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Sectarianizing the Politics in the Middle East

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Abstract

Since the triumph of the Islamic Revolution in Iran until the present day, many political regimes in the Middle East have been sectarianizing their internal and external policies, (i.e., given doctrinal features to these policies). This is what led to the emergence of new alignments and alliances that changed the political map of the region. With the help of the securitization theory, which was developed by the Copenhagen School of Security Studies, this research attempts to explain the phenomenon of sectarianism and its repercussions on the security and stability of the Middle East. The research also deals with the emergence of a security complex or dilemma on sectarian bases, such as the Iranian-Turkish-Saudi complex, and its role in creating hotbeds of tension and conflicts in the region.

The research studies the phenomenon of securitization at the local and regional levels, and assumes that this phenomenon, despite its historical roots, is made by the regimes themselves, and is only intended to pass political projects that serve the regimes but not their peoples. The research concludes that there is no solution to sectarian dilemmas except with mutual understanding among the regimes that make them, and the resort to the policy of friendship and cooperation instead of the policy of conflict and rivalry.

Keywords: Securitization, Sectarianization, Security Complex, Proxy War

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طأفنة السياسة في الشرق الأوسط

ملخص

منذ انتصار الثورة الإسلامية في إيران وحتى اليوم، تقوم العديد من الأنظمة السياسية في الشرق الأوسط بطأفنة سياساتها الداخلية والخارجية، أي بإضفاء سمات مذهبية على تلك السياسات. وهذا ما أدى الى نشوء اصطفافات وتحالفات جديدة غيرت من شكل الخارطة السياسية للمنطقة. وبمساعدة نظرية الأمننة التي طورتها مدرسة كوبنهاكن للدراسات الأمنية، يحاول هذا البحث تفسير ظاهرة الطأفنة وتداعياتها على أمن واستقرار منطقة الشرق الأوسط. كما ويتناول البحث ظاهرة نشوء مركب أو معضلة أمنية على أسس مذهبية، كالمركب الإيراني التركي السعودي، ودوره في صناعة بؤر للتوتر والصراع في المنطقة.

ويدرس البحث ظاهرة الأمننة على المستويين المحلي والإقليمي، ويفترض أن هذه الظاهرة، رغم جذورها التاريخية، هي من صنع الأنظمة ذاتها، ولا يراد منها سوى تمرير مشاريع سياسية تخدم الأنظمة دون شعوبها. ويستنتج البحث أن لا حل للمعضلات المذهبية إلا بتفاهم الأنظمة الصانعة لها، ولجوئها الى سياسة الصداقة والتعاون بدلا من سياسة الصراع والتناحر.

كلمات مفتاحية: أمننة، طأفنة، معضلة أمنية، حرب الوكالة

Introduction

The success of the Islamic revolution in Iran, in 1979, had great repercussions for the entire Middle East. One of the most important of these repercussions is that it added a religious and sectarian dimension to the policies of many regimes in the region. Thus, since the first few weeks and months of the revolution, many leaders of the Islamic Republic revealed their intentions to export the revolution to all Islamic countries, especially the neighboring ones. This caused concern among the regimes of those countries, especially Iraq, the Gulf states, Turkey, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and others. Therefore, it was not a surprise that the reaction of those countries was to antagonize Iran by all possible means. One of those means was sectarian entrenchment.

Given that the Iraqi Shiites constitute more than 60% of the population, the Iraqi regime was the most fearful of the spread of the revolution's contagion to its soil. In order to avoid the Iranian danger, Iraq waged a full-scaled war on Iran. With exception of Syria, almost all the Arab and Islamic countries backed Iraq in that eight-year war. This backing showed the concerns of the region's countries about the Islamic revolution.

After the end of the Iraqi Iranian war in 1988 and the death of Imam Khomeini in the following year, and the assuming of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei the position of *velayat-e faqih*, the intensity of the Iranian discourse about exporting the revolution subsided, and Iran tried to rapprochement with the countries of the region, especially the Gulf states. Accordingly, the 1990s witnessed a breakthrough in the tense relationship between Iran and its neighbors. However, the events of September 11 and the fall of the Taliban and Baath regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq contributed to complicating the situation again, and sectarian politics returned to dominate the Middle Eastern political scene.

The eruption of the Arab Spring revolutions complicated the situation too. Bloody conflicts erupted in Libya, Syria, Yemen and Bahrain, and these conflicts quickly transformed from popular uprisings calling for the overthrow of totalitarian regimes and the building of societies characterized by democracy and social justice, to sectarian conflicts between supporters of different sects. Moreover, several regional and global powers have been involved in those conflicts. Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia were, and still are, the most influential actors involving in the sectarian conflicts all over the Middle East. The severe involvement of these three powers turned several Mideastern countries, such as Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, into arenas for proxy wars among many local organizations and groups affiliating with sects adopted by the regional powerful actors.

The past few weeks witnessed an Iranian-Saudi rapprochement under Chinese sponsorship. This rapprochement resulted in the signing of an agreement to restore diplomatic relations between the two countries after a six-year break. It also witnessed a rapprochement between Turkey and Syria, and a restore to Syrian-Arab relations, especially with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. There is no doubt that the tense global situation due to the Russian-Ukrainian war and the concern about the dangers of a nuclear war have contributed to mitigating the sectarian conflict in the region. However, it is still too early to talk about a radical solution to the Middle Eastern sectarian conflicts. The past few decades witnessed many convergences between the poles of sectarian conflicts in the region, but

they all ended in new conflicts. These conflicts and their causes and repercussions constitute the main axes of this research.

Significance of the Research:

The significance of this research lies in the fact that it deals with one of the most dangerous political phenomena in the Middle East, represented by sectarianism. Thus, some Middle Eastern regimes have made great efforts to use the sectarian diversity of some societies in the region to ignite civil wars that have killed thousands of innocent people and destroyed the infrastructure they had built over many years. This research represents one of the attempts to show the ugly face of those wars and the evil intentions behind their ignition.

Problem Formulation:

Today, no conflict in the Middle East is devoid of a sectarian aspect and external interference in the name of religion or sect. In addition, several countries in the region have turned into arenas for proxy wars between groups fighting on behalf of powers that are sectarianly similar to them. In the light of these facts, this research tries to answer the following questions:

1. What are the roots of the sectarian disputes in the Middle East?
2. What are the methods and goals of sectarianizing the politics of the region? and:
3. What are the potential outcomes of this policy?

Research Hypothesis:

This research assumes that the sectarianizing of Middle Eastern politics is an intentional process aimed at achieving political goals at both the domestic and regional levels. Further, this policy will have disastrous consequences for the future of the region unless sectarianization turns into cooperation.

Methodology

This research deals with the phenomenon of sectarianizing Mideastern politics, i.e., the employment of religious sects for political or security purposes. The phenomenon of sectarianization is very similar to the phenomenon or process of securitization, which was developed by the

Copenhagen School of Security Studies, in terms of its causes, dynamics and results. Thus, the research tries to take advantage of the securitization theory in explaining the process of Mideastern politics. Accordingly, this research is considered as a qualitative one as long as it deals with concepts, terminology, and metaphors, but not with mathematical amounts, as in the case with quantitative research. Furthermore, the research adopts a hypothetico-deductive method in order to draw conclusions about the phenomenon of sectarianization. This method was developed by the Austrian philosopher Karl Poper (1902-1994). It is summed up by deriving a number of hypotheses about a particular phenomenon, based on a prior theory, and then examining those assumptions in the light of practical data. Instead of trying to prove the validity of these hypotheses, the researcher seeks to refute them, and what cannot be refuted from those assumptions is adopted as an explanation of the examined phenomenon.

The research is divided into three main sections. The first one deals with the theory of securitization and its application to the phenomenon of sectarianization. The second one deals with sectarianization at the domestic level, while the third one deals with sectarianization at the regional level. These sections, however, are proceeded by a historical background to explain the root of division inside Islam, and the occurrence of the Islamic sects.

The international influence on sectarian politics in the Middle East is not examined in this research. That is due to the fact that the relationships between the great powers on the one hand and the region's countries from the other are mostly affected by interests that religious sects.

The analysis focuses on three Islamic countries, Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. This focus takes into consideration the fact that each of these countries could, respectively, represent one of the biggest and most famous Islamic sects (i. e. the Sunnis, the Shiites, and the Wahhabis). Moreover, these three countries play the major role in shaping and influencing the politics of the Middle East.

Finally, the research's sections are summed up in a conclusion confirming the main hypothesis that the process or phenomenon of sectarianization is nothing more than a means used to achieve political goals. Further, it is almost impossible to get rid of the dire consequences of this process except with the cooperation of the three parties that carry it out, and the abandonment of the sectarian politics once and for all.

Theoretical Framework

English Oxford Dictionary defines the word 'sect' as "a small group of people who belong to a particular religion but who have some beliefs or practices which separate them from the rest of the group" [(i)]. The size of any sect, however, varies with the size of the religion it belongs to. The followers of some religious sects, such as the protestants and the Sunni Muslims, are more than a billion each. While the followers of other sects, such as the Baha'i or Ismailis, are not more than few hundreds.

Sectarianization is a term derived from the word 'sect', but if we look after the meaning of 'sectarianization' in Oxford English Dictionary, for instance, we will get "no exact match found" [(ii)]. Therefore, I will borrow the argument of the Copenhagen School in Security Studies (CSSS) about 'securitization' to define, explain, and analyze the phenomenon of sectarianization.

> According to (CSSS), "securitization can be seen as a more extreme version of politicization". Thus, "in theory, any public issue can be located on the spectrum ranging from nonpoliticized (meaning the state does not deal with it and it is not in any other way made an issue of public debate and decision) through politicized (meaning the issue is part of public policy, requiring government decision and resource allocations or, more rarely, some other form of communal governance), to securitized (meaning the issue is presented as an existential threat, requiring emergency measures and justifying actions outside the normal bounds of political procedure)" (Buzan, 1998: 24-25). By the same way, sectarianization can be seen as a more extreme version of sectarian affiliation and loyalty. This affiliation, however, can be just a source of a secondary national identity without playing any significant role in the interior or external politics of the state. Secular regimes are examples of such a case. In contrast, the sectarian affiliation could have a significant impact on state's politics at both domestic and foreign levels. In this case, one can speak about politicizing of sectarian affiliation. Furthermore, when a government is involved in internal or external violent conflicts in the name of sectarian affiliation, then one can speak about sectarianization. In other words, sectarianization means declaring a specific sect, or some symbols or values related to it, as objects facing existential threats by others and require emergency measures to keep them survive.

Like the process of securitization, three elements should exist in order to have sectarianized politics. These elements are:

1. Sectarianizing objects: beliefs, values, and symbols that are viewed as existentially threatened, such as imam Hussein for the Shia'

Muslims or the first three of the so-called 'Rightly Guided' caliphs for the Sunni Muslims.

2. Sectarianizing actors: states, parties, organizations, groups, or other actors who declare some sectarian objects as existentially threatened.
3. Functional actors: actors affecting the process of sectarianization without being sectarianizing actors or sectarian objects.

Further, the process of sectarianization cannot succeed in affecting the politics of the state unless some facilitating conditions are available. These conditions are like the ones required to the success of the securitization, and could be summarized as follows:

- The formulation of the speech act. Thus, the more precise and exciting speech the more mobilized people behind the sectarianization.
- The position of the sectarianizing actor, (i. e. the higher the position of this actor the stronger the impact on the audience).
- The acceptance of the sectarian object: (the larger the audience who believes in the 'threatened object' the bigger the opportunity of a successful sectarianization.

However, the sectarian fragmentations or divisions represent a fertile medium for the growth and strength of sectarian politics, especially in the so-called Third World nations, where democracy plays no significant role in political life.

Another term which can be borrowed from (CSSS) to explain sectarianization is the 'Regional Security Complex' (RSC). According to Buzan, a Regional Security Complex (RSC) is defined as "a group of states whose primary security concerns link together sufficiently closely that their national securities cannot reasonably be considered apart from one another" (Buzan, 1983: 106). This definition has been developed later by (CSSS) and the term was defined as "a set of units whose major processes of securitization, desecuritization, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another" (Buzan and Wæver 1998: 201). This new definition of RSC was reformulated to focus on other security actors than states and on other security sectors than political and military ones (Buzan, 2003: 44). On the basis of this definition, one can define the sectarian complex as: a set of states (or other actors) whose major sectarian concerns are so interlinked that their sectarian politics cannot

reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another". For instance, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Syria form a sectarian complex. Thus, one cannot understand and analyze the sectarian politics of each of these states apart from the others.

Further, the sectarian complex is characterized by the following features:

- It must contain two or more sects.
- The complex' parties should be neighbors, or at least belong to same region.
- The relations among the complex' parties are marked by sectarian durable tensions.

Like regional security complexes, the sectarian complexes can be analyzed at three levels:

1. Domestically (i. e. the sectarian influence inside each of the region's states)
2. Regionally (i. e. the role of the sectarian affiliation in the relations among the region's states)
3. Globally (i. e. the role of the global powers in sectarianizing or desectarianizing the politics of the region).

Regarding the dynamic of the sectarian complex, two main variables could have a significant effect on the development of the complex: 1) the balance of power among the sectarianizing actors inside the region, and 2) the ideological and sectarian convergence among the complex' sectarianizing actors.

Finally, there are three scenarios for the development of the sectarian complex:

1. Status quo: (no essential change takes place, at least in the short and middle run).
2. Internal change inside one or more of the region's states, and this change leads to change in the sectarian politics of the region.
3. Global intervention in the favorite of one or more of region's states and then a change in the process of sectarianization.

In the following pages, I will apply this theory on the phenomenon of sectarianizing the Mideastern politics in the post-Cold War Muslim world.

1. Historical Background

The bloodiest and most complicated sectarian conflicts in the Middle East have been taking place between the Sunnis and the Shia'. These conflicts date back to the exceedingly early periods of Islam. The succession of the Prophet Muhammad was the first issue on which the early Muslims divided into two groups. One, which a few decades later came to be known as Shiites, believed that the prophet would have wanted to be succeeded by his cousin and brother-in-law Ali ibn Abi Talib. The other, (which came to be known as Sunnis) believed that his closest friend and father-in-law, Abu Bakr, should be his successor (Armstrong, 2000: 23). Each of the two groups justified its position by several prophetical sayings. Abu Bakr, however, was elected as the first caliph after the death of the Prophet Mohammed and was respectively succeeded by Omar bin al-Khattab, Othman bin Affan, and Ali ibn Abi Talib.

Ali faced powerful armed opposing groups and involved in three bloody battles against them. He succeeded in defeating two of them but failed to defeat the one led by the then governor of the Syrian district (*ash-Sham*) Mu'awiyyah bin Abi Sufyan.

Ali was assassinated in 661 CE, and his most powerful opponent 'Mu'awiyyah', succeeded in seizing power and established an empire known as 'Umayyad State'. The supporters of Ali (Shi'a) continued to revolt against the new regime and were largely suppressed and marginalized from power. On the other hand, most of the Muslim community, by one or other means, gave their allegiance to Mu'awiyyah and the newly established Umayyad Caliphate (MacQueen, 2020: 20).

The severe political struggle, which followed the murder of the third caliph, Uthman bin Affan, resulted, among other things, in dividing the Muslim community (*Ummah*) into several sects and groups. With the passage of time, the sectarian groups turned into jurisprudential and ideological schools and pathed the way for deeper divisions and disputes inside the Muslim empire which stretched from western China to eastern France.

The Sunnis were divided into four groups: Hanafis, Malikis, Shafiis, and Hanbalis. These groups which became jurisprudential schools were named after the Imams who founded them. The Shiites were also divided into many groups but the Twelvers, who followed twelve Imams starting with Ali bin Abi Talib and ended with Mohammed al-Mahdi, have always been

the vast majority of the Shia'. The Shiites believe that their last imam, al-Mahdi, had gone into occultation after the death of his father in 874 CE, and he would return one day to inaugurate an era of justice (Armstrong, 2000: 58).

During the second half of the 18th century, an Islamic sect and movement occurred in the Arabian Peninsula. This movement became to be known as Wahhabism after its founder, Sheikh Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792). The name Wahhabism, however, is used only by those who are against this sect. Otherwise, the Wahhabis name themselves as monotheists (*Muwahhidun*).

The call of this movement was to invite people to return to the true Islam by giving up *shirk* (association) and *bida'h* (innovations) (Nanji, 2008: 403). This invitation, however, has always been violent and caused many bloody conflicts inside the Arabian Peninsula and outside it. The Wahhabis denounce many religious beliefs and practices of both Sunnis and Shiites, such as denying the physical attributes of the Creator (Allah) (i. e. hearing, sight, movement …etc.), constructing and visiting shrines, requesting intercession '*shafaá*' from saint people, celebrating the birthday of the Prophet Mohammad, and even beard shaving. All these beliefs and practices are kinds of associations (*shirk*) and innovations (*bidá*). Further, anyone who does not fulfill his religious duties, such as praying, fasting, pilgrimage, and almsgiving is considered as an infidel (*kafir*) whose blood and property is lawful for them (Bayram, 2014).

By allying with the Saudi family, Wahhabism became the official creed of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the third Muslim sect after the Sunni and Shia'.

Today, around 85-87% of the world's 1.6 billion Muslim population are Sunnis, 10-13% are Shiites, 3% Wahabis, and the rest belong to small different Muslim branches.

The Shiites account for the majority of Muslims in Iran (90-95%), [iii] Iraq (65–70%) and Bahrain (65–75%). There are also large Shi'a minorities in other Muslim countries, such as Lebanon (45–55%), Kuwait (20–25%), and Saudi Arabia (10–15%). [iv]

However, despite the differences among the Muslim groups, all Muslims agree on three religious pillars: 1) oneness of God (*tawheed*), 2) prophecy of Mohammed, and 3) the Last Day (resurrection). These pillars are mentioned in the Quranic verse (4: 136) which states: "*O you who believe! Believe in Allah and His Apostle and the Book which He has revealed to His apostle and the Books which he revealed before, and whoever disbelieves in Allah and his angels and His apostles and the Last*

Day, he indeed stays off into a remote error". The Shia' Muslims, on the other hand, added two more pillars, imamate, and justice. The addition of the imamate to the three pillars has always played a significant role in forming the Shia' identity. Similarly, the Wahabis' understanding of oneness, and their attitudes to the Muslims who are not agree with them contributed to the forming of a quite different Muslim identity.

Heather Robinson argued, however, that the interpretation of the history since the Sunni-Shia' schism asserts that political, legal, geographic, economic, ethnic, and other issues played a role that was equal to, if not more important than, theological disagreements in dividing the Sunnis and Shia' (Robenson, 2018: 9). Robinson's argument is also valid for the disputes between the Wahabis and the other Islamic sects.

In order to make a comprehensive and precise analysis of the phenomenon of sectarianizing Mideastern politics, I will discuss the phenomenon at two levels: domestic, and regional. The global level will not be discussed because global powers have no significant influence on sectarianizing the politics of the region.

2. The Domestic Level

There is no doubt that the regional policy of any country reflects, to a high extent, the ideological and political orientation of the regime which governs that country. Also, the internal conditions of any country have a clear and considerable influence on the formulation of its regional and international policies. Accordingly, it is impossible to understand the foreign policy of a country without understanding the motives behind this policy and the factors which stand behind the creation of these motives.

Today, sectarianism plays an essential role in the foreign policy of several Mideastern countries. Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia are the most important ones. This chapter is devoted to explaining the role of these countries in sectarianizing the politics of the Middle East.

2.1 Iran

Under the rule of the Safavid Dynasty (1501-1734), Iran converted to Twelver Shiism. (v) That took place when the Safavid Shah, Ismael I, in 1501, proclaimed Twelver Shiism, as an official creed. Before this date, Iran was regarded as a Sunni region following the Shafi'i creed. This dramatic move, which was fulfilled by violence, was motivated by political goals. The most important of these goals was to give Iran an ideological distinction and identity vis-à-vis its two 'Sunni' military and political

enemies, the Ottoman Empire, and the Central Asian Uzbeks (Keddie, 2006: 11). Another important reason was to use the Shia' principle of 'emulation' to form a wide and stable public opinion behind the Shah's policies. Thus, since the occultation of the last Shia' imam 'al-Mahdi', the Shiites have been following their highest-ranked clerics in fulfilling their religious duty (Kashmiri, 2018: 35). Accordingly, such clerics have always exercised full authority over their followers. Shah Ismael made use of this tradition to mobilize the people behind his political goals. He, therefor, called many Shia' high-ranked clerics from Iraq and Lebanon to teach and lead the 'new' Shiites toward his ends. By the late of 17th. century, most Iranians were solidly Shiite, and have remained so to the present day (Armstrong, 2000: 101).

On 1st. February 1979, the Shia' cleric, Ayatullah Khomeini (1902-1989), returned to Iran after being, for around fourteen years, in exile to lead an Islamic revolution against the totalitarian rule of Shah Pahlavi (1919-1980). By his return, Khomeini announced the establishment of an Islamic republic with a new political order. He defined what he called *velayat-e faqih* (rule of the supreme jurisprudent) as a form of government by which the country should be ruled. This form of government was based on Ayatullah Khomeini's theory of rule. According to this theory, the nation should be commanded by a qualified jurisprudent, who can protect the state institutions against deviations in fulfilling their religious responsibilities.(vi)

Iran's constitution was so clear in defining the Shia' identity of the new Islamic republic. (Article 12) of the constitution states that: "The official religion of Iran is Islam and the Twelver Ja'fari school of Shia' creed. This principle shall remain eternally unchangeable". Moreover, the constitution (article 57) gave the supreme jurisprudent, or the (*Shia' faqih*) an absolute authority over all the state's governing powers.(vii) According to the new Iranian constitution, the Supreme Jurisprudent is responsible for setting the directions of Iran's domestic and foreign policies. He is also commander-in-chief of the armed forces and controls the state's intelligence and security operations. He is the only one who can declare war and make peace agreements. The Supreme Jurisprudent has the power to appoint and depose the leaders of the judicial authority, the state radio and television networks, and the Revolutionary Guard Corps. He also appoints half of the twelve members of the so-called Guardian Council, the powerful body that oversees the activities of Parliament and determines which candidates are qualified to run for public office. The foundations '*bonyads*', that operate hundreds of

companies, are also under the Supreme Jurisprudent's control. His sphere of power is extended through his representatives, an estimated 2,000 of whom are sprinkled throughout all sectors of the government and who serve as the Jurisprudent's field operatives. His representatives are often more powerful than the ministers since they have the authority to intervene in any matter of state on the Supreme Jurisprudent's behalf (Benjamin, 2018: 46).

Ayatullah Khomeini, like Shah Ismael, also made use of the Shia' principle of emulation to mobilize the Iranian people behind his political ends. But unlike Shah Ismail, who made the authority of the Shiite clergy separate from his own, Ayatullah Khomeini deliberately combined all powers and authorities (i. e. the executive, legislature, and judiciary) in his hand. Thus, he acted as supreme jurisprudent issuing legal opinions '*fatwas*' to keep the state on the track of Islam and the Twelver creed. In short, there was no authority above his own.

Emulation, according to the Shia' school, also means that the emulators obey the jurisprudent's teachings and orders in all aspects of life, be they religiously or worldly. Moreover, the supreme jurisprudent in Iran's Islamic regime is regarded as a legal guardian of the whole nation. Accordingly, obeying him is a religious duty so long the Qura'n states: "O believers! Obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you (Qura'n, 4:59). Using this argument, the supreme jurisprudent can always mobilize his emulators or followers behind his goals.

As an attempt to safeguard the new Islamic regime from internal and external threats, Ayatullah Khomeini established the 'Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) in April 1979. There was no doubt that Ayatullah Khomeini was fearful of a repeat of the 1953 countercoup, in which the military aided in the ouster of Mohammad Mosaddegh and restoration of the shah. [(viii)] For this purpose, the Ayatullah Khomeini made sure that the Revolutionary Guards consisted of Shiites loyal to *Wilayat al-Faqih* only. These corps have not hesitated to fulfill any order issued by al-Khomeini or Khamenei who succeeded him as a supreme jurisprudent.

The participation of the IRGC in the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88) led to the expansion of both its role and its might, making it Iran's dominant military force, with its own army, navy, and air force and, later, its own intelligence wing. Such a powerful paramilitary behind the Islamic revolution and the supreme jurisprudent made it, and still makes, the collapse of the Islamic regime a very hard task.

Another source of the Iranian regime's strength is the Shia' rituals, especially the Day of Ashura', and the Forty Day of imam Hussein. Every year on the tenth of the month *Muharram*, the first on the Islamic lunar calendar, and the twentieth of *Safar*, the second month, the Shiites show a distinctive face of Islam, one that sees spirituality in passion and rituals rather than in law and the familiar practices that punctuate Muslim lives. These rituals express the deep sorrow of the Shiites over the martyrdom of imam Hussein, the third imam of the Shia', and the grandson of the prophet Mohammed, in the Battle of Karbala at the hands of the Umayyad caliph of the time, Yazid, in 680 CE. (Nasr, 2006: 23). This year (2022) more than twenty-one million have gatherted in the Iraqi city of Karbala' to mark the Forty Days (*Arbaeen*) of imam Hussein. It was one of world's largest religious gathering in history.(ix)

As concluded by the French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), religious rituals are practiced by people to sacralize the social structure and bonds of the members of community and to ensure the unconscious priority of communal identification. Durkheim asserts that rituals could transform knowledge into belief and membership into belonging and loyalty (Bell, 1997: 24-26). There is no doubt that such a ritual plays a significant role in unifying the Shiites and consolidating their identity. Moreover, it enables the Shia' clerics to lead their people toward the desired political ends. Accordingly, it is not a surprise to see the supreme jurisprudent and his aids insisting on the Shia' rituals and symbols.

Briefly, the principle of emulation, which obliges the Shiites to follow the supreme jurisprudent in both worldly and religious matters, ensures, to a high extent, the popular support needed for political stability. The Shia' rituals, on the other hand, ensure the regime led by the supreme jurisprudent a unified community which can be easily controlled and directed toward the political ends of the regime.

Iran, since the death of Ayatullah Khomeini until the present day, has witnessed several streets- protests the supreme jurisprudent's regime. Thousands of people from many cities, in addition to the capital, Tehran, were involved in the protests. However, every time the protests did not last for long. That is because of the ability of the supreme jurisprudent to mobilize millions of his supporters and direct them in counterprotests to restore the order. That is the fruit of sectarianizing Shiism on the domestic level.

2.2 Turkey

As a modern country, Turkey was founded on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire (1299-1923), which disintegrated and collapsed during the World War I (1914-1918). This empire was founded in 1299 CE by Osman I, who became the first sultan of the state which turned into an empire.

Islam arrived in predominantly Christian Anatolia with the Seljuks, a Turcoman tribe that converted to Islam in the ninth century. This conversion was not a result of a Muslim military invasion of the region, but a result of the Seljuks' connection with Muslim dynasties in the Arab heartland. The Ottomans, despite the bloody clashes they had with the Seljuks, accepted Islam too and regarded it as a crucial element of their identity (Finkel, 2007: 33).

Like many other Turkish tribes, the Ottomans waged many raids against the Byzantines who had put control over Anatolia at that time. But, unlike other tribes, the Ottomans succeeded in founding a state inside the Byzantine empire which suffered from many internal problems. To the surprise of many historians, this small Ottoman state turned into a huge empire after a few decades (Imber, 2002: 24).

Islam played a crucial role in the development and expansion of the Ottoman Empire. This role took on two main dimensions: the first was the Ottomans' declaration that their state was a legitimate continuation of the Islamic caliphate that the Prophet established in Medina, the state of the four Rightly Guided Caliphs after him (622-660 CE), and then the Umayyad state (661-750 CE), and Abbasid states (750-1258 CE) that fell to the hands of the Mongols in 1258. [(x)]

However, the Ottoman sultans faced a big problem. They were not Arabs, and this made their caliphate questionable, given most Muslim scholars confirmed the authenticity of a prophetic hadith that the caliphs after him were from Quraysh. This hadith was mentioned in Sahih al-Bukhari (Hadith 7140) [(xi)] and Sahih Muslim (Hadith 1820) [(xii)], which. According to Sunni Muslims, are considered as the most authentic books after the Qur'an. Accordingly, the Ottomans adopted the Hanafi school of law as its legal guide (Hallaq, 2009: 37). This was because Imam Abu Hanifa (699-767 CE) was the only one, among the imams of the four schools of the Sunni jurisprudence, to permit a non-Quraishi or an Arab caliphate.

Islam, however, played the decisive role in shaping the Ottoman identity over the course of seven centuries. It also had a decisive role in expanding the empire to reach what it had reached. Thus, the Ottomans launched all their expansionist wars in the name of jihad for the sake of Allah and Islam. By the dissolution of the empire, Islam, however, ceased

to be the main source of identity for the population of Turkey, which Ataturk has founded on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire.

A few years after the defeat of the Ottomans at the hands of the allies, the Turkish secularist politician and officer Kemal Ataturk (1881-1938) was able to establish the Turkish Republic in 1923 to be a strong and independent heir of the defeated empire. Ataturk succeeded in modernizing the country's legal and educational systems and encouraged the adoption of an European way of life, with Turkish written in the Latin alphabet.

However, despite all these dramatic changes Ataturk has introduced, the Turkish people did not sever their ties to Islam. That was due to many factors, of which most importantly the history of the Empire. Thus, Islam remained a source of pride for most Turks because of its close association with the establishment of the Ottoman Empire and its ability to extend its influence over a vast area of land, and the victories it achieved over the two greatest empires at that time: Persian and Byzantine.

Ataturk's nationalist secularism failed in replacing the Islamic identity of the Turkish people. Thus, despite the remarkable success achieved by Ataturk in secularizing all state institutions, Islam returned to its positions of influence on the society and state after the death of Ataturk. In 1950, for instance, the opposing Democratic Party led by Adnan Menderes (1899-1961) won the first parliamentary elections after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Unlike Ataturk, Menderes established strong relations with Islamic countries, and restored Islamic rites banned by Ataturk. This move prompted the army generals, who considered themselves as protectors of Turkish secularism, to carry out a military coup that led to the arrest and trial of Prime Minister 'Menderes' on charges of corruption and deviation from the secular principles of the state, and the issuance of the death sentence against him in 1960. (xiii)

The execution of Menderes did not put an end to the Islamic revival in Turkey. Less than a decade later, the Turkish politician and academic Necmettin Erbakan (1926-2011) founded, in 1969, an Islamic movement called '*Milli Gorus*' which means (national Vision), and whose aim was to warn the Turkish people against the rapprochement towards Europe. According to Erbakan's movement, this rapprochement threatened the Turkish Islamic values and traditions. Furthermore, Erbakan considered the then 'European Common Market' to be a Zionist and Catholic project aimed at assimilation and de-Islamization of Turkey (Eligur, 2010: 66-67). In addition to '*Milli Gorus*', Erbakan founded the pro-Islamic 'Welfare Party' (*Rafah*), which won the parliamentary elections of 1995

and thereby becoming the first Islamic party ever to win a general election in Turkey. (xiv) Erbakan succeeded in forming a coalitional government with the 'Right Path Party' led by Tansu Ciller and in 1996 became the first Islamic prime minister in post Ataturk Turkey. However, in 1997 the generals of the Turkish military forced him to step down in favor of Ciller, after being accused of violating Turkey's secular principles. (xv)

Even though Erbakan did not face the same fate of Menderes, he has also been a subject of suppression by the military generals who enjoyed full control over the Turkish politics at that time. His party was banned in 1998, and he himself was banned from political engagement twice: (1980-1987) and (1998-2003). (xvi) The Islamists, however, did not give up after the ban of the 'Welfare Party'. A new pro-Islamist party under the name of 'Virtue Party' was founded in 1998, and one of Erbakan's close friends, Recai Kutan, was elected as the party's leader. The Virtue Party, however, met a similar fate to that of the Welfare Party, and was banned three years after its establishment (Taniyici 2003).

In 2001, a group of Erbakan's followers, including the former prime minister and the current president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, formed the Justice and Development Party (AK). (xvii) One year later (i. e. in 2002), the party achieved overwhelming result in the then parliamentary elections. It won 34,4% of the votes and 66% of the parliament's seats, and this result enabled the party to form a government alone (Findley, 2010: 359). Five years later (i. e. in 2007), AKP won 46.6% of the votes, while The Republican People Party CHP (xviii), the party which represented Ataturk's secular tradition won 20.9% (Rabasa, 2008: 31).

Since then and up to the present day, the Just and Development Party has been dominating the Turkish parliament and politics. The leader of AKP, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who has been sentenced to ten months in prison after being convicted for inciting religious hatred, and barred from serving in parliament because of this conviction, became Turkey's prime minister in 2003. (xix) After ten years of serving as prime minister, Erdogan was able to bypass many of the army's attempts to isolate him and freeze his party. In 2013, he succeeded in imposing constitutional amendments that changed the Turkish political system from a parliamentary to a presidential one, and in 2014 Erdogan became the president of the republic and the most powerful man in the modern Turkey. Erdogan's biggest show of power was his delivering a strong blow to the military establishment by enacting laws that weakened its role as the protector of

secularism and thus got rid of the risk of coups like those that occurred in the past.

When he was appointed as a major of Istanbul, Erdogan adopted a pro-Islamic policy and speech. He, for instance, made public transportation, in Istanbul, free of charge during Islamic holidays, and banned alcohol in municipal facilities, and lifted employment restrictions on women who wore headscarves. Moreover, when a reporter asked him to explain his success, he replied, "I am Istanbul's imam." (xx)

However, it is extremely hard to describe Erdogan as an Islamist leader. That is because of his constant adherence to NATO, his keenness on a strong relationship with the West, his strong desire to join the European Union and to maintain diplomatic relations and cooperation with Israel. It can be rather said that Erdogan is employing religious rhetoric and some measures of an Islamic nature to expand his popularity among the Muslims. Erdogan could be regarded as a pragmatic political leader.

Erdogan Realized the fact that Islam, as Findley (2010: 338) put it, had more to do with defining the identity for most Turks, than did any other ideas. Accordingly, he was keen to appear as an Islamist who adheres to the principles and teachings of Islam to win the approval of the Muslim majority. He also sought, by adopting an Islamic discourse, to win the affection of many of the Kurds, considering that Islam constitutes a common ground at which Turks and Kurds meet. Erdogan is closer to pragmatism than to Islam. Frank Bealey (1999: 265) defines pragmatic politician as: "one who is concerned less with ends than most ideological politicians, who believes one should be true to one's objectives even at the risk of incurring unpopularity and losing power". This is exactly the case for President Erdogan's personality. He does not seek ideological ends as much as he seeks goals that enable him to maintain his popularity, and to achieve new electoral victories.

It can be concluded that Islam in general, particularly the Sunni creed, is used in today's Turkey, as a means of achieving political goals than an ideology for creating a religious society.

2.3 Saudi Arabia

The kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) has been established in 1934. Since then, it has been ruled by the descendants of the king Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud (1880-1953). The roots of the kingdom date back to 1744 when an alliance was formed between Mohammed ibn Saud, the governor of al-Dir'iyya, and the Saudi tribal leader after whom the kingdom took its

name, and Mohammed ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the founder of the sect 'Wahhabism' (Nanji, 2008: 162). According to the alliance, Abd al-Wahhab pledged to continue supporting Ibn Saud if their campaign to dominate whole Najd triumphed. Moreover, Abd al-Wahhab approved Ibn Saud's taxation of al-Dir'iyya's harvests (Commins, 2006: 19).

The reformative project of Sheikh Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab was represented by the call to the unification of God and the renunciation of everything he believes to be offensive to the doctrine of monotheism, such as pleading with the saints and the righteous, and venerating the shrines and graves, and other rituals that were widespread in the Arab Peninsula at that time. While Sheikh Abd al-Wahhab was in dire need of power to implement his reform project, Prince Ibn Saud needed religious legitimacy to justify his rule. Thus, the power of Ibn Saud and the call of Abd al-Wahhab formed a strong alliance to put control over the whole Arab Peninsula (Wynbrandt, 2010: 117). The alliance succeeded in achiving its goal under the slogan of monotheism and the purification of Islam from the heresies that befell it over the centuries.

After dominating most parts of the peninsula, the Saudi-Wahhabi campaign launched, in March 1802, a severe attack on Karbala in Iraq. Many citizens of Karbala were slaughtered, and its sacred places destroyed, including the shrine of Imam Husain, the third imam of the Shiites and the grandson of the prophet Mohammed. Moreover, the wealth of the tomb was stolen by the invaders. Similar attacks were launched on Basra, Mecca and other cities in the Arab Peninsula and Iraq. Accordingly, the Ottomans decided to defeat the Wahhabis' threat. Sultan Mahmud II (1808–39) ordered Muhammad Ali Pasha, the viceroy of Egypt, to drive the invaders out of the holy cities, and after a long series of battles Ali's oldest son, Ibrahim Pasha, succeeded in occupying Diriya, the capital of the Saudi reign, in 1818 and put an end to the first Saudi-Wahhabi state (Wynbrandt, 2010: 141).

The Saudi-Wahhabi alliance, however, did not give up. It kept waiting for opportunities to return to extend its control over the largest possible territories of the land of Hijaz. The first and most suitable opportunity came a few years after the occupation of Diriya. Thus, in the early 1820s, Ibrahim Pasha decided to withdraw many of the Egyptian troops from the peninsula. Ibrahim's withdrawal enabled the Saudis to reorganize themselves and to shift the balance of power in their favor.

In 1824, Prince Turki, the grandson of Muhammad ibn Saud, launched an attack on Riyadh, the center of Ottoman strength in the Nejd. The attack succeeded in occupying Riyadh and made it a new capital for the

second Saudi state. This state did not last more than a decade. In 1834, Turki was assassinated. The assassination led to a severe struggle for power inside the Saudi dynasty and provided Mohammad Ali Pasha with a good opportunity to defeat the second Saudi state in 1938 (Bowen, 2008: 76-79). Finally, in 1932, and after many years of conflicts and civil wars stimulated by regional and global powers, the Saudi-Wahhabi alliance succeeded in defeating all its internal and external enemies and declared the establishment of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Abd al Aziz Ibn Saud was the first king, and after his death in 1953 until the present day, six of his sons have ruled the kingdom, the last of whom is King Salman.

There are several reasons for why the alliance between the Wahhabis and *Aal Saud* (the house of Saud) has been lasting for so long time. The most important of these reasons is that both sides were, and still are, in urgent need of one another. While the Wahhabis need military, logistic, and financial support from the Saudi royal regime to spread their mission, the Saudi regime, in turn, needs the Wahhabi religious support to legitimize its rule. Thus, since the founding of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia until today, Wahhabi clerics (*ulama'*) have controlled most of the state's religious, judicial, and educational institutions and have completely harnessed them to serve the regime and defend it against all forms of opposition that confronts it. This Wahhabi backing to the regime is justified by the belief of the sect that people should obey their rulers, except on occasions when they were ordered to 'commit a sin' (Vassiliev, 2000: 152).

The Wahhabis have stood by the Saudi regime and fought with it against all its opponents, since the Diriyah agreement in 1744 until the present day. Among the most prominent of these positions is their position on the side of the founder of the modern kingdom, Abdul Aziz bin Saud, in his battles against the "Brothers" (*Ikhwan*), which was insisting on exporting the Wahhabi revolution outside the borders of the Arabian Peninsula (Bowen, 2008: 566). And they sided with King Khalid bin Abdul Aziz to put down what was known as the uprising in the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979, which was led by the dissident Wahhabi Juhayman al-Utaybi to preach the emergence of the 'Mahdi'. The Wahhabi *ulama'* then issued a *fatwa* (legal opinion) permissible to use force to storm the Grand Mosque in Mecca and eliminate the rebellion (Commins, 2006: 167). Then they stood with King Fahd bin Abdul Aziz in 1990 and issued a *fatwa* permissible to seek the help of non-Muslim armies to defeat the Iraqi danger after the invasion of Kuwait. They also

issued a *fatwa* prohibiting all forms of protests against the Saudi regime at the outbreak of the revolutions of what was known as the Arab Spring in early 2011. (xxi) The Wahhabi-dominated courts did not hesitate to issue death sentences for anyone who opposes the regime, such as the death sentence issued, in 2016, against the Shia' cleric Baqir al-Nimr on charges of incitement to destabilize the security of the kingdom. (xxii)

The absolute Wahhabis' support for the Saudi regime is based on their own interpretation of the Qura'n and the Sunnah of the Prophet Mohammed. The Quranic verse (4: 58): "O you who believe, obey God and the Prophet and those in authority among you" is interpretated by the Wahhabi scholars as an order as obedience to rulers in addition to Allah and the Prophet. Similarly, a *hadith* (Prophet's saying): "Whoever obeys the ruler, I appoint, obeys me, and whoever disobeys him, disobeys me", which was mentioned by both Sheikhs Al-Bukhari (7137) and Muslim (4519) in their Sahihs, is considered as a religious order to obey the rulers. (xxiii) In return, the Saudi regime highly rewards the Wahhabi scholars for the support, they always have been showing for the regime's internal and external policies, and this mutual benefit increases the stability of the alliance between the two parties.

It is to conclude that the Saudi regime's adoption of the Wahhabi creed, and its insistence on adhering to it, serves its interests in strengthening its control over the country's resources and crackdown any eventual uprising erupted by the kingdom's Sunni majority or Shia' minority.

3. The Regional Level

According to the theory of the Regional Security Complex (RSC) which was developed by the Copenhagen School of Security Studies, several sectarian complexes can be observed in the Middle East. Or in other words, several security complexes of a sectarian character. Almost, each of these complexes rotates around a state, such as Iraq, Syria, Yemen, or Lebanon.

Like in the regional security complex, patterns of amity/enmity, and the balance of power among the parties of the complex, play the main role in complicating or simplifying the regional sectarian complex. Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, because of their great military, economic, human and media capabilities, formed a triangle that almost includes all these complexes and defines their dimensions and paths of development.

To avoid direct military clashes, these three regional powers (Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia) adopt a strategy of 'proxy war' or what came

to be known as 'forward defense' in their struggle against one another. In this way, these forces transferred their sectarian disputes to the regional arena, causing civil wars to ignite in several countries of the region. In order to form an accurate and comprehensive picture of the struggle of these powers at the regional level, this chapter will deal with the struggle of each of these three regional powers against the remaining two.

3.1 The Iranian-Turkish Struggle

Iran and Turkey have a long history of wars and armed conflicts that goes back to a several centuries. The struggle between the two powers began in the sixteenth century and continued for around 200 years until the collapse of the Safavid state. However, the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514 is regarded as one of the severest armed confrontations between the two powers. In this battle, the Ottomans won a decisive victory over the Ṣafavids and gained control of eastern Anatolia (Keddie, 2003: 11). The major struggle for domination lasted until 1639 when the two powers signed the Treaty of Zuhab, which divided Iraq and the greater Mesopotamian between the two rivals (Heller, 2018: 24).

The sectarian character has marked those wars and conflicts since Shah Ismail as-Safavi announced, in 1501, that Iran adopted the Twelver Shiite sect. While Shah Ismail was claiming to protect the doctrine of the Prophet's family and the infallible imams, the Ottoman sultans, who assumed the title of caliph since the rule of Sultan Murad I (r. 1362-1389), were claiming to protect true Islam, especially since the Arabian Peninsula, which includes the two holy Mosques, Mecca, and Medina, was under their control (Heller, 2018: 24).

After the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, the revolutionary Islamic discourse adopted by the Islamic Republic and the policy of exporting the revolution created a security concern for the secular Turkish regime established by Kemal Ataturk. On the other hand, Iran did not hide its concern about Turkey's strong relations with the West and its membership in NATO, the military alliance led by the United States, which the leader of the Islamic Revolution called 'Great Satan' (Cevik, 2022: 1)

At the present time, despite the establishment of peace between the heirs of the Ottoman Empire and Safavid Empire (Turkey and Iran), they are still fighting one another through their regional proxies, and sectarianism is still a prominent feature of the struggle between the two powers. Today, Iraq and Syria are two arenas where Turkey and Iran are involved in proxy wars against each other. Thus, despite the mutual

interests between Turkey and Iran on bilateral issues, the American military withdrawal from Iraq, in 2011, brought the two parties increasingly into direct struggle in the old Ottoman-Persian battlefield of Mesopotamia. Since then, the conflict between the two regional powers has revolved around the vision of Iraq's future. As argued by Sean Kane, the Turks prefer a secular Iraq in which there is no dominance of an ethnic component over others. They do not hide their desire to empower the Sunnis of Iraq so that they can play a significant role in shaping the country's future.

The main motive behind the Turks' desire for a strong Iraq, led by a strong government, is the fear of the disintegration of Iraq and the establishment of an independent Kurdish state in the north. Such a state will undoubtedly cause great troubles for Turkey because it will motivate the Turkish Kurds to fight harder for independence. As for the Iranians, they prefer a weak Iraq led by a weak Shiite government whose loyalty is to "the rule of the supreme jurisprudent" '*wilayat al-faqih*'. The most important thing that worries the Iranians is the return of Iraq to a dictatorial nationalist regime, like the one under Saddam Hussein. Likewise, the Iranians fear that Iraq will become a headquarters or corridor for US forces aiming to attack Iran. (Kane, 2011: 13).

Syria has once again become an arena of confrontations between the two regional rivals (Turkey and Iran). Since the outbreak of the Syrian popular uprising that followed the fall of the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes in the so-called Arab Spring revolutions, and until today, the Turks and Iranians stand on opposite sides of the Syrian revolution. While Turkey declared its support for the revolution against Bashar al-Asad's regime, and unlimitedly supported the forces opposing it, Iran declared full support for the regime of al-Asad. Armed clashes took place, in February 2020, between Turkish forces in northern Syria and Iran-backed groups, which claimed dozens of lives on both sides, though both sides (the Turks and the Iranians) tried to avoid a direct clash on the Syrian soil (Cevik, 2022: 3).

It is worthy to note that at the very beginning of the Syrian uprise, sectarianism did not play any significant role in the events. It seemed like the revolutions of Tunisia and Egypt. The demands of the protesting people did not go beyond democracy, freedoms, and economic reforms. A month later, things changed. The events purely, or mainly, were interpreted in sectarian terms. Al-Asad's regime and its supporters portrayed the uprising as a conflict between the religious openness represented by the regime on the one hand and the Sunni fundamentalism

demanded by the protesters on the other. In contrast, the opposition portrayed the uprising as a struggle against an Alawite sectarian regime hostile to mainstream Sunni Islam "*Ahl al-Sunna wal-Jamaa*" (Wehrey, 2017: 61). In any case, neither side of the conflict was able to present a convincing sectarian discourse. That is because both al-Assad regime and many opposition forces, such as the Free Syrian Army, were known for their secularism.

Sectarianizing the conflict opened the door for huge regional intervention, especially by the three powers (Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia), and Syria became an arena for proxy wars among many regional and global actors, mainly Turkey, Iran, the United States, and Russia. Turkey and Iran play the role of sectarianizing actors in order to mobilize as many people and groups as they can to achieve their political goals in the region. While the Turks plays the Sunni card to ensure dominance over northern Syria, and then prevent the establishment of a Kurdish independent state, the Iranians play the Shia card to secure a fast foothold in Syria and Lebanon, and then to keep the balance of regional powers in their favor.

3.2 The Iranian-Saudi Struggle

Until 1979, both Iran and Saudi Arabia were under one American umbrella. The agreement of the two countries to fight communist expansion attempts in the region overshadowed all sectarian differences between them. However, the collapse of the Shah's regime and the establishment of the Islamic Republic on its ruins redrew the political map of the Middle East and turned its balances upside down.

The great victory of the Islamic revolution made Ayatollah Khomeini believe that this revolution is capable of expanding to all parts of the Islamic world and overthrowing its totalitarian regimes loyal to the imperialist powers, and thus he sought to export it outside the borders of Iran (Marschall, 2003: 26-27). The tendency to export the Islamic revolution could be clearly seen in the Iranian constitution itself. Thus, the article 154 of the constitution states: "*While practicing complete self-restraint from any kind of influence in the internal affairs of other nations, [the Islamic Republic] will protect the struggles of the weak against the arrogant, in any part of the world. We must endeavour to export our Revolution to the world. We should set aside the thought that we do not export our revolution, because Islam does not regard various Islamic countries differently and is the supporter of all the oppressed peoples of the world*" (Marshall, 2003: 12). Therefore, it was not surprising that this declared policy of the Islamic

Republic aroused the concern of the regimes in neighboring countries, especially the Gulf states, such as the Saudi Arabia, where the Shiites constitute around 15% of its population. Less than two years after the Islamic revolution, the regional concern about the Iranian threat was embodied in a fierce war waged by Iraq against Iran in September 1980, with the absolute support of all Gulf states.

The hostility between Iran and Saudi Arabia reached its climax in the Hajj season of 1987. At that time, Ayatollah Khomeini tried to use the Hajj ritual for political goals, so he ordered the Iranian pilgrims to raise revolutionary slogans against the United States and its allies in the region. Then, the Saudi government strongly confronted the Iranian demonstration, and the result was the fall of more than four hundred victims, most of whom were Iranian pilgrims. Iran responded to the killing of a large number of its citizens with two attacks on the embassies of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in Tehran, causing a number of casualties among their employees. ([xxiv]) In return, the Saudis reaction to the Iranian attacks on the embassy was a more extremist regional policy aspirating by Wahhabism (Robinson, 2018: 21).

There is no doubt that these incidents, which were products of politicizing and sectarianizing religious rituals caused a great rift in the relationship between the two countries, both of which claim the leadership of the Islamic world. This rift has not been restricted to the Saudi and Iranian soils but was reflected in other regional countries where these two powers have influence, especially in the multi-sectarian ones, such as Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Bahrain, and Yemen. All these countries witnessed bitter internal political conflicts, and in all of them, sectarian differences overshadowed the political disputes or, at least, accompanied them. This gave the regional powers ample opportunities to intervene by aligning with one of the conflict's parties against the others. Thus, in Lebanon, for instance, the Iranians aligned with the Shiites, and played a significant role in the establishing and strengthening of Hezbollah which became the most powerful party in Lebanon. In return, the Saudis aligned with the Sunni groups (Boone, 2012: 29).

With the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, Iraq turned into an arena for the Saudi Iranian struggle. Saudi Arabia was not comfortable with the advent of a political regime dominated by Shiite forces that are friendly or allied to Iran. Despite the strong relations between Saudi Arabia and the United States, the Saudis worked to obstruct the American efforts to rebuild Iraq after decades of wars and destruction. To achieve its goals, Saudi Arabia supported the armed Sunni groups that waged a fierce war against the nascent Iraqi forces and their American allies. However, the Saudi support

for the *Mujahideen* in Iraq was not limited to financing and arming only, but also extended to religious support. In 2004, for example, a group of twenty-six senior Saudi religious scholars issued a fatwa calling for jihad in Iraq. (xxv)

During the uprisings and pretests of the so-called Arab Spring, Iran and Saudi Arabia have also found themselves against one another in some countries. In Bahrain, while the Iranians supported the Shiite uprising against the regime, the Saudis used military forces to crackdown the uprising. In Syria, the Saudis offered huge support to the groups which fought against al-Asad regime. In return, the Iranians and their proxies fought beside the regime. In Yemen, the Saudis waged war against the Houthis who seized power with Iranian help. These confrontations between Shia' Iran and Wahhabi Saudi Arabia marked the politics of the Middle East with sectarian characters and complicated the conflicts among the region's nations.

3.3 The Turkish-Saudi Struggle

The roots of hostility between the Ottoman Caliphate and the Saudi state extend back for more than two centuries. As mentioned above, the first Saudi state was established in the Arabian Peninsula, in 1744, as a result of an alliance between the leader Muhammad bin Saud and Sheikh Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab. This Saudi state represented a serious challenge to the Ottoman authority in Hijaz, Iraq, and Syria. However, the Ottomans did not react severly to the challenge of the Saudi state until 1818. Then, the sultan Mahmud II commissioned the ruler of Egypt, Muhammad Ali Pasha, to eliminate the Saudi state. Muhammad Ali, in turn, sent his son Ibrahim Pasha at the head of a military campaign that was able to invade the Saudi capital at the time 'Diriyah' and overthrow the Saudi rule. Moreover, Ibrahim Pasha executed a group of Wahhabi scholars and captured the Saudi Prince Abdullah bin Saud and sent him to Cairo and then to Istanbul, where he was beheaded. Two decades later (in 1837), once again, Mohammed Ali put an end to a Saudi attempt to revive the collapsed state (al-Rasheed, 2002: 14-23). These events were worthy of laying strong foundations for a long historical enmity between the Ottomans, who did not want to give up their hegemony over the Arabian Peninsula, and the Saudis, who aspired to establish a strong Wahhabi Arab state to extend its control over the peninsula.

Today, both two strong powers claim the leadership of the Muslim world. This claim, for both, is driven by specific factoers. As for the Turks, they argue that Turkey is the heir to the Islamic caliphate, which was an extension

to the state established by the Prophet Muhammad and the Rightly Guided Caliphs after him. Moreover, it is the most powerful Islamic state at the moment. Therefore, it is more deserving and capable of leading the Islamic world than others. On the other hand, the Saudis argue that they are more entitled than others to lead the Islamic world because the land of Saudi Arabia is the cradle of Islam, and it embraces the two holiest places for Muslims (Makkah and Medina). This is in addition to its great economic and human potential.

The two countries also differ in the Islamic model they follow. While Turkey follows a moderate Hanafi school of thought that is tolerant of the rest of the Islamic schools of thought, Saudi Arabia follows a strict school of thought based on the teachings of Imam Ahmed bin Hanbal, Sheikh Al-Islam Ibn Taymiyyah and Sheikh Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab. Therefore, Turkey's relationship with Iran and Iraq, for example, is much better than Saudi Arabia's relationship with them (Venetis, 2014: 5-6). These differences, in addition to conflicting economic interests, led to major disagreements between the two countries regarding the many crises in the region.

In the Syrian conflict, despite both the Saudis and Turks showed severe hostility to al-Asad regime, and both made great efforts to turn the political conflict into a sectarian one, their attitudes to the regime's opposition were different. Thus, while the Saudi Arabia supported extreme Islamic movements, such as an-Nusra, the Turkey supported liberal and secular movements such as Syrian Free Army. This difference was due to the views of the two countries to the future of Syria. The goal of Saudis was to monopolize power and control the Syrian opposition in order to establish a Salafist state in the north and centre of Syria. This policy represented a threat to Turkish interests (Venetis, 2014: 10).

The relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood movement is also an important cause of tension between Turkey and Saudi Arabia. This movement, which was founded in 1928, considers the Ottoman rule as an extension to the Islamic caliphate, and therefore it won the approval and support of the Turks, especially President Erdogan, who is considered one of its most important supporters. As for the Saudis, they consider it as a hostile movement because of it supports their historical enemies, the "Ottomans". That is why, the Saudis welcomed the military coup which removed the former Egyptian president, and the Muslim Brotherhood's leader 'Mohammed Morsi' from power in June 2013. On the other hand, the Turkish president Erdogan strongly commended the coup (Venetis, 2014: 11).

Turkey and Saudi Arabia found themselves against one another in the Libyan crisis, and the ideological factor played a role in this dispute. While Turkey backed the elected National Council after the fall of Gaddafi, in which the Muslim Brotherhood constituted the second largest parliamentary group, Saudi Arabia backed General Haftar, who led a war against the Council and almost invaded the capital, Tripoli, under the pretext of resisting Islamic extremism. The Turkish position, however, was also motivated by economic interests related to the gas fields in the East Mediterranean, but this motive, however, does not negate the ideological motive represented by the position on the Muslim Brotherhood (Das, 2019: 11).

The boycott of Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt in 2017 was another reason for tension in the relationship between Turkey and the boycotting countries, especially the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Turkish President Erdogan announced at the time that this boycott contradicts the values and principles of Islam (Battaloglu, 2021: 101). Turkey also declared its support for Qatar, and its readiness to provide everything it could to help it overcome the crisis. The Turks went further by establishing a military base in Qatar.

Many analysts attributed the reason for the Turkish-Qatari alignment to the secretions of the so-called Arab Spring revolutions 2010-2011. Turkey and Qatar are almost among the few countries that did not fear a popular revolution, while the rest of the countries, including the one boycotting Qatar, were afraid of these revolutions to a large extent because of their hostile stances against the Muslim Brotherhood, which played a major role in those revolutions. And because of the warm relationship between Turkey and Qatar on the one hand, and the Muslim Brotherhood on the other, it was natural for these two countries to be on the opposite side of those that are hostile to the Brotherhood (Battaloglu, 2021: 105).

It can be concluded that all these three regional powers (Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia) play the role of sectarianizing actors that use one or another Islamic sect to implement political agendas. Together, they constitute a sectarian complex which is subject to the balance of power between them and the sectarian differences that are used politically. The struggle among these three powers turned the Syrian political conflict, for instance, into a sectarian one. Thus, the interventions of these three powers led, to transform the Syrian crisis from a struggle for freedom and human rights into a struggle between a pro-Shiite regime and Sunni or Salafist groups. Moreover, each of these three powers (Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia) is trying to find local allies in conflicting areas and employ them to work for their political ends. This led to the outbreak of sectarian proxy wars in many

regions of the Middle East. Thus, sectarianism became a prominent feature of the Middle Eastern politics.

Conclusion

Like most religions and ideologies, the Muslims are divided into several sects, and each sect claims a monopoly on the truth. Then the sects were divided into factions until historians were unable to determine their number and intellectual trends. While many of these sects and factions faded over time, others withstood and had a decisive role in establishing empires and states.

Today, Islam is represented by three great sects: *Ahlu Sunnah wal-Jamaa* (the Sunnis), the Twelver Shiites, and the Wahhabis. While the Turkish regime represents, or claims to represent, the Sunnis, the Iranian regime represents the Twelver Shiites, and the Wahhabi sect is confined to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia alone. Because of their military, economic, human, and other capabilities, these three countries are considered the largest powers in the Middle East. Therefore, it is not surprising that they enter conflicts with each other in order to achieve as many interests as possible.

Due to the rise of political Islam after the Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979, religious and sectarian discourse was employed by those three countries in order to reach their goals at the local and regional levels. Making use of the theory of securitization, which is developed by Copenhagen School of Security Studies, this research described the employment of religious sects in politics as 'sectarianization'.

At the domestic level, the regimes of those countries employ sectarian discourse in order to remove their enemies from the arena of political competition, as the Turkish regime did and is doing. Or in order to gain popular support by claiming that they rule in the name of God, religion, and sect, as the case with the Iranian and Saudi regimes.

At the regional level, each of these countries claims that it is the sole representative of the sect it adopts. Further, each of them presents itself as the defender of the followers of that sect in the entire region and gives itself the right to intervene in every regional conflict in the name of the sect it adopts. Accordingly, the sectarian feature prevailed over all the conflicts and crises that the region witnessed. The Syrian crisis, for example, has transformed from a conflict between a totalitarian regime and masses yearning for freedom into a conflict between Shiites and Sunnis. The Yemeni crisis has also turned into a conflict between one of the Shiite groups (Zaydis) who are supported by Iran and the Sunnis supported by

Saudi Arabia. However, what worsened the situation is that these three forces were able to employ local forces in all countries that witnessed political conflicts with a sectarian feature. This, in turn, led to the transformation of those countries into arenas of proxy wars, in which the three powers are fighting with the blood and lives of their followers in the conflict areas. Thus, in Yemen, for example, the Houthis and the forces of ousted President Abd Rabbo Mansour are fighting with one another on behalf of Iran and Saudi Arabia. In Libya, the National Council and the forces of General Haftar are fighting one another on behalf of Turkey and Saudi Arabia. In Syria, the Lebanese Hezbollah and an-Nusra Front are fighting with each other on behalf of Iran and Saudi Arabia.

These regional sectarianized conflicts will continue as long as they serve the interests of the powers that sectarianize them, and they will not end unless the three countries (Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia) succeed in resolving their disputes and refrain from employing sects in their conflicts with each other.

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