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SAUDI ARABIA – IRAN RIVALRY:
SUPREMACY AND INSTABILITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract in the English Language ........................................................................................................... 1
Abstract in the Lithuanian Language ....................................................................................................... 2
Introduction .............................................................................................................................................. 3
1 Theoretical Analysis of the Saudi-Iranian Rivalry .............................................................................. 6
  1.1 Classical Realism ............................................................................................................................. 6
  1.2 Clash within Civilizations ................................................................................................................ 11
2 Historical and Ideological Foundations of the Rivalry ..................................................................... 16
  2.1 The role of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia .......................................................................................... 16
  2.2 Iran and Khomeini .......................................................................................................................... 20
3 The Alliance System ............................................................................................................................ 24
  3.1 Soft power and diplomatic actions .................................................................................................. 24
  3.2 Alliances inter and outside the MENA region .................................................................................. 30
4 The Military Confrontation ................................................................................................................ 36
  4.1 Use of military strength ................................................................................................................... 36
  4.2 Instability and future of the Middle East ......................................................................................... 42
Conclusions ........................................................................................................................................... 48
References .............................................................................................................................................. 49
Abstract in the English Language

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ABSTRACT

The master thesis aims to understand the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, to analyze both how their alliance system and power games spread common competition and how this affects instability and wars in the Middle East. The data for this study are taken from bibliographic sources, through the study reading of experts about the Middle East and political ideologies; also, various articles, publications, dossiers, and commentaries are used by relevant journals, official sites, and significant universities researches. The result of this study shows that the relationship between Tehran and Riyadh is perpetrated by economic and geopolitical aspirations, different conceptions of foreign policy and historical-religious reasons. Finally, in this paper, following the recent developments in the hotspots in the region, it emerged that the sectarian divisions within Islamic society represent the ground on which state and non-state actors cultivate mutual hatred to achieve political goals in the Middle East.
Santrauka

Šio darbo pagrindinis tikslas yra paaiškinti dviejų valstybių, Saudo Arabijos ir Irano tarpusavio priešiškumą, išnagrinėti kaip jų sukurta aljansų sistema ir bei demonstruojami jėgos žaidimai sukūrė konkurenciją bei įtampą visame regione, bei, kokią įtaką tai turi regiono valstybių nestabilumui bei karui Viduriniuose Rytuose. Informacija, kuria remiamasi šiame darbe, yra paimta iš bibliografinių šaltinių apie politines ideologijas bei šios srities ekspertų tekstais. Analizei atlikti taip pat buvo naudojama įvairios straipsniais, publikacijomis, dosjė bei komentarais iš atitinkamų ir temai aktualiai žurnalų, oficialių internetinių tinklalapių, reikšmingų universitetinių tyrimų. Šios temos analizė parodė, jog santykis tarp Teherano ir Rijado sukurtas dėl besikertančių ekonominiių bei geopolitinių siekių, skirtų užsienio politikos sampratų bei istorinių – religinių priežasčių. Taip pat šiame darbe išskiriama yra naujausia regiono karščių zonų pakitimai, kurie sukelia sektantizmo atskirtį Islamo bendruomenėje ir sukuria pagrindą kultivuoti abipusišką neapykantą naudojantis visomis įmanomomis priemonėmis, valstybiniais bei nevalstybiniais faktoriais tam, jog pasiektų savus politinius tikslus Viduriniuose Rytuose.
INTRODUCTION

To understand the recent tightening of the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which, since 2011, have started to play a zero-sum influence game in the MENA area, it is necessary to analyze their ideological foundations, the ground on which Tehran and Riyadh build the regional alliances with state and non-state actors, their economic and geopolitical interests in the hegemonic control of the Middle East, and finally the specific context of some chosen states, in which the Arab Springs have upset the internal balances, leaving room for the two regional powers to fill the gap in the chaos.

In this sense, although other countries are interested in the proxy conflict among the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI), such as Afghanistan, Pakistan or Morocco and Nigeria, this research focuses on those countries more massively in the grip of Tehran and Riyadh: Syria and Yemen, where the two actors represent the two sides of the ongoing civil wars, in which other states are involved too, Iraq and Lebanon, where the political dispute is more or less directly conducive to Saudi or Iranian interests, and Qatar and Bahrain, two Gulf countries, members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), whose relations with Iran are seen with concerns from Riyadh side.

Therefore, through the analysis of the evolution of the relations between the IRI and KSA, starting from the birth of the Saudi state in 1932, the Khomeini Revolution of 1979 in Iran, up to the latest developments following King Abdul's accession to the throne in 2015 and the cutting of diplomatic relations in January 2016, the purpose of the thesis is to analyze the nature of the geopolitical rivalry between the two countries, committed in the various regional hotspots, to understand, ultimately, whether this clash can evolve in a direct military confrontation in the medium term.

**Novelty** - The research identifies the reasons for the Middle Eastern geopolitical rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran in a political-economic key, but it does not exclude an important factor such as the ideological-religious one. In this sense, although other studies on the topic have chosen to focus on one or the other aspect, with a predominance over the first of these; this research is among those who try to arrange a comprehensive approach, to analyze the motivations of state elites in their political-military decisions, and also how these choices are absorbed by citizens, local groups, various militias, far from the centers of power, but close to sectarianism, an historical and intrinsic characteristic of Islam.

**The object of the research** - Understanding the rivalry among Saudi Arabia and Iran.
The aim of the research - This research aims to analyze the influence role that Tehran and Riyadh play in the various hotspots of the Middle East.

The research problem - Is the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia leading the Middle East into instability?

The research goal - To analyze the relationship between the KSA and IRI.

Research tasks:
- to analyze the geopolitical aspirations in the control of the Middle East of Iran and Saudi Arabia, through the classical realism theory;
- to find out the main domestic characteristics of Saudi Arabia and Iran;
- to identify the alliance state and non-state system of the two countries, who back them in the different hotspots of the region;
- to examine how much the geopolitical-ideological clash of Iran and Saudi Arabia means in terms of instability, conflicts, and tensions.

Hypothesis - The geopolitical moves of KSA and IRI in their rivalry in the Middle East are the main cause of the regional chaos.

Structure - This master thesis is divided into four chapters, each of which split in turn into two paragraphs: the first one focuses on the theoretical approach, applying it on the study case, it is discussed the theory of the classical realism, its history e instruments to analyze the reality; then, there is an attempt to disavow the Huntington's theory of the clash of civilizations (1993), bringing as a factor of disproof the tension in the Middle East and the fact that the number of Muslim people dead by Islamic terrorist attacks is higher than other religions.

The second chapter, called “Historical and Ideological Foundations of the Rivalry”, is spent to find out the contemporary history of the two states, highlighting the evolution of their mutual relationship and with the international powers; moreover, the ideological basis of Wahhabism and Khomeinism is analyzed, in the logic of showing the reciprocal differences, but also the foundational framework that both the two branches of Islam represent for Tehran and Riyadh.

In the third chapter, named “The Alliance System”, the rivalry between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and their dispute for the hegemony in the Middle East are discussed: it is analyzed their role in the hotspots of the region, their strategies of proxy wars, and their system of alliance outside and inside the Middle East, including their relationship with state and non-state actors.
Finally, in the last and fourth chapter, there is a comparative analysis of the military strength of the two regional hegemonic actors, alongside with a review of the main incidents occurred between them from 2015 until the early months of 2020, with the logic of showing whether there are the material and ideological conditions for a direct military confrontation between them, evolving from the current proxy conflict.

**Methodology** - The research uses different methods, such as secondary sources and document analysis. These methodologies are combined to define the main characteristics of classical realism, to present the data and figures on terrorism indicators, as well as the welfare sizes of Iran and Saudi Arabia and the total number of the military arsenal of the two countries. Furthermore, the political history of Tehran and Riyadh, their social-religious doctrines and the system of alliances are analyzed. Finally, media analysis is used to identify threats to their security perceived by both rivals.

**Limitations of the research** – Concerning the limitations of the research, three are the main issues: first, the study of a clash between Iran and Saudi Arabia for the geopolitical control of the Middle East is a rather new trend in literature and there are not so many academic sources available; second, the lack of suitable information at government or institutional sites, and the no knowledge of Farsi or Arabic of the undersigned mean that this research is based on secondary sources; third, the speed with which new events occur in the Middle East prevents a long-term analysis.

**Literature review** – The literature and sources are based on scientific papers and articles by experts of the Middle East, Arab Springs, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. Among the others, Madawi al-Rasheed, professor at the Department of Theology and Religious Studies in King’s College London, from which are consulted the book “A history of Saudi Arabia”, published with Cambridge University Press in 2010, and the article “What Fuels the Saudi Rivalry With Iran?”, appeared in *The New York Times* on the 23rd April 2018; Antony Cordesman, an academic who holds a Chair in Strategy at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington DC, from which are examined two analysis: “*Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the Clash within a Civilization*” of the 3rd February 2014 and “*Military Spending: The Other Side of Saudi Security*” of the 13th March 2018; Kasra Aarabi, an analyst at the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, from which are studied two reviews: “*What Is Velayat-e Faqih?*” of the 20th March 2019 and “*Beyond Borders: the Expansionist Ideology of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps*” of the 4th February 2020; Simon Mabon, Senior Lecturer at the Department of Politics, Philosophy and Religion at Lancaster University, from which is read the commentary "*The Battle for Bahrain: Iranian-Saudi Rivalry*, written for “Middle East Policy Council” in 2012.
I. Theoretical Analysis of the Saudi-Iranian Rivalry

1.1 Classical Realism

According to the classical realism theory\(^1\), human nature is one of the most important elements to justify the behavior of the states; in this way, as the individuals are self-interested as the countries must think only in themselves. Thus, the international system is a state of nature, where the most important actors, the states, look for their interests: maximize, increase and demonstrate the power to maintain the status quo, not to risk their security and show to the others their prestige, both with real material elements both with the use of the deterrence strategy. Yet, how the international system becomes, it will be of an anarchic system, without a superior judge able to influence the choices of the countries. Since this situation of anarchy and since the states are rational actors, they can fight for power, security level, and material resources, with the awareness of themselves and others.

As Thucydides\(^2\) wrote 2000 years ago, “if one follows one’s self-interest one wants to be safe, whereas the path of justice and honor involves one in danger”, the international system is not a safe or fair arena, states are in constant search of power and maximizing the power of a state means reducing that of another one in a zero-sum term. This makes the relationship between actors challenging, with the constant fear that someone else could become a danger for the security and survival of the country. This is why, for classical realism, states are unitary actors, where the only possible voice is those of the decision-maker because if “he\(^3\) builds on the people, builds on the mud”.

Furthermore, observed that people\(^4\) (states) in natural conditions are in constant fear of each other as they compete for the resources necessary to secure their survival and viewed that there is no peace, security or justice in the international system, the only way to achieve the coexistence is not in the international organizations, in the international law or the institutions, but in the balance of power between the main actors. Looking at the history, this is the only reason why the states have talked each other: to find a common solution for the split of material resources, that means an increase of power, security, and prestige, minimizing the risk of war, cause the rise of material elements or at least the deterrence perception.

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\(^3\) Niccolò, M. (2015). *The prince*.

In the discussion about the features of classical realism, nothing would make sense without inserting the concept of security dilemma:

“...a structural notion in which the self-help attempts of states to look after their security needs tend, regardless of intention, to lead to rising insecurity for others as each interprets its own measures as defensive and measures of others as potentially threatening” (J.H. Herz, 1951).

Based on this statement, there is the real possibility of the war to solve political issues; according to the classical realism, moral principles cannot be in the properties of a state, whose only goals are survival and obtain power.

Although this theoretical approach is out of date because nowadays states are not unitary actors, complete rationality cannot exist in a constantly changing and ultra-connected world and the countries have lost the central role in favor not only of multinational corporations and international organisms but also actors such as ethnic groups and terrorist organizations; the theory of classical realism can be applied in the Middle East region, where the relationships between states are still zero-sum, regional bodies are nothing more than the arena where the states implement the balance of power to achieve oil revenues and geopolitical control and the possibility of hearing more voices within states is reduced to a minimum by authoritarian governments, theocracies or monarchies.

In particular, with the background of the classical realism theory, it is possible to analyze the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran in a regional context and understand the nature of their rivalry.

The diplomatic relationship between Tehran and Riyadh have faced various and changing moments, depending on internal and external reasons to the borders of the two actors: if, before the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979, the two states had a rather fruitful dialogue, both committed in avoiding the Soviet penetration and against the Nasserian pan-Arabism, whose culminating event was the “twin-pillar policy” of the 70s, established by the US President of the time, Richard Nixon, with whom Iran and Saudi Arabia cooperated in safeguarding American interests in the region; after the power seizure of Ayatollah Khomeini and the foundation of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI), the relation between them changed drastically in favor of a game of influence and military demonstration in the Middle East.

From 1979, the inspirer of the Revolution and then-Supreme Leader of Iran, Khomeini, have begun to attack the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), calling them slaves of the United States, allies of the Zionists and declaring that the heart of Islam, Mecca, was in the hands of a group of heretics. Following the years, although various events, threats, and attacks have challenged the status quo in the Middle East, the collapse of Iraq as a regional power in 2003 can explain better the polarization of the clash between Tehran and Riyadh: the decision of the US President G. W. Bush to invade Iraq in 2003 was a fundamental moment for Iran and it has created the conditions to establish a Shiite government in Baghdad, excluding the Saudis from the access to the Iraqi oil resources and from the spread of influence in that failed state (since then, Iraq is splitting in three: the north Kurdish part, the Sunni area, and the largest Shiite region).

Since 2011, then, and with the beginning of the Arab Springs, Iran and Saudi Arabia started backing opposing sides in different countries: in Syria, KSA is lined up with the rebel groups, strongly opposed to the Iran-supported President Assad; in Yemen, Saudi Arabia stands for the Hadi government against the Houthi rebels, backed by Iran; in Lebanon, the government is sustained by Hezbollah, an ally of Tehran, while KSA has as an ally the Sunni opposition; In Iraq, Baghdad's victory against ISIS, that arose from the Sunni area, strengthened the Shiite role in the country; finally, in Bahrain, the allied KSA monarchy rules over a Shiite majority, who looks favorably on Tehran. All this reflects the duel of geopolitical influence taking place in the region.

Yet, the declaration of the Prince of KSA, Moḥammad bin Salmān Āl Saud, during an interview with Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), on the 15th March 2018: “If Iran develops the nuclear bomb, we will quickly do the same” shows that Saudi Arabia feels Iran as a legitimate menace to its security and for this reason, KSA wants to contain this threat.

Reasoning in these terms, it can be said that classical realism is the suitable theory to analyze the relationship between Tehran and Riyadh: Saudi Arabia’s actions illustrate how a sovereign state is willing to secure the national survive against a possible external threat. Moreover, realism can explain better the diplomatic crisis inside the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), where the member states have severed diplomatic ties with Qatar in June 2017 for the lack of a similar foreign policy between GCC members and Doha.

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11 Madiha Sayani, Can “Realism” be applied to Arab politics?, <<Arab Millennial>>, 18th March 2018 https://arabmillennial.net/2018/03/18/can-realism-be-applied-to-arab-politics/
In this sense, the decision of the GCC to block Qatar and put pressure to align with their conditions is a realistic way to preserve their interests in the region; but, at the same time, the solution of Qatar to restore diplomatic relationships with Iran in August 2017 and to accept Iranian food supplies is a realistic response, with whom Doha not only have refused to comply with the conditions established by the GCC, but also is dealing with their regional enemy, Iran, to contain the threat posed to its sovereignty.

Realism is, in this way, a useful instrument, especially regarding the system of alliances of Tehran and Riyadh, their ways to spread their influence and to counterpoise the strategies of the rival; in particular, the policies of Iran and Saudi Arabia regarding their affairs could understand in two-way of both the countries.

Iran acts, according to the defensive realism theory, in his relationship with the West, especially with the administration Rouhani, based on a win-win rationale; it so can be explained the no longer in force nuclear deal on 14th July 2015. Yet, the behavior of Tehran in the Iraq post-ISIS is seen under the lent of offensive realism: the Iranians support the corrupt system in Baghdad, which favors the Shiite majority versus the Sunni minority and feeds territorial fragmentation, sectarian divisions, and polarization of the parts, where the Shiites see Iran as their natural guide even above the Iraqi government, who turns to the Islamic Republic for the most important issues.

From the KSA side, the defensive realists do not see Iran as a threat in the system of international alliances, as Saudi Arabia has always been an ally of the United States and Israel in the region; the offensive realists, instead, underline how Tehran should be challenged and defeated from all points of view in a zero-sum term.

There are two huge geopolitical aspirations of the two countries: the guide of the Islamic world and the economic and political dominance in the Middle East; both of these suction are challenging not only by the instability in the region, the presence of foreign navies and terroristic organizations but above all by each other; nevertheless, Tehran and Riyadh know well that a frontal and destructive war does not benefit either of them, as it is difficult to predict the outcome, and that fighting the wars of the others (Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, Bahrain) is the safest solution to extend influence and power.

Anyhow, the Saudi-Iran hegemonic rivalry is continuing. “Only when the costs should raise to a level that either side might see as threatening its regional or domestic standing, might there be a noticeable reduction of tensions” (Ali Fathollah-Nejad, 2017).

Finally, a realistic consideration must be made for the role of the US\textsuperscript{13}, the greater ally of Saudi Arabia. At least three are the reasons why the behavior of Washington have an impact on KSA:

- The gradual shift of American troops from the Middle East in favor of the Pacific area started with the Obama administration;

- The decision of the 8\textsuperscript{th} May 2018 by the President of the United States Donald J. Trump to withdraw from the JCPOA (agreement limiting the Iranian nuclear program by the lifting of the economic sanctions, signed on the 15\textsuperscript{th} July 2015 by Iran, P5+1, and European Union), most likely due to the attempt to show a discontinuity with the past;

- The killing by the US in Baghdad on 3\textsuperscript{rd} January 2020 of Q. Soleimani, leader of the Pasdaran, the guards of the Revolution whose task is to export the Khomeinism ideology outside Iran.

Those events, out of subsequent developments, together with the European Union's inability to counterbalance American positions, have the effect to strength the Iranian population anger and the anti-Western sentiment in the country, to weaken the role of Iranian moderate President Hassan Rouhani in favor of the extremist positions of Ayatollah Khamenei, to bring Iran\textsuperscript{14} itself out of JCPOA and closer to Russia and China and finally to increase the number of Iranian allies in the region.

Iran pursues a clear and ambitious foreign policy, with whom try to link the new ally Qatar, Assad regime, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine, the Houthis in Yemen, the government in Iraq, the Shiites in Bahrain, until reaching the regional hegemony. On the other side, the Saudis, observing a strong Iran extends its influence in these countries, have strengthened the relations with Tehran's enemies, spending already in 2017, 11.30% of GDP\textsuperscript{15} for military purposes; but, observing the retreat of the Americans from the area and with them, the downsizing of the ‘bandwagoning’ policy under the US security umbrella, has raised several worries for the KSA.

With the violence in hotspots in the Middle East, the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the “Islamic Cold War” (Marcus, 2017), seems to have no end. The future of their relationship will in most cases remain a zero-sum fight, always if Iran will have the economic and geopolitical strength to continue its hegemonic-revisionist vision of the Middle East map.

\textsuperscript{13} Gustav Skjold Bang Dahl, “Understanding the Islamic Cold War: How can the growing rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia and their behavior in recent years best be explained using IR theory”, International Relations in the Middle East, Sciences Po PSIA, October 2018

\textsuperscript{14} Max Burman, “Iran pulling out of nuclear deal commitment after U.S. strike that killed Soleimani”, <<NBC News>>, 5\textsuperscript{th} January 2020


\textsuperscript{15} Anthony Cordesman, “Military Spending: The Other Side of Saudi Security”, <<CSIS>>, 13\textsuperscript{th} March 2018

https://www.csis.org/analysis/military-spending-other-side-saudi-security
1.2 Clash within Civilizations

In the summer of 1993\textsuperscript{16}, an article by the professor Samuel Huntington entitled “\textit{Clash of Civilizations?}” appeared in the magazine “Foreign Affairs”, claiming that, after the Cold War, the interpretative paradigm of the ideological-political confrontation would not be more useful to explain international events; in fact, the deep cause of the conflicts would have become the civilization. The cultural differences of the various human groups would have constituted the main source of conflict of the Third Millennium.

The main civilizations contemplated by Huntington were essentially seven: the West, Latin America, India, the Slavic-Orthodox civilization (more or less the former Soviet Union), the Japanese one, which coincides with Japan itself, the Confucian (China and the neighboring countries), and finally the Muslim civilization, which would be the one to pose more problems to the international peace.

The conflict between civilizations would have been due to multiple causes: globalization for playing a role of erosion of national feelings, with the consequence of increasing the “civilization identity”; resentment of the peoples towards the West and its cultural products; regionalism which is essentially based on the cultural characteristics common to a group of countries in a specific geographical area.

Huntington focused much of his analysis on the threats posed to Western hegemony: at the beginning of the nineties, the West and the US, in particular, were at the height of their power and the Western values, considered universal as human rights, seemed to be able to finally spread everywhere. This, however, would not have been a lasting success and, indeed, a cultural rejection towards many of the so-called Western values was upon us, supported by the elites of the various civilizations.

A great threat to the West would have been posed by the Confucian and Islamic civilizations. The countries of these two cultures, having economic and demographic potential growth, would have been impervious to the Western values and therefore would have started to challenge the status quo more or less openly; in particular, Islam would have been the most insidious and violent of the two, above all because of the high religious incompatibility with Western Christianity and the obvious lack of sensitivity to human rights issues. Finally, the two civilizations would have tried to undermine the primacy of the West, destabilizing the uses, customs, traditions and unwritten laws of the international society in the years to come.

Despite the fame of this book and the notoriety of the professor Huntington, this theory has had many criticisms and disapprovals; numerous facts have contradicted the thesis of the clash between civilizations, as demonstrated by the Western coalition intervening in the former Yugoslavia in support of the Muslim populations against Slavic-Orthodox Serbia, the alliance between Saudi Arabia and the US, the fragmentation of the Islamic block between Shiites and Sunnis, the ethnic conflicts in Africa or the wars of Russia in Ukraine and Georgia, countries that should be part of the same civilization.

Concerning the Arab world, the unity and brotherhood that the Americans and the Westerners have seen between the populations of the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf had already been broken in the Iran-Iraq War of 1980 or the Gulf War of 1990; but, the final blow was given precisely by the US in that unilateral military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, deposing Saddam Hussein and releasing the secret and repressed demons of sectarianism. From that moment, what had been called a clash between civilizations turned into clash within a civilization\textsuperscript{17}: in the place with more presence of Islamic faithful in the world, categorizing Muslims into one big block would be a terrible mistake to investigate the upheavals in the Middle East. There are dozens of branches, enclosed in two large groups (Sunnis and Shiites).

This would be sufficient to understand the reason for the instability in the Middle East and why there is a problem of governance, that said with the words of Khaled al-Dakhil, a Saudi commentator: “\textit{We have a chronic problem of governance that is more than 1,400 years old. Who is the rightful successor to the Prophet? The question is still hanging over our heads}”, but also it is possible to think that each of these faiths hasn’t its nationalist paradigm, this means that in each country there are conflicts between Shiites and Sunnis\textsuperscript{18}: Iraq, divided into three parts; Syria, where the majority is Sunni, but the Assad regime is Shiite; Lebanon, where there is a clash between the main party-militia Shiite Hezbollah and the Sunni communities; Yemen, where there is a civil war among the Sunni government and the Shiites Houthi rebels; finally, Bahrain, where roughly 70-75\% of the population is Shiite, but they are ruled by the Sunni al-Khalifa House.

There is no doubt that the reasons for the clash in the Middle East must be attributed to political-economic reasons, but it is equally true that the religious and ideological motives, fuelled by clerical elites, inflame the souls of peoples, distant from the centers of the power.

\textsuperscript{17} Anton La Guardia, “\textit{The clash within a civilization}”, <<The Economist>>, 14\textsuperscript{th} May 2016
https://www.economist.com/special-report/2016/05/14/the-clash-within-a-civilisation

\textsuperscript{18} Sarah Almukhtar, Sergio Peçanha and Tim Wallace, “\textit{Behind Stark Political Divisions, a More Complex Map of Sunnis and Shiites}”, <<The New York Times>>, 5\textsuperscript{th} January 2016
In this sense, introducing into the content the reasons for the differentiation between Sunnis and Shiism is necessary: the diatribe\textsuperscript{19} has its roots in AD 632, the year of the death of the Prophet Muhammad, the founder of Islam. His followers divided over the issue of who should inherit what was a political and religious office: most of them, who would later become Sunnis and today represent 80% of Muslims, said Abu Bakr, a friend of the Prophet and father of his wife Aisha. According to others, the legitimate successor should have been Ali, Muhammad's cousin and his son-in-law, and they became known as Shiites, a contracted form of the expression "\textit{shī'at 'Alī}", the partisans of Ali. Abu Bakr's supporters won the dispute, even though Ali briefly ruled as the fourth caliph, the title bestowed on Muhammad's successors. The fracture within Islam became consolidated when Hussein, son of Ali, was killed in 680 BC in Karbala (in present-day Iraq) by troops of the ruling Sunni caliph. Sunni rulers continued to monopolize political power, while Shiites lived in the shadow of the state, seeking guidance in their imams, the first twelve of whom descended directly from Ali. Over time, the two groups' religious beliefs began to differentiate.

Nowadays, Saudi Arabia\textsuperscript{20}, the Saudi House and the Sunni religious elite administer what is the leading country of Islam, which hosts the symbolic cities of Medina and Mecca and it is composed of 80% of Muslims Sunnis. On the other hand, Iran is the leading country of the Islamist Revolution from the bottom, which challenges the status quo in the Middle East and it is 95% made up of Shiites.

Because of these premises, reasoning at a broader level, it is rightful to say that Saudi Arabia openly supports Sunnis in the region, while Iran does the same with Shiites; both countries try to extend their influence in the region and to remove it from the other. Even if this is just the religious aspect in a more complex economic and geopolitical struggle, the doctrinal-religious motivations have a vigorous impact on the hope and expectations of armed groups, rebels, and peoples in the various hotspots of the Middle East.

Moreover, although the complete analysis of the two political-religious ideologies of Iran and Saudi Arabia will be made later, to be more comprehensive in the study of their confrontation, linked to the concept of the clash within a civilization, it is necessary to make a hint on the faiths professed in the two countries, which have contaminated the classical conflict between Shiism and Sunnism: Khomeinism in Iran and Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia.

\textsuperscript{19} "\textit{What is the difference between Sunni and Shia Muslims?} ", <<The Economist>>, 29\textsuperscript{th} May 2013

\textsuperscript{20} Sunnis and Shia in the Middle East, <<BBC>>, 19\textsuperscript{th} December 2013
The two political ideologies\textsuperscript{21}, the first founded in 1979 by the Ayatollah Ruḥollāh Moṣṭafāvī Mūsavī Khomeynī and the second one during the 18\textsuperscript{th} century by Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb, have a strongly authoritarian nature and they try to justify the system of power which reigns in the two countries according to doctrinal precepts. The ideological apparatus that leads to the clash between Tehran and Riyadh originates from here and from that 1979, when the establishment of the Khomeini regime began to scare Saudi Arabia: the Ayatollah has transformed Iran with anti-Americanism feelings, considering Israel’s allies as enemies in the heart of the Middle East and Saudi Arabia as the worst usurpers of Islam; that is why KSA started to see his leadership role in the Islamic world threatened, especially for his guarantee of custodians of the sacred places of Islam, Mecca and Medina.

It is therefore not surprising that in Riyadh it was feared that the Iranian Revolution undermines these balances. The establishment of the IRI was seen suitably as the event that shakes the Iran geopolitical aspirations, leading Khomeini to turn Iran in a revisionist power which challenges the status quo favorable for the KSA: thus, at the end of 1979, the seeds of sectarianism were already planted and they would have poisoned the region in the years to come, creating a politicization of identities (the so-called “sectarian”) that would have shaken the Middle East irreparably.

The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has contributed to destabilizing the region in the last forty years. Far from representing a conflict between Shiites and Sunnis, it has instead provoked a polarization of identities that have contributed to the clash. The crises of recent years have both fed and extracted energy from this sectarian poison, making the prospects of a peaceful rebuilding of the Middle Eastern political space so uncertain.

From that publication of 1993 by Huntington to nowadays, the clash within civilizations has become increasingly visible and the one between Arabs increasingly brutal, with the geopolitical tensions between Tehran and Riyadh which increase only that number of deaths.

It is relevant to say that the thesis of the clash within civilizations inside the Arab world has never been so bloody over the last years: alongside the civil wars between states, rebels, religious affiliates, militias backed both by Iran or Saudi Arabia fighting in the various failed states of the Middle East; there are other non-state actors, i.e. the terrorist organizations, which pursue their goals by infiltrating in the general instability of the MENA area, such as Boko Haram, The Afghan Taliban, al-Qaeda, al-Shabaab, Ansar al-Sharia or the most famous exponent, ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria).

\textsuperscript{21} Annalisa Perteghella, “Iran-Arabia Saudita: rivalità geopolitica, non settaria”, <<ISPI>>, 1\textsuperscript{st} March 2018
https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/iran-arabia-saudita-rivalita-geopolitica-non-settaria-19773
According to the Global Terrorism Index 2015\textsuperscript{22}, provided by the IEP (Institute for Economics and Peace), a think-tank located in Sydney, only 2.6% of deaths from Islamic terrorism have occurred in the West since 2000 – without the 9/11 attack, the rate would be 0.5%. This figure does not take into account the 41 terrorist attacks that took place in the EU from 2015 to 2019 or the six cases that happened in the US in the same years, but still, the majority of deaths from terrorism occurs outside the Western world.

In particular, in the MENA\textsuperscript{23} countries, in the Global Terrorism Index 2018, in the years 2002-2017, more than 33,000 terroristic attacks have happened, with over 90,000 of deaths. This area, together with South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, three majority Muslim regions, covers 93% of all deaths from terrorism since 2002. Moreover, in the ranking “impact of terrorism”, six Muslim states are classified in a very high level (Iraq, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Syria, Pakistan, and Somalia); here, the majority of the incidents against Muslims occurred in 2017 have been conducted by Islamic terroristic organizations: ISIS in Iraq and Syria, the Taliban in Pakistan, Boko Haram in Nigeria and al-Shabaab in Somalia.

These numbers serve to assert that rather than a clash between civilizations there is first and foremost a historical clash within the civilization of the Arab world, between the sectarian divisions within Islamic society. In this sense, the role of Saudi Arabia and Iran is that of trying to influence their respective ideologies to their advantages: both lined up against international terrorism and attacking each other on alleged links with terrorist organizations, Tehran and Riyadh play a fundamentally religious and ideological role in their geopolitical confrontation.

It cannot be a coincidence that in the 2019\textsuperscript{24} country ranking of the most likely to have a terrorist attack, Saudi Arabia and Iran are in the medium impact zone: KSA ranks 30\textsuperscript{th} (behind the US and UK) and IRI is in the 39\textsuperscript{th} place (behind to countries like Russia and France), while their neighbors are ranked much worse: Afghanistan 1\textsuperscript{st}, Iraq 2\textsuperscript{nd}, Syria 4\textsuperscript{th}, Pakistan 5\textsuperscript{th}, Yemen 8\textsuperscript{th}.

As A. Cordesman\textsuperscript{25} writes: “This is a struggle where the data indicate almost all the attacks and casualties are caused by Muslims attacking Muslims […] The West is only on the periphery of this struggle, not its focus. It is a clash within a civilization, and not a clash between them”. (Cordesman, 2014).

\textsuperscript{25} Anthony Cordesman, “Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the Clash within a Civilization”, <<CSIS>>, 3\textsuperscript{rd} February 2014 https://www.csis.org/analysis/saudi-arabia-iran-and-clash-within-civilization
II. Historical and Ideological Foundations of the Rivalry

2.1 The role of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia

The Kingdom\textsuperscript{26} of Saudi Arabia came to light in 1932. This date represents only the end of a process of conquests that the Saudis began in the 18\textsuperscript{th} century, which would not have occurred without the doctrinal-religious force that the Wahhabi faith gave to the Saudi House, when, in 1744, Muhammad ibn Saud, Emir of Diriyah, and Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab, a Muslim clerical who had to escape from its homeland, have been sworn in to create a religious emirate.

For this reason, the features of the Kingdom\textsuperscript{27} from its foundation to today are imbued by the rules of the Wahhabi clergy, who approves the succession and endorsing the King's decisions, while Riyadh provides for them with strategic positions, such as the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, with competences about the Islamic schools for the kids (madrasa).

To understand the domestic characteristics of the KSA, as well as its position towards other international actors and his hegemonic rival Iran, it is necessary to clarify the aspects of its creed: Wahhabism is a branch of Salafism, a current of Islam which interprets the Koran and Sunna in an indigenous and traditional manner, opposite to the more moderate Sufism. The term refers to the restoration of a pure Islam, believing that the original aspect of the faith has diminished over the centuries, mixed with Western foreign interference; in this sense, its followers\textsuperscript{28} are extremely hostile towards the unfaithful Muslims (Shiites, Sufi, and other Islamic groups) who do not consider Muslims at all, and towards the properly infidels (Jews and Christians).

Thus, even though the members of Wahhabi\textsuperscript{29} movement define themselves as the only true Muslims, they are called al-Muwahhidūn, “Unitarians”, a term derived from their stress on the absolute oneness of God (tawhīd). They repel all acts considered implicit polytheism, such as visiting tombs and venerating saints; moreover, they condemn all innovations (bidʿah) and they believe in the idea of takfīr, ban and capital execution for those who do not respect these precepts.

As A. Crooke reports\textsuperscript{30}, Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab wrote: “Those who would not conform to this view should be killed, their wives and daughters violated, and their possessions confiscated”.

\textsuperscript{26} Madawi al-Rasheed (2010). \textit{A history of Saudi Arabia}. Cambridge University Press.
\textsuperscript{29} Noah Tesch, \textit{Wahhābī}, <<Britannica>>, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Wahhabi
\textsuperscript{30} Alastair Crooke, “You Can’t Understand ISIS If You Don’t Know the History of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia”, <<The Huffington Post>>, 30\textsuperscript{th} March 2017 https://www.huffpost.com/entry/isis-wahhabism-saudi-arabia_b_5717157
In this sense, there is no religious freedom in Saudi Arabia, because the worship of other creeds are prohibited and religious crimes are sentenced with the death penalty. In general, according to Freedom House\textsuperscript{31}, in 2019, KSA was in the last places of the world ranking on freedom indicators with a score of 7/100; then, in the country sheet, it is reported: “Saudi Arabia’s absolute monarchy restricts almost all political rights and civil liberties. No officials at the national level are elected. The regime relies on extensive surveillance, the criminalization of dissent, appeals to sectarianism and ethnicity, and public spending supported by oil revenues to maintain power. Women and religious minorities face extensive discrimination in law and in practice. Working conditions for the large expatriate labor force are often exploitative”.

In particular, among the others, two categories\textsuperscript{32} of people suffer the most from the features of the Riyadh regime: women and Shiites. Concerning the first one, despite the reforms carried out by Prince Salman in recent years, with which the restrictions on cinema and sports events for women have been reduced and have been allowed them to drive and to travel abroad even without a male guide, the laws regarding the male guardianship on women under the authority of male relatives, and patriarchal laws governing marriage, divorce, and custody are still in place.

About the second category. Shiites in KSA represent 10-15\% of the population and almost all of them live in the eastern province along the Persian Gulf, an area particularly sensitive for Riyadh, due to the oil fields in the soil and to the border with its Sunni allies. Not being able to destabilize the region, the Saudi House allows them to worship in their mosques but prohibits the public celebration of their religious days. However, the Shiites are discriminated in the society or the job search, the investments resulting from the oil revenues are invested far from their area and finally, they are considered enemies of the state and Iranian spies in the Kingdom.

Therefore, in internal politics, the Saudi government is mixed with Wahhabi authoritarianism, not to mention the repression of dissidents, executions, the centralization of the judiciary, the detention of journalists; but also in foreign policy and especially in relations with Iran, the nature of the Riyadh regime obliges him to establish and disconnect contacts according to the ideological positions of Tehran.

The dialogue between them, indeed, have faced different moments, since their relationship has experienced ups and downs: in 1929, they symbolic signed the Saudi-Iranian Friendship Treaty, with which they established diplomatic relations, but both were engaged in the state-building process and in creating infrastructures for oil revenues, discovered in their subsoil.

\textsuperscript{31} Freedom in the World Countries 2019, <<Freedom House>> https://freedomhouse.org/
The first resentment in their relationship was in the 1940s, when the Iran friendly to the British recognized Israel as a sovereign state, provoking the disdain of a Saudi Arabia, not yet allied with the US, and alongside Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Yemen, and Iraq in the Arab-Israeli War of 1948. However, during the 60s, the two countries, which cooperated with the US against USSR and Nasser, made a demarcation agreement concerning the delimitation of the borderline separating the underwater areas between the KSA and IRI. This deal has been preceded by King Faisal’s visit to Tehran in 1966, which was repeated in 1975. In general, it can be said that the period 1968-1979 was the warmest of their relationship history.

In the meantime, the Saudi oil began to be used for the creation of Muslim alliances, such as the International Islamic Relief Organization, the Muslim World League and the World Assembly of Muslim Youth; these organizations converted the Saudi money into Wahhabi influence “by funding schools, mosques, charities, and medical clinics under the supervision of Saudi clerics and religious allies throughout the Muslim world and the Muslim diaspora in the West” (Commins, 2019).

The year 1979 changed the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran: the King of that time, Khalid, had to face the challenges of the Iranian Islamic Revolution in February and the Grand Mosque seizure in Mecca in November by a group of Muslim extremist dissidents. To both, the King replied with the strengthening of the Wahhabi precepts, regardless of the growing Islamic extremism within Saudi Arabia, mission left to his death to King Fahd, who, in the throne from 1982 to 2005, established over 300 mosques, 400 Islamic centers, and colleges and 2,000 schools, creating a network from Sudan to northern Pakistan.

Moreover, the continuous appellations of heretics used by Khomeini towards them fueled Riyadh’s economic support for Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), which followed the 1984 incident in which Iranian warplanes struck a Saudi oil tanker in the Persian Gulf, the subsequently Kingdom's downing of two F-4 Iranian aircraft, the 1987 clashes in Mecca between Iranian demonstrators and Saudi security forces, with the consequent looting of the Saudi Embassy in Iran. All these events, which testify the first escalation of violence between the two actors, brought to the breakdown of diplomatic relations in 1988, then restored in 1991.

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Then, the opposition of many radical Muslims to the support of the Kingdom towards the US and against Iraq during the Gulf War (1990-1991) had the result of fueling the Islamic terrorism, giving the way to Osama Bin Laden, a billionaire Saudi citizen, to recruit people inside al-Qaeda, for the 1995 terroristic action in al-Khobar, and the most famous 9/11 attacks in New York. The Saudi involvement in the Twin Towers was a breaking point in the US-KSA relationship, which improved only after the aid of Riyadh in the War on Terror by G. W. Bush and the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, which was seen by the Sunni subjects as a terrible heresy.

That US invasion of Iraq, with the following collapse of Baghdad as a regional leader, was also the first step of the end of the reproach of the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which began in 1989, after the death of Khomeini, and thanks to the political acumen of the moderate President Rafsanjani (1989-1997) and the Crown Prince Abdullah, later king in 2005. The temptation of Tehran to influence the failed Iraqi Shiite state, the Saudi suspicions towards the first hints of an Iranian nuclear program, the election in 2005 and re-election in 2009 of President Ahmadinejad, a figure close to Ayatollah, were the first signs of a new turn in their relationship.

In this context, the outbreak of the Arab Springs in 2011 was only the decisive turning point, fueling harsh tension between Iran and Saudi Arabia, throwing them into the proxy wars, with the geopolitical use of state and above all non-state actors, breaking the diplomatic relations in January 2016, until reaching the bloody events, the mutual accusations of recent years.

Thus, concerned with Islamic terrorism, the Saudis are “both the arsonists and the firefighters”37 (McCants, 2016). On one hand, like the Iranians, they promote a dangerous form of Islam; on the other, they are partners of the West in counter-terrorism.

The issue is about conflicting goals: “Saudi leaders seek good relations with the West and see jihadist violence as a menace that could endanger their rule [...] but they are also driven by their rivalry with Iran, and they depend for legitimacy on a clerical establishment dedicated to a reactionary set of beliefs” (Shane, 2016).

In any case “Wahhabism38 is likely to remain a pillar of the kingdom in the medium term. The religious establishment controls colossal material and symbolic means [...]. Any confrontation between the children of Saud and the heirs of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab will be destructive for both” (Mouline, 2018).

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2.2 Iran and Khomeini

Although to date “Iran” is the only official denomination of the state, this term was recognized just in 1935, when Shah Reza Khan, founder of the Pahlavi dynasty, who took the power with a military coup d’état in 1921, replaced the name of Persia with that of Iran, i.e. “land of the Aryans”, the Indo-Iranian people who have lived in Central Asia between the III and the II millennium BC.

At the time, the country was in a chaotic situation: the lack of population wealth, despite the abundance of oil in the Iranian subsoil, discovered in 1908 by the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC), and the push from the bottom of anti-imperialist movements, led to a great political crisis, which, in 1950, erupted, when the Iranian Parliament (Majlis), upon the proposal of the Prime Minister Mossadeq, refused to ratify an agreement for new concessions to the APOC, and subsequently proclaimed the nationalization of the oil industries in March 1951.

This resulted in a breaking between Mossadeq, supported by the people, and the Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, backed by the foreign powers; in 1953, he dismissed the Premier, but Mossadeq reacted violently, leading to a clash with the army, who, with the support of British and American secret services, known as Operation Ajax, managed to capture him.

From that moment, Iran began to apply a decidedly pro-western policy: in foreign affairs, the relations with Great Britain were improved, American military and economic aid returned with the Baghdad Pact of 1955, alongside with the closeness with Saudi Arabia and Israel, allies of the US; in domestic politics, the Shah implemented a modernization process in an attempt to transform the Iranian society in a western and secular sense, known as White Revolution: land reform, education rights, a vote for women, the foundation of a national health system…

The problem was that these reforms were opposed by two elements of Persian society: the Marxist groups, who denounced the interference of Western powers in Iranian affairs, and the clergy, frightened by the Shah's attempt to expel them from power, which they found in the religious Ruḥollāh Khomeini their charismatic leader.

Thus, in 1963, a sermon of Khomeini, with which he warned the Shah to be careful of being overthrown by the people, gave the way, with its forced exile, to the first hints of the Revolution.

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41 Daniel, E. L. (2012). The history of Iran. ABC-CLIO
The decision to exile him was also made for his writings: his subversive vision of the country was already evident from his first book, "Discovery of Secrets" (1940), in which he called for the full involvement of Iranian clerics in political issues as a religious duty; in particular, he wrote that the sovereign should be chosen by an assembly of religious and that the legislative power would be up to the clerics or a group supervised by them.

Even from exile, Khomeini never stopped sending revolt messages to the people, through audio cassettes illegally sent to Iran. In 1970, in his best-known work “Islamic Government”, he resumed talking about theocracy, but developing different concepts about Islam and the Western world: in his view, the religious laws of Shiism were perfect because they were from the word of God, and it matters little if they did not align with the new society; indeed, the Ayatollah believed there was an existed alienation in the Muslim world, due to the westoxication, i.e. a fascination for the Western culture that created an inferiority and impotence complex among Muslims. In this sense, only under the Shiite Revolutionary system (abandoned after the death of Mohammad), the Iranian community could produce a unity of thought and action based on Islam, which could give the faith to all the Muslims to fight against the moral corruption of the modern world.

With the words of Khomeini who secretly resounded in homes, the Iranians fought the Revolution against the Shah, the army and foreign powers, so much so that, in the period 1970-1978, SAVAK, the Iranian police services, reaching an estimated number of 100,000 people incarcerated, 10,000 tortured and between 4,000 and 7,000 killed.

Thus, the 16th January 1979 came, when Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi with the help of the US left Iran and, most of all, the 1st February 1979, when Khomeini returned home, establishing the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI), a theocratic state of anti-Western and anti-capitalist sentiments. Immediately after, indeed, he sent into exile and sentenced thousands of Shah collaborators with the death penalty and he also marginalized all the other political forces that had favored the Revolution, including communists and nationalists.

At that point, Khomeini, who trusted little of the Iranian army, which until then had been under the orders of the Shah, created the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), better known as Pasdaran, which today controls a huge part of the Iranian oil economy and it is in charge of many military operations abroad.

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42 “Khomeinism: The Impact of Theology on Iranian Politics”, CIA, November 1983
44 Elena Zacchetti, “La Rivoluzione che cambiò l’Iran”, <<Il Post>>, 11th February 2019
https://www.ilpost.it/2019/02/11/frivoluzione-iran-1979-khomeini/
Moreover, two referendums were held: the first one, which was held in March, asked the Iranians if they wanted to keep the existing system or become the Islamic Republic; obviously, the second option won with 98.2%, because “the measure was seen as a vote on the Revolution itself rather than whatever would follow” (Fishe, 2017). The second referendum was held to approve the new Constitution, which proposal was somewhat acceptable for many citizens. The new state was dominated by organs formed by religious and led by the Supreme Leader Khomeini, but also included elective institutions, such as the President of the Republic and the Parliament, both with purely administrative functions. It created a dualism between democracy and authoritarianism.

However, although the management of the state took place on multiple levels, it was a small minority those who were part of the restricted circle, which held the executive power in Iran; this refers to 45-50 individuals, all led by the Ayatollah, whose common value was the desire to protect the country and its revolutionary principles through the constant closure to the outside.

What Khomeini had created in Iran was a proof of absolute power that he legitimized with the reinterpretation of the Shiite concept of velayat-e faqih, i.e. guardianship of the Islamic jurist: since God made sure to create the Islamic Republic and since nobody knew Islam and the Sharia law better than the Shiite clergy, they were the ones who had to govern as guardians of the state through religious but most of all political offices, under the authority of a supreme clerical leader, the vali-e faqih (guardian Islamic jurist), which provide guardianship (velayat) over the country.

The Ayatollah established the conditions for a theocratic state, suspicious of any novelty and strongly anchored to Islamic values; but, is in foreign policy that Khomeini’s thought has reached its fame in the world: the call to export the Revolution to all Muslims who are “oppressed by Eastern or Western imperialism” shocked the Middle Eastern regional framework.

In particular, three were and are the main opponents of Iran: the US, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. About the first, “the foremost enemy of Islam” or “The Great Satan”, as defined by Khomeini himself, were perceived as a great manipulator, given both the 1953 overthrow of Mossadegh and the support for the Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi crimes during the Revolution; moreover, the hostage crisis (1979-1981), when a group of students stormed the US Embassy in Tehran and held 53 employees hostage for 444 days, and subsequent 1988 American shot down of a plane with 290 Iranians flew to Mecca were the first signs of a mutual antagonism that persists to this day.

Second, the relationship with Israel was characterized by the Iranian belief of its existence to satisfy Western interests in the Middle East; this is why Tehran, together with the majority of Arab countries in the region, has no doubts in wanting to destroy the Zionist State. In Khomeini’s words: “I once again remind everyone of the danger of the prevalent, festering and cancerous Zionist tumor in the body of Islamic countries.” (Khomeini, 1987).

Third, Saudi Arabia; after the Revolution, the relations between IRI and KSA cooled particularly, Khomeini’s speeches against Riyadh were perceived as a threat by the Saudi House, who in addition to continuing to invest in exporting Wahhabism, gave economic support to Saddam Hussein in the Iraq-Iran War (1980-1988), inaugurating a rivalry for the ideological and political hegemony of the Arab world which today is represented by the Saudi-Iranian proxy conflict.

After Khomeini’s death, which occurred on the 3rd of June 1989, even though the call to export the Revolution remained; domestically speaking, the appointment of Khamenei as Ayatollah brought a profound transformation in the conception of the role of the Supreme Leader; while Khomeini possessed almost absolute power, with his ideas and charisma at the center of the floor, Khamenei’s weak credentials entailed the drastic downsizing of his office: a period of social and doctrinal instability in the Iranian regime opened up, which continued to nowadays with protests and clashes between the political class asking for an openness to the West and the market economy, position represented by Prime Minister Hassan Rouhani, and an anachronistic clergy, whose point of reference is the Ayatollah.

Next to these two blocks, there is a third one48: a new Iranian society, in which many girls, for example, wear only a veil that covers the hair behind the neck or where in response to the blockade of social media, many young people use the VPN software to camouflage the place from which they connect to the Internet and the world.

48 Elena Zacchetti, “Cinque cose per capire l’Iran”, <<Il Post>>, 6th February 2016
https://www.ilpost.it/2016/02/06/iran/
III. The Alliance System

3.1 Soft power and diplomatic actions

According to Joseph Nye\textsuperscript{49}, soft power is “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments”; the ways to achieve this goal, opposite to hard power (economics, material resources, the quantity of population or size of the territory) are based on two interconnected levels: the international one, or rather the reputation of the state in the world, his contribution on multilateral problems and peacekeeping operations, the respect of the international agreements, the sustain on NGOs; and the domestic one, i.e. the culture of the state, which means life quality, tolerance, cultural relevance, state branding, movies, education, scientific centers, food, celebrities, sports.

Arguing on soft power across Iran and Saudi Arabia could seem something really out of the collective imagination of the two states, considered actors who make more use of hard power in their choices and political influences, but there is a vast repertoire of tools that both Tehran and Riyadh employ to attract the attention of other actors in the Muslim society in a mutual challenge for the hegemonic role within the Arab world.

Concerning Iran, although the Islamic Republic has to deal with wars and alliances with violent actors against the West or in support of terrorism, Tehran has a crucial role in the region as its policies are a combination of hard and soft powers, becoming a "smart power" (Nossel, 2004).

In particular, Iran soft power\textsuperscript{50} rests on three pillars. First of all, its culture and history, based on a 3,000-year-old civilization, which has been the backdrop to a large number of cities and important sites, which today represent one of the main reasons for tourist travel in Iran, especially for historians, archeologists, and scholars of Persian philology. Farsi, in fact, and its evolution, is another element of attraction, having many characteristics in common with the languages of some of its neighbors, such as Turkish, Georgian, Armenian. Moreover, in spreading the Persian culture, the 5 million Iranians in the world are of crucial importance, through language institutions, restaurants, songs and more.

The second pillar is the unique political model of the religious democracy, which, even if only pretentious, “constitutes a substitute for traditional systems and is considered an appealing model for religious Muslims” (Ellusseini, 2016).


\textsuperscript{50} Fadi Ellusseini, “Soft Power in the Middle East: The Invisible Skirmish”, <<E-International Relations>>, 8\textsuperscript{th} August 2016 https://www.e-ir.info/2016/08/08/soft-power-in-the-middle-east-the-invisible-skirmish/
The third column is the Iranian foreign policy: established with the Constitution of 1979, the actions of Tehran outside its boundaries are, as written in the Charter, based on Islamic values, fraternity among all Muslims and the protection of the oppressed around the world. These ideas are to be seen in the post-Revolution political context; reason for which, for “fraternity among all Muslims”, it is meant Shiite brothers or converts, and for “oppressed around the world” it is meant Muslims forced to submit to impure rulers, allies and accomplices of the interests of imperialist powers.

Therefore, the result of these three tools is the ability of Tehran to build ties and alliances in the Arab world, especially in those countries where the Shiite component plays an important role in society; Iran indeed influences many Shiites state and non-state actors “through media campaigns, establishing cultural and religious centers, financially supporting Shiites minorities and, recently, politically and militarily assisting Shiites communities with the aim of strengthening their role and influence within their societies” (Elhusseini, 2016).

Moreover, with its anti-American rhetoric, Tehran has created this state branding, with whom catalyzing all the discontent and disagreements over Washington's interference in Middle Eastern issues, promoting Iran’s role as a regional leader against foreign hegemony and therefore creating the conditions to grab all the sympathies and favors of the actors opposed to the interventionism of the United States in the region, but above all, given the game of influences with Saudi Arabia, contrary to the hegemonic role of Riyadh.

Finally, through diplomacy, Teheran is trying to link himself with Turkey, Qatar, and Malaysia, a kind of emerging block in the Muslim World. These four countries met themselves in Kuala Lumpur, during a three-day Summit in December 2019, where, compared to the public speeches on the persecution of the Rohingya in Myanmar and the problem of the Uighurs in China, a more veiled meeting followed, where there was a discussion on the creation of a framework of Muslims countries alternative to the alliance between the United States, the Gulf states and Egypt, in which to reformulate economic issues and the belonging of the holy cities Mecca and Medina to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

On Riyadh's part, this meeting was seen as a threat, which expressed in the words of the Saudi columnist Hailah Al-Mashawah: “This summit will never liberate Jerusalem. It will not face down the terrorism in Iran, and it will not put an end to the tragedies of the Islamic peoples. Moreover, this summit is motivated by jealousy and hatred against Saudi Arabia, with no constructive goal”.

51 “Kuala Lumpur Summit 2019: A Bid By Qatar, Turkey, Malaysia, Iran To Challenge Saudi Arabia's Standing In Muslim World”, <<MEMRI>>, 23rd December 2019
Concerning the Iranian soft power, the nuclear deal\(^2\) was another matter on which Tehran could exploit its consequences: the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), signed under the UN Resolution 2231 in July 2015 between Iran, EU, the members of the Security Council, and Germany (which established the downsizing of the Iranian nuclear program with the lifting of the economic sanctions), boosted Iran’s soft-power credentials as international actor engaged in the preservation of collective security through peaceful manners, fueling hopes for a more incisive role of the moderate president Rouhani, compared to the Ayatollah and the clergy.

That deal had therefore created the conditions for Tehran “to devise and implement a comprehensive strategy to project soft power in a way that both mitigates the regional security dilemma and serves the national advantage” (Shoamanesh, 2016).

Iranian diplomacy indeed understood that, through the impetus of the agreement, it could create a network of friendly states, similar to its interests, providing them with the suitable incentives to staying in this friendship through strategic partnerships, joint projects, and financial cooperation, with whom build a permanent forum on regional security to discuss issues of strategic objects, where Iran would have positioned itself as a leader in promoting stability.

Signs of this soft-power increase plan, which from the regional level aimed at its worldwide development, were the May 2016 agreement about the economic corridor of the Chabahar port between Iran, India, and Afghanistan, the installation of the high-speed train Yiwu-Tehran, part of the Chinese BRI (Belt and Road Initiative), the Iran-Azerbaijan deal on hydroelectric trade and the cooperation on water resources, and the project for an international north-south transport corridor between Russia, Iran, Central Asian states and India.

Now, the 2018 US withdraw from the JCPOA and most of all, in January 2020, the decision of Iran itself to leave the agreement, because of the killing of the Pasdaran commander, Qasem Soleimani, has probably put an end to any effort in the mediation on the Iranian nuclear program, which it will continue “with no restrictions and based on its technical needs\(^3\)”; but, moreover, as a collateral consequence, the re-establishment of economic sanctions inevitably clashes with Iran’s soft power projects: Tehran, with less income, will have to opt for more hard power policies in the influence game in the Middle East against Saudi Arabia, fueling the already high tensions in the region.

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On the opposite side, the other regional leader has different rhetoric about the soft-power compared to the one of Iran, as the characteristics of the state are different: Saudi Arabia is the largest state of the Arabian Peninsula and it produces the greatest amount of oil in the whole Middle East, its society and its history are imbued with Islam, enough to host Medina and Mecca. Therefore, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is one of the most powerful states in the world, being “the center of four important worlds: the Middle East, the Arab world, the Muslim world, and the global energy world” (Gallaroti, 2013).

Saudi Arabia has achieved this key position through hard power policies (material resources, wars) but, starting from the 20th century, the Saudis have counterbalanced this hard power with soft power initiatives, making a real effort to multilateralism: Riyadh is indeed a member of the United Nations since 1945 and it plays a huge role in the IMF, the WTO, and the World Bank; at the regional level, Riyadh is a member of OPEC, the Arab League, the GCC, the Muslim World League, the International Islamic Relief Organization.

The KSA foreign policy is based on a strong contribution to build frameworks in which Saudi soft power can develop; in particular, four are the international networks where this goal is pursued: the Gulf states, the Arab countries, the Muslim community, and the international arena.

About the first, the states of the Persian Gulf, embodied in the Gulf Cooperation Council, represent the principal ground in which Saudi foreign policy implements its interests, achieving important domestic and trans-border goals. For example, in 2008, under a Saudi proposition, the GCC created a common market within the member states that eliminated trade barriers in goods and services. Riyadh is indeed the main engine of this regional union, mainly due to its significant oil revenues, with which it helps the GCC countries in exchange for political compliance (to give some figures, 80% of Bahrain’s state oil and gas incomes come from the Saudis Abu Safah oil field).

Concerning the second network. Saudi Arabia, being the main source of international economic aid to the Arab states, has managed over the years to assume the role of mediator in disputes within the Arab League. In this organism, Riyadh’s interests are directed towards a solution to the Palestinian question, the isolation of the Syrian regime of Assad and the assistance of the Yemeni government in the fight against the Houthi rebels.

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Regarding the Muslim community, then, the most influential organizations for Riyadh are the International Islamic Relief Organization, the Muslim World League and the World Assembly of Muslim Youth. Here, since Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy is based on Islamic principles and since the alliance between Saudi House and Wahhabi clerics is the basement of the Kingdom, these organizations are the places in which Riyadh strengthens its role of undisputed leader of the Muslim world, through aid to other Muslim countries, such as the construction of roads in Yemen or airports in Senegal, promoting its pan-Islamism in the way “to making the best out of its religious soft power” (Gallaroti, 2013).

Fourth, the role of KSA in the international arena, which coincides with his contribution to the OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries): the Saudis, in the face of frequent drops in the standard price by cartel members, have repeatedly cut their production in an economically disadvantaged way to keep the agreement on oil prices alive. This behavior was seen as an attempt to increase its international credibility especially towards the West and the United States, favoring its soft power.

All of this networks system work for Saudi Arabia in the sense to stabilize the relationship with the other international actors to maintain his guide role in the Middle East, as leader of the Muslim community, guardian of the holy places Mecca and Medina, the richest country in the area and most reliable ally of the great powers; but, through the use of the various frameworks, the revenues from oil and its economic and social benefits that Riyadh exports to other friendly countries, a hidden goal for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is to contain the Iranian expansionist project, seeking to further reduce the number of possible allies of Ayatollah.

This objective can be achieved through three different strategies in establishing relations with the Islamic Republic, interchangeable based on the type of dialogue that external conditions suggest, but in any case directly managed by the political will of the Saudi House:

- KSA uses soft power policies over Iran to counter-balance security and stability in the Gulf;
- KSA uses soft power policies towards Iran to cooperate with Teheran instead to contrast it;
- KSA uses soft power policies with Iran for a future-based strategy to influence Teheran policies.

In particular, these three operations are not only outlined in the general system, but they can be applied in different contexts and hotspots: as chosen case, it is worth highlighting the role that Riyadh has in neighboring Iraq, a Shiite-led country, with a strong commitment with Tehran.

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The warlike nature of King Salman, the political acumen of the Crown Prince and the American request to stem the Iranian push towards the West have meant that since 2015 Saudi Arabia has changed its way of looking at Baghdad

Although accused of having supporting ISIS against Shiite militias in the Sunni part of Iraq, and weakened by the Iraqi government, backed by Iran, the Saudis are attempting to remodel their relationship with its near East\textsuperscript{57}: a Saudi consulate in Southern Iraq has been raised, 140 flights per month between Saudi Arabia and Iraq have been established, several companies, including SABIC, the Saudi petrochemical giant, have exported offices in the Iraqi capital, $1 billion in loans and $500 million in export credits have been promised to Iraq to support post-war reconstruction. These actions and promises are becoming increasingly popular especially in the south of the country, in the city of Basra, on the border with Kuwait.

Iran's natural response is that of the ISIS-Saudi rhetoric, with which they try to absorb all the soft-power of Riyadh. Moreover, recalling when Saudi Arabia pushed the Iraqis to start a war against Khomeini's Iran (1980-1988), Tehran, in turn, strengthened its benevolence by opening a free trade area near Basra, and abolishing the visa requirement for Iraqis on the border with Iranian Khuzestan region.

This brief overview shows the action-reaction of Iran and Saudi Arabia in a small part of Iraq, but this corresponds exactly to an example of their regional geopolitical duel, which is fought, as well as with the use of force, with diplomatic actions and zero-sum soft-power measures.

Despite the way of approaching each other, indeed, it is the political image of Tehran and Riyadh that determines the strength of the two regional challengers in the weapons deployment of the “Islamic Cold War” (Marcus, 2017).

\textsuperscript{57}“Saudi Arabia’s use of soft power in Iraq is making Iran nervous”, <<The Economist>>, 8\textsuperscript{th} March 2018 https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2018/03/08/saudi-arabias-use-of-soft-power-in-iraq-is-making-iran-nervous
3.2 Alliances inter and outside the MENA region

The alliance system of a state is one of the ways to look at its status in the world and trying to understand its range of action. Most of the time, the system of alliances on which a country is based depends on its geopolitical position, the amount of its GDP and the prestige it has in the international arena.

Saudi Arabia has all these characteristics, but also it is a hegemonic actor in the Middle East for being the state with the highest number of oil revenues and the leader of the Muslim community, guardian of La Mecca and Medina. Thus, the Saudi status quo is suitable for their role; however, their fear is the Iranian expansionism, which began with the 2011 Arab Springs and intensified from 2015 onwards.

The Kingdom has therefore set up a system of security alliances inter the region to counter Iranian influence. There are at least three informal multilateral coalitions and alliances: the Arab Coalition in Yemen of March 2015, the Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFT) of December 2015 and the Anti-Qatar Coalition of June 2017.

The first one has the mandate to make war against the Houthi rebels, seen as Iran’s supporters; the second to coordinate and support military operations against terrorist attacks in the region and the third one to convince Qatar to follow the strategic lines of KSA foreign policy within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). All of the three coalitions are lack of institutions or specific rules, each member knows that being part of it does not in itself establish lasting relationships with others and that the real purpose in the cooperation is to expand the Saudi influence in the Middle East to the detriment of Iran, leaving ample room for the initiatives of the Kingdom.

For example, inside the Yemen Coalition, despite the geographic diversity of its states, GCC countries, Senegal, Morocco, US, and the UK, all of them support the Hadi government, whose main ally is the KSA; within the IMAFT, then, notwithstanding the differences in strategic positions and military power, most of the partners have a Sunni majority population, who, feeling threatened by Iran and its controlled or inspired groups, support the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen and contrast Tehran’s allies in regional hotspots, fueling the influence of Riyadh in the Arab world. All of this is well explained, finally, by the 2017 anti-Qatari Coalition, whose members had no controversy to align themselves with the Kingdom’s decision to implement diplomatic and economic ties with Doha for his ambiguous relations with the IRI.

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As written before, the natural habitat of the Kingdom’s foreign policy is the GCC: since his birth (1981), KSA has always tried to transform it into a regional security organization under its leading, in the way to promote its legitimacy and spread influence in the country members; the establishment of the common market in 2008 should be seen in this sense, rather than an economic measure by itself. UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman fully support Riyadh against Teheran, claiming that Iran is planning expansionist moves thought terrorist groups.

Saudi Arabia is, therefore, the true protagonist of the GCC, as confirmed by its efforts to expand the members’ number: in 2011, in fact, during the Arab Springs, Riyadh had invited Jordan and Morocco to join the organization and in 2014 the Saudi House extended the invitation to Egypt, for a project known as GCC Plus. However, in addition to demonstrating the undisputed leadership that the Saudis hold in the Gulf, these attempts to transform the Gulf Cooperation Council into an international alliance represent the Saudi frustration for the incapacity to extend the Council beyond the Gulf Arab monarchies.

This was the first reason why Saudi Arabia invested so many economic and logistical resources in creating coalitions throughout the MENA area, or rather the containment of Iranian expansionism in the region not just with the traditional allies, but also trying to attract the sympathies of as many state and non-state actors as possible.

A second reason was the Riyadh’s awareness of the unwillingness of the United States to guarantee their security, starting from the Arab Spring. During that baleful 2011, the Obama administration backed the rebel struggle in many countries, such as Libya, Egypt, and Bahrain, helping to bring the framework of the MENA area into a riot, regardless of the possible consequences for the Saudi House. Moreover, the gradual shift of US troops from the Middle East in favor of the Pacific area as well as the 2015 signature of the Iranian nuclear deal, in which there is no mention of the Tehran proxy wars, “have compounded the growing perception of the Obama administration as an unreliable ally, reluctant to resist Assad in Syria, Shiites militias in Iraq or Iran” (Miller, 2017).

In this sense, the turning point for a more muscular American policy took place with the Trump administration; he is more active in supporting the Saudi ally, with whom in 2017 he signed a comprehensive arms deal\(^59\) for $147 billion, whose goal is to counterbalance the Iranian influence in the Middle East. Furthermore, the US withdraw from the JCPOA and the killing of the Pasdaran leader are all signs of this better trend for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

\(^{59}\) “What’s the goal of America’s arms deal with Saudi Arabia?”, <<ABC News>>, 25\(^{th}\) May 2017
Despite the worsening of the already high tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia that Trump has brought, the Kingdom can call the United States their greatest ally. Although in the past President Obama tried to establish a climate of dialogue with Teheran, distancing its ties with Riyadh, nowadays the new administration re-established the classic alliance system. KSA is therefore not only the first market for US arms (justified by the entente between the Prince Mohammad bin Salman and the White House to contain Iranian backed terrorist organizations) but also, together with Israel, the curator of his interests in the region, favor for which Washington guarantees the Saudi House its security protection.

Thus, the major allied state-actors of Saudi Arabia are the Gulf countries (except for Qatar, who has excellent relationships with Iran since 2017), Jordan, the United States and Israel. Regarding non-state actors, instead, KSA has good relations with the Syrian Liberation Army, the government of Yemen, as well as minorities in Iran (the Marxists of the People's Mujahedin Organization, the Kurdish and the Sunni armed group Jaish al-Adl).

On the other side of the Persian Gulf, the Islamic Republic of Iran does not have such a large state alliance, being a country born and developed with strongly revolutionary connotations, challengers of the established order and against international powers. For this reason, Iran has been able to build from the Revolution onwards a system of alliances of non-state actors, who, on the one hand, do not have excessive military power or finances to invest in war expenses, on the other their strength lies in the trans-nationality of these militias, armed groups, religious affiliations, capable of operating in various contexts and of standing out in the chaos and tumultuousness of low-intensity Middle Eastern conflicts.

Furthermore, if Saudi Arabia and its allies recruit personnel with compulsory conscription or with other more or less coercive methods, Iran's non-state allied actors make proselytism their hiring method, growing in number through young and less young Shiites, convinced and inflamed by the words of religious leaders against the impure Saudis and the arrogant Americans, giving the Pasdaran a fundamental logistical and military aid in the various regional hotspots.

This axis comprises Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Shiite militias who back the government in Iraq (Badr Organization, Kata’ib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al-Haq), the Houthis in Yemen, the army of Assad in Syria, Hamas in Palestine, the Shiites militias in Bahrain who plot against the Sunni king al-Khalifa, and, finally, even Hezbollah al-Hejaz, a Khomeinist organization in Saudi Arabia.

Alongside this non-state alliance, in recent years, Iran has made the best use of the diplomatic crisis in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), building a special relationship with a state actor, previously very close to Riyadh: Qatar.

On 5th June 2017, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, UAE, Egypt plus other African states put an economic and political embargo on Doha\textsuperscript{62}, which called for a maritime, air and land blockade. The reasons for this decision were the illegal relations that the Emir al-Thani had with the terrorist groups of Hamas and The Muslim Brotherhood, but above all with Iran. In order not to set the embargo, these countries gave Doha ten days to decide on thirteen conditions imposed by them, including the suspension of the television station Aljazeera, the end of relations with Iran and military cooperation with Turkey. Qatar unexpectedly voted against, most likely after having received reassurances from Ankara and Tehran about the military and economic aid. Qatar has thus become another battleground, whose value is strategic, like Bahrain, as a member of the GCC.

Concerning the other battlegrounds in the MENA area\textsuperscript{63}. In Lebanon the situation is mixed: the incumbent Prime Minister Hassan Diab is backed in the Parliament by Hezbollah, an ally of Tehran, while, the parties of the Sunni community have good relationships with Riyadh. In Syria, the Shiite President Bashar al-Assad is openly supported by Iran in the clash against rebels and jihadist groups; moreover, Damascus is the link between the Iranian weapons and Hezbollah in Lebanon, who also fight against Israel. Netanyahu was the first to stress the attention on the Iranian expansionist attempt and he entertains relationships with Saudi Arabia to the common purpose of opposing the influence of Iran in the region. Egypt is in an equal distance between Teheran and Riyadh: historically, Il Cairo has better relations with the Kingdom, but, after the Egyptian-Iranian oil deal in October 2016, the position of al-Sisi is uncertain. Finally, the same medium level position is for Turkey: as a Sunni state, Ankara has strong ties with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, but, at the same time, Erdogan has forged an alliance with Iran against Kurdish presence and influence in the region.

In the light of above, the regional situation of the game of the alliances is very uncertain and takes place at different levels of common interest or opposition; the actors involved have indeed historical, religious, and identity link with Saudi Arabia or Iran. Not to mention the political and economic ambitions of state leaders, armed groups, local warlords. If this is the situation in the MENA area, the issue is complicated as well at the international level.

\textsuperscript{62} Alia Chughtai, “Understanding the blockade against Qatar”, <<Aljazeera>>, 5th June 2018
\textsuperscript{63} “Iran and Saudi Arabia: Friends and foes in the region”, <<BBC>>, 10th November 2017
In addition to the US, whose role in the Middle East has been previously analyzed, also Moscow, Beijing, and the EU have a strategic interest in the competition between the KSA and IRI.

Concerning the Kremlin\(^{64}\). In the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Putin does not take sides and does not remain neutral, but cooperates with both at the same time; there are indeed good relations with Riyadh and Tehran. Moscow sees Iran as an ally in opposition to the US, but also against secessionism and jihadism; in particular, Russia has a debt to the IRI for not supporting Chechen Muslims during the Second Chechen War (1999-2009). Furthermore, Iran and Russia cooperate in Syria, alongside Assad, against groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, Sunni jihadist movements, which, in addition to being anti-Western, are also anti-Russian and anti-Shiites. At the same time, Moscow has some businesses with Saudi Arabia on commercial and investment relations, oil, energy, arms; and also in this case, Putin is grateful to Riyadh for not putting sanctions on Russia on the Ukraine issue, despite American demands.

Moscow does not choose between them, but thinks from time to time in order to get the most. Therefore, “Russia does not want their rivalry to escalate into an open conflict that poses difficult choices for Russia which Putin would prefer not to be confronted with” (Katz, 2018), since, in the face of US support for the KSA, Putin could no longer having affairs with both simultaneously.

Regarding the Middle Kingdom\(^ {65}\). Although nowadays Beijing does business with both Saudi Arabia and Iran, the Chinese non-involvement in the political issues of the Middle East would be more complicated in the future for four reasons: first, since the BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) traverses this region affected by civil wars, China would have to get its hands on Middle Eastern geopolitics for its economic interests; second, the BRI would align China with Iran for its strategic geographic position, a large population, and a significant market suitable for Chinese products and investments; third, the Tehran-Beijing dialogue would be seen to be such a threat to American interests in the area that the US would increase economic and military efforts to support the KSA; fourth, the tensions between the KSA and IRI would worsen so much that between terrorism, wars and killings, the political situation would not allow China to cure its economic issues.

Should this not happen, and China, through an equidistance policy, would be able to be halfway between the parties; even in this case, Beijing should engage in crisis management during the inevitable waves of instability. “Like other great powers before it, China would soon start finding how difficult the shifting sands of the Middle East are to navigate” (Lidarev, 2017).


Lastly, arguing about the European Union. Even though the EU does not have a real single foreign policy instrument, as the member states did not want to delegate this aspect of their sovereignty to Brussels, creating what is a more than effective symbolic office, i.e. the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, which is always bypassed by the individual foreign ministries of the most influential members of the Union; as regards the tensions in the Middle East, the countries of the European Union have a more or less similar opinion, so much so that it is possible to reason in terms of a unique EU vision.

The EU\(^{66}\), indeed, does not want to follow the American hard line towards Iran, as it would only increase the instability in the region; rather, the efforts of European countries are directed towards a balancing position between Riyadh and Tehran, with the main interest in avoiding a war between the two regional powers, which would increase the European Union's internal security threats, through the reinforcement of terrorist groups, the increasing number of refugees who see Europe as a haven and the economic damage resulting from the general imbalance in oil extraction and energy policies.

For this reason, although the end of the JCPOA has meant a major defeat for Europe, since not only does a meeting table fail, but also a mutual economic advantage that prevents the risk of escalation is lost, the European governments\(^{67}\) are aware of the fact that they have to resist American pressures of total alignment towards Saudi Arabia, as this would translate into “undermining the Iranian economy, destabilizing state institutions and fuelling civil unrest in a country of 80 million people” (Geranmayeh, 2018).

Finally, what Europe or at least the most influential European countries should do is going beyond economic questions and entering in the geopolitical issues of the various Middle Eastern hotspots, to counterbalancing American and Russian positions and building a terrain in which Iran and Arabia Saudis can share political and economic interests, without proxy conflicts and games of sectarian-ideological influences.


IV. The Military Confrontation

4.1 Use of military strength

From the Revolution onwards, the decisions in terms of the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have always been made concerning each other. However, now the concern for a possible real and destroying conflict is given by two new elements: a multipolar world, in which non-state actors count, and the warlike nature of King Salman, who, ascended the throne in 2015, immediately raised the tensions with Iran, which have never been so high.

In addition to this, another way to understand the possibility or not of an open clash between Tehran and Riyadh is their military power: in 2018, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)\textsuperscript{68}, Iran spent 13.2$ billion in the military budget, i.e. 2.7\% of the entire GDP, giving to the Islamic Republic the 18\textsuperscript{th} place in the country world ranking for the number of military expenditures and the 25\textsuperscript{th} one for the spending as a share of GDP; in the same year, Saudi Arabia was in the third place in the world for total military expenses (after US and China), with 67.6$, and in the first place overall for military spending on the percentage of GDP, with 8.8\%.

According to these figures, there would be no competition between the IRI and KSA, as also the economic data\textsuperscript{69} demonstrate: both massively dependent on oil revenues, in 2019 the Kingdom has a GDP of $762.25 billion and GDP pro capita of $22,507, being part of the G20 countries; while Iran, in the same year, has a production of 484.63 billion and an average income distribution of just $5,820.

If, however, the Kingdom can boast better performance on almost all socio-economic indicators, the Islamic Republic has a fundamental element of superiority: the population (almost 84 million people against less than 34 million).

This inevitably reflects on the number of individuals that the two governments can employ for military purposes\textsuperscript{70}: 550.000 active persons for Iran, with almost 24 million citizens available and 230.000 persons for Saudi Arabia, with 8 million Saudis of suitable age to serve the country militarily.

\textsuperscript{69} International Monetary Fund: World Economic Outlook Database April 2019
\textsuperscript{70} Military Power of Iran and Saudi Arabia, ArmedForces.eu
https://armedforces.eu/compare/country_Iran_vs_Saudi_Arabia
Moreover, while on air forces Tehran and Riyadh are equivalent, with more or less 850 total aircraft for both; looking at the land forces, Tehran has a huge advantage of 2500 tanks against 1140 of Riyadh and a total artillery number of 4100 versus almost 800; not to mention the navy confrontation (406 against 27 for KSA), with 40 submarines deployable for Iran, given the substantial absence of Saudi ones.

It should not be surprising therefore that in the 2020 military strength ranking of Global Firepower71, which takes into account financial and military might as well as geographical and logistical capabilities, Iran is on the 14th position and Saudi Arabia on the 17th upon 138 countries over the world.

Although the significant economic disadvantage, fueling from the sanctions of the international community for the nuclear program, according to the American journalist Chase Winter, the Islamic Republic of Iran is capable of threatening the hegemonic role of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in the Middle Eastern region through three different asymmetric strategies72: the first one is named forward defense, with which to use “regional allies and proxies, known as the axis of resistance, as leverage to weaken, bog down, deter or fight Iran's enemies away from its soil” (Winter, 2018).

A second panel of the Iranian military strength is the development of ballistic missiles that could reach US bases, Israel and the Gulf states; even if these missiles are considered by the neighbors as an offensive threat (especially regarding Iranian supplies to the Lebanese Hezbollah in attacking the Jews and the missile attacks by the Yemeni Houthi rebels against Saudi Arabia and its allies), this measure is seen under Tehran’s view as a defensive way to hit the enemy in the case of a previous thrust.

As reported by the International Crisis Group (ICG)73, an ONG based in Brussels which deals with the prevention of armed conflicts, Iran began to invest in its missile skills at the end of the war with Iraq of Saddam Hussein(1980-1988), with the awareness of its high incompetence in the technological-military field, having as reference Israel’s most sophisticated missile program. Over time, this deterrent tool has become so important against enemies in the region that it outweighs the economic damage in terms of sanctions by the international community for the same missiles in the cost-benefit calculation.

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71 Military Strength Ranking 2020, Global Firepower
https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-listing.asp
72 Chase Winter, "Iran's military power: What you need to know", <<Deutsche Welle>>, 6th August 2018
The last plank of the Iranian military chances is to bring the world economy into a standstill. This means, in the event of an unwanted war by Tehran, to bring down the quantity or even the price of the material resources that cross the Strait of Hormuz, located between the Gulf of Oman and the Persian Gulf, which correspond to about one-third of the world's natural gas and a quarter of the global oil consumption; if that were not enough, in addition, Iran could use its non-state allies in Yemen to do the same in the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, between the Gulf of Aden and Djibouti, in which 4% of the oil traded in the world passes through.

To do this, Iran could block choke points with mines and employ unconventional tactics against enemy warships, with low-cost boats and motorboats, armed with anti-ship weapons, such as torpedoes and missiles.

In particular, this third and last strategy is part of the characteristics of a larger confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia, based on the energy policy: Saudi Arabia has large oil reserves and a smaller population, so it prefers stable and long-term oil prices. Iran, on the other hand, having a larger population and being economically weak from sanctions, prefers short-term floating prices; for this reason, threatening to destabilize the balance of resources in the region could prove to be an excellent deterrent move.

All of these tactics, indeed, are considered by Iran just in a deterrence level, to avoid the risk of a conflict, because in that case, despite all the measures that Tehran could take, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia could rely on the Western help, which, immediately upon the outbreak of the conflict, would represent a significant ally for Riyadh against Ayatollah, who should hope for a Russian or Chinese intervention that is not entirely taken for granted, given the economic collaboration that Putin offers to both parts and the Chinese reticence to enter geopolitical issues.

On the other side, Saudi Arabia has instead to face many issues regarding its military equipment. The Kingdom has high-quality weapons, which are built and modeled within the country, such as his F-15SA Eagle, or imported from specialized production centers, such as the United States, with the F-15 Eagles, the vehicles M2 Bradley fighters, Boeing AH-64 Apache and Sikorsky UH-60 Black Hawk attack helicopters, M1-A1 / A2 Abrams tanks, or Europe, from which the KSA imports the Eurofighter Typhoons, “perhaps the most advanced fighter jet fielded by European militaries” (Brimelow, 2017).

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75 Ben Brimelow, “Saudi Arabia has the best military equipment money can buy — but it's still not a threat to Iran”, <Business Insider>>, 16th December 2017 https://www.businessinsider.com/saudi-arabia-iran-yemen-military-proxy-war-2017-12?IR=T
However, his arsenal is designed for a conventional war rather than proxy fights and this is why Riyadh, despite the amount of military material, has no good response in the clashes in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen, for the benefit of Iran, who is aware of this Saudi defiance and therefore of being much more dangerous for his political rival in proxy wars than in conflicts with classic features.

Thus, Saudi troops are not prepared for enemies without uniforms or conventional codes of conduct, such as local militias, tribal groups, or military-religious affiliations, which instead have experiences in the low-intensity conflicts of the 21st century; in this sense, an anti-Western Iran with a leading role of world Shiism acts, through its military forces within the Pasdaran, to share its influence on these non-state actors, exploiting sectarianism within Islam and widespread anti-Americanism in the region.

In the light of above, it emerges that Iran's greatest strength is its asymmetric capabilities, while for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia it is its economic-military strength in the classical sense of the term. Most of Iran's military capabilities were developed first during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), where Tehran learned to earn limited victories through asymmetric tactics, fighting against a technologically superior opponent and with international powerful allies, and then in the upheavals of the post-2011 Arab Springs, where the Pasdaran and the Shiite militias allied with Tehran in the various hotspots of the region have developed skills “in terms of command and control, integrated operations, and ground offenses” (Ostovar, 2018).

Saudi Arabia, instead, has less military experience: during the Gulf War (1990-1991), Saudi forces managed to drive away the Iraqi invasion just with the US help, revealing all the inexperience of the army. More recently, in the Yemeni civil war, although the Saudi coalition pushed the Houthi out of positions in the south of the country, the situation in the biggest city, Sana’a, where the bombings of Saudi Arabia did not result in gains on the ground, raised doubts about Saudi surveillance, intelligence, and reconnaissance capabilities.

Thus, what about if the Saudi military strength meets Iran’s asymmetric capabilities? Both states have muscles and weaknesses, which, added together, give the result that neither of them has a clear advantage over the other: Saudi Arabia has airpower that would allow it to maintain dominance in the skies during the entire phase of a war with Iran; moreover, with its air vehicles, it would have the opportunity to hit crucial checkpoints and military bases with air-to-ground missiles, both on the coast and in Iranian territory.

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Iran, on the other hand, would achieve maritime dominance in the short term, as its naval strength is by far the most significant in the Persian Gulf; here, with rapid and violent attacks, mines and ballistic missiles, it could immediately hit the ports, military ships and Saudi infrastructures, taking the Kingdom's defense systems by surprise, forcing them to expose themselves and therefore significantly reducing their effectiveness, as they would not have the time to react to all the attacks of the Islamic Republic.

However, the war would not concern regime change or land control, because both countries would not be able to enter deep into the enemy territory, without suffering damage: the war would only see its duration extend over a long time through punitive missions and hostile attacks. In this perspective, the economic strength, the skies power, the best technology of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia would certainly be favored in a long conflict, but the resistance capacity of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which has experienced years of war against stronger powers, would represent an unknown factor.

In any case, it is clear how this type of war would not only involve its main architects, Tehran and Riyadh, but certainly also the regional and international players; in this sense, the transnational alliance of non-state actors that Tehran has built in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Bahrain, and Yemen would certainly support Ayatollah Khamenei in this conflict, but it would simply target Saudi citizens in their countries, since, having far less military strength than the Saudi House, it would not directly attack the Saudi borders or, if so, it would not inflict penalties with any degree of effectiveness.

On the other side, the state alliance system of Saudi Arabia would certainly be involved; this means that, in the event of a confrontation with Iran, the United States would come into play alongside the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Although Iran may punish Americans for their involvement and attempt to discourage them from making this choice, showing them the disadvantages that would result, through the military clash between their armed forces, hitting or killing their citizens in the various regional hotspots and shooting down the ships of their navy in the Persian Gulf, in the end, Ayatollah would only have to watch Americans go to war with Saudi enemies.

Therefore, the certain involvement of the United States, especially with the Trump administration, is the main reason that prevents Iran from starting a direct military confrontation with Saudi Arabia. The military power that Washington would bring to Riyadh would change the balance of forces, “and Iran does not possess the capabilities to outlast a coalition military effort against it” (Ostovar, 2018).
However, nobody wants a war\textsuperscript{77}: not Saudi Arabia, whose already demonstrated inexperience in the strategic-military field could be even more evident in a war of this proportions, casting doubt on its regional leadership; not Iran, whose influence in the region is due to proxy wars and would risk shattering against the Saudi military force; and certainly not the United States, whose military intervention in the Middle East in favor of Saudi Arabia should be made up of a front on the field against the allied actors of Iran, but also on the economic-geopolitical level against China and Russia.

For this reason, “\textit{were there to be an open confrontation, it would probably be due to an escalation of tensions, and not an unwarranted attack by either one}” (Clavijo, 2019).

4.2 Instability and future of the Middle East

Starting from the Arab Springs, the Middle East has become a land of chaos, where the already rooted sectarian divisions within Islam, the contrasting strategies in terms of economic policies of the state and non-state actors allocated in the region, the different choices of foreign policies of the international powers committed for some time to maximize their power and prestige in the MENA area have all of them served as fertile ground for the outbreak of geopolitical tensions between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran, aimed at regional domination.

This competition, whose prize is the title of the hegemonic actor in the Middle East, takes place in those territories where, in 2011, to a previous fragility, both the sincere democratic aspirations of the population, inspired by the images and pictures that social media showed of the revolt in Tunisia first and North Africa later, both the more or less legitimate moves of power by ambitious actors have been added.

Thus, emerged hotspots in the Middle East, where Tehran and Riyadh, directly and indirectly incorporated on the field or by political choice, launched themselves in search of zero-sum political influence.

All this is fought in:

- the ongoing civil war in Syria (2011 - present), where the situation is very complex, given the presence of many political and social conflicts within the war itself. Here, the geopolitical interests of the KSA and IRI undergo scaling down in terms of scope from time to time as they are added up to those of many other regional and international actors: indeed, in his clash against the various groups, all included in the Syrian opposition, but with different views on the country’s future, Assad regime and its army are backed by Russia, the Lebanese Hezbollah, Iran, and more covertly by China78, which, based on its internal policy, cannot allow dissidents to overthrow a sovereign country, and must preserve its economic interests in the region; on the rebels’ side, there is the United States, the Western and Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. However, Ankara fights at the same time against the Rojava, a Kurdish autonomous region in Northern Syria, established de facto in 2012. Then, all of them struggle against the small settlements left in the ISIS hands, plus against terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda and al-Nusra Front, who infiltrated the upheavals of the war;

78 Giorgio Cafiero, “China plays the long game on Syria”, <<Middle East Institute>>, 10th February 2020
https://www.mei.edu/publications/china-plays-long-game-syria
- the ongoing civil war in Yemen\textsuperscript{79} (2014 - present), the result of a process started in 2011, following protests against the Ali Abdullah Saleh government, leading him to resign in favor of 'Abd Rabbih Mansur Hadi, a personality close to Saudi Arabia. Here, the Kingdom, his Arab Coalition in Yemen, the GCC and the United States are on the side of the Hadi government, who since 2015 has found refuge in the interim capital of Aden, while Iran backs for the Shiite Houthi rebels, who are in control of the capital Sana'a, with a “political council” establishing its sovereignty over much of northern Yemen;

- the political instability of Iraq, a failed state since 2003, where the exclusion of Sunnis from access to power and oil resources, in the hands of Shiites and Kurds, has fostered growing protests in 2011 in the Sunni part of Iraq, leaving room for the emergence and strengthening of power on the territory of Islamic terrorist organizations. In this context, the five years of war against ISIS (2012-2017), although won, did not change the Iraqi status quo, but, if possible, made it worse, exacerbating the resentment of Kurds and Shiites against Sunnis and Saudi Arabia and by strengthening the national role of the Shiite government of Baghdad, which is massively corrupt by Iran, which, however, is challenged by the formation of small terrorist cells, Baathist, Sunni, and Kurdish rebel groups;

- the never-ending fights of Lebanon, where, since 2009, the prime ministers have resigned and are elected for power games of Iran and Saudi Arabia, in the figures of Hezbollah and Sunni parties and in which in recent years huge protests have been taking place against the government due to unemployment, economic recession, and corruption, leading the previous prime minister Saad Hariri, supported by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, to resign in October 2019, leaving the floor to the current Lebanese premier Hassan Diab, having the majority of seats in Parliament thanks to the support of Hezbollah;

- the suspicions and resentments in the state of Bahrain\textsuperscript{80}, resulting from the brutal repression of the Sunni Emir al-Khalifa on 16\textsuperscript{th} March 2011, with the help of the Peninsula Shield Force, the GCC army, against protesters calling for democratic reforms, which had gathered in the capital Manama, at the Pearl Roundabout, a site which was then destroyed two days later, to remove a symbol around which the dissidents could regroup. From that moment, the population, made up of 70-75\% of Shiites, and especially the militias in the area have begun to look favorably on Iran, giving Ayatollah a significant influence in a country of the Gulf Cooperation Council.


\textsuperscript{80} Mabon, S. (2012). \textit{The Battle for Bahrain: Iranian-Saudi Rivalry}. Middle East Policy, 19(2), 84

https://mepc.org/battle-bahrain-iranian-saudi-rivalry
Taken individually, these clashes, to which it is necessary to add the diplomatic crisis between the GCC and Qatar in 2017, represent the fate of the different actors involved; but considered all together, the picture that emerges is that of a chronic instability widespread throughout the Middle East, in which the Kingdom and the Islamic Republic if they are not the first architects, are certainly the promoters.

The first ingredients of political instability in the Middle East are thus the proxy wars that Iran and Saudi Arabia are carrying out for the project of regional hegemony; however, since the rise to the throne of King Salman in 2015, Tehran and Riyadh, in addition to fighting the wars of others, began to have sporadic incidents among them, making their relationship even fierier and triggering tensions higher than in the period 1979-1988.

In April 2015, the first event of a new wave of high tensions between the KSA and IRI was the sexual harassments of two Iranian teenagers by the Saudi police at the Jeddah International Airport, with the consequent protests outside the Saudi Embassy in Tehran, where 300 people clashed with the police of the Mission. Then, on the 24th September, the most serious incident of a pilgrimage occurred, with 717 deaths (most of whom were Iranian) and more than 900 injured by a mob that formed in Mina, 5 kilometers from Mecca; the following accusations of incompetence from Tehran perspective and the counter-accusations of pilgrims non-compliance with the safety rules from Riyadh view led the Islamic Republic to suspend pilgrimages to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The events of the following years even worsen the situation: on the 2nd January 2016, Saudi Arabia executed 47 political prisoners, including the Shiite exponent Nimr Baqir al-Nimr. In retaliation, some people gathered at the Saudi Embassy in Tehran, trying to set it on fire, before being arrested by the police. These events have led to the cut off of the diplomatic relations of the two countries that last since then.

In 2017, in the wake of the execution of Nimr Baqir al-Nimr, KSA security forces besieged al-Qatif, a Shiite majority city in Saudi Arabia and the home of its executed member, bombing neighborhoods, killing many civilians and destroying numerous historical sites. The following month, Iran announced that the Saudi coast guard had killed an Iranian fisherman and captured three other Persian citizens, who, according to the Saudis, were planning a terrorist attack on a Kingdom oil field.

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In November, then, the Royal Saudi Air Defense intercepted a ballistic missile that would hit Riyadh Airport; the Saudis claimed to have evidence that the missile would depart from the Houthi territories in Yemen, but launched from Hezbollah and supplied by Iran. Immediately after, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman told the British Foreign Secretary of that time, Boris Johnson, that: "direct military aggression by the Iranian regime [...] may be considered an act of war against the Kingdom”.

The meaning of the statement was later exacerbated by a more famous and dangerous interview that the Saudi Kingdom's Crown Prince made on the 15th March 2018 for the American television station Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), in which he affirmed, speaking about Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, that: “He wants to create his own project in the Middle East very much like Hitler, who wanted to expand at the time [...] Many countries around the world and in Europe did not realize how dangerous Hitler was until what happened. I don’t want to see the same events happening in the Middle East”.

However, the same year, on the 2nd of October, the Saudi assassination of its citizen Jamal Khashoggi, a dissident against the government of Riyadh who lived in Turkey, who was killed inside the Saudi Embassy in Istanbul, massively changed the opinion of many international actors on the actual will of the Saudi House to modernize the Kingdom, worsening reputation.

Iran took advantage of the opportunity and Khamenei issued a statement in which he raised doubts about the American alibi: "I don't think that a country would give commit such a crime without the protection of America”.

The tensions between the KSA and IRI have grown so much in recent years that the term 2019-2020 Gulf crisis appeared in literature: in addition to some minor accidents that occurred throughout the summer between the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Iran in the Persian Gulf or the Strait of Oman, including attacks on oil-tankers and ships, and drones shot down, with all the repercussions and political declarations from both sides that followed; in September, the Houthi rebels, most probably supported by Tehran, launched from Yemen drone attacks on the largest oil processing plants in Saudi Arabia, at the Khurais and Abqaiq oil fields, stopping about half of the supplies from the country.

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This has led to an increase in retaliation for Iran by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and its American historical ally: throughout 2019 and the first months of 2020, there were attacks, incidents, killings, and raids against targets on both sides.

Notable mentions are the establishment of the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC), i.e. a group of countries, the United Kingdom, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Australia, the United Arab Emirates, Albania, all headed by the United States, whose founding purpose is to ensure security and order in the Gulf of Oman and the Persian Gulf; and the killing, among the others, of the Pasdaran leader Qasem Soleimani\textsuperscript{86} in a US airstrike at Baghdad International Airport on 3\textsuperscript{rd} January 2020, in response to the attack of the American Embassy in the Iraqi capital by some Shiite militias on 31\textsuperscript{st} December 2019.

In particular, this latter event has raised tensions to such a level that, on the 17\textsuperscript{th} January 2020, for the first time since 2012, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei\textsuperscript{87} made a sermon during Friday prayers in Tehran, launching against the “slave” allies of the United States, appealing to the Trump administration as "clowns", and emphasizing that the "real punishment" for the assassination of General Qasem Soleimani would have been the escape of the American military forces from the Middle Eastern region.

In addition to the proxy wars, therefore, another element responsible for the significant increase in the instability in the Middle East is the sporadic, but increasingly repeated and bloody direct military action involving both the Kingdom, reinvigorated by the closer alliance with Trump administration, and the Islamic Republic.

Finally, a third component of the regional chaos is the presence of terrorist organizations\textsuperscript{88} operating in the area, which creeps into instability and from time to time are more or less allies of this or that part: ISIS, who, although defeated on the territory, can reform quickly thanks to its proselytism and which operates mainly in Iraq, with some forays into Syria; the Lebanese political party of Hezbollah, considered by the West to be a terrorist organization, which is responsible for the clashes with Israel; Hamas, the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, whose goal is to destroy the King David country; and finally al-Nusra Front and al-Qaeda who fight to establish the sharia law in Syria.

\textsuperscript{86}“Qasem Soleimani: US kills top Iranian general in Baghdad airstrike”, <<BBC>>, 3\textsuperscript{rd} January 2020

\textsuperscript{87}“Iran’s supreme leader blasts U.S. ‘clowns’ in rare personal message amid a crisis”, <<CBS>>, 17\textsuperscript{th} January 2020

\textsuperscript{88}Sven Pöhle, “Islamist terror groups in Africa and Middle East”, <<Deutsche Welle>>, 26\textsuperscript{th} June 2014
The resulting panel is of widespread instability, in which decision-making power is in the hands of the political-religious elite, the economic resources shared with some close allies and where non-state actors have a greater influence on the Arab population.

Thus, shocked by the hegemonic aspirations of Iran and Saudi Arabia, shattered by continuous clashes in the regional hotspots, bloodied by the sectarian rivalry between Sunnis and Shiites and raped by the actions of the Islamic terrorist groups, the Middle Eastern region seems to go in a disastrous and irreparable direction.

What is the solution? The answer to this question can only be the total and complete union of interest of its two major countries, Iran and Saudi Arabia, trying to find a fruitful economic policy on oil for both, to create a system of all-encompassing alliances that can last over time and to clarify, once and for all, that they are both parts of the same faith: Islam.

The future of the Middle East is therefore uncertain: the two regional powers feed their rivalry, preventing any dialogue. If there will be a deep escalation between Riyadh and Tehran, the instability in which the region lives will turn into a bloody war, involving regional allies, armed groups and international actors, whose leaders will depend on the fate of the Arab world.
CONCLUSIONS

This study sought to answer the question "What consequences does the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia bring to the Middle East?". To this end, to understand the hegemonic nature of the confrontation, the different choices of the two regional actors in terms of foreign, economic and religious policies were analyzed, through the use of bibliographic sources and information from relevant research centers.

The answers provided in this thesis show that there is clear competition within the MENA area between Tehran and Riyadh, intending to extend their influence in a zero-sum term both in the regional civil conflicts (Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon) and in the folds of domestic politics of the most vulnerable state-actors (Bahrain, Qatar).

This result is consistent with the initial expectation done in the introduction, according to which the geopolitical clash of Saudi Arabia and Iran to conquer regional supremacy would have increased the chronic instability of the Middle East, already widespread due to the presence of various sectarianisms in the area.

Based on this premise, the political-religious differences within Islam before (Sunnism and Shiism, Salafism and Sufism) and between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran after (Wahhabism and Khomeinism) were also examined. In this context, this paper focused on the non-state actors, i.e. rebel groups, religious affiliations, militias, terrorist organizations, which, allies from time to time with Tehran or Riyadh, disrupt the Middle Eastern region with the use of force.

Furthermore, this study analyzes also the state alliances system of the two regional rivals, identifying the ever stronger presence of international players in the Middle East for geopolitical and economic interests, such as the United States, Russia, and China, with the European countries in the background.

In conclusion, it is important to underline that this thesis focused on the social imbalances of the Arab world, which manifested themselves in the Arab Springs and in the protests of recent years, called Arab Springs 2.0, where it exists a clash between the secularized young generations and the religious elite of archaic views.

The future of the Middle East will depend on the degree of relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which will have to decide whether to involve everyone in a bloody war or to build a dialogue based on economic profits, international prestige, and religious sharing.
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