian objective by keeping Iraq out of the Iranian sphere of influence and helping anti-Iranian Sunni politicians and militias in Iraq. Indeed, Saudi Arabia feared that Iraq would be incorporated into the Iranian Shiite realm, and that the Iraqi Sunni population would be relegated from a plausible share in power-sharing in Iraq. Some Shia politicians who ran the Iraqi government after the ouster of Saddam Hussein asserted that most of the Iraqi privileges belonged to them, based on their demographic majority, and accused the former Baathist regime and the Iraqi Sunni constituency for being the main culprits for their past suffering. The Syrian civil war contributed substantially in consolidating the relations between Iran and Iraq. Indeed, Iran made use of the Iraqi land corridor to send logistical aid for Bashar al Assad's regime. Iraq's government under Nuri al Maliki protested against the suspension of Syria's membership in the Arab League, and encouraged Iraqi Shiite militias to cross the border into Syria, to save the Assad regime from falling, since the Syrian civil war became a sectarian regional conflict as well.

[379] Keiko Sakai, Philip Marfleet, and Ali Granmayeh, "Iranian-Iraqi Relations 2003-2013: Iran's Influence in Post-Saddam Iraq," essay, in *Iraq since the Invasion: People and Politics in a State of Conflict* (Abingdon, Oxon, New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2020), 206–18, 211.

6.2.1.3. The Geo-economic interdependence

Most pundits tend to believe that in addition to its political objectives, Iran is trying to link Iraq to it economically and financially. Since the beginning of the Anglo-American occupation of Iraq in 2003, Iran has negotiated various economic projects in Iraq, such as the construction of highways to connect Basra to Iranian economic centers, the building of an airport for the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala, and power plants in the south of Iraq.[380] Furthermore, Iranian trade with Iraq has grown exponentially since the invasion of Iraq, despite Iran's major exports to Iraq consisting of oil products and natural gas.[381] In addition, Iran's economic linkages with Iraq are sometimes believed to be established in order to offset the international sanctions against it.[382]

6.2.2. Iraq post-2003, a vassal state to Iran

6.2.2.1. Iran's elimination of domestic opponents in Iraq

The Mujahidin-e Khalq Organization, also known as MKO, was a left-wing Islamist militia that had been confronting the clergymen in Tehran since 1981. The MKO leaders were provided a safe haven in Iraq in 1985 by Saddam Hussein. The MKO was granted huge privileges by the Iraqi regime on its soil, in exchange for its military help during the Iran-Iraq War, during the invasion of Kuwait in 1990, and in the suppression of Shia and Kurdish rebellions in 1991. It comes as no surprise that Iranian leaders were

[380] Ibid, p 212.

[381] Ibid.

[382] Ibid.

adamant in having Americans or Iraqis closing the MKO's base in Iraq, and having its members extradited or deported to Iran.[383]

6.2.2.2. Iran's eradication of Kurdish encroachment on its frontiers from Iraq

Another important issue is the blockage of cross-border encroachment by Kurdish insurgents. According to the Algiers Agreement, Iran and Iraq consented to forestall the cross-border passage of Kurdish Peshmerga into the other country's territory. In 1975, this was an Iraqi domestic issue, but when this problem was settled thereafter, it became an Iranian issue. The Free Life Party of Kurdistan, known as PJAK, is an Iranian Kurdish insurgent group, which has undertaken a sizable amount of military endeavors against Iranian territory from their headquarters in north-eastern Iraq. The crux of the issue lies in the Iraqi government's inability to establish control over the entirety of Iraq's territory. Additionally, the Kurdish Regional Government located in Erbil isn't interested in controlling the Kurdish insurgents active in neighboring countries.[384]

6.2.2.3. Iran's dispute on the Shatt al-Arab waterway with Iraq

Another point of contention between Iraq and Iran is the dispute over the sovereignty of the Shatt al-Arab waterway, which marks a portion of the international border between the states. The waterway was under the sole control of Iraq until 1968, when Iran asked for new provisions guaranteeing the legitimate rights of both countries. Following the Algiers Agreement of 1975, this waterway fell under the jurisdiction of both Iraq and Iran. However, at the time, Saddam Hussein approved the agreement under

[383] Ibid, p 208.

[384] Ibid.

pressure, in exchange for the shah halting Iran's constant backing of Kurdish insurgents in Iraq. Iran now considers the Shatt al-Arab borders as inviolable, whereas Iraq, in contrast, is interested in amending the 1975 Algiers agreement.[385]

6.2.2.4. Iran's altercation on the delimitation of its national frontiers with Iraq

Another issue between Iran and Iraq concerns the land borders that stretch for over 1500 kilometers. During the Iran-Iraq War, most demarcation signs were removed, but both parties did not reinstate them after the end of hostilities. The non-existence of such border markers led to the eruption of heightened tensions between the two countries over an oil field situated in Fakkeh. In 2009, Iraqi oil contractors occupied the oil field which Iran claims is within its territorial boundaries. However, the Iranian regime back then was occupied with quelling the Green protest movement following the fraudulent elections of 2009. Later on in the same year, Iranian soldiers captured this oil well and obliged the Iraqi oil contractors to leave. Iran's controversial deeds back then created strong backlash in Iraq, even among parts of the Shia community.[386]

6.2.3. The Iranian vectors of influence in Iraq post-2003

6.2.3.1. Shiism

During the past two centuries, many Iranians immigrated to Mesopotamia, and installed themselves in the Shia holy shrines of Karbala, Najaf, and Samarra. There were friendly relations between Iraq and those immigrants, some of whom adopted Iraqi citizenship, while keeping the Iranian nationality as well. Those immigrants were

[385] Ibid, p 209.

[386] Ibid, p 210.

perceived skeptically by the Sunni Baathist Iraqi government which considered them as a fifth column, faithful to Iran solely. When the political relations between Iran and Iraq were favorable, thousands of Iranians made pilgrimages to the holy shrines of Iraq on a yearly basis. Furthermore, Najaf was the traditional Shia source of emulation, and the center of the largest Shia seminaries. A substantial number of high ranking Iranian clerics graduated from the Najaf seminaries, even long before the Islamic Revolution. However, when Saddam Hussein ascended to power in 1979, the Shia spiritual leadership suffered significantly. Many of these Iraqi clerics were assassinated, imprisoned or deported to Iran, on charges of spying for the Islamic Republic of Iran. Yet, despite these Iraqi clergymen's rejection of the Wilayat al-Faqih doctrine and ideology, the Iranian Mullahs in Tehran agreed to host them in their territory. It is worth mentioning that none of the senior clergymen based in Najaf aspired to form a theocracy in Iraq, given that most Iraqis' inclination is towards the establishment of a secular democracy in their country. Following the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq, Iranian authorities planned to make use of these Iraqi clerics who would return to their homeland as a power base among the Shia population there.[387]

6.2.3.2. Political Allies

Years before the start of the hostilities between the two neighbors, thousands of Shia Iraqis left Iraq to take refuge in Iran. Among them were Iraqi clerics who instituted the Supreme Council of Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), and considered themselves an Islamic model to rule over Iraq in the future. SCIRI began recruiting Iraqi youthful refugees to establish an anti-Saddam Hussein militia, the Badr army. The Badr militia

[387] Ibid, p 213.

was financed and equipped by the IRGC. Other than SCIRI, a substantial number of Iraqi political opponents to Saddam Hussein, from multiple affiliations, lived in Iran towards the end of the twentieth century. The most reputable were the leader of the Kurdish Patriotic Front, Jalal Talabani, the leaders of the Dawa Party, Ibrahim al Jafari and Nuri al Maliki, the leader of the Hezbollah Brigades, Jamal Jafaar al-Ibrahim, known as Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis who passed away in 2020, along with Qassem Suleimani, and multiple others. Leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran built and maintained friendly relations with these Iraqi politicians, which helped Iran in shaping Iraqi politics in post-occupation Iraq.[388]

6.2.3.3. The Quds Force

The steppingstone of Iran's sway over Iraq relies on the Quds Force and its previous commander General Qassem Suleimani, who was the head of all Iranian affairs in Iraq. Getting rid of foreign military forces in Iraq was one of the aims of the Iranian government. Therefore, the Quds Force encouraged the creation of other Shia militias in Baghdad and southern Iraq to push the Anglo-American forces out. Furthermore, all of the Iranian operatives and agents in Iraq were under the supervision of Suleimani. All of Iran's ambassadors in Baghdad, past or present, were part of the IRGC. Ultimately, Sulaimani was the most powerful figure in Iraq, whose approval dictated many courses of action.[389]

From 2003 onwards, the Quds Force formed armed groups that fought against the American and British forces. Initially, the largest recipient of Iranian aid was the Mahdi

[388] Ibid, p 214.

[389] Ibid, p 215.

Army of the populist preacher, Muqtada al-Sadr, but as of 2004 the Quds Force started to count on other smaller groups that were easier to subdue. The US military called them special groups. The most known were Asaib Ahl al-Haqq led by Qais al Khazali, and the Hezbollah Battalions under the command of Mahdi al Muhandis. These special groups undertook hundreds of attacks on the Anglo-American forces, killing and wounding many. The American army was never able to thwart these special groups, because they could always flee to Iran.[390] Thus, the Quds Force contributed to obliging the US to retreat from Iraq in December 2011.

6.2.4. The Iranian interests in Iraq post-2011

6.2.4.1. The rise of the Islamic State

Iran pursued a two-pronged strategy in Iraq for many years. First, it backs allied political parties and politicians in Iraq. Second, it leads militias that until 2011, were waging armed struggles against American forces in Iraq. Following the American withdrawal from Iraq, the Quds Force had accomplished a pivotal target in its security-political policies. Yet, it was not able to subdue Sunni terrorists. The evidence to this claim is that in only three years, the Islamic State was able to conquer large areas of western and northern Iraq. The fall of Mosul to IS in June 2014 demonstrates the flagrant weaknesses of the Iraqi army.[391] However, when the Islamic State annexed enormous swathes of land in Iraq, the government requested American intervention. For its part, the Quds Force regrouped with all of the militias faithful to Iran before 2011 under the banner

[390] Guido Steinberg, "The 'Axis of Resistance,'" Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), 2021, https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2021RP06/, 23.

[391] Ibid, p 24.

of the Popular Mobilization Units. Together, the PMU with American aerial assistance defeated IS, and expelled it from Iraq.[392]

6.2.4.2. The emergence of the Popular Mobilization Units

A few days later, the country's most sacred Shiite scholar Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, issued a fatwa declaring a holy war against the Sunni jihadists. Tens of thousands of Iraqi Shiites enrolled themselves in the war against IS. Yet, while Sistani was an adversary of the Islamic Republic of Iran, it was the pro-Iranian Iraqi militias that mostly profiteered from the voluntary recruitment campaign. Indeed, Sistani's call was primarily intended to motivate Iraqi Shiite young men to enroll in the Iraqi army or police force. This alliance of more than fifty military units was guided from the very beginning by pro-Iranian militias that had been created in the 1980s or after 2003, such as the Badr Organization, the Hezbollah Battalions (which was created as a Badr splinter group after 2003 in order to fight the American army, in contrast to its parent institution), and the Asaib Ahl al-Haqq, which was founded after 2003 as a splinter group of the Sadr movement. A fourth military organization rallied around the PMU, namely Muqtada al Sadr's movement under the militia called Saraya al-Salam, however keeping Iran's impact at arm's length.[393]

[392] Ido Levy, Shia militias and exclusionary politics in Iraq - levy - 2019 - middle ..., 2019, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/mepo.12442, 123.

[393] Guido Steinberg, "The 'Axis of Resistance,'" Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), 2021, https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2021RP06/, 24.

6.2.4.3. The creation of the Shiite Crescent land corridor

Since the creation of the PMU, the Iraqi state had tried relentlessly, but to no avail, to influence its decision-making process. Despite these attempts to control the PMU, they continued operating as vectors of influence of Iranian foreign policy, taking orders from Tehran solely. The Iraqi state thus paid dozens of billions of dollars to non-state actors that eroded its sovereignty. However, militarily, the PMU was successful in defeating the Sunni jihadists following the re-conquest of Mosul in October 2017. Simultaneously, the sections of the PMU subservient to Iran, were taking control of areas that were aimed at becoming portions of the Iranian land bridge, stretching from Iraq to Lebanon. Nevertheless, these pro-Iranian Iraqi militias underwent significant pressure from 2019 onwards. The so-called Axis-of-Resistance is powerful militarily, but is subverting the prerogatives of the state under which it undertakes its operations to benefit Iran's interests, and its own specific interests.[394]

6.3. The Iranian sponsorship of Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad

6.3.1. The Islamic Republic of Iran and Hamas: (1987- Present)

6.3.1.1. The emergence of Hamas

Hamas was founded in 1987 by Sheikh Ahmad Yassin.[395] Hamas is the acronym of "Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya" in Arabic, which translates to the Movement of the Islamic Resistance.[396] Instead of focusing on Palestinian nationalism, as suggested by

[394] Ibid, p 25.

[395] Stephen Zunes and Emily Schwartz, "The Rise of Hamas," Foreign Policy In Focus, June 22, 2007, https://fpif.org/the_rise_of_hamas/, 2.

[396] Helga Baumgarten, "The Three Faces/Phases of Palestinian Nationalism, 1948–2005," Journal of Palestine Studies, 2005, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1525/jps.2005.34.4.25, 120.

Fatah, to liberate Palestine, Hamas differed in its approach to free Palestine from its occupier by emphasizing "Islam as the solution and the alternative" as published in its first communique, on December 14 1987.[397] While Fatah's constituency was mainly made up of the Palestinian refugees expelled in 1948, thus a by-product of the Palestinian diaspora, Hamas's constituency was made up of the Palestinians who lived in the Occupied Territories, in the West Bank and in Gaza. Fatah was preoccupied with liberating historic Palestine from its Zionist colonial settlers, whereas Hamas in contrast, was resisting the Israeli security apparatus. Hamas was created at the dawn of the Palestinian Intifada, which started in December 1987.[398] Hamas follows the Muslim Brotherhood's ideology. In fact, originally Hamas was instituted by the Muslim Brotherhood's Gaza branch in the late 1940s. It is worth noting that the Muslim Brotherhood was established by Hassan al Banna, in 1928, in Egypt. The Muslim Brotherhood in Gaza was not involved in political activities before 1987. Instead, it fostered social, religious, educational and cultural activities among its youth. Nevertheless, towards the start of the 1980s, the Muslim Brotherhood in Gaza underwent politicization after some of its own members left to form the nucleus of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, which represented an activist, militant, and extremist organization aimed at destroying Israel.[399] Indeed, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad's heroic operations against Israeli forces starting from 1983, constituted a threat to the dominant status of the Muslim Brotherhood in Gaza. Thus, subsequently, when the first intifada broke out in December

[397] Ibid.

[398] Ibid.

[399] Ibid.

1987, the Muslim Brotherhood decided to create Hamas as its political wing.[400] This is when Hamas became a distinct political and military entity of its own, prone to resistance.

6.3.1.2. Hamas and the notion of Jihad

Other than being a direct answer to the outbreak of the First Intifada, Hamas was simultaneously a reaction to the peace efforts between Fatah and the Israelis. Therefore, the Muslim Brotherhood of Gaza's transformation into Hamas was a counter-action to the series of initiatives Fatah was undertaking. Hamas envisions Palestine to be an Islamic nation-state, and that no one possesses the prerogatives to partition or give away any part of any Muslim land, including historic Palestine. Furthermore, Hamas stresses that in order to free Islamic Palestinian land one has to engage in the sacred Jihad, which is a duty for all Muslims. Hamas also invested a substantial amount of resources on aggrandizing its network of charitable institutions, including health clinics, social services, among others. This trend has fortified the tight bonds between its popular constituency and its political apparatus. Additionally, Hamas's dependence on zakat, or the Muslim tax, and donations from all over the Muslim world elevates its standing compared with Fatah's corruption, because it ensures that Hamas's political bureau remains closely intertwined with its supporters, thereby preventing a gap from occurring between the social and the political strata.

6.3.1.3. Hamas, a credible alternative to Fatah

In sharp contrast to Fatah, which at its zenith was the absolute leader of all the Palestinian factions, Hamas thus far has not reached this position. Yet, it has terminated

[400] Ibid.

Fatah's preeminent influence within the Palestinian National Movement (PNM), and it has asserted itself as a worthwhile and serious competitor to Fatah overall, which had become sidelined and discredited gradually. It was initially the Zionist state that precipitated the emergence of the Palestinian Islamist political party as a counter-movement to the PLO, a loose coalition of secular political movements constituted of Fatah, leftist and nationalist parties. While the PLO's popular base were unauthorized to organize political gatherings by the Israelis, the latter permitted Islamic entities to prepare rallies, publish newspapers, and establish their own radio stations. The Israeli authorities were thus applying the tactic of divide to better rule. American policy-makers had the same attitude towards Hamas and the PLO. Even if the PLO, since 1988, had wrested away its so-called terrorist actions, and unilaterally recognized the right of Israel to exist, US officials were prohibited from meeting with PLO members, however they had relations with their Hamas political counterparts.[401]

6.3.1.4. The rise of Hamas

One of the early achievements of Hamas took place when the Israeli cabinet decided to kick out around 400 Palestinian Muslims, in winter 1992.[402] Despite the fact that most of those expelled were Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad members, they hadn't committed any crimes permitting the Israeli government to expel them from a legal standpoint. Similarly, this radical Zionist initiative was a clear breach of Public International Law, which prompted the United Nations Security Council to unanimously condemn the action, while demanding the unconditional return of those displaced. The

[401] Ibid.

[402] Stephen Zunes and Emily Schwartz, "The Rise of Hamas," Foreign Policy In Focus, June 22, 2007, https://fpif.org/the_rise_of_hamas/, 2.

U.S. administration vetoed the resolution in the United Nations Security Council, making it non-binding. The outcome, however, was that the exiled and killed were perceived as heroes and martyrs. This considerably enhanced the reputation and standing of Hamas in the eyes of their Palestinian constituency. However, following the signature of the Oslo Agreement between Israel and the PLO in 1993, domestic polls demonstrated that Hamas obtained the backing of only 15 percent of the Palestinians.[403] Nevertheless, enthusiasm for Hamas increased as it became gradually clear that an independent sovereign Palestinian state could not be carved out, because Israel was pursuing its settler-colonial objectives in the West Bank irrespective of its commitments. The rule of Fatah and the Palestinian Authority was viewed negatively by Palestinians, whereas Hamas was viewed more favorably, and as more trustworthy. In addition, Fatah's 1993 major turnabout to cease the armed struggle against Israel, and instead depend on a US guided peace process proved to meet a deadend, which had major negative repercussions on the lives of many Palestinians in the West Bank and in Gaza.[404] Meanwhile, Hamas took advantage of the situation to continue its suicide and military activities, which augmented its popularity among Palestinians.

6.3.1.5. Hamas and the liberation of Gaza in 2005

The year 2000 represented a major turning point in Middle Eastern history. After almost twenty years of occupation, the Israeli armed forces stepped back from southern Lebanon.[405] This achievement was attributed to Hezbollah's fierce resistance, as it

[403] Ibid.

[404] Ibid, p 3.

[405] Seyed Ali Alavi and Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *Iran and Palestine: Past, Present, Future* (London, New York: New York, 2020), 113.

marked the first time in its history that Israeli troops were forced to pull their forces out of Arab lands. Shortly after the liberation of southern Lebanon in May 2000, Israeli provocations triggered a second Palestinian Intifada, following Ariel Sharon's visit to al Haram al Sharif.[406] At this stage, the victory of Iran's main ally in the region encouraged Palestinians to emulate the same path of resistance against the occupation. By extension, it is worth noting that in contrast to the first Intifada, whereby Palestinians were throwing stones at their Israeli enemies, the second Intifada witnessed the militarization of these upheavals against Israeli brutalization of the Occupied Territories. Similarly, the year 2005 represented a watershed in Middle Eastern history, because Israel began to withdraw its military forces from Gaza.[407] After 38 years of occupation, Gaza was now free. This achievement was principally attributed to Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

6.3.1.6. Hamas's victory in the Palestinian Legislative Elections of 2006

After the death of Yasir Arafat in 2004, the American administration decided that the Palestinians should organize free and fair elections.[408] But to their dismay, Hamas ran for elections, which was opposed by the U.S. administration. Nevertheless, the Palestinian elections persisted and were closely supervised by international monitors. The results were overwhelmingly in favor of Hamas, as they were able to garner approximatively 56 per cent of the total votes, thus securing a majority of the prospective Palestinian parliament, and the prerogative to appoint a prime minister of their choice, as

[406] Ibid, p 114.

[407] Ibid, p 118.

[408] Stephen Zunes and Emily Schwartz, "The Rise of Hamas," Foreign Policy In Focus, June 22, 2007, https://fpif.org/the_rise_of_hamas/, 2.

well as the right to form a new government under their influence.[409] The Palestinian voters' logic was based on Hamas being the sole alternative to Fatah, whom they despised because of its cronies' corruption. In addition, Israel was refusing to enter into meaningful peace negotiations with Abbas's Palestinian Authority. Furthermore, since the living conditions' quality was declining due to the current status-quo, hopes for peaceful, secure and viable coexistence with Israel in a separate Palestinian state, were dwindling. Taking all these factors into account, the Palestinian electorate voted largely for Hamas. As an outcome, Abbas was authorized to remain president, whereas Ismail Haniya became prime minister.[410] In response, the US attempted, but to no avail, to discredit the Hamas led government. It imposed financial sanctions on the Palestinian Authority, which deprived them of sufficient liquidity. Indeed, the Palestinian government was largely reliant on foreign aid to provide basic functions to its indigenous population. The effect of these punitive measures was catastrophic. In counter-response, the Islamic Republic of Iran filled in the gap by providing Hamas with millions of dollars, thus enacting a treaty of alliance with the latter, without which Hamas might not have survived.[411] Since that pivotal interference, the Mullahs in Iran were becoming major players in the Arab-Israeli conflict to their own advantage, in pursuing their particular hegemonic ambitions in the Middle East. It was out of these difficult conditions that Hamas evolved from a fundamentalist minority, to an electoral majority that controlled the Gaza Strip almost exclusively since 2007.

[409] Ibid, p 4.

[410] Ibid, p 5.

[411] Ibid.

6.3.2. The Islamic Republic of Iran and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad: (1980-Present)

6.3.2.1. The emergence of a schism within the Muslim Brotherhood

The Palestinian Islamic Jihad was founded in the early 1980s by Dr. Fathi al Shaqaqi.[412] In his youth, al Shaqaqi was significantly affected by Pan-Arab ideas. However, after the defeat of the Arab armies against Israel in the 1967 war, al Shaqaqi was disillusioned with Arab nationalism, and turned to Islam. In 1974, al Shaqaqi moved to Egypt to study medicine at the Zaqaziq University.[413] In Egypt, al Shaqaqi became acquainted with pupils from the Islamic associations and shared with them his disregard for the Muslim Brothers. Al Shaqaqi and his colleagues then acquainted themselves with the works of Jamal al Din al Afghani (1838-1897), Sayyid Qutb (1900-1966), Hassan al Banna (1906-1949), Mohammed Baqir al Sadr (1935-1980), and Ali Shariati (1933-1975).[414] From 1974 up until 1981, the period of time during which Shaqaqi lived in Egypt, represented the most pivotal moments for the Palestinian Islamic associations. Furthermore, Shaqaqi forged an independent and exclusive path of his own, away from the Muslim Brethren and came up with a new movement, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Indeed, Shaqaqi was ostracized from the Muslim Brotherhood in 1979, because he criticized the association's lack of a strategy for armed strife to liberate Palestine.[415] At the time, as mentioned earlier, the Muslim Brotherhood were not largely interested in the Palestinian cause. However, for Shaqaqi, the Palestinian issue should be at the forefront

[412] Erik Skare, A History of Palestinian Islamic Jihad: Faith, Awareness, and Revolution in the Middle East (Cambridge, United Kingdom, England: Cambridge University Press, 2022), p 83.

[413] Ibid, p 84.

[414] Ibid.

[415] Ibid.

of all issues. In 1979, Shiqaqi published a book titled al Khomeini, discussing the Islamic revolution in Iran, which marked later on the manifesto of his new party.[416]

6.3.2.2. The creation of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and its military branch

In 1980, Shaqaqi was back in Palestine, which is where he started disseminating his ideas in the West Bank and in Gaza.[417] Grand Ayatollah Khomeini's Pan-Islamic rhetoric heavily shaped the ideology of the new Islamic Palestinian political party. It is also worth indicating that Shaqaqi criticized the sectarian dimensions of the Muslim faith that only served the interests of imperialist colonial forces and their Zionist colluders. Because of his success in enrolling new members and aggrandizing his followers, Shaqaqi was jailed in 1983 by the Israelis.[418] It is during his sojourn in prison that Shaqaqi got acquainted with pro-Fatah Palestinian fighters with Islamic affinities, that benefited him in empowering the military wing of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad which he called Saraya al Quds. Indeed, Saraya al Quds was instituted two years earlier in 1981.[419] By the time Shaqaqi was in prison, Saraya al Quds was operating in the West Bank and in Gaza, against the Israeli army.

[416] Ibid.

[417] Ibid, p 85.

[418] Ibid, p 86.

[419] Ibid, p 95.

6.3.2.3. The rise of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad

In December 1987, the first Intifada broke out.[420] Despite the Intiada being a public upheaval triggered by nationalist aspirations and socio-economic resentments, it also included Islamic dimensions, which were considered parts of Palestinian cultural identity. During the first Intifada which lasted for several years, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad's armed branch was conducting daily military operations, including armed confrontations and suicide attacks against the Israelis. As mentioned earlier, Shaqaqi along with other Islamist Palestinians among whom were Hamas members, were expelled from the Palestinian Territories and sent into South of Lebanon in 1988.[421] Despite the exile of its leaders from the Palestinian Territories causing a setback for the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, this allowed Shaqaqi and his close aides to move into Lebanon. This presented a new opportunity that paved the way for the organization to build infrastructure in Lebanon and Syria, including building training camps, and enhancing their military aptitudes, among other elements. By the mid-1990s, Saraya al Quds had evolved into almost a full-fledged military institution.[422] However, in 1995, Shaqaqi was assassinated in Malta by the Mossad.[423] His death didn't preclude the end of the Islamic Jihad's struggle against Israel for the liberation of Palestine, nor its close bonds with Iran. On the contrary, Ramadan Shallah, the newly elected general secretary of the Islamic Jihad, and until the present moment the secretary general of the organization, was a major

[420] Ibid.

[421] Ibid, p 97.

[422] Ibid.

[423] Ibid, p 98.

proponent of the military resistance against Israel. He also highly criticized the PLO's openings with the Zionist state.

Therefore, with the unfolding of the Second Intifada in September 2000, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad had transformed itself into the third largest armed bloc in the Palestinian sphere.[424] By the time of the Second Intifada, the Islamic Jihad was able to garner more supporters because the peace process between the PLO, principally Fatah, and Israel had reached a dead end. Therefore, from the first Intifada in 1987, and until the second Intifada in 2000, the Palestinian Authority was quelling the Islamist Palestinian factions as per the indictments of the US and Israel, in order to be considered a viable and legitimate partner for peace. But, after the eruption of the second Intifada, the PA could no longer sustain its aggressive counter-insurgency efforts against Hamas and the PIJ.

6.3.2.4. The interaction of Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza after 2007

As recounted earlier in the previous section, Hamas's triumph in the Palestinian parliamentary elections sparked a civil war in the Palestinian arena. PIJ navigated between Fatah and Hamas in 2007, during the intra-Palestinian armed strife, while attempting to diffuse the tension between the two political parties through negotiations and dialogue.[425] Although Hamas fared well in the municipal elections, it did not expect to gain 74 out of 132 seats in the Palestinian Legislative Council or PLC.[426] Nevertheless, because Hamas and Fatah didn't manage to configure a national unity government, the animosity between both parties increased dramatically. Subsequently, an armed strife

[424] Ibid, p 165.

[425] Ibid, p 181.

[426] Ibid, p 183.

occurred and ultimately Hamas decisively defeated Fatah in the Gaza Strip, whereas the former remained in control of the West Bank. The PIJ decided to remain neutral, and applied a pragmatic policy because it was aware that any intra-Palestinian conflict was self-defeating and would only serve the interests of Israel. After Fatah was expelled from the Gaza Strip, the tension escalated between Hamas and the PIJ. The former was trying to gain a monopoly over violence in Gaza. While both political parties were Islamist, it is worth stressing that armed struggle was the currency, or the raison d'etre of the PIJ, whereas Hamas was more interested in establishing law and order in Gaza. Simultaneously, Hamas always considered itself the dominant player in Gaza, and always resented acute sensitivity when the PIJ gained in popularity and in affiliation, at its expense. Therefore, confrontation between Hamas and the PIJ was slightly unavoidable, quite frequently, but most of the time, it was contained through Egyptian mediation.

6.3.3. Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad during the Arab Spring

Towards the end of 2010, huge protests erupted in several countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain and Yemen.[427] These massive demonstrations were called the Arab Spring, and later on, spread out to Syria. The upheavals in Syria against the al-Assad regime transformed into a civil and regional conflict, with sectarian overtones. This section explores the effects of the Syrian conflagration on Iran's relations with the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas.

[427] Seyed Ali Alavi and Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *Iran and Palestine: Past, Present, Future* (London, New York: New York, 2020), 127.

6.3.3.1. Hamas

As the crisis in Syria deepened, it also attracted the involvement of regional players, like Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia who joined the US and the EU in demanding that Bashar al-Assad leave office, whereas Iran and Hezbollah, and to a lesser extent Iraq, supported their Syrian ally. Both Iran and Hezbollah were surprised by Hamas's decision to join the anti-Syrian coalition and cut ties with Damascus. Hamas had moved its headquarters from Syria to Egypt, and then Qatar in February 2012.[428] It is worth noting that since 1999, the Syrian government had hosted the Hamas political bureau after it was kicked out of Jordan.[429] In Damascus, the Hamas officials were well received, and had the privilege of earning financial and logistical support from Syrian authorities, Iran and Hezbollah. This is mainly explained first by Hamas being an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood whose leadership in Egypt, in Turkey, or in Qatar, and elsewhere in the Middle East, were siding against the Syrian regime; second, because Hamas did not wish to be associated with a criminal, corrupted and totalitarian regime like al Assad's, who was killing the Syrian population. Iranian officials didn't criticize Hamas directly, making sure to leave the channel of communication between both parties open.

Another important development worth highlighting was the overthrow of the democratically elected Muslim Brotherhood Egyptian president, Mohammed Morsi in July 2013.[430] He was replaced by general Fattah al-Sisi, who exercised significant pressure on Hamas by isolating it economically and politically to get rid of the Muslim

[428] Ibid, p 128.

[429] Ibid, p 134.

[430] Ibid, p 140.

Brotherhood in the country. At this juncture in time, Hamas appeared to be more isolated than ever before. This prompted Hamas to re-examine its stance towards its former allies in the Axis of Resistance, mainly Hezbollah, and Syria. Therefore, the discourse of Islamic solidarity was re-introduced in Hamas's speeches. During the second half of 2013, the pro-Iranian parts within Hamas restored and recalibrated their political affiliations with the Islamic Republic of Iran.[431]

6.3.3.2. The Palestinian Islamic Jihad

On the other end of the Palestinian political spectrum, the Islamic Jihad conserved its position within the so-called Axis of Resistance.[432] Similarly, during the Arab Spring, the PIJ applied the rationale of principled pragmatism.[433] After the deterioration of the situation in Syria, Islamic Jihad officials declined to cut ties with the Syrian regime, and instead maintained their neutrality. While it is true that the PIJ always encouraged the logic of unity in the Muslim world, neutrality, as well as non-interference in internal Arab affairs, when this logic threatened its modus operandi in practice, which is none other than armed struggle against Israel, the latter strategic assessment gained ascendance over the former theoretical framework.[434] The author is emphasizing this aspect, because during the Arab Spring, the PIJ sided with Iran, Hezbollah, and the Syrian regime, which

[431] Ibid, p 142.

[432] Ibid, p 136.

[433] Erik Skare, *A History of Palestinian Islamic Jihad: Faith, Awareness, and Revolution in the Middle East* (Cambridge, United Kingdom, England: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 190.

[434] Ibid, p 195.

was in sharp contradiction to its ideological principles, even if this entailed an excess dependence on Iran and its proxies in the Middle East.[435]

Ever since the takeover of Gaza by Hamas, there were several rounds of conflicts between the Palestinian Islamic factions and Israel: Operation Cast Lead in 2008, Operation Pillar of Defense in 2012, Operation Protective Edge in 2014, the Great March of Return in 2018, the 2021 Israel–Hamas crisis and the ongoing Israel-Hamas war that erupted on October 7 2023.

6.4. Iran's alliance with the Houthis

6.4.1. The first phase of Iran's alliance with the Houthis (1980-2004)

6.4.1.1. The origins of the Houthi cultural revivalist movement (1980-2000)

In Yemen, the Zaydi community is estimated to make up around 30 to 40 percent of the overall population.[436] The Zaydis represent an eighth-century offshoot of Twelver-Imami Shiism, who are followers of the fifth Imam, Zaid bin Ali. Furthermore, it is important to note that the Zaydi community in Yemen is much closer to the Shafei confession, one of the four Sunni schools of Islam, than to Twelver Imami Shiism. However, following the Iranian revolution of 1979, the Zaydi tribes of northeastern Yemen undertook a cultural renaissance whose objective was to roll back the threat of Saudi Wahhabi Islam.[437] During the 1990s, Hussein al Houthi, a Zaydi tribesman affiliated himself with the al Haqq Yemeni political party to lead this Zaydi cultural

[435] Ibid, p 196.

[436] Ofira Seliktar and Farhad Rezaei, "Chapter 7," essay, in *Iran, Revolution, and Proxy Wars* (S.l., USA: Springer Nature, 2021), 202–34, 214.

[437] Ibid.

revivalism. His first political endeavor was a failure. Following this setback, Hussein al Houthi traveled to Qom at the invitation of Ayatollah Khamenei.[438] In Qom, he was taught the Iranian Shiite classical model. When Hussein al Houthi returned to Yemen in 2000, he created in the highlands of northeast Yemen a cultural movement called the Believing Youth in order to spread his beliefs.[439] It is at this juncture that the Believing Youth expressed their acute resentment towards the West, by formulating this popular chant which later became the creed of the Houthi movement: "God is the Greatest, Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse on the Jews, Victory to Islam".[440]

6.4.1.2. The politicization of the Houthi cultural revivalist movement (2000-2004)

Simultaneously, throughout these years, Hussein al Houthi criticized the government of president Ali Abdullah Saleh, who ran Yemeni political affairs since 1978, for neglecting the northeastern Zaydi mountainous areas. Despite president Ali Abdallah Saleh's Zaydi origins, he was worried about Hussein al Houthi's political, social, and religious activities, which were destabilizing the country. Furthermore, Hussein al Houthi's links to Iran clashed with the pro-Saudi foreign policy of president Ali Abdullah Saleh. Additionally, the relationship between Hussein al Houthi and Ali Abdullah Saleh deteriorated further after 9/11, because the latter was obliged under American pressure to join the war on terror against al Qaeda.[441] Following the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Believing Youth movement, under the leadership of Hussein al Houthi,

[438] Ibid.

[439] Ibid, p 215.

[440] Ibid.

[441] Ibid.

renamed themselves Ansar Allah.[442] By extension, it is also during this period that Hussein al Houthi along with his father Badreddine and brother Abdel-Malik, transformed from a peaceful dissent movement, into an armed political resistance party. The Houthis were trying to emulate the Lebanese Hezbollah.

6.4.1.3. The militarization of the Houthi cultural revivalist movement (2004-2010)

In reaction to this development, president Ali Abdullah Saleh attempted to settle his scores with the Houthis without resorting to violence, but they refused to negotiate. Therefore, in June 2004 president Saleh instigated a counterinsurgency military operation in Saada, and was able to assassinate Hussein al Houthi by September.[443] The death of Hussein al Houthi was martyrized. Instead of pacifying the Houthi revolt, their leader's killing only exacerbated the tension between the Zaydi community and the regime in Sanaa. By 2004, the Houthis mobilized large segments of the Zaydi community, and some of the Sunni neighboring tribes attempting to create an autonomous area in northeastern Yemen. In fact, they administered their region by themselves, through running their own schools, offices and prisons, collecting taxes, recruiting soldiers, and smuggling weapons. Meanwhile, Badreddine al Houthi was acting as Ansar Allah's de facto spiritual leader. From June 2004 until July 2008, there were five armed clashes between the Houthis and the Yemeni government.[444] However, it is worth indicating that these five rounds of warfare between both belligerents were taking place around the Saada governorate. Yet, in August of 2009, the Yemeni government, fed up with Houthi insurgency, retaliated

[442] Ibid, p 216.

[443] Ibid.

[444] Ibid, p 217.

with a huge military offensive, codenamed Operation Scorched Earth, which attempted to annihilate the Ansar Allah political movement, but to no avail.[445] This sixth round of fighting cost both protagonists thousands of victims, including civilians. Yet, in early 2010 Abdul Malik al Houthi, the operational leader of the Ansar Allah, signed a momentary truce with president Saleh.

6.4.2. The second phase of Iran's alliance with the Houthis (2011-2015)

The unfolding of the Arab Spring in 2011, revitalized Houthi ambitions in Yemen. After significant pressure, Ali Abdullah Saleh, president of Yemen, resigned in favor of his vice president, Abed Rabbu Mansour Hadi.[446] In February 2012, Hadi assumed power, through a transitional government, following Yemeni elections for a two-year mandate.[447] During this period of time, the Houthis were included in the UN-led and GCC-supported National Dialogue Conference. Meanwhile, the new president Hadi's utmost priority, was to reinvigorate the shattering Yemeni economy and terminate the hostilities in the Saada governorate. However, he failed and when the UN-led and GCC-supported National Dialogue Conference series of initiatives collapsed in 2014, the Houthis stormed into Sanaa, Yemen's capital in collusion with Saleh-allied forces, and toppled the Hadi government, striving to conquer all of the Yemeni territory.[448] In fact, Ali Abdullah Saleh, who refused to give up power, secretly reintroduced himself in Yemen after a brief absence, and made a secret pact with the Houthis by switching sides, and allowing a large

[445] Ibid, p 218.

[446] Ibid.

[447] Ibid.

[448] Ibid, p 219.

proportion of the Yemeni army to side and fight alongside Ansar Allah. Indeed, this was what mainly led to the Hadi government's collapse. In January 2015, the Ansar Allah were able to capture the presidential palace. They also absolved the Yemeni parliament of its responsibilities, as well as put Hadi under house arrest.[449] Nevertheless, he managed to flee to Aden, and established a provisional government there with the backing of the international community, the Hashid tribal confederation, and the armed forces faithful to Hadi. Despite this development, the triumphant Ansar Allah invaded considerable portions of Yemeni mainland, encompassing the port of Hodeida, Taiz, and almost overran Aden. The Houthis, however, claimed that their only objective was to end corruption, be allotted a just and equitable share in the power-sharing system of post-Saleh Yemen, and receive funds for the development of the Saada governorate, following years of government negligence. In response to this series of actions by Houthis, a coalition of nine Arab countries, under the leadership of Saudi Arabia, undertook a military intervention in March 2015 codenamed Operation Decisive Storm, followed subsequently by Operation Restoring Hope.[450]

6.4.3. The third phase of Iran's alliance with the Houthis (2015-Present)

At this stage, since Saudi interference in the course of the Yemeni civil and perhaps even regional conflict, the bonds between the Ansar Allah and the Islamic Republic of Iran evolved. This was partially the by-product of the Houthis' successes in overcoming their struggles against Saudi Arabian and Emirati troops, along with their

[449] Ibid.

[450] Guido Steinberg, "The 'Axis of Resistance,'" Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), 2021, https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2021RP06/, 29.

Yemeni allies. Furthermore, in December 2017, the Houthis assassinated their former ally, ex-President Ali Abdullah Saleh, because he attempted to switch sides again during hostilities.[451] Later in the course of the armed strife, the Yemeni rebels officially ruled Sanaa alone and reconfigured the administration of the northeastern mountainous regions they took control of since 2014, by re-establishing the hegemonic role of the most well-known Zaydi "Sayed" families, and re-enacting an imamate under Abdel Malik al Houthi.[452] Furthermore, following some Houthi decisive victories on the battlefield with the assistance of IRGC-Quds Force, and the Lebanese Hezbollah, as well as under American pressure, the Saudis and their Emirati homologues ceased their offensive on the crucial port city of Hodeida, laying out on the Red Sea in December 2018.[453] Indeed, the two Gulf countries wished to pursue their military attacks on the port-city to drive the rebels out of Hodeida, in order to constrain the Ansar Allah partisans to join negotiations, and oblige them to concede politically. The cessation of this strategically pivotal military operation put the Allied victory on the back-burner. This evolution in the conflict implied severe repercussions. Because the United Arab Emirates decided to withdraw from the Yemeni war, taking into account that Saudi Arabia alone cannot triumph in this conflict, this implied the flagrant weakness of Saudi Arabia's armed forces, and a significant amount of issues within the Yemeni internal alliance system.[454] To make matters worse, the Emiratis began to support the Hirak, or the south Yemeni separatists since then, against the will of Saudi Arabia and the Yemeni president. Despite a truce being signed

[451] Ibid.

[452] Ibid, p 30.

[453] Ibid.

[454] Ibid.

in Riyadh between president Hadi and the Hirak in November 2019, the contending parties could not unify their efforts to eliminate the Houthi threat.[455] Their mutual distrust of one another, and their divergent goals in post-conflict Yemen have sometimes led the internationally recognized Yemeni government and the south Yemeni separatists to engage in military clashes in Aden. As of 2020-2021, the Yemeni president controls regions near the Saudi Arabian border, like the governorates of Marib and Hadramaut, whereas the Hirak took control of Aden city, and its surrounding towns along the coast.[456]

At this part of the section, it is worth noting that the change in US presidents further undermined Saudi Arabia's stance in the Yemeni war. While former American President Trump had increased military and diplomatic support for Riyadh, even going on to list the Houthis as terrorists, the current American administration under the presidency of Biden, reversed this decision and proclaimed that armed backing for the Kingdom would stop.[457] The future of Yemen remains ambiguous both militarily and politically at this point.

6.4.4. The objectives of Iran's alliance with the Houthis

6.4.4.1. The creation of a new Iranian proxy in the southern border of Saudi Arabia

Since the Ansar Allah took control of Sanaa, in 2014, this development paved the way for the emergence of new geopolitical prospects for the Mullahs in Iran. Indeed, the Islamic Republic of Iran was striving to widen the scope of the Shiite Crescent to its southern edge. After having come to knot in fomenting dissent in Saudi Arabia from

[455] Ibid.

[456] Ibid, p 31.

[457] Ibid.

within, the clergymen in Iran sought to destabilize its arch-rival in the Persian Gulf by waging a low-intensity war against it along its southern border. Since the takeover of Sanaa by the Houthis, the Iranians have controlled five capitals of the Arab world which are Baghdad, Beirut, Damascus, Gaza and now Sanaa. Furthermore, the evolution of the Ansar Allah, from a remote tribal group into an organized Fourth Generation Warfare (4GW) army is substantial.[458] This achievement is attributable to two main factors: first, the IRGC-QF and the Lebanese Hezbollah's constant and persistent assistance to the Houthis, and second, the former Yemeni president, Ali Abdullah Saleh's allegiance switch to the rebels, which enabled large portions of the Yemeni army, faithful to him, to join the Ansar Allah. This allowed the insurgents to have access to all kinds of military equipment, such as tanks, helicopters, missiles, drones, as well as military bases. Ultimately, the IRGC-QF was able to transform the Zaydis in Yemen throughout the years from an isolated community, into another version of Hezbollah. Additionally, the clerics in Iran asserted that the Islamic Republic was looking forward to eventually taking control of oil supply wells in Shiite-populated areas of the greater Middle East, thus transforming the Shiite Crescent into an economic crescent as well.[459]

6.4.4.2. The creation of a new maritime choke point in the Red Sea at the Bab al Mandab Strait

Following Osama Bin Laden's exit from Sudan, given the latter's short-term alliance with the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Iranian policy-makers conceded that they

[458] Ofira Seliktar and Farhad Rezaei, "Chapter 7," essay, in *Iran, Revolution, and Proxy Wars* (S.l., USA: Springer Nature, 2021), 202–34, 221.

[459] Ibid, p 227.

would never be able to constrain the Saudi Arabian Kingdom from its western border.[460] Nevertheless, the Iranian military staff conceived a new strategy to augment the Islamic Republic of Iran's deterrence posture against its regional, as well as international enemies, by devising the Anti-Access, Area-Denial (A2/AD) tactic.[461] The Anti-Access, Area-Denial tactic consists of a well-known naval strategy aimed at preventing or diminishing the deployment and the margin of maneuver of enemy armed forces, into a specific theater of confrontation. Usually, maritime powers have employed the A2/AD tactic to make up choke points in crucial maritime corridors. Given the Ansar Allah's victory in Yemen, the Iranian military planners prepared an innovative twenty years long A2/AD scheme to retaliate to any prospective attacks against Iran. The tactic is to suspend the supply of oil around the world, and perhaps even disturb the enemies' supply lines of communication through a triangle of maritime choke points from the Strait of Hormuz in the Persian Sea to the Bab al Mandab Strait in the Red Sea and the Strait of Malacca in the Indian Ocean.[462]

6.4.5. The prospect of Iran's alliance with the Houthis in the foreseeable decades

There are two main reasons explaining why Iran interfered in the course of the Yemeni civil war. First, Iran's competition with Saudi Arabia for the supremacy of the Middle East, and second, as the Saudi-Iranian concurrency approached a zero-sum game since the beginning of the Arab Spring in 2011, a comprehensive assistance plan to the

[460] Ibid, p 221.

[461] Ibid.

[462] Ibid, p 223.

Houthis in Iran was seen as vital.[463] In this case, it is worth drawing attention to Iran's adoption of a two-pronged strategy in Yemen. On one hand, the military and security apparatus assumes that the Houthis have become a prospective long-term ally of Iran that must be emboldened to continue destabilizing Saudi Arabia, and draining its financial resources for the procurement of expensive weapons, a blood-letting geo-political strategy, by keeping it on the defensive.[464] On the other hand, however, the foreign policy and governmental establishments tend to think otherwise, as they perceive the Houthis to be a strategic liability, because so far, the latter have not acted as Iranian proxies. On the contrary, the Ansar Allah have disregarded Tehran's advice on how to conduct the Yemeni civil and regional war, by, for instance, entering Sanaa and attempting to subdue Aden on their own. Thus, it is widely held that the Iranians should be more careful regarding their relationship with the Houthis, because if the Houthis continue to act independently against the wishes of Tehran this might have a blowback effect on Iran.[465] In any event, although the Ansar Allah are a very recent ally of the Islamic Republic of Iran, their relative triumph in Yemen as of 2015, has created a breakthrough in enlarging the scope of action of their patron in Tehran. Nevertheless, it is worth emphasizing that, despite their positive contribution to Iran's regional role in Arab politics, relations between the Ansar Allah and the clergymen in Tehran are not as close as the one between the latter and the Lebanese Hezbollah, along with its pro-Iranian Iraqi militias in Iraq.[466]

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[463] "Iran's Priorities in a Turbulent Middle East | Crisis Group," International Crisis Group, April 13, 2018, https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran/184-irans-priorities-turbulent-middle-east, 23.

[464] Ibid.

[465] Guido Steinberg, "The 'Axis of Resistance,'" Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), 2021, https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2021RP06/, 31.

[466] Ibid.

If the Houthis wind up taking over all of Yemen and administering it at their own discretion, which at this stage is improbable, their military prowess on the battlefield hides long-term impeding troubles for Iran, which might considerably reduce the latter's gain in leverage and influence across Yemen. Yemen is one of the poorest countries of the Middle East, thus when the hostilities cease, an Ansar Allah victory means they will have to govern a crumbling state financially, economically, and socially. In this case, the Houthis will prove to be a weak ally and a liability for Iran, because Iran will have to provide liquidity to reconstruct the country, and help it cover the basic needs of its population.[467]

6.5. Conclusion

In Chapter VI, titled "Turning into a Regional Power", the author has sought to describe how the Islamic Republic of Iran transformed itself from a relatively standard country with a limited amount of influence and power-projection across the Middle East, particularly in the Arab world, to an influential regional power. In Chapter VI, the author started by outlining the domination of Iraq by Iran following the American invasion of 2003. Indeed, in this part of Chapter VI, the author has described how Iraq had become a vassal state to Iran. Then, in section two of Chapter VI, the author provided an overview of the Iranian sponsorship of Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Indeed, in this part of Chapter VI, the author thoroughly described how Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad emerged, rose to prominence, and how they interacted with the Islamic Republic of Iran during and after the Arab Spring. The Palestinian Islamic Jihad certainly represents an Iranian proxy, in sharp contrast with the more independent Hamas. Afterwards, in

[467] Ibid, p 32.

section three of Chapter VI, the author addressed the alliance of Iran with the Houthis in Yemen. In this part of Chapter VI, the author narrated in detail how the Zaydi community in Saada has transformed itself from merely a cultural revivalist movement in Yemen following the Iranian revolution of 1979, to a recent political and armed ally of the Islamic Republic, particularly after their takeover of the Yemeni capital, Sanaa, in 2014. However, it is worth mentioning that the Ansar Allah, are not yet an Iranian proxy, as the Lebanese Hezbollah is, and as the pro-Iranian Iraqi factions, like the Popular Mobilization Units, are. Clearly, by the end of the Arab Spring, Iran has effectively transformed itself into an assertive regional power, with a large network of proxies and allies across the whole Middle East.

Finally, in Chapter VII titled “Shoring up the Syrian regime” the author intends to talk about the interference of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the course of the Syrian civil war, which had regional and international dimensions, as well as sectarian overtones. Indeed, Iran needed to reveal itself as a credible ally to its oldest strategic partner in the Middle East since the Iranian revolution. In addition, Iran had a vested interest in safeguarding the land corridor of the Shiite Crescent which ran from Tehran to Beirut, passing through Baghdad and Damascus. Iran was interested in maintaining its logistical axes of communication with its proxies and allies in the Fertile Crescent, namely Hezbollah, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Hamas. This would have been substantially threatened by the toppling of the Syrian regime by the rebels, which explains the importance of Iran’s intervention in favor of the regime during the Arab Spring. Ultimately, if the Syrian regime had not survived the most serious existential threat it has faced, the Iranian ambition of becoming the leader or hegemon of the Middle East, including the entirety of the Arab world, would have been compromised.

CHAPTER 7

SHORING ASSAD'S REGIME

7.1. Introduction

In Chapter VI, the author sought to describe how the Islamic Republic of Iran transformed itself from a relatively standard country with a limited amount of influence and power-projection across the Middle East, particularly in the Arab world, to an influential regional power. In Chapter VI, the author started by outlining the domination of Iraq by Iran following the American invasion of 2003. Then, in section two of Chapter VI, the author provided an overview of the Iranian sponsorship of Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Afterwards, in section three of Chapter VI, the author addressed the alliance of Iran with the Houthis in Yemen. Clearly, by the end of the Arab Spring, Iran has effectively transformed itself into an assertive regional power, with a large network of proxies and allies across the whole Middle East.

Iran's Arab policy objectives can be identified as threefold: its first objective was to become the de facto leader of the region, since it considers itself a key nation in the Middle East. The second objective of Iran's Arab policy was to export its own revolution and instill Islamist republics similar to its own across the entirety of the Arab countries, which Iran considered despotic and totalitarian. The third objective of Iran's Arab policy was to topple the corrupt pro-American political regimes.

The objective of Chapter VII is to describe how Iran interfered in the course of the Syrian civil war to assist al Assad's regime and prevent it from collapsing. Chapter VII is made up of five sections: one, Syria before its alliance with the Islamic Republic of Iran; two, Syria at the outset of the Arab Spring in 2010; three, the intervention of Iran

in the course of the Syrian civil conflict (2011-2023); four, the intervention of Russia in the course of the Syrian civil conflict (2015-2023); and five, the victory of Iran in the course of the Syrian civil war (2017-2023). Chapter VII is significant because it describes how Iran needed to prove to its proxies that it was a credible ally, particularly to its oldest strategic partner in the Middle East. In addition, Iran had a vested interest in safeguarding the land corridor of the Shiite Crescent, which ran from Tehran to Beirut, passing through Baghdad and Damascus. Iran was interested in maintaining its logistical axes of communication with its proxies and allies in the Fertile Crescent, namely Hezbollah, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Hamas. This would have been substantially threatened by the toppling of the Syrian regime by the rebels, which explains the importance of Iran's intervention in favor of the regime during the Arab Spring. Ultimately, if the Syrian regime had not survived the most serious existential threat it has faced, the Iranian ambition of becoming the leader or hegemon of the Middle East, including the entirety of the Arab world, would have been compromised.

7.2. Syria before its alliance with the Islamic Republic of Iran

The reasons why the author aims to talk about Syria from the end of World War One up until its independence, the politicization of the Syrian army and the Alawites are manifold: first, to demonstrate that Syria consists of a mosaic of different sects and ethnicities; two, to underscore the politicization of the Syrian army, which has allowed the minority of Alawites to take command of the Syrian army before taking control of the Syrian government and state; three, to shed light on the nature of the Alawite community, which would explain the Syrian civil war's sectarian dimension.

7.2.1. Syria from the end of World War One up until its independence

Following the end of World War One, the Bilad Ash-Sham region of the Near East or greater Syria was dismembered according to the Sykes-Picot agreement between France and Great-Britain. During this period, the Syrians regarded Bilad Ash-Sham, which included Lebanon and Palestine, in addition to Syria, to have been artificially and arbitrarily divided because of European imperialist ambitions to conquer and divide this part of the world. Furthermore, once the French government took control of Syria, under the mandate from the League of Nations, it pursued a policy of divide-and-rule to disable any form of opposition from arising against it. Therefore, the French mandate over Syria was composed of five zones: Latakia was parceled out for the Alawites, Alexandretta for the Turks, Jabal Druze for the Druze, whereas the Sunni Muslims were handed Aleppo and Damascus separately.[468]

However, in 1936, Syria was reunited, and ultimately the province of Alexandretta was granted to Turkey in 1939 to prevent the latter from being dragged into World War Two on the side of Nazi Germany. In return, Turkey promised to remain neutral during the course of the war. Even though the Syrians were promised full independence in 1941 by the Free French government in exchange for Syrian support during the conflict against Nazi Germany, it was only in 1946 that the Syrians became independent, after British pressure obliged the French to withdraw.

7.2.2. The politicization of the Syrian army

It is worth mentioning that during the French mandate, the Alawite persecuted community took advantage of the situation to enter the military academy and achieve

[468] Sean Yom, *Government and Politics of the Middle East and North Africa* (New York, USA: Routledge, 2019), 257.

upward social mobility, even though the amount of Alawites being recruited into the Syrian army exceeded their percentage of the overall Syrian population.[469] After the Syrian independence from France, and with the politicization of the Syrian armed forces as an instrument to acquire power, the Alawite community possessed a relative edge compared with other Syrian communities, which paved the way for it to further its political ambitions.

The creation of the state of Israel in 1948, and the defeat of the Arab armies which were more interested in furthering their own objectives than liberating Palestine, as they failed to coordinate their military endeavors to prevent the creation of Israel, paved the way for the Syrian military to enter the political arena. Accordingly, since general Husni al-Zaim's military coup in 1949, and until Hafez al Assad's seizure of power in 1970, the military juntas ruled over Syria through different successive coup d'états.

7.2.3. The Alawites: who are they?

The Alawites are a minority sect splintered from Shiism.[470] They represent a feudal community which was always isolated, persecuted and hated by Sunni orthodox Muslims. The Alawite sect was founded in the ninth century in Mesopotamia, after a disagreement arose over the choice of the eleventh Imam.[471] Before being labeled Alawites, they were first called Nussayris, after the name of their founding father Ibn Nussayr who originated from Bassora in present-day Iraq. The term Alawite, which means in Arabic partisan of Ali, started becoming official during the French mandate, to

[469] Ibid, p 258.

[470] Xavier Baron, *Aux Origines Du Drame Syrien: 1918-2013* (Paris, France: Tallandier, 2013), 125.

[471] Ibid.

replace the word Nusayris.[472] The Alawites settled in northern Syria during the ninth and tenth centuries. In fact, Alawites took advantage of the instability during the Crusaders period, to inhabit the pieces of lands on the fringes of the Muslim and French empires. It is worth noting that just like the Druze and the Maronites before them, the Alawites settled in mountainous regions in order to escape persecution. It is only with the fall of the Ottoman Empire that the Alawites started to open up to the world, because the French mandate's power counted on allowing the minorities to govern, instead of authorizing the majority rule. With the establishment of the French mandate power, the Alawites gradually started settling on the Syrian littoral in Latakia, before spreading out to the rest of the country.

7.3. Syria at the outset of the Arab Spring in 2010

7.3.1. The reasons behind the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2010

In the summer of 2000, Bashar al Assad ascended to power to succeed his deceased father, Hafez al Assad. Initially, Bashar seemed to represent progress and change. His first speech advocated evolution, reform and modernization. At the beginning of his reign, Bashar al Assad authorized a substantial amount of political freedom, which was called the Damascus Spring.[473] However, a few months later, he retracted the program and persecuted political activists. During this period, Syria was in need of drastic internal reforms because of its corrupt economy, capital flight and lack of foreign investment, among other elements. However, al Assad was reluctant to implement any set of radical reforms to ensure that he ruled the country uncontested. However, the

[472] Ibid.

[473] Itamar Rabinovich and Carmit Valensi, *Syrian Requiem: The Civil War and Its Aftermath* (S.l., USA: Princeton Univ Press, 2022), 21.

regime did undergo some marginal reform, such as the liberalization of the Syrian economy, which was configured in a way to benefit a recent elite, made up of the president's own family and clan, chiefs of the military, and security services, who took advantage of the situation to enrich themselves further, at the expense of the Syrian people. Bashar al Assad was evidently conscious of this outcome, but was benefiting from this system, and could not afford to threaten the status of the elite on which his political survival depended. Therefore, the economic effects of Bashar's superficial reforms were marginal, at best, even if its political impacts on the Syrian people were resounding. Furthermore, the new president distanced himself from the rural population, and instead focused on building cordial ties with the new economic elite. The decrease of state subsidies, as well as the increase in inflation brought about a deterioration of the standard of living of the Syrian popular classes. In addition, after Bashar al Assad ascended to power, Syria experienced a demographic boom. The drought of the years 2008-2011 only exacerbated the situation, which was behind the rural exodus to the main cities prior to the Arab Spring. These developments also reinforced the proliferation of extremist Islamic tendencies among the Syrian poor masses. It is clear by now, why Syria was a hub of opposition to the rule of Bashar al Assad and his clique before the eruption of hostilities during the Arab Spring.

7.3.2. The regional and sectarian dimensions of Syrian crisis in 2010

The Syrian uprising erupted in March 2011, in Daraa before spreading to the rest of the country.[474] It was inspired by the Tunisian, Libyan and Egyptian revolutions that

[474] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East* (New Haven, USA: Yale University Press, 2020), 38.

toppled their Arab regimes. Nonetheless, despite this regional dynamic at play, the decline of American dominance over the Middle Eastern regional order following the 2003 invasion of Iraq paved the way for the re-ignition of the regional rivalry for the supremacy of the Middle East between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and the rise of armed non-state actors. According to neo-realist international relations theory, when there is a modification in the balance of power in a regional order, in this case the "Pax Americana" from 1991 until 2003, the risk of war increases because other actors will strive to fill the vacuum.[475] Furthermore, according to civil war political science theorists, civil wars are more probable in specific countries neighboring other countries that have experienced civil strife recently, and whereby populations of the same ethnicities or sects live along the borders of the two states concerned.[476] This was the case for Syria, which was poorly situated geographically, because it shared frontiers with three countries that had experienced late civil wars like Lebanon, Iraq, and the Kurdish region of Turkey, while sharing with them the same ethnic and sectarian constituencies which fought against each other in the aforementioned wars.

7.3.3. The conflagration of the Syrian crisis from a peaceful uprising into a civil war

Syria' civil strife consisted in its initial stages of a domestic struggle between, on one hand, the Free Syrian Army and its mainly Arab Sunni supporters, and on the other hand, the Syrian Arab army and its Alawite and Christian backers. However, as violence spread out, the Syrian civil war evolved into a regional, and a global conflict with sectarian overtones. The opposition parties, in addition to the Free Syrian Army, came to

[475] Ibid.

[476] Ibid, p 40.

include other Sunni Islamist factions which were financed by Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Western countries such as the US, the UK, and France, as well as al Qaeda affiliates. By extension, the loyalist parties came to include the Lebanese Hezbollah, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, pro-Iranian Iraqi militias and Pakistani and Afghani Shiite troops. In September 2015, the Russian air force which proved to be pivotal, interfered in the course of the Syrian regional proxy war. It is also worth highlighting that starting 2013, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, ISIS, emerged and invaded large portions of the Syrian eastern desert, but was partially kicked out after 2017 when a coalition of fifteen states under the leadership of the US fought the self-declared Caliphate. Simultaneously, the Kurds set up their own militia in northeastern Syria, which later became known as the Democratic Union Party, or PYD. In response, the Turkish military forces invaded northwestern Syria, to secure Idlib which subsequently became the stronghold of the rebel forces after 2020, and to counter the rising influence of the Kurdish PYD, which was allied with the Kurdish PKK, the number one enemy of the Turkish state.

7.4. The intervention of Iran in the course of the Syrian civil conflict (2011-until the present)

7.4.1. Iran's initial reluctance in participating in the course of the Syrian civil conflict

Since the eruption of the Syrian uprising in March 2011, most Iranian policymakers feared that a freed Syria would follow the West, or would be controlled by jihadist factions. Each of these two scenarios would put an existential end to Iran's ambitions of becoming the hegemon of the Middle East. To prevent such a scenario from materializing, the Iranian officials tended to advise al Assad against making use of excessive brutality to quell the protests, however al Assad had already begun using

excessive violence. When the mass demonstrations evolved into an armed struggle because of the regime's massive crackdown, a debate ensued in Iran.[477] On one hand, president Ahmadinejad was wary of a military intervention in Syria because it would foment a sectarian war in the Middle East against the Iranian theocracy, and it would damage Iran's reputation if they side against the oppressed. Indeed, Ahmadinejad perceived the protests to be genuine, similar to what occurred in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, among other countries. Thus, the latter encouraged the Assad regime to enact reforms in order to quiet the protests. However, the IRGC viewed the Syrian revolt differently, chiefly because it considered it a plot by Western and Arab countries to break the Axis of Resistance apart. The military wing advocated for assisting the Syrian regime in tackling the revolt. At the close of the debate, the IRGC imposed its will and ordered an armed intervention in Syria on the side of al Assad's regime.

In the author's point of view, Tehran would have participated in the Syrian war effort sooner or later because the uprising morphed into a sectarian zero-sum regional proxy struggle that endangered the Iranian quest for hegemony in the Middle East. Nevertheless, the Syrian conflict proved to become a sort of trap, and a war of attrition for the Islamic Republic of Iran, because it drained Iran's resources. Thus, initially, the Mullahs tried to control their interference in the Syrian civil war, but over time, the Syrian Arab army eroded, thereby obliging the Islamic Republic of Iran to commit more funds, human resources, and armaments to a war that it was not keen on from the start. In addition, despite its huge investment in the Syrian quagmire, the Iranians weren't able to substantially influence the course of war alone.

[477] "Iran's Priorities in a Turbulent Middle East," Crisis Group, April 23, 2018, https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran/184-irans-priorities-turbulent-middle-east, 15.

7.4.2. The first phase of Iran's intervention (2011-2012)

As in Iraq, the Quds Force was leading the way by deciding Iran's military operations to protect Shia Shrines from Sunni jihadists in Damascus, and uphold the Assad regime. In early 2011, the Mullahs sent a minor group of senior Quds Force officials to Syria to assess the situation.[478] The group was composed of Soleimani and Hamadani, among others, who, it was assumed, would share their experience in unraveling the 2009 Iran Green Movement with their Syrian regime counterparts to curb the uprisings in Syria. However, the Syrian regime's military capability was quickly collapsing. More than any other element, the air-transport communication links between Iran and Syria via Iraq, would prove to be detrimental to Tehran's overwhelming success in that stage of the Syrian civil war. In fact, Iran authorized the Quds Force to send advisors and technical support to enable al Assad to surveil the opposition's communications, in addition to crowd control equipment, UAVs and ammunition. Allies in Iraq turned a blind eye to the Quds Force's daily flights over Iraqi airspace. It is believed that from 2011 to 2020 Iran has lent the Syrian regime between 20 and 30 billion dollars.[479] Nevertheless, this support did not disallow the decrease in number of regime fighters which dwindled from 300 000 at the beginning of 2011 to less than 100 000 in 2012 because a large chunk of the Sunni fighters deserted.[480]

Despite the concealment of its military activities in Syria, the policymakers in Iran were wary of their population's reaction to this campaign to protect an Arab dictator,

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[478] John Chipman, *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East* (London, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2020), 21.

[479] Guido Steinberg, "The 'Axis of Resistance': Iran's Expansion in the Middle East Is Hitting a Wall," EconPapers, August 2021, https://econpapers.repec.org/RePEc:zbw:swprps:62021, 17.

[480] Ibid, p 18.

because by 2012 the Quds Force was providing intelligence, training and battlefield support to the Syrian regime.[481] Over time, it turned out to become impossible to deny Iranian intervention in the Syrian civil war to the Iranian public.

7.4.3. The second phase of Iran's intervention (2012-2013)

As a consequence of the desertion of very large portions of the Syrian Arab Army, Damascus with the assistance of the Quds Force, worked to create militias such as the National Defense Forces, which expanded to encompass more than 100 000 troops.[482] Here, the target of the Quds Force was to institute militias loyal and faithful to it only, like the Lebanese Hezbollah. Yet, in practice this aim was not viable, because Shiites in Syria made up two percent, at most, of the overall population. Furthermore, the Syrian regime along with its Russian patron, after September 2015, were coordinating their efforts to juxtapose the militias into the Syrian military apparatus. In addition, the Russians were attempting to contain, and even sometimes eradicate Iranian influence in Syria. Therefore, the Quds Force was only slightly capable of swaying the National Defense Forces under its supervision. Additionally, of the remaining Syrian troops, a high proportion were more prone to complying with Moscow's orders than to Tehran's.

Thus, the Quds Force had to recruit armed men from the Axis of Resistance that were gathered outside Syria. During the Syrian civil strife, Hezbollah demonstrated itself to be the Quds Force's most crucial partner. Just like Iran, Hezbollah in Lebanon was highly intent on maintaining the Alawite regime in Syria, because it was through this

[481] John Chipman, *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East* (London, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2020), 22.

[482] Guido Steinberg, "The 'Axis of Resistance': Iran's Expansion in the Middle East Is Hitting a Wall," EconPapers, August 2021, https://econpapers.repec.org/RePEc:zbw:swprps:62021, 18.

country's airports and ports that its whole supply of military equipment passed. Furthermore, Hezbollah feared the replacement of the Assad regime by a Sunni government that would turn against it once in control. Thus, Hezbollah sent military personnel as soon as the crisis evolved into a protracted civil conflict. Until early 2013, Hezbollah was mainly interested in safeguarding Damascus and the Syrian-Lebanese frontiers, when the Syrian insurgents posed a threat to its supply lines.[483] Until then, the Lebanese Shiite organization denied being involved in the ongoing military encounters. It was only during the battle of al Qusayr in July 2013, that Nasrallah publicly disclosed that Hezbollah was participating in the Syrian regime war efforts.[484] Since the battle of al Qusayr, Hezbollah has regrouped around 7 000 to 10 000 armed troops in Syria, at all times, for a militia of about 50 000 men.[485] It also fought in large military operations across all of Syria. Since 2011, the Lebanese Shiite organization has suffered at least as much as 2000 dead and more than 5 000 wounded.[486] Despite these heavy losses, Hezbollah grew stronger operationally because it had spearheaded several battles along with the Quds Force, the Syrian Arab army, the Russian air force and several militias in al Qalamoun, al Zabadani and the Golan heights, later on in the course of the Syrian war.

7.4.4. The third phase of Iran's intervention (2013-2014)

By early 2013, Iran's progress in the Syrian regional and proxy war was hitting an impasse. Thus, the Quds Force undertook three important changes in their military

[483] Ibid.

[484] Ibid.

[485] Ibid, p 19.

[486] Ibid.

strategy and tactics in conducting the conflict in Syria. First of all, Soleimani ordered al Assad to wage operations against opposition forces through the southern and western fronts solely, because they were the most important to the regime's survival. Second, Soleimani decided to expand the amount of Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi militia forces in the country. Third, the Iranian foreign ministry waged an assertive diplomatic campaign which was targeted at the American and Gulf countries, who were determined to oust al Assad from power. It was not surprising to see Iran excluded from the Geneva peace talks in 2012. By mid-2013, the situation stabilized. In summer 2013, the IRGC was able to defeat opposition parties in the pivotal battle of al Qusayr mentioned earlier.[487] Gaining back control of this town was highly important, because it enjoyed a strategic location along the supply route for opposition forces in Homs, as well as, splitting Damascus from al Assad's traditional stronghold on the Alawite coast. Simultaneously, this town is located near the entrance to the Bekaa Valley, the main channel for Iran's movement of personnel and weapons to Hezbollah.

7.4.5. The fourth phase of Iran's intervention (2014-2015)

In the ensuing years, the IRGC enlisted Shiite Afghans and Shiite Pakistanis. The Afghans were called the Fatimid Brigade, whereas the Pakistanis were called the "Followers of Zineb". The Afghan volunteers were issued from the Hazara Shiite community in Afghanistan, and numbered around 10 000 men.[488] In sharp contrast, there

[487] John Chipman, *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East* (London, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2020), 23.

[488] Guido Steinberg, "The 'Axis of Resistance': Iran's Expansion in the Middle East Is Hitting a Wall," EconPapers, August 2021, https://econpapers.repec.org/RePEc:zbw:swprps:62021, 19.

were about 1 000 Pakistanis fighting in Syria only.[489] Losses among both factions were numerous, because both these Iranian proxies were not as battle-hearty and experienced as their Arab counterparts. It is worth indicating that the Quds Force also recruited fighters from Iraqi militias such as the Hezbollah Battalions, Asaib Ahl al-Haqq, and the Badr Organization. Since 2013, Iraqi militiamen have enlisted as much as 5 000 regular combatants. Nonetheless, these pro-Iranian Iraqi factions couldn't send more troops because they were preoccupied fighting ISIS in Iraq as of 2014.

Even though initially, the Syrian regime forces were accumulating victories, the tempo of the war was draining away al Assad's exhausted forces. Furthermore, the rise of ISIS in Iraq, and the fall of Mosul in June 2014, entailed that the pro-Iranian Iraqi militias had to return to Iraq to fight the self-proclaimed caliphate, which in response obliged the Islamic Republic of Iran to start recruiting Afghani and Pakistani Shiite fighters. By late 2014, Iran was immersed in a protracted war that it could not win militarily on its own, but from which surrender, withdrawal or defeat, it could not afford in the political and strategic realms.[490] The 2015 year started badly for Iran and its allies, because by then, the Syrian rebels were increasingly well equipped, battle hardened, and demonstrating signs of improved inter-factional coordination and juxtaposition. Subsequently, by August 2015, the loyalist forces were in control of around one-sixth of Syria's territory only.[491] Soleimani's battlefield defaults encompassed a deficiency in combat air support, advanced artillery, missile coordination, and sophisticated special-operation associates.

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[489] Ibid, p 20.

[490] John Chipman, *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East* (London, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2020), 23.

[491] Ibid.

7.5. The intervention of Russia in the course of the Syrian civil conflict (2015-2023)

During the summer of 2015, the Islamic Republic of Iran dispatched Qassem Suleimani to Moscow. Although the Mullahs in Iran were skeptical of Russia's true motives, they had no other choice than to accept cooperation with Russia, or let the Syrian rebels triumph in the conflict. Indeed, since the Russian intervention in Syria in September 2015, the Iranians were attempting to work proactively in order to prevent Moscow from gaining the upper hand in leveraging and influencing the regime in Damascus, which the latter was able to take advantage of for its own purposes.[492]

7.6. The victory of Iran in the course of the Syrian civil war (2017-2023)

ISIS's partial defeat in 2017 in Iraq and in Syria led to the rise of a new conundrum in Tehran, concerning Iran's exit strategy from Syria, since the regime's victory was preeminent.[493] For example, taking into consideration the sacrifices Iran had to endure because of the Syrian conflict, in terms of human lives, liquidity, and the loss of soft power in the eyes of the international community, the IRGC was unwilling to abide by the ceasefires that would prevent the Syrian Arab army and its allies from reconquering important portions of the Syrian territory, like eastern Aleppo and chunks of Idlib. However, despite the IRGC's objections, the foreign ministry establishment was in favor of a diplomatic solution to the crisis, taking into account the war's slow progress back then. Eventually, a compromise was struck whereby Iran would pursue its military conquest while also conducting parallel diplomatic initiatives in attempting to bring about

[492] "Iran's Priorities in a Turbulent Middle East," Crisis Group, April 23, 2018, https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran/184-irans-priorities-turbulent-middle-east, 17.

[493] Ibid, p 18.

a ceasefire and create de-escalation zones. This was for the benefit of the Assad regime, during the so-called Astana process, in which Russia and Turkey negotiated with the Islamic Republic of Iran.[494] Iran was able to take advantage of the opportunity during the Astana talks to consolidate its gains in Syria, because it was excluded from the Geneva peace process, back in 2012. Nevertheless, it had to accept Turkey's participation in the Syrian civil war, whose main objective was to annex parts of northern Syria, to secure a safe haven for the refugees and the rebels, as well as, to defeat the Kurdish armed separatists.

Along with the interference of the Russian airpower, since September 2015, all of these different Iranian led militias contributed in the Syrian regime war effort, and helped it gain the upper hand as of December 2016 when they were able to recapture the eastern part of Aleppo previously controlled by the Syrian insurgents from 2012.[495] Furthermore, in 2017, all of these Shiite combined militias were also busy fighting IS from the Syrian desert to Deir ez-Zor, along the Euphrates river, close to the Iraqi frontier. Following the takeover of the Syrian border town of Abu Kamal, in late 2017, the IRGC was successful in securing a military land bridge from Tehran, via the Iraqi governorates of Diyala, Salah al-Din and Anbar to al-Qaim to the Syrian governorates of Deir ez-Zor, Homs and Rif Damascus, all the way to either Lebanon, or to the Syrian-Israeli border at the Golan Heights.[496] These vast coalitions of Shiite Iranian led militias also constructed military bases and warehouses along this land bridge.

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[494] Ibid, p 19.

[495] Guido Steinberg, "The 'Axis of Resistance': Iran's Expansion in the Middle East Is Hitting a Wall," EconPapers, August 2021, https://econpapers.repec.org/RePEc:zbw:swprps:62021, 20.

[496] Ibid.

7.7. Conclusion

Finally, in section one of Chapter VII, the author covered Syria before its alliance with the Islamic Republic of Iran, concerning the composition of its population consisting of a melting pot of sects and ethnicities - with an Arab Sunni majority, and the politicization of the Syrian Arab army, and the nature of the Alawite community. In the second section, the author described the situation in Syria, Bashar al Assad's ascent to power in 2000, until the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2010, and how the Syrian civil war transformed into a regional, as well as an international proxy war with sectarian layers. Afterwards, in the third section, the author narrated the intervention of Iran in the course of the Syrian civil conflict in its different phases from 2011 until 2023. Later on in Chapter VII, the author outlined the intervention of Russia in the Syrian civil conflict in 2015 and how its air force modified the dynamics of the Syrian conflict to the advantage of al Assad's regime. Finally, in section five, the author spoke about the victory of Iran in Syria, and how this triumph paved the way for Iran to erect a land bridge from Tehran to Beirut. Ultimately, Chapter VII is extremely important because it describes how Iran needed to prove to its proxies that it was a credible ally and patron, and how it had a vested interest in safeguarding the land corridor of the Shiite Crescent, that ran from Tehran to Beirut, passing through Baghdad and Damascus. Iran was interested in maintaining its logistical axes of communication with its proxies and allies in the Fertile Crescent, namely Hezbollah, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Hamas. This would have been substantially threatened by the toppling of the Syrian regime by the rebels, which explains the importance of Iran's intervention in favor of the regime during the Arab Spring.

In Chapter VIII, the author will be talking about the Saudi Arabian and Iranian rivalry, as well as the contest for supremacy over the Middle East. Since the reign of Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia were not friendly or cooperative, despite the fact that both were American allies in the Middle East under the Twin Pillar policy. However, following the Iranian revolution, relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia worsened further. Both states were trying to become the leader of the Muslim community across the world. During the Iran-Iraq war, the tension between Iran and Saudi Arabia was high. However, after the death of Khomeini in 1989, the relations between both regional powers improved substantially, particularly during the presidency of Mohammed Khatami. But, with the election of Ahmadinejad in 2005, relations changed to the worse again. From that period of time and until the 2023 rapprochement, Iran and Saudi Arabia were engaged in proxy wars in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and Bahrain, among other areas.

CHAPTER 8

IRAN'S STANDOFF WITH SAUDI ARABIA

8.1. Introduction

In Chapter VII, in the first section, the author addressed Syria before its alliance with the Islamic Republic of Iran; in the second section, the author described the situation in Syria since Bashar al Assad ascent to power in 2000 until the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2010, and how the Syrian uprising in 2011 transformed into a regional and international proxy war with sectarian layers; in the third section, the author narrated the intervention of Iran in the course of the Syrian civil conflict in its different phases from 2011 until 2023; in the fourth section, the author discussed the intervention of Russia in the course of the Syrian civil conflict in 2015 and how its air force modified the dynamics of the Syrian conflict to the advantage of al Assad regime; and finally, in section five, the author talked about the victory of Iran in Syria, and how this triumph paved the way for Iran to erect a land bridge from Tehran to Beirut. In other words, Chapter VI is important because it describes how Iran had a vested interest in safeguarding the land corridor of the Shiite Crescent, which ran from Tehran to Beirut, passing through Baghdad and Damascus. Iran was interested in maintaining its logistical axes of communication with its proxies and allies in the Fertile Crescent, namely Hezbollah, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Hamas. This would have been substantially threatened by the toppling of the Syrian regime by the rebels, which explains the importance of Iran's intervention in favor of the regime during the Arab Spring.

Iran's Arab policy objectives can be identified as threefold: its first objective was to become the de facto leader of the region, since it considers itself a key nation in the

Middle East. The second objective of Iran's Arab policy was to export its own revolution and instill Islamist republics similar to its own across the entirety of the Arab countries, which Iran considered despotic and totalitarian. The third objective of Iran's Arab policy was to topple the corrupt pro-American political regimes.

The objective of Chapter VIII is to highlight the standoff between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The chapter is significant for several reasons: first, because Iran, as per its Arab policy objectives mentioned above, is seeking to topple the corrupt pro-American political regimes of the Arab world, and is evidently interested in overthrowing the al Saud monarchy and establishing a political regime subservient to its interests; second, because Iran, as per its Arab policy objectives, is striving to become the leader of the Middle East, as Saudi Arabia is nowadays the only Arab Muslim country able to counterbalance the Iranian threat in the Middle East; third, explaining the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is fundamental to understanding the modern political dynamics of the Middle East. Chapter VIII contributes to the thesis central question by demonstrating that Iran, by seeking to overturn Saudi Arabia and its allies in the GCC in order to obtain ascendance in the Gulf region, is modifying the balance of power in the Middle East to its own sole advantage. This paves the way for Iran to become the uncontested regional power of the Middle East, and it has a destabilizing effect on the geopolitical order of the Near East. Indeed, the Islamic Republic of Iran is clearly a revisionist state, seeking to entirely modify the balance of power in the Gulf to its own benefit. Chapter VIII is made up of four sections. Section one describes the historical background of the standoff between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Saudi Arabia. Section two narrates the nature of the rivalry between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Saudi Arabia. Section three talks about Iran and its several links with the Shiite communities of the Gulf, encompassing

Saudi Arabia, but also Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar. Section four describes the failed initiative by the Trump administration in 2019 along with the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, to create the Middle Eastern Strategic Alliance – an Arab NATO to counter the aggressive, expansionist and hegemonic ambitions of Iran.

8.2. The historical background of the standoff between Iran and Saudi Arabia

Since the unification of Saudi Arabia in 1932, and the subsequent creation of the country, and the establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty in Iran in 1925, there was mutual distrust between the two countries. This uneasy coexistence between both regional powers is grounded in history.

8.2.1. The Twin Pillar Policy

Since the end of World War II, the Gulf region has been an extremely important area of the world for the United States, because of the presence of hydrocarbons. From 1945 until 1971, the year the United Kingdom granted the smaller Gulf principalities their independence, the US invested in upgrading its trilateral relations with both Iran and Saudi Arabia in several realms like the political, military, and economic spheres in order ensure its vital interests are protected, and in order to prevent the Soviet Union from making inroads into the Persian Gulf. However, after 1971, instead of having the US taking over the British responsibilities in the Gulf, the former strove to delegate these roles to its two crucial allies, namely Iran and Saudi Arabia, thereby enacting the twin-pillar policy until the Iranian revolution of 1979.[497] It is worth noting that until 1979 the US attributed to the Shah of Iran the role of the policemen of the Middle East.

[497] Louise Fawcett, *International Relations of the Middle East* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2016), 296.

8.2.2. The timeline of the new Middle Eastern Cold War between Iran and Saudi Arabia

Since the unfolding of the Iranian revolution in 1979, the relation between Saudi Arabia and Iran has undergone three major phases. Phase one started in 1979 and ended in 1990, including the Iran-Iraq war and the First Gulf War. During this period of time, there was a high amount of tension and animosity between the countries, because Saudi Arabia was helping Iraq financially to conduct its war against Iran. Phase two started in 1991 and ended in 2003, and it involves a peaceful coexistence between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Indeed, during this period of time, with the death of Khomeini in 1989 and the election of Rafsanjani, a pragmatist, from 1989 until 1997, followed by Khatami, a reformist, from 1997 until 2005, and with the disappearance of the Iraqi threat, Iran and Saudi Arabia were on more friendly terms. Phase three started in 2003 and ended in 2023, during which Saudi Arabia and Iran were at odds. The tension resurfaced between the two states with the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, and with the discovery of the Iranian secret nuclear military program that same year. Furthermore, with the election of Ahmadinejad, in 2005, as president of the Islamic Republic of Iran, a conservative hardliner, relations deteriorated further. In addition, the eruption of the Arab Spring in Syria, Yemen and Bahrain only complicated relations further. The situation came to a standstill in 2016 with Saudi Arabian authorities assassinating Grand Ayatollah Nimr al Nimr. Nonetheless, in March 2023 Saudi Arabia and Iran concluded a rapprochement with Chinese mediation.

8.3. The nature of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran

The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is complicated and encompasses several fields such as national security, sectarianism, geopolitics, leadership and influence over the greater Middle East, as well as the Muslim world.

8.3.1. The national security factor[498]

Security issues are at the heart of the standoff between the two protagonists. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia tend to think that their actions towards each other are vital to safeguard their own security interests. Thus, in this specific scenario security becomes a zero-sum game, whereby the gains in security of one party is observed to be the loss of the other party. Therefore, Saudi Arabia and Iran have entered a security dilemma cycle.

Saudi Arabia firmly believes that the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policies vis-à-vis the Gulf area, in particular, and the Arab world in general, are imperialist and that the sole way to contain Iran's behavior is to confront it, rather than trying to appease it. Saudi Arabia's view is not unfounded, because since Khomeini's Islamic revolution of 1979, Iran has never ceased attempting to project its power across the whole Middle East. For instance, Iran masterminded a botched coup attempt in Bahrain in 1981, it was also behind the bombings in Kuwait in 1983 and 1985, it organized anti-Saudi gatherings during the Hajj of 1987, and it was found guilty of destroying the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia in 1996. Following the eruption of the Arab Spring in 2011, Iran has intensified its bellicose rhetoric against Saudi Arabia. Indeed, Iran is seeking to apply pressure on Saudi Arabia on all fronts. Furthermore, although Iran does not exercise immediate

[498] Ibrahim Fraihat, *Iran and Saudi Arabia: Taming a Chaotic Conflict* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 42.

control over states like Qatar, Oman, and Bahrain, it still possesses some sway. This will be discussed further in section three of Chapter VIII.

Seen from the Iranian point-of-view, the foreign policy of Iran also rests on four main threats to its national security, which are namely the United States, Israel, the international system, and the instability of its neighboring states. Irrespective of the US's intentions, it is widely believed among Iranian policymakers that the US can be the origin of formidable damage to their country's security. As a result, Iran has decided to subvert the stability of the Gulf Peninsula, because it hosts the US's major allies of the Middle East. Admittedly, just like the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Iran is cautious about being enclosed in its territory by American military infrastructures. This explains why Iran seeks proactively to establish regional and global coalitions by enlarging its scope of influence in the area, even if this entails colliding with Saudi national security interests. Israel is another important threat to the Islamic Republic of Iran because it fears an Israeli attack on its nuclear facilities, although Iranian strategists know that the Zionist state is unlikely to undertake such an operation without full American support, knowledge, and tacit approval. Another danger to Iran emanates from the global system itself, because it is led and orchestrated by the US, which is therefore hostile towards Iran and its values, especially in an age of globalization.

Another factor responsible for heightening the security crisis between the rivals was the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), between Iran and the P5+1 in 2015. The nuclear deal further aggravated the looming competition between the regional countries. For their part, the Saudis felt that they had been betrayed by their security sponsor in Washington, and had to rely on themselves to confront the Iranian threat in the region. Indeed, the nuclear deal did not address Iran's regional role in the

Middle East, and particularly in the Arab world. Furthermore, even under harsh sanctions, Iran was able to invest in three proxy wars, namely Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. Therefore, the cessation of these sanctions clearly poses a bigger threat to Saudi security. By adhering to this incomplete deal, according to Saudi perception, Iran was handed over a free pass and the means to control the Middle East, thus disrupting the region's dynamics, and the balance of power within the system's structure. However, with the election of Trump to the White House, the relationship between the US and Saudi Arabia returned to normal. In addition, in 2018, Trump's administration revoked the nuclear deal with Iran.

8.3.2. The sectarian factor[499]

While some political analysts assume that sectarianism plays a major role in defining a substantial amount of Middle Eastern conflicts nowadays among which is the Iranian-Saudi rivalry, other experts tend to observe sectarianism as an instrument that has been employed by both Saudi Arabia and Iran to further their own political ambitions in the area. This section of Chapter VIII goes on to argue that the Sunni-Shia sectarian divide was not, and is not, the reason behind the contemporaneous hostilities in the greater Middle East. On the contrary, the competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran is motivated by geopolitical factors, leadership of the region, and security concerns. Yet, it is worth mentioning that the politicization of the sectarian divide among Muslims by both countries to muster backing for their political ambitions has catalyzed the Saudi-Iranian rivalry to new horizons, thus deepening and widening the schism among the Muslim community. This sectarian concurrence can be seen in several countries, such as Lebanon,

[499] Ibid, 57.

Iraq, Syria and Yemen. There were also external, uncontrollable events for both Iran and Saudi Arabia that contributed to exacerbating the conflict among Muslims, beginning with the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, followed by the Arab Spring in 2011.

8.3.3. The geopolitical factor[500]

Other factors explaining the deep-seated animosity between Saudi Arabia and Iran are geopolitics and the pursuit of regional influence and power projection in the Middle East. Indeed, both countries are aware of the fact that in order for one of them to transform itself into the uncontested hegemon of the Near East, it must control the geography of the region to be able to accumulate enough power and leverage over the other. Since the rise of Khomeini in 1979, Saudi Arabia and Iran have competed constantly in maximizing their buildup of power and influence as well as in gaining geopolitical contests. This is the case in a substantial number of countries like Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and Iraq.

8.3.4. The leadership (of the Muslim community) factor [501]

Whereas the al Saud monarch is historically qualified as the Custodian of the Two Holy Places of Mecca and Medina, Iran's Supreme Leader has been qualified as the informal Custodian of the Shia faith. One of the crucial preconditions set by Saudi Arabia to solve its differences with Iran, is for Iran to cease its role as the leader of the Shiite communities in the Arab world, and instead view Shiites as subjects of their own countries. Yet, it is important to clarify that the relationship between the Iranian theocracy and the Shiite communities of the Arab countries is complicated. Ultimately, there is no

[500] Ibid, 71.

[501] Ibid, 73.

separation between Iran defending the cause of disenfranchised and persecuted Shiite minorities in the Arab world, and in making use of this cause to further its quest for regional leadership.

8.3.5. The international and regional structural factors[502]

The tension between Saudi Arabia and Iran is based on a long history of rivaling interests. The prospective evolution of this rivalry is also subject to other factors, aside from security, sectarianism, geopolitics, leadership and influence, like the regional and international contexts, which have also a huge impact. Historically, the standoff between Iran and Saudi Arabia was shaped by the nature of the regional and international contexts, which either contributed to appeasing or heightening the concurrence between them. Contemporaneously, the global factors have generated more acrimony between the protagonists. These global factors consist of two notable actors, namely the United States and Israel.

The regional Gulf security is of paramount importance for the US because of the presence of hydrocarbons. That is why the Gulf figures out within vital American national security calculations. This is also why the US cannot allow itself to remain neutral in conflicts that take place in this area. The ousting of Saddam Hussein's political regime in 2003 proved to be a fatal mistake on behalf of the US, and a gift offered by Bush Junior's administration to the Iranian theocracy, because it paved the way for Iran to become the proto-hegemon of the Fertile Crescent. Previously, the Baathist regime represented a bulwark for Iran, as the regional structural dynamics evolved from a stable regional system with a coherent balance of powers to a protracted stalemate. Indeed, after the

[502] Ibid, p 79.

overthrow of the Baathist regime in Baghdad, the Iranian threat to the Arab Gulf countries magnified, but at the same time, it did not allow Iran to dominate the region at its own guise. This state of affairs benefits American interests in the Gulf, because it justifies American military presence in the region, safeguards American security guarantees to the Arab petro-monarchies, and permits the US to keep on controlling the hydrocarbon resources.

Another benefactor to this state of affairs, aside from the United States, was Israel. Indeed, the prevalent situation had served Israel's interests in one main configuration. The Zionist state was successful in convincing Saudi Arabia that the Iranian threat was a source of anxiety for its neighbors in the Middle East, and that they had to coordinate their efforts to contain it expediently. This development paved the way for the beginning of a new era of normalization between one of the pivotal Arab countries in the Arab-Israeli conflict, which is a vital country in the Muslim world as well. The fact that the Obama administration ignored Saudi Arabia and Israel's concerns concerning the rise of the Iranian regional role in the Middle East, after the signing of the nuclear deal in 2015, only encouraged the two former states to start cooperating on their own.

8.4. The Iranian ties with Shiite communities in the Gulf

8.4.1. Saudi Arabia[503]

In Saudi Arabia, Shia unrest, intermittent since the 1930s but mainly well tamed since the 1990s, arised again but did not stimulate much Iranian interest, as was the case in Bahrain. The Shia unrest emerged in the town of Qatif in the Shia-inhabited Eastern Province. In 1979, a Shia rebellion occurred there but it was subdued aggressively. But,

[503] *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East* (London, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2020), 189.

in 2011 with the outbreak of the Arab Spring, Nimr al Nimr, an extremist Shiite cleric who had studied in Iran and Syria for more than ten years, refused to comply with the Saudi Arabian monarchy. Instead of advocating for an accommodation and a peaceful coexistence with the al Saud ruling family, Nimr al Nimr was preaching for overthrowing the Wahhabi state. Consequently, Nimr was held in custody in 2012, sentenced to death in 2014, and executed in 2016. Following his death, Iranian mobs ransacked the Saudi embassy and the Saudi consulates in Iran, which led to the severance of the diplomatic ties between both countries that same year, and until 2023. Until today, there isn't any evidence corroborating Iranian meddling in the Nimr affair. Nonetheless, it is worth stating that the Saudi Shiite cleric had been encouraging both the exportation of the Iranian revolution in Saudi Arabia, and the implementation of the rule of Wilayat al Faqih in his indigenous country. Tehran benefited from this tactical maneuver by focusing on Nimr's opposition to the Saudi Arabian regime and on his subsequent death only from a distance. In 2017, there was another layer of disturbances in western Qatif particularly in the city of Awamiya, whereby the Saudi National Guard was destroying an important area of Shiite dissent, under the pretext that wanted criminals resided in the town. The Saudi National Guard imminently vanquished the armed opposition in Awamiya. This incident didn't garner much attention in the pro-Iranian media because Saudi officials made sure to minimize violence in Awamiya's operation. Simultaneously, there weren't any revolts among the Saudi Shias in the Eastern Province in solidarity with the Awamiya incident, because of the disparate nature of the Shiite movement in Saudi Arabia, and because of their reluctance to confront the Saudi state head-on. Iran usually tends to ignore Shia rebellions across the Gulf if its interference will trigger an undesired escalation with a neighboring power. Instead, Iran prefers to make use of its networks in

more pivotal scenarios only when it can affect its national security agenda. Indeed, the Islamic Republic of Iran attempts to frustrate Saudi Arabia and its allies in the Gulf Peninsula at a low risk. Similarly, even the deceased Shiite Saudi Arabian cleric Nimr al Nimr once acknowledged: “Iran acts out of self-interest and not out of piety or religious affiliation”.[504]

8.4.2. Bahrain[505]

Another example is Bahrain which Iran considers as its fourteenth province. It is worth mentioning that Bahrain's population is made up of 65 percent Shiites and 35 percent Sunnis. In February 2011, huge demonstrations broke out in Bahrain. At first, they were peaceful but gradually transformed into an assertive and sectarian Shia-led movement. While the al-Wifaq political party was in a dialogue with the Bahraini government to enact some reforms, other more extremist groups were in favor of a revolution, and the implementation of a republican regime. Once government officials acknowledged their inability to contain the popular uprising in Bahrain, the GCC decided to deploy the Peninsula Shield Force in March 2011. However, it is worth indicating that up to this point, the Islamic Republic of Iran was not aiding the rebels in Bahrain, except rhetorically. The Peninsula Shield Force was able to crush the grass-roots rebellion. However, following the failure of this uprising, Iran started taking advantage of the situation to stir unrest in Bahrain by arming dissidents and militants, willing to take the risk of defying the state and of fomenting sedition in the kingdom to achieve their objectives of overturning the autocratic Sunni regime of al Khalifa. Nevertheless, despite

[504] Ibid, p 190.

[505] Ibid, p 185.

Iran's augmented backing to the Bahraini revolutionaries, it faced logistical barriers to supplying Bahraini rebels with weapons for several reasons. One of these barriers is that Bahrain is an island, thereby making it difficult for the IRGC to send its equipment; another reason is because Bahrain's relatively small size which makes it difficult to engage in terrorist acts without being caught; a third reason is that Bahrain's population is small in number, thus it is complicated to recruit new followers without being arrested. Taking into consideration the above factors, the probability of having the indigenous Shiite Bahrainis taking over the Al Khalifa monarchical government is very slim. The author believes that the Iranian policymakers in Tehran are conscious of their endeavors' limitations in the Bahraini case. Therefore, in this situation, the Islamic Republic of Iran is solely interested in keeping the Bahraini island destabilized and obliging Bahraini officials to violently repress these manifestations to affect its image abroad, which makes it uncomfortable for Americans to keep their Fifth Fleet headquarters there.

8.4.3. Kuwait[506]

Kuwait, like Bahrein, is home to a large Shia population. Even though the Shiite Kuwaitis do not form a majority of the overall Kuwaiti population, they constitute a sizable minority, representing almost 40 percent of the total population. But, unlike in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, Kuwaiti Shiites are not disenfranchised or discriminated against. However, although Iran does not view Kuwait as an enemy at the same level as Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, it has still invested in maintaining a reduced infrastructure to undertake destabilizing activities in Kuwait, depending on the need to do so. Yet, American military forces deployment in Kuwait discourages the Islamic Republic of Iran

[506] Ibid, p 190.

from fomenting trouble in this Emirate. Nevertheless, in 2015, the Kuwaiti police discovered a Lebanese Hezbollah stock housing explosive material, ammunition and armaments. Whereas the cache was old, the cell was deemed nonetheless active. Almost years later, a high number of the militants responsible for overseeing the storage were caught by Kuwaiti police. The investigation found that Iran was partially responsible for the creation of this armed hide-out. The memory of the 1980s attacks were still quite fresh in Kuwaiti memory.

8.4.4. Oman

Oman has long term friendly ties with Iran for three main reasons. First of all, Oman is the only country in the Gulf Cooperation Council that is able to comprehend Tehran's perspective and objections. Second of all, the cordial friendship between Oman and Iran disproves the Arab consensus that Syria is Iran's sole ally in the Arab world. Third of all, because Oman maintains friendly relations with important Western powers, it can play the role of mediator between Iran and the West on key issues. The reason explaining strong Iranian-Omani bilateral relations is largely Iran's successful armed intervention in the Dhofar uprising, in the early and mid-1970s.

8.4.5. The United Arab Emirates

Concerning the United Arab Emirates, the entirety of this country's indigenous population is Sunni in confession, except that there is a medium-sized community of Iranian immigrants in Dubai. Thus, Iran which has appointed itself as the protector of the Shiite community across the greater Middle East, and particularly in the Arab world, cannot take advantage of any opportunity to embroil itself and agitate Shiite

constituencies in the UAE because there are none – at least not among the indigenous UAE citizens. Yet, it is worth re-asserting that the UAE and Iran have litigious differences on a territorial dispute which dates back to 1971, when the Shah of Iran invaded and then incorporated three islands in the Persian Gulf: Abu Musa, the Greater Tunb and the Lesser Tunb. The origin of the dispute can be traced back to Great Britain's withdrawal from the Persian Gulf area in 1971. Indeed, after authorizing the kingdom of Bahrain and the UAE to accede to their independence in 1971, the Shah of Iran negotiated a secret deal with Great Britain stipulating that Iran would respect Bahraini independence as long as the United Kingdom ignored Iran's capture of these three islands. While the UAE instantaneously contested the occupation of these three islands, it had not shown resolve to take them back by force and may be renouncing its claims over them.

8.4.6. Qatar

Regarding Qatar, it has also forged close ties with Iran. Indeed, the GCC blockade of Qatar in 2017 that lasted four years and was directed by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, among other countries, has reinforced Qatar and Iran's bilateral relations. In fact, the logic behind the blockade was Qatar's alleged backing of Hezbollah and Hamas, sponsorship of the Muslim Brotherhood, and its desire to strengthen its ties with Iran. The embargo on Qatar brought to the fore the sensitivities within the GCC, and was created in 1981 to contain Iran's aggressive plans in the region, but ended up creating the opposite effect, particularly following the Qatar blockade. In addition, Qatar is investing with Iran in constructing the largest offshore natural gas field in the world known nowadays as South Pars- North Dome. It is worth stating that all the indigenous Qatari population is Sunni in confession.

8.5. MESA: The attempt to thwart Iranian hegemonic aspirations in the Middle East[507]

Following the election of Trump to the White House, he attempted to convince the Saudi Arabian monarch Salman and the crown prince Mohammed Bin Salman, or MBS, to try to enlist a coalition of countries in the creation of MESA (Middle East Strategic Alliance), also called Arab NATO, to counter the hegemonic aspirations of Iran in the region. In 2019, the foreign ministers of Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates met altogether in Amman to discuss this issue. While Saudi Arabia was proceeding in constituting the MESA technically, the Trump administration was in devising its political, defense, economic, and energy pillars, and it set up meetings with each and every prospective member country. In the meantime, Trump was working on his botched deal of the century, to try to settle the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, so that at some stage in the future, Israel could become a MESA key member. Nonetheless, Trump was able to make a breakthrough by paving the way for the signature of the Abraham Accords, which consisted of a peace agreement between Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain, ratified in September 2020.

8.6. Conclusion

The author started Chapter VIII by describing the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia, before Khomeini's revolution which toppled the Shah. Under the Nixon doctrine, the Twin Pillars policy was enacted by the United States, whereby it protected its vital interests in this area of the world and prevented the Soviet Union from making inroads into the Persian Gulf. It is worth mentioning that the Shah was acting as the

[507] Lacin Idil Oztig, "Regional Dynamics and the Future of Middle East Strategic Alliance," Wileyonlinelibrary.com/journal/dome, November 14, 2020, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/dome.12229, 104.

policeman of the Gulf. Bilateral ties between Riyadh and Tehran weren't very cordial but they managed to coexist somewhat peacefully. This trend changed radically with the rise and ascent of Khomeini in 1979. The concurrence between Saudi Arabia and Iran underwent several ebbs and flows, over the past forty-five years, but overall the relationship was extremely unfriendly and cold. This is why analysts called it the new Middle Eastern Cold War. After portraying the historical background of the standoff between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the author pursued Chapter VIII by describing the multi-layered nature of the tension between the two countries that transcends national security, sectarianism, geopolitics, leadership of the Muslim world, and some external factors. Later on in Chapter VIII, the author narrated the ties between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the several different Shiite communities of the Gulf, such as in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait and the rest of the GCC countries. Towards the end of Chapter VIII, the author talked about the failed initiative which Trump had attempted to implement in order to contain the expansionist ambitions of Iran in the Gulf. Indeed, the Trump administration was trying to forge a new military, economic and political institution that will check Iran's aspirations in the Middle East. It is an Arab NATO which could have included Israel should it have succeeded.

Finally, in Chapter IX, titled Appraising Iran's Arab Policy, the author will summarize each and every section starting with the introduction and ending with Chapter VIII. Then, the author will summarize his findings. Afterwards, the author will state whether the Islamic Republic of Iran will fundamentally change its policy with Saudi Arabia and abandon its regional ambitions. In the last section of Chapter IX, the author will comment on the future of the two countries' relations.

CHAPTER 9

APPRAISING IRAN'S ARAB POLICIES

The objective of this research was to explain the reasons behind the hegemonic ascendance of the Iranian regime in the Middle East over the past couple of decades, mainly through its Arab policies which it is using as a means to an ultimate end of trying to dominate the region, which is leading to irreversible consequences on the stability of the region.[508] The author believes that this research about Iran and its Arab policies is essential and crucial because it allows us to examine whether the region might conflagrate. In addition, the author believes that is central nowadays given Iran's attempts at going nuclear militarily, which is threatening international world order, peace and stability.[509]

Since the establishment of the Median, Persian, Parthian, and Sasanian populations in modern Iran, among others, its kings always sought to build empires and strove to become the uncontested hegemons of the whole Middle East.[510] Indeed, their different and multiple types of kings fought against the Greeks, the Roman empire and then the Byzantine empire. This constant in Iranian spirit is found in the creation of the

[508] Ali. G Dizboni and Omar Sofwat, "Hegemonic Aspirations and Middle East Discord: The Case of Iran," Conflict and Diplomacy in the Middle East: External Actors and Regional Rivalries, November 25, 2018, https://www.e-ir.info/2018/11/25/hegemonic-aspirations-and-middle-east-discord-the-case-of-iran/, 1.

[509] Imad Mansour, "Iran and Instability in the Middle East: How Preferences Influence the Regional Order," International Journal, 2008, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40204430, 943.

[510] Hervé Ghannad, Identité et Politique Extérieure de l'iran (Levallois-Perret, France: Studyrama, 2013), p 43.

Buyid dynasty in the Middle Ages whose kings sought to reconstruct the lost grandeur of the former Iranian empires for a century.[511]

Contemporaneously, the Islamic Republic of Iran is striving to become the regional hegemon of the Middle East by enacting its Arab Policies. The policy-makers in Iran are aware that Iran alone cannot, and will never be able to become the hegemon of the Middle East. This is why it is seeking to create allies of its own in its neighboring Arab countries whereby the authority of the state is weak. Iran became gradually Muslim after the seventh century A.D., following the Arab conquests of the whole Middle East, with the spread of the Muslim faith.[512] Back then, during the seventh century A.D., the Arab armies originating from the entirety of the Arabian Peninsula were able to defeat both the Byzantine and the Sassanian empires altogether. This is partly why the Iranians nowadays, hold a grudge towards their Arab counterparts. Indeed, the Arab conquests to spread out Islam, across the whole Greater Middle East, put an end to the hegemonic and expansionist aspirations of the Iranian political elite, back then at least.

Since Iran is the only country internationally that is entirely Shiite, it is using Pan-Shiism as a tool to gain the loyalty of its Arab Shiite counterparts, who are usually disenfranchised on local levels in their respective countries. This was the case first and foremost of the Muslim Shiite communities in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen. Furthermore, it is also worth mentioning that the Iranian population converted to Shiite Islam in the sixteenth century onwards only, with the rise of the Turkic Safavid dynasty,

[511] Cl. Cahen, "Buwayhids or Būyids," Brill, April 24, 2012, https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/buwayhids-or-buyids-SIM_1569, 2.

[512] Hugh Kennedy, The Great Arab Conquests: How the Spread of Islam Changed the World We Live In (London, USA: Phoenix, 2008), 169.

for geopolitical reasons mainly, and definitely not out of piety, or preference for Shiism, as a better sect than Sunnism.[513]

Simultaneously, the way the clergymen ascended to the helm of power in Iran is complicated, and has endured several centuries to take shape. Indeed, the Qajar dynasty, established in the late eighteenth century, being temporal rulers, unlike their Safavid predecessors, had to protect and safeguard Shiism from any inherent danger or external threat.[514] Thus, and in order for the Qajar rulers to safeguard their hold on power, they had to enact policies in coordination with their Shia clergy counterparts, in order to remain in power, and to receive religious backing. It is also during the Tobacco Protest of 1892[515] and the constitutional revolution of 1905-11[516] that the authority and influence of the Mullahs in Iran never stopped increasing among the Iranian populace. Additionally, it is also during the Mossadiq constitutional experiment[517] and the corrupt policies of Mohammed Reza Pahlavi that the clergymen in Iran evolved into one of the main political stakeholders. The 1979 Iranian revolution, illustrated the moment when the clergymen were able to ascend to the zenith of power, because Khomeini was able to oust the other revolutionary political movements, and establish a theocracy over there.[518]

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[513] Hervé Ghannad, Identité et Politique Extérieure de l'iran (Levallois-Perret, France: Studyrama, 2013), p 47.

[514] Nasr Seyyed Vali Reza, The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future (New York, USA: Norton, 2016), 75.

[515] William L. Cleveland and Martin P. Bunton, A History of the Modern Middle East (New York, NY, USA: Routledge, an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 110.

[516] Pierre-Jean Luizard, Histoire Politique Du Clergé Chiite: XVIIIe-XXIE SIÈCLE (Paris, France: Fayard, 2014), 92.

[517] Ibid, p 177.

[518] William L. Cleveland and Martin P. Bunton, A History of the Modern Middle East (New York, NY, USA: Routledge, an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 433.

It is through the emancipation and politicization of the Shiite community in Lebanon, led by Musa al Sadr in the 1960s and in the 1970s,[519] that the creation of Hezbollah in 1982 materialized.[520] The Alawite Hafez al Assad's rise to power in Syria in 1970 and his alliance with the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979,[521] as well as the housing and protection of the Iraqi Shiite leaders swearing allegiance to the Wilayat al Faqih inside Iranian territory, following the coup d'état led by Saddam Hussein in 1978 in Baathist Iraq, all led the Iranian Mullahs in Tehran to develop their Arab Policies across the Middle East.

Yet another tactic of Iran to become a regional power in the Near East, was to meddle and interfere in the course of the Arab-Israeli conflict. It is worth mentioning however, that the Islamic Republic of Iran was never interested in liberating the Palestinian Homeland. On the contrary, the Islamic Republic of Iran seeks to destabilize the "Lesser Satan", namely Israel, it also seeks to have access to the Eastern Mediterranean Sea through Hezbollah in Lebanon,[522] Hamas[523] and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad,[524] in Gaza, and finally, it seeks to acquire the sympathy of the Arab populations.

[519] Fouad Ajami, Vanished Imam (New York, USA: Cornell University Press, 2012), 39.

[520] Aurélie Daher, Hezbollah: Mobilisation and Power (London, UK: Hurst & Company, 2019), 44.

[521] Jubin Goodarzi, Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East (London, UK: Tauris, 2009), XII.

[522] Matthew Levitt, "Hezbollah's Regional Activities in Support of Iran's Proxy Networks," Middle East Institute, 2021, https://www.mei.edu/publications/hezbollahs-regional-activities-support-irans-proxy-networks, 9.

[523] Stephen Zunes and Emily Schwartz, "The Rise of Hamas," Foreign Policy In Focus, June 22, 2007, https://fpif.org/the_rise_of_hamas/, p 5.

[524] Erik Skare, A History of Palestinian Islamic Jihad: Faith, Awareness, and Revolution in the Middle East (Cambridge, United Kingdom, England: Cambridge University Press, 2022), p 84.

In addition, following the toppling of Saddam Hussein in 2003, the clergymen in Iran were able to take advantage of the golden opportunity to establish a friendly subservient political regime in Baghdad, thus controlling almost the whole Fertile Crescent without engaging militarily.[525] Another strategy used by the Iranian policymakers to become a regional power was to help the initially local disgruntled Zaydi cultural movement, turned into both a political and a military Houthi party that was able to seize power in Yemen, in 2014.[526]

Following the unfolding of the Arab Spring in 2011, an uprising occurred in Syria that threatened the regime of Bashar al-Assad. The Islamic Republic of Iran undertook the mission of shoring up the al-Assad regime, by whatever means possible. In fact, the Iranian political leaders sent into Syria the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, the pro-Iranian Iraqi militias, but also expedited Shiite Pakistani and Afghani mercenaries, and obliged the Lebanese Hezbollah to contribute to the war effort.[527] With the pivotal help of the Russian air force that started in 2015,[528] the IRGC and its proxies were only then able to turn the tide of the war to their advantage, by 2016. Since then, and following the end of the Arab Spring uprisings, Iran had built a land corridor that stretches out from Tehran to Gaza passing through Baghdad, Damascus and Beirut, thus controlling five main Arab capitals in addition to Sanaa.

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[525] Keiko Sakai, Philip Marfleet, and Ali Granmayeh, "Iranian-Iraqi Relations 2003-2013: Iran's Influence in Post-Saddam Iraq," essay, in Iraq since the Invasion: People and Politics in a State of Conflict (Abingdon, Oxon, New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2020), 206–18, 206.

[526] Ofira Seliktar and Farhad Rezaei, "Chapter 7," essay, in Iran, Revolution, and Proxy Wars (S.l., USA: Springer Nature, 2021), 202–34, 214.

[527] Guido Steinberg, "The 'Axis of Resistance': Iran's Expansion in the Middle East Is Hitting a Wall," EconPapers, August 2021, https://econpapers.repec.org/RePEc:zbw:swprps:62021, 18.

[528] "Iran's Priorities in a Turbulent Middle East," Crisis Group, April 23, 2018, https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran/184-irans-priorities-turbulent-middle-east, 17.

Thus far, the only country capable of counterbalancing Iran's hard and soft powers, across the Arab world, was the kingdom of Saudi Arabia and some of its Gulf key allies.[529] Furthermore, the Islamic Republic of Iran is leading a standoff with Saudi Arabia and conducting a geopolitical rivalry with the latter country in all spheres encompassing religion, culture, leadership of the Muslim world, among other elements. By extension, and in the same vein, ever since the Iranian revolution of 1979, Tehran is also trying to take advantage of the presence of disempowered Arab Shiite minorities in the Gulf such as in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait and Oman to attempt to destabilize these countries politically.[530] Simultaneously, and as proven during the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-88,[531] the Iranian military apparatus could threaten to close the Strait of Hormuz at almost any time, whereby most of the hydrocarbon energy supply pass through daily. By arming the Houthis with anti-naval missiles, the Iranians leaders are also attempting to strangle Saudi Arabia.[532] It comes as no surprise that the former Trump administration, along with the coordination of Saudi Arabia, was trying to enact an Arab NATO to thwart the hegemonic aspirations of Iran in the Middle East.[533]

According to the author, it doesn't look like that the Islamic Republic of Iran will ever abandon its regional ambitions. Indeed, as mentioned earlier in this work, Iran's Arab policies are threefold: one, its first objective was to become the de facto leader of

[529] Ibrahim Fraihat, Iran and Saudi Arabia: Taming a Chaotic Conflict (Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 42.

[530] Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East (London, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2020), 189.

[531] Williamson Murray and Kevin M. Woods, The Iran-Iraq War: A Military and Strategic History (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 93.

[532] Ofira Seliktar and Farhad Rezaei, "Chapter 7," essay, in Iran, Revolution, and Proxy Wars (S.l., USA: Springer Nature, 2021), 202–34, 221.

[533] Lacin Idil Oztig, "Regional Dynamics and the Future of Middle East Strategic Alliance," Wileyonlinelibrary.com/journal/dome, November 14, 2020, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/dome.12229, 104.

the region since it considers itself a key nation in the Middle East. Indeed, Iran is one of the oldest civilizations in the Middle East, it is a culturally rich country, and it was the policeman of the Middle East during the Shah rule era. Therefore, Iran believes it is entitled to be the leader of the Near East. Two, its second objective was to export its own revolution and spread out Islamist republics similar to its own across the entirety of the Arab countries. In fact, Iran considered them despotic and totalitarian. Iran's Mullahs believed the Gulf monarchies to be derived from Wahhabi Islam, a trend in Sunni Islam that tends to be more fanatical and rigid, which is in sharp contradiction to Islam's true and proper precepts. Iran was also adamant on transforming neighboring Iraq into an Islamic country that will follow the former's path because the Baath party ruling over Iraq was secular and Iraq was governed by the Sunni minority in the country. Three and lastly, the third objective of Iran's Arab policy was to topple the corrupted pro-American political regimes. Indeed, Iran saw the Gulf monarchies as allies to "Greater Satan", the United States of America, which are protecting the latter's national interests and the preservation of their own regimes, rather than looking after their populations' welfare and security.

Therefore, according to the author at least, because the Islamic Republic of Iran always strove to become the hegemon of the Middle East, it will keep on striving in doing so. Yet, the Islamic Republic of Iran has sought to improve its ties with Saudi Arabia lately, with Chinese mediation, in order to consolidate its gains in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen – just like it did after the Iran-Iraq war, when it reconciled itself with the Gulf petro-monarchies. Therefore, it seems that the truce signed by both regional powers is only temporary. Furthermore, there were local disturbances inside Iranian territory that threatened the regime's grip on power because it is investing in its foreign objectives,

rather than in the well-being of its citizens. This may be the only way to topple the Islamic Republic of Iran. Indeed, a mass revolution with external aid and support is the only means to get rid of the Iranian regime, since the latter is about to start deploying nuclear weapons, with the development of accurate and devastating ballistic missiles.

The author doubts that Iran will become the hegemon of the Middle East. But it remains to be seen in any case. It seems that despite turning into a regional power through the development of its Arab Policies, the Islamic Republic will have to face stiff resistance from the remaining countries that counter-balance it, which are the Gulf monarchies under the leadership of Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Israel. It comes as no surprise that Saudi Arabia and Israel were attempting to sign a formal peace treaty among themselves, in order to counter the hegemonic aspirations of the Iranian theocracy.

Certainly, Hamas' attack on Israel on October 7 2023 was to prevent such a peace treaty from occurring. In addition, the author believes that Iran did not commit to helping out Hamas in its war against Israel because it is not in its national interest to do so, since it would lose everything it has built in the last couple of decades. By entering the current war on the side of Hamas, as it always claimed it would for any of its allies in the Axis of Resistance, the conflict could conflagrate into a regional war, with outside countries like the US assisting Israel, and Iran could incur a huge defeat. Instead, Iran has asked its numerous proxies in the region like Hezbollah, the Houthis, and the pro-Iranian Iraqi militias to act on its behalf, so as not to lose credibility in the eyes of the public. This is why the author tends to think that it will be very difficult for Iran to become the uncontested hegemon of the Middle East, despite its informal alliance with China and Russia, against the American led world order. Nevertheless, one thing is certain: Iran will never abandon its regional ambitions and its rapprochement with Saudi Arabia consists

solely of a tactical maneuver to recover after several direct and indirect armed conflicts in Syria, for example, that have depleted the Iranian treasury along with the harsh American sanctions. It remains to be seen what the Islamic Republic of Iran will plan next.

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