STRATEGIC FLASHPOINTS UNDER POLARITY IN FLUX: POWER SHIFTS IN THE MODERN SAUDI-IRANIAN STRATEGIC COMPETITION

Aidan Parkes (Australia)

ABSTRACT

The tensions between The Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) have afflicted the Gulf, and broader Middle East region pervasively since the 1979 Islamic Revolution of Iran. The most theoretically illuminating feature of this conflict, is that rather than isolated and regional, it develops parallel to international shifts in power. This article analyses the ascensions of two Islamic powers, and how their ascensions have aligned, commensurate to trends in global polarity. Whilst religious incongruence underpins an aversion that is predicated on sectarianism, structural implications of polarity remain pervasive, and omnipresent in explaining the way states interact with one another. Polarity theory has been applied to the Middle East in the regional sense (Kausch, 2015). However, the literature pertaining to how global polarity inflects on the Saudi-Iranian contest is understudied. It is this space in scholarship this paper seeks to address.

KEYWORDS: Polarity, security, Strategic Studies, Iran, Saudi Arabia

INTRODUCTION

This article will explore the contributing factors that explain the protracted animosity between the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). The scope of this paper will focus primarily on post-1979 Iran, and the foundation of the Saud Dynasty in 1744. This is done to capture the modern zeitgeist of an ever-complicating and multiplex relationship. 1979 is also widely considered the inception of a modern "Shiite Crescent", which will be discussed further. The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran crystallized modern state Shiism in an irreducibly adversarial position to the Wahhabi-predicated Saudi Regime. Hence, although the modern Saudi-Iranian quandary has deep historical roots, its modern roots should be traced to the fusion of Shiism with Iran in 1979 and Wahhabism with Saudi Arabia in 1744. This article explores the religious, sociological and contemporaneous geopolitical elements of Saudi-Iranian animosity. The first section will contextualise religious incongruence that underpins modern hostility. The second section will explore the way in which both Iran and Saudi Arabia's modern state legitimation is founded on reciprocal religious intolerance. The third section explains how nascent multipolarity affects the alliance structures of Saudi Arabia and Iran, and subsequently intensifies their antagonism, thus bifurcating their international relations. Polarity theory has been applied to the Middle East in the regional sense (Kausch, 2015). However, the literature pertaining to how global polarity inflects on the Saudi-Iranian contest is understudied. It is this space in Middle Eastern scholarship this paper seeks to harmonize.

CONTEXTUALIZING A COMPLEX CONTEST

The modern Middle East has been described by some as its own 'Cold War' (Gause, 2014). This characterization is apt because similarly to the Cold War, two regional major powers are pursuing strategic objectives through proxy wars in the Middle East. The difference in the Middle East's circumstance is the opaque influence of non-state actors (NSA). NSA's have vexed how states approach war in the 21st century. NSA's have the versatile ability to fill vacuums, complicate conflict zones, and act as proxies for states. Both the KSA and IRI have modernized their 21st century war strategies and instrumentalized violent NSAs for geostrategic goals. The confluence of modern tensions between the KSA and IRI can be traced back to Iran's Revolution in 1979. At this point, the KSA had just received F-15 fighter jets from the US in addition to deeper liaison between Washington and Riyadh regarding Afghanistan's future (Hart, 1998). Meanwhile in Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini led the Revolution that ousted the secularist pro-US Shah of Iran. Hence, two key implications can be drawn from the 1979 Revolution, an inherent distrust towards the US and a mutually irreconcilable distain between the KSA and Khomeini's post-Revolution IRI.

RELIGIOUS INCONGRUENCE

Complex sectarianism drives the modern conflict between the KSA and IRI. Yet religious incongruence invariably predicates the deep-seated animosity. The Sunni-Shia split, which began over discrepancies regarding the mode of leadership succession within early Islam, soon intensified into a multiplex socio-political divergence. A political divergence that has endured centuries. Indeed, as Abdo notes, "Iran has never abandoned Ayatollah Ruhoollah Khomeini's vison of a pan-Islamic Middle East with Iran as its progenitor" (Abdo, 2013 p.51). The city of Karbala evokes innate reverence from Shia Muslims. This is because the Battle of Karbala and subsequent death of Imam Husayn bin 'Ali are central to modern Shia identity. Saud al Kabeer bin Abdul-Aziz bin Muhammad bin Saud added sectarian nuance to the Sunni-Shia divide when he led the Wahhabi sack of Karbala in 1802. Here, the nascent Saudi state led some 12,000 Wahhabi-inspired supporters to Karbala where they sacked the city indiscriminately killing thousands, whilst looting and destroying the Shrine of Imam Husayn. The Saudi sack of Karbala was economically conducive because the Shrine had an abundance of gold, jewels and rare minerals (Roussea, 1809). Politically, the attack polarized the region and exacerbated sectarianism. Baghdad became a contested fault line between the Arabian Peninsula and greater Persia. The attack also broadly politicized religious adherence, fusing Wahhabi rhetoric with the House of Saud's legitimacy. Ultimately, modern sectarianism has developed out of religious divergence and its ideologically incongruous influence on state legitimation. Whilst both Iran and Saudi Arabia derive domestic legitimacy from religion, the respective interpretations are inherently incompatible. This incompatibility poses an intractable quandary for modern state legitimation.

STATE LEGITIMATION IN ISLAMIC SOCIETIES: A WEBERIAN ANALYSIS

Omnipresent in structure of state, religion is the central source of legitimation in both the KSA and IRI. German sociologist Max Weber divides the foundations of a state's legitimate authority into three categories: rational-legal, tradition and charisma (Weber, 1978). He also believed religion to be a crucial force in society. Most instructively, Weber's three determinants hinge largely on Islam in the case of both Saudi Arabia

and Iran. Indeed, there are other, non-religious forms of authority in Tehran and Riyadh. However, were religion precluded from either state's ethos, attaining Weberian legitimacy would prove foundationally problematic. What this means is that of state authority hinges upon religious determinants (Wolin, 1981). Islam's socio-political clout has permeated the judicial institutions, rendering Weber's "legal-rational" authority subordinate. "Tradition" as a mode of authority hinges on customary principles and finds root in patriarchal domination (Gerth & Mills, 1958). Again, not uncommon to Islamic societies, customary principles often synergize with cultural Islam. Examples of this include Muslim tribal customs which predate Islam both in Saudi Arabia and Iran, and the way in which customary cultural traditions have synergized with Islam. "Charisma" as a precept of Weberian authority requires "virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities" (Weber, 1947, p. 297). Here, charismatic endearment is inextricably linked to Ayatollah Khomeini's meteoric rise. Emblematic of Ibn Saud's charismatic leadership, he was able to create the Ikhwan, a religious military brotherhood that aided Saud in consolidation of the Arabian Peninsula. Indeed, political reliance upon tribes was no uncommon in embryonically centralizing Islamic societies. Additionally, Saud brought Bedouin tribal allegiance under the Ikhwan. Thus, it is evident that the precepts of Weberian legitimacy are deeply embedded in Islamic legitimation within the political realm. What this means for the KSA and IRI is that authority hinges upon two interpretations of Islam that are in mutual, vehement rejection of each other. The institutionalization of religion both in Iran and Saudi Arabia solidified political legitimacy, but also mutual animosity.

STATEHOOD AND RELIGION IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA

Islam is inextricably linked to the inception and predominance of the House of Saud. In 1744, a bay'ah, or 'oath of loyalty' was established between the Al Saud family and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. This is widely considered the inception of the first Saudi state (Metz 1992). Modern Saudi Arabia was founded on an alliance between Muhammad ibn Saud and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, an influential theologian from Najd. What became the House of Saud, joined forces with a fundamentalist interpretation of Sunni Islam that became known as Wahhabism. Wahhabism is dogmatic in its interpretation of Islam, and unambiguous in its rejection of Shia Islam. The alliance was mutually beneficial, as Ibn Saud could unify the disparately restive Bedouin tribes through Wahhabism. Indeed, unification under the banner of Islam was often the only point of commonality between disparate tribes, but nonetheless an effective one, particularly against a common enemy. Saud was also able to consolidate his expansion into the Arabian Peninsula with religious justification afforded by al-Wahhab's support. In return, Ibn Saud ensured the propagation of Wahhabism and specific adherence to Tawhid in all conquered lands. The Tahwid was central to Al-Wahab's conception of Wahhabism and denotes the centrality of monotheism as expressed in the Shahada. It specifically pronounced, "There is no god but God and Muhammad is the messenger of God" (Ruthven, 2004, p.14). Al-Wahhab saw the value in political engagement declaring that, "without the coercive power of the state, religion is in danger, and without the discipline of revealed law, the state becomes a tyrannical organization" (Hopwood, 1983, p. 23-25). The House of Saud did experience two interludes in opposition. Briefly against the Ottoman Empire's viceroy of Egypt. However, its Wahhabi infusion endured, which

Niblock notes is still "crucial to the nature of the Saudi state" (Niblock, 1983, p. 11). The pervasiveness of Wahhabism served as a cultural conduit for tribal elites to consolidate authority through an application of social and legal Islam which "rests upon a belief in the sanctity of everyday routines" (Gerth & Mills, 1958, p 297). However, the nexus between Wahhabism and the Saudi state manifested in a way which institutionalized an interpretation of Islam that vehemently rejected Shia Islam as apostasy.

THE IRANIAN RESISTANCE: THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTION

The 1979 Islamic Revolution ousted the Pahlavi dynasty of Iran. It had governed for over half a century. The Revolution institutionalized the endearing notion that a "Shiite Crescent" could manifest within the region. Internal factors such as corruption, budget imprudence, and tacit cultural assimilation rendered public perception disparate, but collectively indignant. Ruhollah Khomeini emerged as the first Supreme Leader of the nascent, reactionary Islamic state. Khomeini predicated his ascension on two central precepts: Wilayat al-Faqih' and a conceptually revisionist approach to the U.S. led-world order. The Wilayat al-Faqih' transcripts to the 'Guardian of the Islamic Jurist'. It signifies central imperative of Twelver Islamic jurisprudence in guiding the IRI's judicial system. Regarding Khomeini's foreign stance, he unambiguously declared, "we have set as our goal the world-wide spread of the influence of Islam and the suppression of the rule of world conquerors… We wish to cause the corrupt roots of Zionism, capitalism and communism to wither throughout the world" (Schirazi, 1997, p. 8). Khomeini drew Weberian legitimation not only through religious "traditional-authority", but also through endearing "charisma" in his stokes to call on Islamic revolutions around the world. In this regard, Samuel Huntington drew legitimation parallels based on charisma between Khomeini and John Calvin (Huntington, 1996, p.111). Since the IRI's inception, Khomeini was an implacable enemy of the Saudi's Wahhabi regime. Most profoundly, Khomeini crystallized state Shi'ism in Iran and ensured the IRI remained the ideological vanguard of Shiites around the world. This religious clout has manifested around the Middle East and continues to cause angst in Sunni states cautious of an emergent "Shiite Crescent". Ultimately, the enduring dichotomy between the KSA and the IRI is twofold, and to a certain extent, bridges a religious past with the geopolitical present.

MULTIPOLARITY & THE POWER TRANSITION THEORY (PTT): A STRUCTURAL CONSIDERATION

The emergence of a multipolar world is the most profound structural change to the international system since the fall of the Soviet Union (Buzan, 2011). The unequivocal rise of China, Russian resurgence, and the US' relative decline, are all emblematic of a broad redistribution of power. Hence, multipolarity finds structural concordance with A.F.K. Organski's "Power Transition Theory" (PTT). The theory proves instructive in explaining how multipolarity manifests in the contest of the Gulf strategic environment. The PTT sees the international system as a hierarchical structure whereby a dominant power establishes a rules based "international order" (Organski, 1958, p. 173). Here, states are classified in binary terms as either "satisfied" or "dissatisfied" within the international order. Within this paradigm, states are commensurately considered "status-quo", or "revisionist" (see Figure 1). The coalescence between the PTT and multipolarity finds root in Organski's nuanced stipulation concerning power. He notes: "power is relative, not absolute. It is not a characteristic of the nation itself but a characteristic of

its relationship with other nations" (Organski, 1958, p. 305). However, modernity and its precepts have both complicated and broadened the once military-centric calculus of power politics. Strategic bandwagoning is not anomalous to power politics. The pervasive and often omnipresent economic competition between modern powers commonly implicates multiple economic stakeholders. Consistent with the structural implications of multipolarity, Iran has fostered strategic regional alliances with states such as Qatar, Turkey, Syria and Iraq. Hence, a structural change in polarity has invariable regional implications. For the KSA and IRI, international alliance structures are divergent. Whilst the KSA supports a waning US-led world order, the IRI is forming strategic alliances with great powers like China and Russia. Indeed, ambitious powers are cognizant of this power shift as Geranmayeh and Liik note: "Iran and Russia share an aspiration to create and maintain a "multipolar" world order that would treat both of them as important decision-makers" (Nizameddin, 2008, p. 475-500). Not only does this add dynamism to the ostensibly rigid realist PTT, it coalesces with the nascence of multipolarity. For the KSA and IRI, this denotes a two-pronged quandary whereby the flux international system exacerbates pre-existing sectarian tensions.
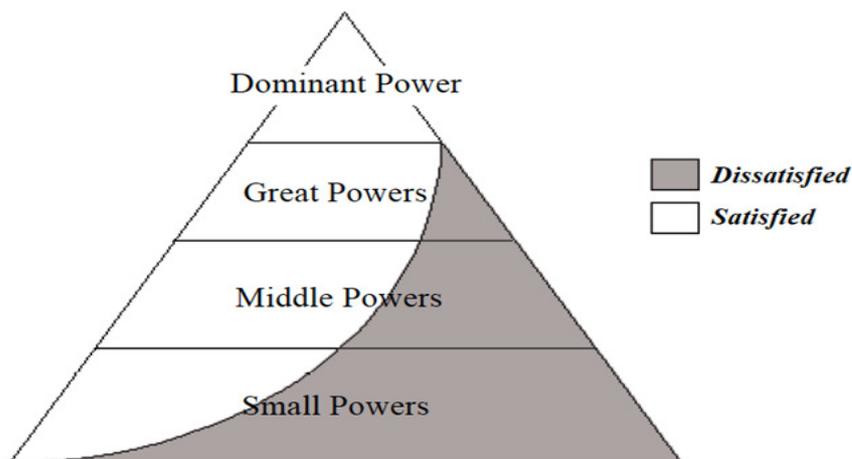

Figure 1 – Global Power Hierarchy. The dominant power is seen as the pre-eminent international power rather than hegemon. Kugler, J. (2006, December 11). *Power and power hierarchies in the global and regional context.* GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Hamburg.

SAUDI-IRANIAN MANIFESTATIONS: FOREIGN FAULT LINES – US & ISRAEL

The most intractable feature of modern animosity between the IRI and the KSA is the latter's longstanding strategic alliance with the US, and the former's perpetual disdain for perceived US imperialism. This animosity is broadly exacerbated by the politics of oil. Thus, evidencing the centrality of economic and strategic clout.14 Upon the discovery of vast and easily extractable oil reserves in the KSA, the US began to foster a strategic relationship that would see the KSA integrate within the emergent US-led world order. Indeed, the discovery of oil proved timely and served as a conduit to sway the state from autochthonous tribalism to a more centralized and governable modern. Indeed as Haykel explains, "Oil magnified the clientelist power of the Saudi rulers to unprecedented levels at a time when modern the centralizing state was also becoming the dominant institution

in society. This then stripped many hitherto active agents in society, such as tribal shaykhs" (Haykel, 2015, p. 128). Thus, whilst an association with al-Wahhab religiously legitimized the first Saudi State, an association with the US proved broadly conducive to Saudi Arabia's strategic interests. As Jones notes, Saudi Arabia's oil wealth is "passed along in myriad social welfare programs that include free education, free health care, sweeping employment support, subsidies for industry and business, and even the provision of copious amounts of water" (Jones, 2011, p. 47).

Contrasting the Saudi experience, the US has never truly experienced a productive relationship with the IRI. This is largely due to the anti-American and anti-Zionist rhetoric that gave rise to Khomeini's rise. Hence, Weberian legitimacy hinges on such foundational ideals. These include Iran's deep-seated aversion and suspicion to colonial and imperial overtures. The IRI's modern divergence with the KSA finds root in its rejection of the US-led world order and Zionism. In a 2015 meeting, Ayatollah Khamenei told Russian President Vladimir Putin that the "long-term plan of the US is against the interests of all nations, particularly our two nations, which can be thwarted by closer cooperation" (Geranmayeh & Liik, 2016, p. 2). What this denotes is a three-pronged dissension between the KSA and IRI. Those being; religiously incongruent sources of political legitimacy, conflicting regional objectives, and dichotomous international alliances. This antipathy is a point of commonality with many disenfranchised Muslims around the world and Arabs in the region which has proved endearing to Iran in uniting Muslims in opposition to the US and Israel. H Rostami-Povey (2010, p. 6) explains how this contemporary aversion works to mitigates historical and cultural incongruence:

> the ordinary people tend to communicate with each other through a mutual perception of the roles of Israel and the USA in the region. Iran is popular simply because it is the only country in the region that supports the Palestinians and the Lebanese while opposing Zionism and the Western – in particular US – policies in the region.

The 2006 Lebanese War crystallized an already prolific history of animosity between the IRI and KSA. through its support of Hezbollah and Hamas, Iran has been actively, and consistently involved in hostility towards Israel. Its anti-Zionist rhetoric is harmonious with its rejection of the US-led order and reactionary appeal to Islamic revolution. Thus, whilst Ibn Saud's consolidation of modern Arabia was largely contingent upon support from the West, Khomeini's consolidation of the Islamic Republic was founded on fundamental antipathy towards the West.

The New Middle East Cold War: The Multiple Hierarchy Model Multipolarity offers regional opportunity for the KSA and IRI. This is because both states have the capacity to wield influence commensurate of a regional hegemon. As Peter Harris explains: "the same principles that hold at the global level define interactions within regional hierarchies" (Harris, 2014, p. 241-259). Here, great power alliance structures bifurcate the IRI and the KSA. As the fluid KSA maintains its support of the status-quo despite the uncertainty of US global leadership or regional arbitration, the IRI has enhanced its geostrategic alignment with likeminded revisionist states internationally in the geostrategic case of Russia, but also through pragmatic economic opportunism with China. From this, regional shifts in power have resulted. Thus, the PTT highlights how structural changes in polarity affect regional dynamics (Organski, 1958). Here, the KSA benefit from the status-quo rules based order. In contrast, as a "revisionist state" the IRI does not benefit from the status-quo and consequently seeks to disrupt and ultimately reorder it.

The PTT becomes ever more applicable as US leadership in the Middle East becomes more tepid. Tepidity in leadership through Washington's political maneuver in moving the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in December of 2017, but also tepidity through the dwindling once omnipresent force presented by the US. Now, spheres of regional influence appear more salient, whilst spheres of broader geopolitical clout have manifested symptomatically of a broader shift in polarity. The precepts of multipolarity denote a refocus on regional spheres of influence whilst the PTT observes the way in which the international system shifts commensurate to tectonically structural alternations in polarity and power parity. It in within this context that the KSA and IRI's ideological incongruence has seen augmented bifurcation as a result of polarity shifts, resulting in protracted modern animosity.

LEMKE'S PTT AND (PARITY) PROXY WARS: THE MULTIPLE HIERARCHY MODEL

Douglas Lemke brings nuance to the PTT by postulating that regional subsystems exist subsidiary to the international system, compromising of the global system (Lemke, 1995). It is through Lemke's adaptation that the PTT best explains Saudi-Iranian competition. Figure 2 observes the interaction between international and regional hierarchies. Lemke notes: "When a dissatisfied member of a given local hierarchy achieves parity with the local dominant power it has the opportunity to go to war to alter the local status quo" (Lemke, 1995, p. 149). It is difficult to ascribe dominance to a single state in the Middle East due to the complex asymmetry in power between states such as Iran and Israel. Here, Iran is more powerful than Israel on measurements such as population, economic productivity etc. However, Israel possess opaque nuclear capabilities and a security guarantee from the US. However, the manifestation of dissatisfaction plays out through sectarian competition within the region. The way in which states pursue their interests are multifaceted and often include instances of hard and soft power. Given the enlarged role Islam plays in Middle Eastern society, religion manifests as an instrument of clout. Regional influence has become paramount due to declining US presence in the region, and the nascent, systematic restructuring of polarity in the international system. Furthermore, Lemke (1995, p. 149) notes that "most of the time the local dominant country enjoys preponderance of power over its neighbors in the local hierarchy, and as a result there is peace". This is problematic for the Middle East
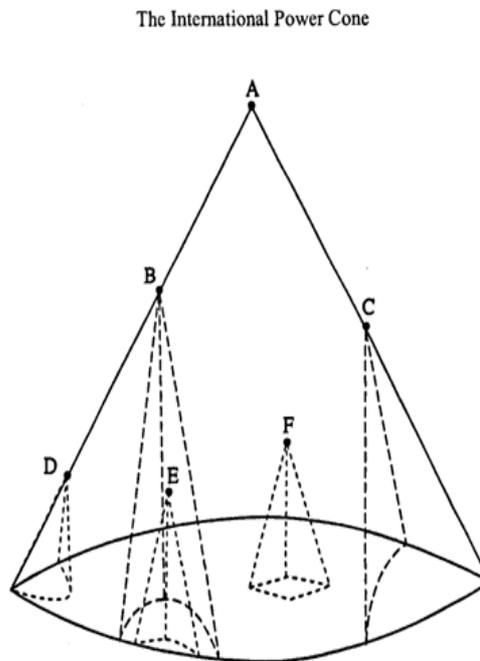

The International Power Cone

Figure 2 – Lemke's "International Power Cone". Lemke, D. (1995). Toward a general understanding of parity and war, *Conflict Management*

region because it implies that an absence of local dominance denotes instability. Here, the PTT highlights the volatile nature of the Middle East, but also illuminates the nature of modern "revisionist" and "status quo" proxy-war competition.

REGIONAL MANIFESTATIONS

The KSA and IRI have not engaged in the war envisioned by Organski's original PTT, nor Lemke's nuanced adaptation. This is symptomatic of an anomalous phenomenon: globalized multipolarity. Here, both the absolute cost of war, and the interconnectedness of the Middle East region, rationally dissuades Tehran and Riyadh from direct confrontation. Instead, stoking revolutionary uprisings or supporting counterrevolutionary efforts, in addition to the financing of proxy wars have proven both economically prudent, and politically shrewd means of expressing dissatisfaction with the regional status quo. Characteristic of the region, omnipresent religious clout, political, culturally and historically. Indeed, the empirical majority of Middle Eastern conflicts find predication on religious incongruence.

However, the unprecedented interconnectedness afforded through globalization evidences the broad geostrategic necessity and its salient precedence over the ubiquitously rationalized religious justification. Though religious discordance underpins the rhetoric of such sectarianism, the clouded proliferation of loosely associated, and poorly structured religious-militias negates the need for direct warfare. In its place, however, manifests an opaque consortium of non-state actor groups of varying degrees of political legitimacy and international recognition. Such groups often engage in fleeting alliances of pragmatic mutual gain, seldom espousing shared religious ideals and rarely shared political objectives. Power parity is the most crucial variable in the PTT, this is because it postulates the probability of war. The opaque and complex asymmetry of the Middle East's hierarchy obfuscates a state's ability to aptly discern power parity in the region. Hence, tacit regional competition manifests in two ways: proxy warfare and in the case of the IRI, encouraging subversive revolutions.

Arab Spring

The complexities and breadth of political outcomes from the Arab Spring vary in such diversity that generalized summation would be simplistically erroneously. Though one particular observation may be made from the 'springs' that occurred across the Middle East. That is, a geographic uprising of divergent causes and stressors, all symptomatic of a restive region no longer beholden, afraid or perturbed by the repercussions of great powers outside proximity of geographic concern. The competition between the KSA and the IRI has been characterized by some as a "New Middle East Cold War" (Gause, 2014). Gause (2014) believes this is because socioreligious ideology and political affinity supersede pure military might in such regional competition. Indeed, Ismail (2016) affirms this view by observing a causal relation between Saudi clerics' pronouncements and their political undertones. However, it is nascent multipolarity which facilitates such inter-regional cold-war strategic overtures. Indeed, modern globalization necessitates and ultimately ensures the implicit "cold" nature of such rivalry. During the Bahraini Spring of 2011, the Saudi-led intervention proved instrumental in quelling an anti-government uprising and supporting the Sunni minority government. Whilst the KSA looked to support pre-existing (status-quo) regimes such as those in Egypt, Tunisia and Bahrain, the IRI contrastingly perpetuated its Islamic revolutionary zeal. However, as is

often ubiquitous of the Middle East, the IRI and KSA's policy towards the Arab Springs were more opaque than ostensibly portrayed. This was done so as to maintain harmony between the states' endgame objectives, whilst maintaining strategic ambiguity so as to maintain influential versatility throughout the uncertainty of the uprisings.

Iraq

The US invasion of Iraq and subsequent chaos that ensued is indicative of the concomitant nature of PTT local hierarchies within the broader international hierarchy. This is because the US's most climacteric act, at its hierarchical dominance precipitated what would become Iran's regional reassertion and window for revisionism. For this reason, Iraq serves not only as a historic fault line between Shiite Iran and the nascent Wahhabi Saudi state, but also as the catalyst for the modern power vacuum presented subsequent of US withdrawal in the 21st century. As Lemke (1995, p. 149) explains, "Local hierarchies really are local; they comprise proximate states that are able to move enough of their resources into each other's territory to make warfare possible". Here, Iraq bridges the religious past with the geopolitical present, and serves as a conduit between the regional hierarchy and global order. It is intrinsically linked to the IRI and KSA both geographically and socioethnically. When discussing the relationship between the dominant state and local dominant country, Lemke (1995, p. 238) notes that, "the status quo of the local hierarchy therefore might well be created, defended, or simply affected by more powerful external actors". This is particularly applicable to Iraq because the US's intervention weakened its international standing as the world's sole superpower. Yet concurrently, it reordered the Middle Eastern subsystem. Ultimately, the same sacred fault line which bifurcated political Islam centuries ago, remains commensurately relevant to geopolitics.

Yemen

Beginning in 2015, the Yemeni Civil War typifies the opaque nature of antagonism between the KSA and IRI. Both the nature and proximity of proxy warfare permit a certain degree of ambiguity through militias. Here, just as ideological clout transcends the geographic parameters of Organski's PTT, ostensibly independent militias with affinities to the ideologies espoused by Riyadh and Tehran obfuscate the groups' true objectives. What began in 2011 as an internal presidential succession row, soon descended into a multidimensional conflict at the heart of the Saudi-Iranian proxy war. In response to the predominantly Shia-led "Houthi" rebel movement capturing Yemen's capital Sana'a, the KSA led a military intervention to remove the rebels and reinstall the ousted president Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi to power. Suspicious of a looming "Shiite Crescent", the KSA accused the IRI of supporting the Houthis as part of the broader regional competition, an accusation that has been corroborated by the United Nations (UN) (Landry, 2015). Despite being the poorest Arab nation, the state has seen some of the worst bloodshed in history with some 10,00 civilians killed and 40,000 injured (al-Haj, 2017). The impoverished nation is of geostrategic importance to both Tehran and Riyadh as it shares a border with the KSA and is split demographically with close to half its population of the Shia faith. The geostrategic imperative of regional primacy in Yemen is illustrated by the Houthi's assassination of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh in December 2017. Saleh and his forces had been strategically aligned with the Houthis against exiled President Hadi. However, Saleh's public declaration of willingness to cooperate with Riyadh in the cessation of hostilities and peace negotiations was ultimately incongruent with Tehran's

regional grand strategy. For many, Saleh was a symbol of unity in Yemen. His death invariably places Yemen deeper in the midst of a proxy war between two external powers with little hope or intention of resolution imminent.

CONCLUSIONS

Religious incongruence underpins historical Saudi-Iranian animosity. However, it forms just one piece of a complex puzzle. modern determinants such as sectarianism, war and mistrust have predicated its enduring nature. Though, state formation, ethnocentrism and draconian methods of legitimation equally compound the complex aversions espoused in Tehran and Riyadh. Geopolitical theories are useful tools of analyses because they provide structural foundation to illuminate multifaceted conflicts. Multipolarity and the implications of the PTT are invariably central determinants of conflicts in an age of such complex interdependence.

The oscillating nature of the international system will continue to protract or pacify the nature of state to state relations. Ultimately, it will inflect yet illuminate, seemingly regional issues.

NOTES

1. The day of āshūra' commemorates the death of Husayn bin 'Ali on the tenth day of Muharram

2. In describing Iran's religious political clout, King Abdullah II of Jordan coined the term "Shi'ite Crescent".

3. There is still exuberant debate over whether a power transition will take place and by what means. See Cox, M. (2011). Power shift and the death of the west? Not yet! European Consortium for Political Research, 10(3), 416-424; Fenby, J. (2014). Will China dominate the 21st century? Cambridge: Polity; Mearsheimer, J. (2006, April). China's unpeaceful rise. Current History, 105(690), 160-162.

REFERENCES

Abdo, G. (2013). The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a – Sunni Divide. *Brookings Institute, Analysis Paper, 29.*

Buzan, B. (2011). A world order without superpowers: decentred globalism". *International Relations, 25(5),* 2-25.

Cox, M. (2011). Power shift and the death of the west? Not yet! *European Consortium for Political Research, 10(3),* 416-424.

Esposito, J.L, and El-Din Shahin, E. (2013). Islam and power in Saudi Arabia. *The Oxford handbook of Islam and politics.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fenby, J. (2014). *Will China dominate the 21st century?* Cambridge: Polity.

Gause, F. G. III. (2014). Beyond sectarianism: the new Middle East cold war. *Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper, 11.*

Geranmayeh, E, and Liik, K. (2016, September). The new power couple: Russia and Iran in the Middle East. *European Council on Foreign Relations.*

Gerth, H, and Mills, C. W. (1958). From Max Weber: *Essays in Sociology, 110.*

Gill, B. (1998). Chinese arms exports to Iran. *Middle East Review of International Affairs, 2(2),* 55-70.

Harris, P. (2014). Problems with power-transition theory: beyond the vanishing disparities thesis. *Asian Security, 10(3),* 241-259.

Hart, P. (1998). *Saudi Arabia and the United States: Birth of a Security Partnership*. Indiana: Indiana University Press.

Haykel, B. (2015). *Saudi Arabia in transition: insights on social, political, economic and religious change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hopwood, D. (1983). The ideological basis: Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's Muslim revivalism.

In Tim Niblock (Ed), *State Society and Economy in Saudi Arabia* (p. 23-25). London: Croom Helm.

Huntington, S. (1996). *Clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order*. New Dehli: Penguin Books.

Ismail, R. (2016). *Saudi Clerics and Shia Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Jones, T. (2011). Saudi Arabia versus the Arab Spring. *Raritan, 31(2),* 43-59.

Kabir, N.A. (2013). *Young American Muslims: dynamics in identity*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Kausch, K. (2015) Competitive Multipolarity in the Middle East Italian. *Journal of International Affairs 50(3),* 1-15.

Kenneth A. (2005). *Explorations in classical sociological theory: seeing the social world*. Newbury Park: Pine Forge Press.

Kister, M.J. (1990). *Society and religion from Jāhiliyya to Islam*. Michigan: Variorum.

Khaldun, M. (1969). T*he Muqaddimah: an introduction to history* (trans. Franz Rosenthal). Ed. N.J. Dawood. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Lemke, D. (1995). Toward a general understanding of parity and war. *Conflict Management and Peace Science, 14(2),* 143-162.

Marschall, C. (2003). *Iran's Persian Gulf policy: from Khomeini to Khatami*. New York: Routledge Curzon.

Mearsheimer, J. (2006, April). China's unpeaceful rise. *Current History, 105(690),* 160-62.

Metz, H. (1992, December). *Saudi Arabia: a country study*. Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress.

Niblock, T. (1983). *State society and economy in Saudi Arabia*. London: Croom Helm.

Nizameddin, T. (2008, July). Squaring the Middle East Triangle in Lebanon: Russia and the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah nexus. *The Slavonic and East European Review, 86(3),* 475-500.

Rostami-Povey, E. (2010). *Iran's influence*. New York: Zed Books.

Rousseau, J.B. (1809). *Description du Pachalik du Baghdad Suivie d'une Notice Historique sur les Wahabis*. Paris: Treuttel and Würtz.

Rubinstein, A. (1981). The Soviet Union and Iran under Khomeini. *International Affairs, 57(4),* 599-617.

Ruthven, M. (2004). *Historical atlas of Islam*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Schirazi, A. (1997). *The constitution of Iran: politics and the state in the Islamic Republic*. New York: Tauris.

Weber, M. (1947). *Theory of social and economic organization*. Trans ed. A. Anderson., T. Parsons. CT: Martino Fine Books.

Wolin, S. (1981). Max Weber: legitimation, method, and the politics of theory. *Political Theory, 9(3),* 401-424.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aidan Parkes *has received his higher education from Australian National University, Australia. He has published his research papers on topics related to intelligence security and war in national and international journals.*