

**T.C.  
SAKARYA UNIVERSITY  
INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL SCIENCE**

**SECTARIAN AND ETHNIC IDENTITY POLITICS  
AND CONFLICTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

**MASTER THESIS**

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**Department : International Relations**

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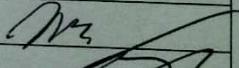
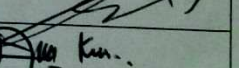
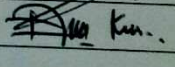
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## **DECLARATION**

I declare and guarantee that all data, knowledge and information in this document has been obtained, processed and presented in accordance with academic rules and ethical conduct. Based on these rules and conduct, I have fully cited and referenced all material and results that are not original to this work.

**Lan NGUYEN HOANG**

**14.07.2016**

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**Title of the Thesis:** Sectarian and Ethnic Identity Politics and Conflicts in the Middle East

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Identity is the special feature of conflicts in the contemporary Middle East. Sectarianism under the umbrella of the Saudi-Iran rivalry representing the politicization of Sunni and Shia Islam, which has influenced and even dictated proxy wars and civil conflicts in regional smaller states, from Iraq, Syria to Yemen and Bahrain, is widely defined as one form of mostly discussed identity conflicts today. The enduring Palestine – Israel conflict, which has been known as an integrated feature of the Middle East, started as a conflict of two peoples with distinct identities. Similarly, the Kurdish question characterizes ethnic identity politics and conflicts through the struggle of the largest people without a state in today's world map. In this context, this thesis is motivated by two main research questions: What role do ethnic and sectarian identities play in Middle East's politics and conflicts? And how ethnic and sectarian identity politics has been used in all political processes of regional wars?

A major part of literature on identity politics in Middle East's conflicts has either provided a comprehensive and descriptive account of Middle East history as well as current conditions with ethnic and sectarian identities as roots and origins of regional instabilities, or focused mainly on the manipulation of identity politics by actors in their struggles for power. Synthesizing the theories on identity politics already in existence, namely primordialism, instrumentalism, and social constructionalism, this research constructed an integrated theoretical model in which sectarian and ethnic identity - one essence intrinsic to Middle East's societies and constructed alongside regional history – is not only measured by its tremendous influences on political processes; but also compared in the usage of political actors of all levels in political practices. Applying this approach to the foregoing regional conflicts, the thesis is an effort to offer more insights into ethnic and sectarian politics and the covert political goals behind identity conflicts in the Middle East that have been heatedly debated as one of the most severe global problems.

**Keywords:** Identity Politics, Identity conflicts, Ethnic and Sectarian conflicts, the Middle East, Middle East's politics, Saudi Arabia- Iran rivalry, Palestine – Israel conflict, Kurdish questions.

**Tezin Başlığı:** Ortadoğu'da Etnik ve Mezhepçi Kimlik Politikaları ve Çalışmaları

**Tezin Yazarı:** Lan NGUYEN HOANG **Danışman:** Doç.Dr. Tuncay KARDAŞ

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Kimlik, günümüz Ortadoğu siyasetinde önemli bir role sahiptir. Irak, Suriye'den Yemen ve Bahreyn'e bölgesel daha küçük devletlerdeki veraset savaşları ve sivil çatışmalara dahi nüfuz eden, Sünni ve Şii İslam'ın siyasallaşmasının temsil ettiği Suudi -İran rekabetinin şemsiyesi altındaki mezhepçilik günümüzde çokça tartışılan kimlik çatışmalarının çok geniş bir biçimde tarif edilen bir biçimidir. Kimlik Çağdaş Ortadoğu'da çatışmaların özel bir özelliğidir. Etkiledi ve hatta dikte vekil savaşlar ve Yemen ve Bahreyn için Irak, Suriye bölgesel küçük devletlerin sivil çatışmalar, yaygın bir biçimi olarak tanımlanır Sünni ve Şii İslam'ın siyasallaşmasına temsil Suudi-İran rekabeti çatısı altında mezhepçilik çoğunlukla kimlik çatışmaları bugün görüştü. Ortadoğu denilince akla gelen uzayıp giden Filistin-İsrail çatışması, farklı kimliklere sahip iki halkın çatışması olarak başladı. Benzer biçimde Kürt sorunu da etnik kimlik politikaları ve çatışmaları olarak karakterize olmuştur.

Bu bağlamda, bu tez iki ana araştırma sorusu üzerinden harekete geçmiştir: Ortadoğu'da siyaset ve çatışmalarda etnik ve mezhepsel kimlikler ne rol oynamaktadır? ve etnik ve mezhepsel kimlik politikaları bölgedeki tüm savaşların siyasi süreçlerinde nasıl kullanılmaktadır? Ortadoğu'da çatışmalardaki kimlik politikaları üzerine yapılan literatürün büyük bir bölümü Ortadoğu tarihine kapsamlı ve açıklayıcı olması yanında, bölgesel istikrarsızlıkların kaynağında ve köklerindeki etnik ve mezhepsel kimliklerin olduğu mevcut koşulların üzerine veya ağırlıklı olarak güç mücadeleleri içinde aktörlerin kimlik politikalarını manipüle etmeleri üzerine odaklanmaktadır. Kimlik üzerine mevcut olan primordializm, araçsalcılık ve sosyal inşacılık olarak adlandırılan teorilerin bir sentezi olarak, bu çalışma mezhepsel ve etnik kimlik içinde - Ortadoğu toplumlarına ve bölgesel tarih boyunca kurulmuş içsel bir öz olarak - entegre bir teoritik model kurarak sadece politik süreçlerin üzerindeki muazzam etkisi ölçülemez, aynı zamanda politik uygulamalarda tüm düzeylerdeki siyasi aktörlerin kullanılmaları da karşılaştırılmıştır. Bu yaklaşım yukarıda sözü edilen bölgesel çatışmalara uygulanarak, bu tez uluslararası alanda etnik ve mezhepsel politikalar hakkında en hararetli tartışmalarından biri olarak Ortadoğu'da kimlik çatışmalarının arkasına sığındığı siyasi hedeflerin içyüzünü daha fazla anlayabilmek için bir çabadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Kimlik politikaları, kimlik çatışmaları, etnik ve mezhepsel çatışmaları, Ortadoğu politikaları, Suudi -İran rekabeti, Filistin-İsrail çatışması, Kürt sorunu.



## INTRODUCTION

### *Background*

The era of globalization has allowed local events and developments inside states to have extensive effects outside of conventional boundaries and even global consequences. In the case of Identity Politics, when identity-related conflicts arise and political identity is militarized and used for mobilization, there are chances that they may no longer be the story of domestic instability without regional and international implications. Indeed, besides the clash of interests between parties in those conflicts in which they use Identity Politics as a useful instrument, the special aspects of “identity” tension exacerbates the situations and even causes domino effect or contagion reaction. Middle East’s politics has proven this by providing representative sample of cases that are both extremely complicated and heatedly debated. The region – with a culture of extraordinary richness, a history of deep length and exceptional intricacy, a social map of byzantine complexity, and a present of tension, conflicts and wars – has become the source for the mainstream narratives of regional identity-related violence and instability with international-scale impacts. Contemporary global issues correlated with ethno-religious identities, including armed confrontation, nuclear deterrence, terrorism, civil wars and insurgency, the collapse of nations, displaced people and refugee crisis – issues that constituted a challenge to classical state-centric and rational perspectives in security studies and international relations – can all be witnessed in the Middle East. Accordingly, this thesis is an effort to examine Identity Politics in conflicts on the whole region of Middle East in all levels of analysis with political actors of all ranges, rather than in just a state or a case study, in order to embrace both its similarly-rooted usage and influences on local-scale events and the domestic, supranational, regional and international impacts.

The term Middle East was coined by the Europeans, specifically British. It does not have a clear boundary for the whole region while it implies a vast land with the maximum scope of definition comprises of the countries along the southern and eastern coastlines of the Mediterranean Sea, from Morocco to Turkey, plus Sudan, the countries of the Arabian Peninsula, Jordan, Iraq and Iran.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, it is worthwhile

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<sup>1</sup> ROBERTSON, David, “The Routledge Dictionary of Politics”, Routledge, London, 2004, pp.308-309.

to note that trying to understand the complexity of all Middle East's politics and conflicts in the tangled and constantly changing relations among groups and governments can be an impenetrable task. Similarly, to capture the full influences of Identity Politics on all of the perplexing and interlacing divisions and violent struggles in the Middle East is not possible for this thesis. To understand Identity Politics in regional conflicts, it first lays out the framework to organize actors, determinants, and levels of analysis, and then focuses on three important conflicts that have been most debated with regional impacts: The sectarian conflict, most notably in the name of Saudi Arabia - Iran rivalry, with its implications on national actors and domestic affairs, the reactions of regimes and intrastate actors in the countries that have been the battleground for the ostensibly sectarian-rooted conflicts including the ones that are on the verge of collapsing, as well as the influence and the use of Identity Politics in the emergence of inter-national jihadist and terrorist groups that gave birth in the huge vacuum of power created by the chaos in the weak and failing states; Palestinian and Arabs conflicts and Identity Politics from the carving out of Israel on Palestine to the violence that is still going on today which revolves around the issues of land, political rights and majority status within state as well as the people who lost their land and are losing their lives; and the issue of the Kurds - to whom the West promised a state- to get their desire extinguished and themselves becoming the minorities in different nations.

### ***Significance of the Topic and Thesis Question***

The literature on Ethnic and Sectarian Identities, Identity Politics in conflicts in the Middle East abounds with detailed and thorough case studies on specific political issues, on individual country or region, or on particular relations between certain actors. Many of the researches, however, either take Identity Politics for granted by arguing that ethnic and sectarian identities originated from ancient fissures that can not be mended; or focus solely on the instrumentalist and mercenary reasons behind the manipulation of Identity Politics for material interests. The aim of this thesis is to understand Identity Politics and its influences on rivalry and conflicts that are related to, or claimed to be correlated to ethnic and sectarian discords in the Middle Eastern region including the examination of its power and its usage for political actors of different levels from a regional perspective. Its focus is on politicized identities which

lie at the heart of three above-mentioned conflicts that are considered most noticeable with the most regional influences, with the confidence that this approach would provide the best framework to understand the Middle East's politics and struggles. By addressing the questions: 'how are identities constructed and politicized?', what role do ethnic and sectarian identities play in politics?, what social and economic issues that are inextricably intertwined with identity politics and identity conflicts? what is the relationship between Identity Politics and Interest Politics? and to what extent and how identities affect decision making, affiliation and mobilization processes, security and conflicts in Middle East conflicts?'; and then putting the theoretical output into the Middle East, the thesis aims to serve the further understanding by providing a lens for analysis of Identity Politics and Identity conflicts that are becoming more conspicuous in a region that has always born the strategic importance in world politics.

### ***Thesis methodology and design***

This thesis depends on qualitative methodology on the regional scope, with close attention to Identity Politics and conflicts under the theoretical framework of new security studies, as well as explanations under the view of constructivism. Data were collected based on an evaluation of primary and secondary sources, ranging from government documents, research paper, news articles, journal articles, to scholarly books. It also uses a variety of quantitative data, analyzing data sets on social and political, security and conflict trends.

The first chapter discusses the theoretical approach to Identity Politics in divisions and conflicts, from the philosophy of Identity to the approaches to this political phenomenon in the literature of Political Science and Security. It examines the issue of "Other", "Otherness", the relation between "us" and "them" and their role in the perception of groups and the formation of Identity Politics. The relationship between consciousness of identity and political processes, including self-government and interrelations, security and conflicts within international relation disciplines is a focus. Accordingly, Identity Politics is synchronized in the broader wheel of multilayered politics, in which conflicts and divisions are studied through different levels of lens,

taking into consideration political actors ranging from sub-state politicized identities to supranational, regional and international actors.

The second chapter paves the way to addressing the question on the salience of Identity Politics in Middle Eastern modern politics by specifying the sources of Ethnic and Sectarian Politics in the Middle East. While ethnic and sectarian Identity Politics refers to political strategies rather than political goals, it should be acknowledged that the richness of the regions not only in natural resources, but also in cultures and history play a significant role in the game of Identity Politics here. With the focus on the rivalry sectarianism of Sunnis and Shias, the Kurds, and the Jews, it lays out the politicization of these inherent identities by reviewing histories of difference and strife, comparing the identity and interest in the interaction and interrelations among these groups, especially in times of instability, and examining the background that significantly contributed to the mix between interest and identity in modern Middle Eastern Politics and conflicts. Under the certain socio-cultural background of the region, it analyzes the affiliation and mobilization based on or related to ethnic and sectarian identities to prove that Identity and Interest are two faces of the same coins of Politics that are closely connected and at times, one might be disguised as the other. At the same time, it looks at the interaction of actors within states and the foreign intervention into the states to understand its influence on Identity Politics and conflicts concerning identity differences.

Chapter three looks towards Identity Politics from a regional perspective. This chapter sets out a general view on the region as a collective object of analysis, and then goes deeper into the force within and outside these borders. The understanding of three thorny issues in the Middle East including Sunni-Shia rivalry, the conflict between Palestine, the Arab world and Israel, and the Kurdish question will provide the considerable understanding on not only regional Identity Politics, but also a cluster of other issues of different levels with various actors which are governed or influenced by Identity Politics. From the politicization of identities to interrelations and inter-reactions among groups and then among states for the sakes of ethnic and sectarian identities in response to the policies of weak regimes and the involvement of other international actors including non-governmental and trans-national actors to states

whose powers rank at the top of the world, to the strategies of Identity Politics using the card of ethnic and sectarian differences in order to hide political interests and goals, this chapter plays a crucial role in the thesis as it connects the determinants in the former chapters and put it in the regional whole reality of instability and conflicts. This chapter also seeks to delve into the layers within state actors – the battlegrounds for the conflicts of Identity Politics - with the intention to look further into Identity Politics in the unstable boundaries carved by the Western powers and the inter-identity and intra-identity conflicts followed.

## **CHAPTER 1: THEORETICAL APPROACH TO IDENTITY POLITICS IN DIVISIONS AND CONFLICTS**

Middle East represents the most interesting, most discussed, and at the same time, most perplexing cases of Identity Politics and Identity-related conflicts. In the Middle East the sacred sites to Muslims, Christians and Jews are located, and the two narratives of the peoples without their nations have been told: the Jews and now the Kurds. As much as the ethnic and religious diversity in the region is referred to as the mosaic of Middle East weaved in artificial states created by imperialist, ethnic and religious identities have always been intimately and uniquely intertwined in Middle Eastern politics. Authoritarian regimes, instability, violence, minority suppression, sectarian struggles, terrorism, mass killing, struggle over identities and differences alongside conflicts over control of oil-rich regions have become the specialities of the Middle East. In this region, 2015 alone witnessed a total of 71 conflicts, which accounted for almost a quarter of all highly violent conflicts worldwide. The region's six wars also made up nearly a third of all wars.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, it has always been widely considered that the association between ethnicity, religion and violence is even stronger: all of the Middle East's major religions – Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, have concepts of holy war. It also has always been largely viewed that that ethnic and sectarian identities of the Middle East and their relations with politics and conflicts are deeply embedded in its history; that the history of the land is transparent in the identities within, as the region looks towards the past to define and explain present situations and seek guidance for future developments. How many percent of the truth is represented in this major view that is dominating the media and the literature of international relations and politics analysis today on sectarianism and terrorism? Is that true that the view of the Cold War between Saudi Arabia and Iran as well as endemic ethnic and sectarian conflicts provides the best framework to understand the chaos in the Middle East today? Do sectarianism schism and the ancient divisions that were rooted deep in the inception of ethnic clans and religious groups and have been nurtured for hundreds of years explain the failing states and the seemingly never-ending violence in the region?

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<sup>2</sup> Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research, Conflict Barometer: 2015, <http://www.hiik.de/en/>.

The Middle East has witnessed the tensions among Arabs, Turks, Kurds, Barber, between the minority and the majority, and even inside majority, ethnic or religious communities. Many of the religious clashes are not Sunni-Shia but between “secular” and hardliners; largely between Muslims and Christians in Egypt, in Israel too there has been an increased racist rhetoric between Jews and Arabs. “This atomization of identity” is worse in weak states.<sup>3</sup> However, the view of Middle East politics through sectarianism, as identity differences-based hatred, violence and exclusion, be it religion, ethnicity, ideology is an oversimplified approach. The approach from Identity Politics provide a clearer picture of who are getting what and how much they are bargaining in the game of politics using differences.

The understanding of Identity Politics in divisions and conflicts in Middle East requires a firm theoretical framework – which maps the decisive determinants and diminish the influence of ostensible factors - while acknowledging that this brand of politics is only a momentum in the bigger wheel of politics; in order to untangle the complexity and define the core issues that may lie inside, under, or behind Identity Politics.

This chapter will focus on determining the theoretical approach to Identity Politics by examining the philosophy of and current approaches to Ethno-Sectarian Identities and their role in Political Science in order to formulate a balanced, objective, and valid analytical framework to the study of Identity-related crises, conflicts, and other political phenomena in the Middle East.

### **1.1. The Concept of Identity**

According to the level from individual to communal, “Identity” can mean the core aspect of selfhood; the interactive development of collective self-understanding or product of multiple and competing discourses of self; a collective group or category, and the instrumental means of social and political actions. It can be understood as the basis of individual or collective selfhood that is “deep, abiding, or foundational” which should be “valued, cultivated, supported, recognized, and preserved”. It can be understood as the fundamental sameness among groups’ members, a collective

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<sup>3</sup> DOYLE, Chris, “Mideast Identity Politics more than Sunni-Shia schism”, Financial Times, 2013, <https://next.ft.com/content/35252c78-f9ff-11e2-98e0-00144feabdc0>

phenomenon and a foundation for solidarity, shared dispositions or consciousness, or concerted actions. “Identity” can also be used as oppose to “interest” in the effort to highlight and conceptualize non-instrumental mode of social and political actions where individual or collection actions are governed by “particularistic self-understandings” rather than by “putatively universal self-interest”.<sup>4</sup>

The concept of Identity is indeed a complicated one. Thus, the understanding of Identity requires an examination constructed on three most fundamental points: its foundation and formation, its influence and utility, and its usage. The theoretical approaches to Identity Politics also rest on these core points, with the different level of concentration and the degree of variability on each point result in one different framework.

## **1.2. Approaches to Ethnic and Sectarian Identities in Political Science**

It is generally understood that ethnic identity of a group is constituted by specific traits including: a believed common descent with shared ancestry and common history memories; a shared culture in which language, religion, traditions and shared symbols are consider most important elements; and attachment to a particular territory.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, religion is one ascription of ethnic identity. However, the Middle East provides an example of multiple identities where sectarian identity, on one side, is a sub-identity that overlaps ethnic identity; thus on the other side, it has independent power - a tremendous power indeed - in controlling the chess board of Middle Eastern politics. Religion can serve as a foundation for defining ethnic identity, a factor for narrowing or separating ethnies into sub-groups, or as a unifying force for sustaining and enlarging ethnic boundaries and identities.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, in this thesis, religion and ethnicity are given equal weight as sources to constitute identities.

In the literature of International Relations and Security Studies, there are three basic theoretical approaches to identities and their role in social and political processes, especially in conflicts.

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<sup>4</sup> BRUBAKER, Rogers and COOPER, Frederick, “Beyond Identity”, *Theory and Society*, Vol: 29, No: 1, 2000, pp.7-8.

<sup>5</sup> SMITH, Anthony D., “The Ethic Origins of Nations”, Oxford: Blackwell, 1986, p.32

<sup>6</sup> ABRAMSON, Harold J., “Religion”, in THERNSTROM, Stephan, ORLOV, Ann, and HANDLIN, Oscar (eds), “*Havard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*”, Havard University Press, Cambridge, 1980, pp. 869-870



### 1.2.1 Primordialism

Scholars of this school assert that ethno-religious identities are “primordial”, implying that they are deeply rooted, and essentially unchangeable. They contend that certain “ties and connections” are “primordial” in the “human experience”, and they are a basic group identity that consists of the “ready-made set of endowments and identifications” that every individual receives at the moment of birth made available by the family and community into which he is born at that specific time in that given place.<sup>7</sup> Primordial bonds of lineage, cultural and religion ties are attachment that stems from the “givens” of social existence.<sup>8</sup> They are what give rise to and sustain ethno-religious identities. The corollary of this intrinsic quality of identity makes ethnic and sectarian boundaries fixed and immutable. As a result, identity conflicts based on ancient hatreds among groups of different ethnic and sectarian demarcations are nearly irreconcilable.

This perspective - that ethno-religious identities are presumed to be the origins of Middle East’s instabilities, conflicts and wars - has played a prominent part in the media nowadays. For example, tensions between Shia-Sunni forces, which have fed a Syrian civil war, incited violence in Iraq, and widened fissures in tense Gulf states, are viewed as part of an ancient religious struggle “for the soul of Islam – a great war of competing theologies and conceptions of sacred history – and a manifestation of the kind of tribal wars of ethnicities and identities [...]”<sup>9</sup> Or in the case of the Kurds, primordialists has referred to sources for their argument that Kurds belong to a distinct race, ranging from historical and archeological evidences that the Kurds’ ancestors are the Medes – an Indo-European tribe that descended from Central Asia onto the Iranian Plateau and extended their power throughout almost of the Middle East in the seventh century; and cultural evidences of their distinctive language and customs, to anthropological evidence which shows that the Kurds are a distinct nation with a history dating as far back as 60,000 years.<sup>10</sup> Similar manner in description was used at

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<sup>7</sup> ISAACS, Harold R., “Idols of the Tribe: Group Identity and Political Change”, Harper and Row, New York and San Francisco, 1975, pp.36-39

<sup>8</sup> GEERTZ, Clifford, “The Interpretation of Cultures”, Basic Books, New York, 1973, p.259

<sup>9</sup> NASR, Vali, “The Shia revival: How conflicts within Islam will Shape the Future”, W.W. Norton & Company: New York, 2007, p.20.

<sup>10</sup> GALIP, Ozlem Belcim, “Imagining Kurdistan: Identity, Culture and Society”, I.B. Taurus, New York, 2015, pp.14-17.

the beginning of the conflict between Jews and Palestinians: The partition of Palestine was based on the irrepressible conflict between Arabs and Jews who belonged to two different ethnic groups with different religions and languages, mismatched conduct of cultural and social life, distinctive ways of thought and conduct and incompatible national aspirations.<sup>11</sup> For that reason, prospects of conciliation of conflicts rooted in primordial, fixed and unchanging identity issues are considered bleak and strategies for resolution are regarded unattainable.

As ethno-sectarian identities are assumed to be primary and natural, this approach tends to overlook the larger historical and structural conditions that construct and reinforce or deconstruct and undermine ethnic loyalties, and neglects the economic and political interests closely associated with identity sentiment. For example, by interpreting the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia as struggle driven by sectarian schism, this approach disregards the multiple cross-cutting divisions, alliances and overlapping identities within the so-called Sunni and Shia camps. Consequently, it fails to explain the alliance between Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran and Syria, and the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Qatar. The Alawite-Shia sectarian kinship is a weak factor to define Iran's affinity with Assad regime without the geo-strategic interests and a common position of Israel that bonds two regimes.<sup>12</sup> This approach also fails to explain why culturally similar or identical groups fight (as in the case of tension caused by mistrust and rivalry between the Iraqi Kurds and the following conflict in Iraq from 1994-1997 between the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriot Union of Kurdistan), while culturally different groups cooperate. Another fundamental weakness is caused by the negligence of the multiple identities that either belong to subgroups of larger groups, or are overlapping, and hence it does not examine why and under what condition people pick one identity over others, or account for why some identities disappear while new ones emerge.<sup>13</sup> Generally, although this approach is still maintained by some academics, many practitioners and top policy makers

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<sup>11</sup> PAPPE, Ilan,, "The Making of the Arab-Israeli Conflict: 1947-1951", I.B. Taurus, London and New York, 2006, pp.30-31.

<sup>12</sup> MALMVIG, Helle, ""Coming in from the Cold: How we may take sectarian Identity Politics seriously in the Middle East without playing to the tunes of Regional Power Elites", POMEPS, "Islam in a Changing Middle East", p.10

<sup>13</sup> SPITKA, Timea, "International Intervention, Identity and Conflict Transformation: Bridges and Walls between Groups", Routledge Studies in Peace and Conflict Resolution, Taylor & Francis Group, Oxon and New York, 2016, p.14.

especially in influencing the type of intervention in conflicts, scholars favor other approaches that view identities in a more flexible and dynamic manners.

### **1.2.2. Instrumentalism**

The instrumentalists notice the shift in people's choices for ethnic groups and religious identification and the use of ethno-sectarian identities as strategic tool for gaining advantages and resources. In short, these identities are goal-oriented; they change when there are comparative advantages attached with the new ones<sup>14</sup>, and thus they persist only when they are useful instruments for people in the group to yield significant benefits and a valuable means of political mobilization for advancing group interest. As a result, ethno-sectarian identities are superficial political construct which are open and susceptible to manipulation and exploitation by political actors to acquire power domestically or gain allies for their game of power balance regionally and globally. Elites and counter-elites are constrained by mass cultures and ethnic or religious institutions and they rally their group in pursuit of a particular common goal. However, the leaders of ethnic or sectarian movements can invariably select from the deeply-felt traditional cultures the aspects that might be useful for their defined interests while disguise them behind the group interests.<sup>15</sup> In other words, instrumentalism sees material power and interests as the driving force that moves the direction ethnic and sectarian identity affiliation. Specifically, "rational choice theory" suggests that in order to attain goals of wealth, prestige and power, an ethnic or sectarian group can project itself to its members using the achievement of such goals as the mechanisms. In the process, it can motivate or discourage participation in a collective undertaking through a scheme or rewards and punishments based on the aforementioned individual goals of wealth, prestige and power. On the other hand, the group can control the flow of information or even fabricate explanations to maneuver for influence in member's particular decisions or actions.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> KREIDI, Lina Haddad and MONROE, Kristen Renwich, "Psychological Boundaries and Ethnic Conflict: How Identity Constrained Choice and Worked to Turn Ordinary People into Perpetrators of Ethnic Violence during the Lebanese Civil War", *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, Vol: 16, No: 1, Fall 2002, p.26.

<sup>15</sup> BRASS, Paul R., "Elite Competition and Nation-Formation", in HUTCHINSON, John and SMITH, Anthony D. (eds.), "Nationalism", Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1994, p.87

<sup>16</sup> MICHEAL, Hechter, "Ethnicity and Rational Choice", in HUTCHINSON, John and SMITH, Anthony D. (eds.), "Ethnicity", Oxford University Press, 1986, pp.90-98

Instrumentalist observers of the Middle East's politics have accused governments of causing all the chaos and turmoil and devastation in their pursuits of ruling-class interests. They point to the cases where governments use sectarianism, ethnic and religious animosity to brand all opposition of authoritarian rule as violent extremists so that they can control and defeat these revolutionary movements: In Syria, it is the attempt to convince Alawites, Christians and Druze that Sunni rebellion is led by extremist jihadis who are willing to persecute minorities atrociously in order to mobilize on the basis of anti-Sunni sectarianism.<sup>17</sup> In Egypt, the military government incited sectarian hatred of Christians and gave a free rein to Saudi-aligned Salafi groups after 2011, and then claimed itself as the protector against Muslim Brotherhood – which has been branded as terrorist group since 2012.<sup>18</sup> On the a regional level, instrumentalists perceive that the current upsurge in Sunni-Shia sectarianism is the product of a power game between Saudi Arabia and Iran played on the battleground of other weak Arab states and non-state actors, which not only serve their geopolitical rivalry through promoting their clients in these weak states domestic struggles and thus enhancing regional influence, but also dampen domestic opposition in both.

The major shortcoming of this approach lies in its core presumption that ethnic and sectarian is merely another expression of continuous universal power struggles. Since identity is perceived as just another ideology cynically used by power-holders, this school is less-equipped to rationalize the prominence and effectiveness of identity politics in the region in contemporary politics. Besides, while instrumentalists pay insufficient attention to identity formation and the meaning behind the claims and commitments of ethnic and religious affiliation, they omit to include the notion of symbolic identities, in which ethnic and religious option is non-rational, nonmaterial-

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<sup>17</sup> STOLLEIS, Friederike, "Discourses on Sectarianism and "Minorities" in Syria", in STOLLEIS, Friederike (ed.), "Playing the Sectarian Card: Identities and Affiliations of Local Communities in Syria", Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2015, pp.9-10.

<sup>18</sup> TADROS, Mariz, "Sectarianism and Its Discontents in Post-Mubarak Egypt", Middle East Research and Information Project, Washington, <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer259/sectarianism-its-discontents-post-mubarak-egypt>

driven, and psychologically satisfactory in emotional fulfillment, social attachment, or recreational pleasure.<sup>19</sup>

### **1.2.3. Social Constructionalism**

This school pinpoints the centrality of social construction in identity formation and retention and highlights the historical and structural forces that create and sustain identity. Constructionalists state that ethno-sectarian identities are not primordial, and prejudice and discrimination are not based on the natural inter-group antagonism; they are originated from customs constructed from “invented traditions”, or “myth-symbol complex”<sup>20</sup> which establishes the “accepted” history of the group and the criteria for distinguishing who is a member; identifies heroes and enemies; and glorifies symbols of the group’s identity.<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, identification and identity affiliation are determined or constructed and reconstructed by society (both by internal forces, actions taken by groups themselves such as negotiation, redefinition and reconstruction of ethnic and sectarian boundaries, and external forces including the social, economic, and political processes and outsiders). They are flexible and changeable in relational processes, and they enable either collective transformation to a larger-scale unity or alienated dissociation. For example, the gradual weakening of governments, state army and police force, and institutions that provide protection and ensure stability creates the conditions of possibilities for ethnic and sectarian tension. When a state and its institutions succumb to instabilities, invasion or sanctions, and the grip of central control is loosened; its citizens turn to grouping, militia or identity to get the best chances of survival.<sup>22</sup> They “reflexively grasp at ethnic or national identifications or what passes for them”<sup>23</sup>.

In short, social constructionalism emphasizes the social construction of identity-related phenomenon in politics which does not view all ethnic and sectarian expressions, as well as all purported political goals, as in some way opportunistic; hence the divergence from the claim of instrumentalism that identity politics is shaped

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<sup>19</sup> YANG, Philip Q, “Ethnic Studies: Issues and Approaches”, State University of New York Press, 2000, p.47

<sup>20</sup> HADDAD, Fanar, “Sectarianism in Iraq, Antagonistic Visions of Unity”, C.Hurts & Co., London, 2011.

<sup>21</sup> KAUFMAN, Stuart J., “Ethnic Conflict”, in WILLIAM, Paul D., “Security Studies: an Introduction”, Routledge, New York, 2008, p.203.

<sup>22</sup> TALENTINO, Andrea Kathryn, “The Two Faces of Nation-Building: Developing Function and Identity”, Cambridge Review of International Affairs, vol: 17, no: 3, 2004, p.569

<sup>23</sup> RULE, James B., “Tribalism and the State”, Dissent, Fall 1992, p.519.

solely by the rational-choice behavior and decisions of egoist actors based on their utilitarian calculations to maximize their interests and minimize their losses.

This school better explains the volatility of ethno-sectarian identities than primordialism. However, its insufficient consideration of the inherited nature of identities as well as the political and economic interests in the construction of identity leads to the presumption that ethnic and sectarian identities are just tools for self-preservation and a form of passive undercurrent available to sub-state elites when state structures collapse.

#### **1.2.4. An integrated Approach**

The brief examination of three current strands on ethno-sectarian identities reveals both the validity and limitations of their arguments. Therefore, an integration of valuable insights would provide a better theoretical framework for ethnic and sectarian identities in politics.

The first point that all study must assent to is that ethno-sectarian identities are partly based on ancestral origins and cultural characteristics, hence they are partly ascribed. Consequently, ancestry, cultural inheritance, and customs (that are generally accepted by communities), along with group-interest, the larger economic, political and social structures (that underlie the social construction of ethno-sectarian identities) make these identities relatively stable. However, although certain traits such as physical features, social origin, native language, religion are not easily modifiable; identities boundaries are not immutable and identity preference and affiliation are not immune to change, acquisition and transformation, especially group identities that are based on shared values, beliefs, perceptions and concerns.<sup>24</sup> Because the costs and benefits associated with ethnic and sectarian groups' membership relatively determined ethnic affiliation or identification, social structural conditions can be the catalysts or stimuli of ethnic and sectarian consciousness and identity. An example to illustrate this second point is that government recognition or designation can not only promote a majority's self-consciousness and organization but also increase identification and

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<sup>24</sup> KRIESBERG, Louis, "Identity Issues", in BURGESS, Guy and BURGESS, Heidi, (Eds.), "Beyond Intractability", Conflict Information Consortium, University of Colorado, Boulder, Posted July 2003, <http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/identity-issues>

mobilization among minority groups not officially recognized. Or ethnic and sectarian identities can be enhanced by competition for economic and political resources, in cases where the successful pursuit of political positions by prominent ethnic or sectarian candidates can increase group member's pride, interest and power.

This leads to the second point, which is cognizant of the role of self-interest in ethnic and sectarian options. Facing multiple identity choices with the additional option of change, the costs and benefits of ethnic and sectarian affiliation and the calculation of gains and losses play a pivotal role in people's decision to choose or avoid an association with an identity group. It should also be noted that considerations of benefits and costs of ethnic and sectarian affiliation can be either rational or non-rational, i.e. an ethnic or religious group membership can furnish people with material advantages, or provide them with symbolic grants such as psychological satisfaction.<sup>25</sup>

The third thesis of this approach is framed on the utilization in practice of ethnic and sectarian identities by political actors in the pursuit of power to achieve their political interests. In this case, identities are either skillfully selected or promoted according to its effectiveness in realizing political goals or directly manipulated in various political processes according to their influences on specific political communities where political actors wish to gain power.

This combined approach to ethnic and sectarian identities is the foundation for the understanding of Identity Politics and the backbone for theoretical framework of Identity Politics in the Middle East.

### **1.3. Identity Politics in Political processes**

#### **1.3.2. The philosophy of "Other" and Identity Politics in Self-government and Interrelations**

Because the ongoing enterprise of self-construction, self-definition and self-presentation are always the foundation for any form of self-government and hence interrelations, any politics -to a certain extent - is identity politics which involves making comparisons and choices among values and interest as well as giving

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<sup>25</sup> NAGEL, Joane, "Constructing ethnicity: Creating and Recreating ethnic Identity and Culture", *Social Problems*, No: 41, p.163

commitments to and interacting with individuals, ingroup community, and other groups to identify the ourselves. The philosophy of Identity in the in groups' nature, perception, and actions, as well as relations among groups has widely and consistently been attached to the creation of "others" in social and political science. Accordingly, this perception of the self in relation with the "other" has deeply influence both self-government and interrelations among social and political actors.

From the 18th century, the efforts by Western European governments to promote domestic cohesion and development by means of foreign conflict gave rise to the conceptualization of the "us" and "others" binary. Immanuel Kant theorized that warfare drove people apart; but the threatening "others" and the need to defend themselves were the foundation of state development, as the struggles against "others" compelled people to form communities, establish social structures, and submit to the rule of law. He contended that domestic order is maintained by conflict among societies. The essential unity of the state does not rest on its anterior cultural, linguistic or religious identity, but in the allegiance to a common authority or common defense.<sup>26</sup> Friedrich Hegel considered conflicts among states as developments for each nation to become aware of itself by encouraging self-knowledge and self-recognition among citizens.<sup>27</sup> Alexander Wendt, drawing on the philosophical views of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Immanuel Kant, termed three cultures of international politics which are defined by explicit reference to their primary assumption about other states' identities: enmity, rivalry, or friendship, which decides or Hobbesian, Lockean, or Kantian cultures, respectively. According to his viewpoint, most theories of international relations made a dual progression along these axes: Structural realism combined highly pessimistic, zero-sum assumptions about the structure of international politics with very limited assumptions about internalization; structural liberalism acknowledged the possibility of cooperation but also expects rivalry by asserting that states, analogous to firms, compete for advantages for their citizens but

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<sup>26</sup> KANT, Immanuel, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose", in REISS, Hans (ed.), "Kant: Political Writings", Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp.41-53

<sup>27</sup> Hegel, G. W. Friedrich, "The German Constitution", in DICKEY, Laurence and NISBET, H.B., (eds.), "Political Writings", Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, pp.6-101.



also share an interest in “internalizing” international cooperative system of property rights, international regimes, laws, etc. to provide public benefits on a global scale.<sup>28</sup>

In such ways, identity politics in social and political processes has even been largely ascribed to the demonization of this “others”. Ingroup solidarity and outgroup hostility, or groups’ inclusion and exclusion have been considered the flip sides of the same coin.<sup>29</sup> The structural-functional perspective on ethnocentrism and stereotypy contends that pride, loyalty and feelings of group’s superiority interfaces with contempt, hatred and hostility toward other groups. The struggle for scarce resources in group formation was at the root of hostility and violence toward competing groups. Social identity theory suggests that in social processes, group identities buffer anxiety and enhance self-esteem as individuals share the reflected glory of groups’ achievements. This group identification leads to bias in favor of groups’ members and prejudice against those outside of groups’ boundaries.<sup>30</sup> The a priori assumption is that low-status groups have two options, either to take collective actions intended to improve the standing of the group, or to defect to another group with a higher standing. This preference to boost groups’ standings and the strategies to realize this aspiration are seen not only in individuals but also in state actors. Simultaneously, the bond between self-esteem, and groups’ standing and identification is entangled with other group and contextual variables, which makes the choice of identity sustenance strategies extremely sensitive to context. More often than not, this strand of understanding propounds that the interactions and interrelations with others is the basis for the formation of identities.<sup>31</sup>

On the other hand, there is also a strand of thought which suggests that group attachment does not require hostility for other groups, and group identities were developed before any conceptions of outgroups. Toward outgroups, ingroup solidarity and identification are compatible with both positive and negative affects depending on

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<sup>28</sup> WENDT, Alexander, “Social Theory of International Politics”, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, pp.1-35

<sup>29</sup> BREWER, Marilyn B., “The Psychology of Prejudice: Ingroup Love or Outgroup Hate?”, *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol: 55, No: 3, 1999, pp. 429-444.

<sup>30</sup> BROWN, Rupert, “Social Identity Theory: Past Achievements, Current Problems and Future Challenges”, *European Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol: 30, No: 6, November 2000, pp.745-778

<sup>31</sup> HUDDIE, Leonie, “From Social to Political Identity: A Critical Examination of Social Identity Theory”, *Political Psychology*, No: 22, 2002, pp.127-156.

the circumstances. Moreover, the boundaries which decide the members and the foreigners of groups are flexible: ingroup identification can be more or less inclusive on different conditions. Bias inside groups and hostility toward other groups are more closely associated with preferential treatment of groups' members than it is with discrimination or violence against outgroups. Accordingly, discrimination and exclusion do not require ingroup loyalty, or even negative stereotypes of outgroups. Sherif Muzafer theorized that "transcendent" identities might actually diminish hostility because they provide the base for common identity and empathy among groups.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, when a group becomes larger and more impersonal, its institutions, rules and customs that maintain loyalty and cooperation inside the group tend to embark on the character of moral authority. When outgroups do not adhere to the same rules and customs are no longer viewed as indifferent, but with contempt and hostility. In addition, groups strive for positive distinctiveness by their members because their peculiarities on dimensions that matter to them and the feelings of superiority can help them to tolerate and even acknowledge the superiority of other groups in other domains. This becomes the motivation for the search of positive distinctiveness. The higher status associated with this distinctiveness, the more competitive this meaningful and useful search among groups become. The process, however, can be intensified or dampened by leaders, depending on their political aims, whether to exploit or buffer the hostile feelings.<sup>33</sup>

### **1.3.2. Identity Politics in Security and Conflicts**

All too often, the discussion of Identity Politics is attached to discourse on world conflicts; as claims to absolute identity are seen as sources of exclusion and violence, awareness of difference is considered as leading not to unity but destruction, and the transformation of inescapable difference into the oppositional category of Otherness is regarded as the condition for violence to arise. So in what way this identity politics, which is a core part of politics, become pathological in the sense that it is utilized to stifle and smother rather than to animate and enable democratic politics? According to Richard Parker, there are three paths to the extreme end of identity politics: First is the

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<sup>32</sup> SHERIF, Muzafer and SHERIF, Carolyn W., "Groups in Harmony and Tension: an Integration of Studies on Inter-group Relations", Harper, New York, 1953, p.44

<sup>33</sup> LEBOW, Richard Ned, "Identity and International Relations", *International Relations*, Vol: 22, No: 1, 2008, p.479.

tendency of “essentialism”, which is not only reflected in the stereotypes that individuals belonging to a specific group (be it racial or religious) are essentially the same and share the same identity in myriad other respects; but also embedded in practice where elites seek to establish and maintain positions as “spoke men” or “advocates for” one or another “affinity group”. Second is the tendency for “demonization”, in which healthy grievance against “others” turns to consuming blame and then to taken-for-granted prejudice. This may begin as a useful weapon in political struggle but may turn into barriers to open political engagement. The third pathology is the “victimhood syndrome”, which arises when blame and prejudice against wrongdoers induce a conviction of impotence and become a central part of a group’s identity, and becomes extreme when the tendency of “victim talk” undermines self-responsibility and manipulates support.<sup>34</sup>

As a result, identity politics can be maneuvered along the construction and maintenance lines based on mythologies which give rise to emotionally-laden symbols that politicians can employ to rouse their followers’ feelings, to manipulate the emotions of their audiences, to gain support, to mobilize forces and alliances, and to gain the best interests. As it is generally understood that ethnic and sectarian identities are built on myths that define who is a group member, what it means to be a group member, and typically, who the group’s enemies are; these myths which are often based on truth can also become selective or exaggerated in their presentation of history. For example, Israeli politician’s references to the Holocaust and anti-Semitism sentiment can be described as the “chosen traumas” where real events became mythologies that formed the morally defining experiences and the symbolic and psychological identification of Jewish people.<sup>35</sup>

On the other hand, identity politics can become the politics of “minority”, where ethnic and sectarian identification of individuals in “minority” groups is not recognized by majority coalition and consequently, is bound to be ignored or abused by the majority. In the process of minority identity formation, the victimization of the

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<sup>34</sup> PARKER, Richard D., “Five theses on Identity Politics”, *Harvard Journal of Law & Public Policy*, Vol: 29, No: 1, pp.53-54

<sup>35</sup> VOLKAN, Vamik D., “Chosen Trauma, The Political Ideology of Entitlement and Violence”, 2004 <http://vamikvolkan.com/Chosen-Trauma,-the-Political-Ideology-of-Entitlement-and-Violence.php>

minority and the demonization of the majority can become the sources and the tools for either mobilization or suppression. This process may be useful in struggles for equality, but it may also result in the extreme destruction of majority rule, political equality and popular sovereignty where political elites take up the cause and manipulate minority identity politics under the cards of democratic political freedom to serve their political purposes.

In conclusion, the security problems arise when communities of certain identities are manipulated into the pathology of “essentialism”, “demonization”, “victimization”, or exclusivist oppositions, with the worst outcomes of collapsed political institutions and states, or violent conflicts and wars among countries.

#### **1.4. Multilayered Identity Politics in Divisions and Conflicts**

It is important to note that the theorization of the analysis objects, including groups and states, not just an assumption of their existence, is important in understanding their identities and Identity Politics. Besides, just as it is important to examine individual identities through his natural characteristics as well as the backgrounds of his family and his community, political actors should be analyzed through their integrated traits and components while putting them in the bigger social and political pictures: sub-state actors in states and states in international system, taking into account the intersection of regional and global forces with the domestic politics and histories of individual countries.

##### **1.4.1. Socio-cultural domestic conditions and the politicization of sub-state identities**

In specific historical periods, society may offer materials for multiple social divisions – including ethnic and sectarian differences – to become issues of contention. Indeed, the three distinctive states of ethnic and sectarian identities based on the level of oscillations are portrayed as “aggressive”, “passive” and “banal”. When people are exposed to material and ideational insecurity and their group struggles for survival, competition for scarce resources and the aggressive assertion of competing identity claims are likely to move any group’s collective sense of itself from banal or passive to the violently assertive.<sup>36</sup> Ergo political mobilization that is built on ethnic and

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<sup>36</sup> HADDAD, “Sectarianism in Iraq, Antagonistic Visions of Unity”, p.11.

sectarian identities do not operate wholly rational, instrumental, or even fully conscious basis.

However, not all of those social cleavages are translated into political divisions or violent actions. To transform sub-state identities into political identities requires the presence of a certain type of sub-state political elites who would supply what a wider community needs, a degree of stability, ideational certainty, and political mobilization to mobilize non-political actors for politically relevant actions and thus their participation in politics. Then they can legitimize their role in terms of a communalistic identity in the struggle for support and political power. The artfulness of ethnic and sectarian politics in contemporary developed world “lies precisely in its ability to combine emotional sustenance with calculated strategy”.<sup>37</sup> When the sub-state political elites politicize ethnic and sectarian divisions by resorting to the rhetoric of mobilization based on claims of superiority, exclusion, and intolerance, and when identity politics are accompanied by claims of collective exclusivity, xenophobia, and intolerance – in short, by “demonization” - it raises the potential for violence against individuals identified by characteristics of the excluded groups.<sup>38</sup> In the most extreme forms, it fuels and increases the chance of conflict escalation into repression and violence.

However, identity politics is not necessarily end in violence. Identity politics often develop in response to similar practices by other groups because the repression of a particular group based on intrinsic identities requires organizing politically on the basis of those identities, in an effort to secure rights in the political process. If these reactive groups are convinced that the political institutions governing them will protect those rights, violence might be avoided. But if these institutions are nonexistent or weak, the probability of escalation to violence is significant.<sup>39</sup>

In short, the socio-cultural domestic conditions and the politicization of sub-state identities are essential to understand why political entrepreneurs choose to practice

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<sup>37</sup> ROTHCHILD, Joseph, “Ethnipolitics: A Conceptual Framework”, Columbia University Press, New York, 1981, p.61.

<sup>38</sup> BRASS, Paul R., “Ethnicity and Nationality Formation”, *Ethnicity*, Vol: 3, No: 3, September 1976, pp.225-239.

<sup>39</sup> CRAWFORD, Beverly and LIPSCHUTZ, Ronnie D., “Discourses of War”, in KRAUS, Keith and WILLIAMS, Micheal C., “Critical Security Studies”, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1997, pp.168-169.

Identity Politics rather than interest-based Politics, the tendency of development of Identity Politics at state level and when the inclination to violence occurs, as well as the possibilities of outcomes once identity-related tensions arise.

#### **1.4.2. State capacity and State identity**

Taking into consideration the issue on domestic level, the coherence of a state relies on its ability of domination and coercion to impose order on the population, to monopolize deployment of collective violence across the whole of its territory, and to carry out its will despite resistance. However, once a state has obtained the ability to impose and guarantee order, the basis of its sustainability and legitimacy moves to the power of domination by consent, which lies on its capacity to provide and maintain infrastructure, delivering services the population benefits from – including security, education, health, economic opportunity, environmental surveillance, making and enforcing an institutional framework, etc. - as it operates across society unopposed. The degree to which a state has reached this ideal type can be judged firstly by the ability of its institutions to impose and guarantee the rule of law, then to penetrate society, mobilize the population, and finally regularly extract resources in the form of taxation. Ultimately, the stability of the state depends on the extent to which its actions are judged to be legitimate in the eyes of the majority of its citizens, and the ability of its ruling elite to foster consent.

In domestically weak states, citizens might have political loyalties that supersede their loyalty to the state itself which can be ethnic or sectarian, can stay on the sub-national or supranational levels, or can be related to regional or international forces. When they are politicized and turned to opposition, “financially, organizationally and politically weak central governments render insurgency more feasible and attractive due to feeble local policing or inept and corrupt counterinsurgency practices”.<sup>40</sup> This can be simply illustrated the Third World which suffered instability rooted from weak state structures emerging from the process of decolonization during the Cold War period. As state structures lacked a close fit between the state’s territorial dimensions and its ethnic and societal composition, they lacked a “capacity to ensure the habitual identifications of their inhabitants with the post-colonial structures that have emerged

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<sup>40</sup> FEARON, James D., and LAITIN, David D., “Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War”, paper presented at the Annual Meetings of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, 2001, p.3

within colonially-dictated boundaries”. The most common outcome of this was conflicts about national identity, including separatist insurgencies which climaxed in the 1960s.<sup>41</sup> When the state institutions that protect the rights of sub-state identity communities groups are weak or worse, nonexistent, the prospect of violence turns high.

It is equally as important to take into account a number of regimes who try to inculcate their publics with state-centric nationalism based on state identity. These nationalist projects are expedient and useful for state political elites and actors who are closely affiliated with the regimes to realize various ambitions including coercing their political wills, ensuring their continued and exclusive access to political power, rallying constituents, or deflecting criticism over their failings in state governance. In the implementation of these projects, they might paint the reformist opposition as explicitly based on ethnic and sectarian claims.

### **1.4.3. Regional and International involvement**

State strength or weakness in the domestic political affairs and its international power ranking are two different indicators. The first is manifested when central government is unable or have to struggle to exercises control over its society, to enforce its writ in parts of its territory, to enforce decisions, to provide basic services to its citizens and to control its borders. The second is assessed by multiple indicators, including not only the solid realms of natural resources, economic development and performance, military capability; but also soft power – which is directly linked to a state identity, its perception and the recognition of international communities about its role on regional or global level, and its actions to construct or maintain certain images about its role – which are dominantly realized by its central government. It is generally witnessed that without the firm and solid institutions to generate domestic stability, the higher regional and international ranking a state enjoys - especially in natural resources – the higher the temptation of others to meddle with it becomes.<sup>42</sup> Because a state is a collection of sub-state identities, and the state identity usually is the reflection of the

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<sup>41</sup> AYOOB, Mohammed, “Regional Security and the Third World”, in AYOOB, Mohammed (ed.), “Regional Security in the Third World”, Croom Helm, London, 1986, pp.9-10.

<sup>42</sup> JOHN, Johnathan Di, “Conceptualising the Causes and Consequences of Failed States: A critical Review of the Literature”, Development as State-Making, Crisis States Research Center Working paper No.25, 2008, pp.3-5

majority, a state identity and its sub-state identities, or even a region with multiple identities, might fall prey to the dissolution strategy to break down groups through the spread of ethnic and sectarian strife, which is viewed by scholars and observers as the modern version of the divide and conquer practice in the colonial era. As a result, when a state recedes in power and control, non-state actors become more influential in a country's domestic politics. Besides their agendas deeply which are embedded in their own domestic backgrounds, they can be allies and clients of the regional or international actors who are having particular political interests.

One important sub-layer in this level of Identity Politics requires the cogitation of non-state and supra-state actors. They are largely or entirely autonomous from central government funding and control, and act “in ways which affect political outcomes, either within one or more states or within international institutions, either purposefully or semi-purposefully, either as their primary objective or as one aspect of their activities”.<sup>43</sup> The Middle East – where state frameworks, organizations, political structures, alliances, and political leaders are fragile and fluid - has witnessed the growing influence of non-state political actors. Three important factors to understand the motivations of these actors include their identities, which determine their foundation for political mobilization and actions; the norms – their shared expectations concerning proper behavior for their identity; and interests, which refers to their aims, the goals they want to achieve.<sup>44</sup>

In sum, ethnic and sectarian identities are perceived as partly ascriptive and largely socially-constructed. They not only influence political actors but also are politicized and utilized in social and political processes. At the extreme ends, they are manipulated by various actors for gaining mobilization, alliances, and interests. While it should be noted that Identity Politics, as well as Interest Politics, refers to political strategies rather than political goals; the concept of “other”, “us” and “them”, differences and similarities, is essential to understand Identity Politics in self-governing, state security, interrelations, conflicts, and international relations. The

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<sup>43</sup> JOSSENLIN, Daphne and WALLACE, William, “Non-state Actors in World Politics”, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2001, pp.3-4.

<sup>44</sup> VALENSI, Carmit, “Non-State Actors: A Theoretical Limitation in Changing Middle East”, *Military and Strategic Affairs*, Vol: 7, No: 1, March 2015, p.7



bewildering tangle of these social and political processes, especially in Middle East, requires the approach to separate level of the multilayered Identity Politics there, from the politicization of sub-state identities and their power in mobilization, to state capacity and its state to form and maintain unified state identity, regional and international involvement including non-state actors, to the impacts on each other and on the region as a whole.

## **CHAPTER 2: THE SOURCES OF IDENTITY POLITICS IN MIDDLE EASTERN CONFLICTS**

The interaction of local and global processes in our contemporary juncture of history suggests that the concept of state-based identities, which is exemplified by nationalism, needs to be updated. While states continue to be the major framework to understand the political organization of communities and the boundaries of identities – which is exemplified by nationalism - political identities play an important role in a multitude of political processes on all levels and scales, from the determination of state priorities (in competing executive or military constituencies), centralization and decentralization (such as regional and international communities, sub-nationalist movements, civil wars and insurgency, or the collapse of nations), transnational social movements (for example, fundamentalism, feminism), to the responses to global crises (concerning today’s challenging issues including armed confrontation and violent conflicts, nuclear deterrence, terrorism, displaced people and refugees crisis).<sup>45</sup> In this context, the study of identity as an independent aspect of politics on a larger scale than state-based analyses would provide a more comprehensive understanding on its role – not only domestically, but also trans-nationally and globally.

History is a process that is constantly evolving and it reveals stories of seemingly unconnected events that are in fact crucial in understanding the variety of perspectives and beliefs defended by the groups and the nations. Religion and ethnicity nowadays are more likely to surface sheens for the age old political-economic and territorial conflicts underlying them. This chapter looks at the ethnic and sectarian composition of the ethnic and sectarian groups that are in the centre of Middle East’s conflicts, as well as their history, formation and sustenance of their identities, in order to understand the nature lying at the roots of the struggles. The understanding of the roots of Identity Politics and identity-related conflicts through the examination of ethnic and sectarian origins, the legacy of history, ethnic and sectarian and socio-cultural structures in economic and political designs of countries in the Middle East and the related factors that bear the capability to ignite conflicts, the role of Identity Politics as sources of identity politicization, affiliation and mobilization processes, as

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<sup>45</sup> PETERSON, Spike, “The Politics of Identity in International Relations”, The Fletcher Forum, Summer 1993, p.2

well as the political or economical goal behind the card of Identity Politics, and the domestic or foreign mismanagement which released forces under different identity camps that eventually grew out of states' control is the fundamental step to identify the nature of identity-related phenomenon in the region.

### **2.1. Ethnic and Sectarian Composition in major Middle East's conflicts**

The debate around Identity or Policy, or groups' Values or Interest, is similar to the chicken and egg conundrum. Historically, organic ideologies which are specific to given structures possess the psychological capacity to organize the masses that arbitrary, rationalistic, or "willed" ideologies lack.<sup>46</sup> Ethnic and Religious identities also belong to that category of organic ideologies, which is used through Identity Politics in a region that is well-known as a pool of cultural diversity.

#### **2.1.1. Sunni-Shia schism: Identity Politics vs. Political Power**

The regional expression of the contention between Sunnis and Shias that is becoming the major center of many debates on schism is the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran: they both perceive and are perceived as leading players in the battle to proclaim themselves and their polities to be the true Islamic state, their societies to be based on the true Islamic normative values, and their regimes to be the governments of divine law and Sharia. However, as the sources of conflict lie at the sectarian tensions and differences, they have distinctively different and vast interpretations of the forms and rules of governance, and thus the fissure in their relation based on this divergent conveyance Identity Politics in the same race for Political Power.

It began with the death of Muhammad ibn abd Allah in 632, known later as the Prophet Muhammad, who received revelations and founded the religion of Islam in Arabia. Descendants of the Prophet Muhammad's daughter Fatima and her husband Ali – the Shias -claim that he and their sons were wrongfully deprived of the prophet's mantle in favor of a rival dynasty, the *Umayyads* in Damascus and later the *Abbasids* in Baghdad, who replaced Ali as the fourth caliph. The victimhood over the killing of Hussein in Karbala in 680, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad, left antagonism and resentment in Shia community, and thus exclusion, injustice and martyrdom as leitmotifs of Shia Islam. However, the Shia community is not unified as differences

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<sup>46</sup> RUDE, George, "Ideology and Popular Protest", The University of North Carolina Press, 1995, pp.20-22.

arose over the proper line of succession. Mainstream Shias believe there were twelve Imams while Zaydi Shias, found mostly in Yemen, recognized only the first five Imams, Ismaili Shias – the second largest - Shia sect broke off in the eighth century at the seventh, and Alawite Shias – broke off at the twelfth.<sup>47</sup> Clashes between Sunnis and Shias in the early time were translated into the rivalry between the Ottoman and Safavid Empire. Nowadays, about 1.3 billion out of 1.6 billion Muslims in the world are Sunnis and roughly 200 million are Shias.<sup>48</sup> Some Sunnis can be heard referring to Shias as *al rafidha* - which means rejectionists -, or infidels, while some Shias have called Sunnis *takfiris* – which means apostates. Sunni insurgent groups have killed Shias, while Shia militias have murdered Sunnis, both with the charge of heresy and apostasy.<sup>49</sup>

In fact, when political power is striped away from the narrative, people of two sectarian groups have largely coexisted in peace throughout history: they have main provinces that overlap geographically, they have shared struggles against common enemies, they engage in friendship, pray together at the same mosques, and even intermarry.<sup>50</sup> However, it has been generally argued that religion fosters strong loyalty and commitment than other identities. For instance, in the most extreme case, religious warriors perceive that “terrorism assumes a transcendental dimension, and its perpetrators are thereby unconstrained by the political, moral, or practical constraints that seem to affect other terrorists”.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, Islam – the religion that encompasses various ethnic and racial groups - is a special case. Religion, perception of political power and ruling right, Political power, and Identity Politics have always been closely entwined. As mentioned early, the Sunnis and Shias came into conflict first when their ideas concerning the political authority of the leader first contradicted: Sunnis supported the status quo and the existing political institutions, Shias believed

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<sup>47</sup> CORBIN, Henry, “History of Islamic Philosophy”, Routledge, New York, 2006, pp.30-31.

<sup>48</sup> PewResearch Center, “Mapping the Global Muslim Population”, Pew Forum on Religion, 2009, <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/10/07/mapping-the-global-muslim-population/>

<sup>49</sup> AL-KHALIDI, Ashraf and TANNER, Victor, “Sectarian Violence: Radical groups Drive Internal Displacement in Iraq”, Project on Internal Displacement, the Brookings Institution, University of Bern, 2006.

<sup>50</sup> HARTMAN, Leda, “Islamic Sectarianism: Can Sunni- Shiite hostilities be resolved?”, SAGE Publications, Congressional Quarterly Inc., <http://library.cqpress.com/cqresearcher/document.php?id=cqrglobal2012080700>

<sup>51</sup> HOFFMAN, Bruce, “Holy terror: the Implications of terrorism motivated by a religious imperative”, Worldwide Department of Defense Combating Terrorism Conference, Virginia Beach, 1993.

that the rightful successor of the Prophet, the interpreter of religion and the guardian of its esoteric knowledge, should also have the political rights of ruling.<sup>52</sup>

Similarly, behind the names that Sunnis and Shias use to call each to express animosity, are the struggles of political power. Wahabbism, for example, which reflects the marriage of Saudi power and Wahhabi teaching – the strict interpretation of Sunni Islam, first in 1744 and again in 1902, was a means to overturn Arab tradition and convention, a path of seizing power, and basis for Saudi Arabia’s monarchical rule. Islam was used to unify the politically divided rival tribes and peoples under a single consolidated authority.<sup>53</sup> Understanding that the identifying culture and traditions of the region demanded that newly integrated tribes be loyal to its ruler, Ibn Saud created religious establishment, built mosques for the communities, sent the *ulama* – the learned of Islam - into them to disseminate the Wahhabi code, at the same time provided material supplies and infrastructures, and thus generated the sense of commitment to the ruling authority and to the expansion of their belief and faith in the puritanical Wahhabi doctrine.

On the other hand, Safavid dynasty adopted Shia as the state religion not only for it had an intimate connection with the Persian population, but also because it was eager to advance Shia by military means in order to build a state that was separate from the Ottoman. Seeing the advances of Saudi Arabia, Iran wanted to compete with it on a regional level as a contending power, while monitor closely Wahhabism and its implications in practice of Islam in the region.<sup>54</sup>

This rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is typical and at the center of intra-Islam sectarian conflicts in the Middle East, in which sectarianism plays the role as the institutional set of arrangements that determines familial, local, regional or even global loyalties or affiliations, and the sectarian Identity Politics is inherently associated with inter-sectarian and intra-sectarian violence that has rapidly proliferated in the region in the struggle for Political Power.

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<sup>52</sup>NASR, Seyyed Hossein, “Ideals and Realities of Islam”, ABC International Group, Inc., 2013, p.144

<sup>53</sup> CLEVELAND, William L., and BUNTON, Martin, “A history of the Modern Middle East”, Westview Press, Boulder, 2009, p.231.

<sup>54</sup> RAMAZANI, Rouhollah K., “The Persian gulf: Iran’s role”, University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville, 1972, p.24.

### **2.1.2. Jews and Arabs: Identity Politics for a People without a Nation and a People without Nationalism**

For much of the past century, the conflict between Palestinians, Arabs and Israelis, which has endured for decades with periodic violent eruptions, has been the defining feature of the Middle East. Delving deep into the beginning of the conflict would provide a better vision on whether this conflict is the clash of two different peoples of two distinct identities, or it is Identity Politics, in which identities are one defining factor, but the core problem lies in the struggle for control of a land and the political power of being the majority population within it.

In the speech by Jewish Agency representatives in the General Assembly, May 1947, Moshe Sharett said: “It is true that Hitler is gone now, but not anti-Semitism. He was the product, not the source of German Jew-hatred. Anti-Semitism in Germany and in many other parts of Europe is as rife as ever and potentially militant and fierce... The very age of European Jewry serves only to accentuate the basic historic insecurity of Jewish life in the dispersion”.<sup>55</sup> This statement summarized the traumas of Holocaust and Anti-Semitism that left a deep scar on Jew conscience of carrying Jewish identity, resulted in Jewish desire of establishing a nation for the Jews and Zionism.

In the beginning of the conflict, both considered each other as not qualified for nationalism due to the lack of national identities. In many Arabs’ view, the Jews used Holocaust as a means to gain the land of Palestine and Western powers created Israel as a compensation for the Holocaust, all through the victimization by chosen traumas of being discriminated and executed. Meanwhile, according to many pro-Palestinians, Jewish nationalism had never been accepted. Delivering his speech in the General Assembly Plenary meeting on November 26, 1947, Amir Arslan - Syrian representative quoted from a book titled “The Races of Mankind” written by Professor R. Benedict and Dr. G. Weltfish to oppose the “historic right” demanded by the Jews: “Jews are people who acknowledge the Jewish religion. They belong to all races. The European Jews are very varied in origin and biological type”.<sup>56</sup> On the other hand, the

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<sup>55</sup> SHARETT, Moshe, Speech in the General Assembly, May 1947, Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/foreignpolicy/mfadocuments/yearbook1/pages/speeches%20by%20jewish%20agency%20representatives%20in%20the%20g.aspx>

<sup>56</sup> ARSLAN, Amir, Speech at 125<sup>th</sup> Plenary meeting, November 26, 1947 [http://www.zionism-israel.com/zionism\\_ungromyko2.htm](http://www.zionism-israel.com/zionism_ungromyko2.htm)

Zionists had long considered the Arabs as “interlopers whose ancestors in the seventh century had conquered - or stolen - and then Islamized and Arabized Palestine, a land that belonged to someone else.” Zionist nationalism had developed from as early as in the 1880s, while the Zionists viewed the formation of Palestinian nationalism and identities was just a response to Zionist movement in the early 1920s, shortly after it had taken root among the notables of Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo and Beirut. Before the end of the World War II, most Arabs in Palestine defined themselves as Ottoman subjects; as Arabs – meaning, they belonged to that large, amorphous Arabic-speaking collective, and territory, lying between Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean, whose seventh-century origins lay in the Arabian Peninsula; as Muslims; as inhabitants of this or that village or town and members of this or that clan; and, vaguely, as inhabitants of “Syria”, an Ottoman imperial province that traditionally included Palestine in its southwestern corner. They argued that Arabs had not had the rights to limit Jews to come into Palestine in period from 1882, when they had not even had their ‘nationalism’ and national identity, but just the vague characteristic of ‘Arabness’. In short, the lack of a distinct and dominant identity on the Palestinians side and the strong identity formed through social reality and myths on the Israeli side, and the power over the utilization of a holy land of spiritual and symbolic significance to both constituted the pivotal contradiction that took a heavy toll on two identities.<sup>57</sup> Besides, this conflict also had religious elements both in its international and domestic manifestations: the dispute on the above-mentioned Jerusalem which has turned into violent clashes, the presence of a religious party in Israeli government, and the rise of Hamas and other overtly Islamist Palestinian movements.

To detect the use and manipulation of Identity Politics for interest requires the drawing of lines between symbols and reality. The lengthy discussion above about arguments from two sides at the beginning of the conflict, contains only one piece of reality at the core: the Jews had been suffering greatly everywhere in the world and it wanted a nation on the land of Palestine while the Palestinians resisted. A fast forward look, through all Israeli efforts of using Identity Politics among other strategies in the US, towards the result of the partition of Palestine for the Jews and the Palestinians

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<sup>57</sup> FOX, Jonathan, “Civilizational, Religious, and National Explanations for Ethnic Rebellion in the Post-Cold War Middle East”, *Jewish Political Studies Review*, Vol: 12, No: 1-2, 2001, pp.184-186.

would provide another angle of this conflict: The total population of Palestine in 1946 was 1,972,000 which comprised of 1,247,000 Palestinians, 608,000 Jews and 16,000 others. Jews accounted for about 30% of the population while approximately the remaining 70% were Arabs. Jews mostly were immigrants from Poland, Russia and Central Europe and only one third of them had acquired Palestinian citizenship. They owed merely 6 to 7 % of Palestinian land, namely 1,491 square kilometers out of a total of 26,323 square kilometers in Palestine. However, the Partition Plan granted Jews 55% and gave Arabs 45 % of Palestinian land. The population of Palestinian majority in the proposed Palestinian state would be 818,000 and the minority Jews would be less than 10,000. Meanwhile the Jewish state would have about 499,000 Jews and 438,000 Palestinians. It means the Partition Plan “proposed to give the minority population an exclusive and hegemonic right to the majority of the land”.<sup>58</sup>

In short, unified and defined national identities occupied a major part of arguments of both the Jews and the Palestinians in the beginning of the conflict. However, it is just the surface of the conflict. The grounded reality in the beginning of this conflict was briefly this: The Jews did not want to be the minority in Palestine as it had experienced the terrors in being the weak in Europe. However, the political means that Zionism used resulted in the unfair partition of Palestine, which became the opening of the conflicts that has endured until today.

### **2.1.3. The Kurds: Identity Politics vs. Political Interests**

With the population of approximately 30 millions inhabitants, Kurds constitute the largest ethnic group in the Middle East after Arabs, Persians and Turks. They can also claim to have one of the longest ethnic histories originated in the Middle East, dates back as early as 2400 BC, where they occupied the area of lands in the Taurus Mountain of eastern Anatolia, the Zagros Mountain of Western Iran, portions of northern Iraq, Syria, and Armenia, and other adjacent area. Foreign migrations and conquests including those of Arab, Turkish, Khwarizm, Mongol, and later on, again Turkmen between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century had an immense influence on the culture of

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<sup>58</sup> Jason D. Söderblom, “*A State of Inequity: The UN Partition Plan of 1947*”, The Terrorism Intelligence Centre, Canberra, September 2003, p.5 <http://world-ice.com/Articles/Inequity.pdf>



Kurdish people over time.<sup>59</sup> With the Arab invasion, Kurds followed the teaching of Islam. However its language, culture, lifestyle remained distinctly different. Being founded on this separatism was the deep-rooted reason for the contemporary Kurd problem in the region.<sup>60</sup>

After the collapse of Byzantine Empire in 1453, the Kurdish feudalists' efforts to set up their own dynasty were stifled as the Kurds were trapped in the rivalry between the Ottomans and the Persian Safavids, who both sought to seize the Kurds' region and assimilate Kurds' population. This political division between Ottoman and Persian Empires lasted for at least five hundred years. In 1843, The Ottomans captured Vadr-Khan Bek, back then the Kurdish area of the Middle East. A massive Kurdish uprising there in 1847 was one in more than fifty various Kurdish insurrections against the Ottomans, which lead to suppression by Ottoman forces that would continue until the Empire fell. The oppression suffered under this system led to the first attempt in mobilizing Kurdish ethnic identity and organizing a national Kurdish movement as early as 1908, which arose with the Young Turk Revolution.<sup>61</sup>

The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire during World War I created a new situation for Kurdish people. On January 8<sup>th</sup>, 1918, President Woodrow Wilson made a vague promise about a Kurdish country to be carved out of the carcass of the defeated Ottoman Empire in the twelfth of his Fourteen Points.<sup>62</sup> The Kurds at the time, who comprised the bulk of the population of the Mosul province and insisted on their competing claims to a nation-state of their own, made the Britain, which was ruling Iraq at the time, consider initially the establishment of autonomous provinces in Kurdish areas. Yet, the Kurds had larger ambitions in the region, as its nationalism with the hope for statehood emerged during and after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. The Kurds' political organization at the time – the Society for the Progress of Kurdistan (SPK) began making nationalist demands in 1918 with its formation in Istanbul. However, the incoherent unity was SPK's weakness: it was split between

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<sup>59</sup> BENGIO, Ofra, "Kurdish awakening: Nation Building in a Fragmented Homeland", University of Texas Press, November 2014, p. 41

<sup>60</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica, online version on <http://global.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/325191/Kurd>

<sup>61</sup> OZOGLU, Hakan, "Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State: Evolving Identities, Competing Loyalties, and Shifting Boundaries", Suny Series in Middle Eastern Studies, State University of New York, February 2004, p.245

<sup>62</sup> President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy, Yale Law School Online [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/wilson14.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/wilson14.asp)

secessionists led by Amin Bedirkhan and autonomists led by Sheik Abdulqadir.<sup>63</sup> What even further complicated the Kurdish problem was the status of Kurdish-dominated Mosul province as a possessor of substantial oil deposits, which made it become the objective in a perplexing struggle among the Turks, the Kurds and British.<sup>64</sup> Although Kurdish aspirations were directly safeguarded in the Treaty of Sevres negotiated between Great Britain and the defeated Turkey, which provided for independence from Turkey in those parts of Anatolia where Kurds were in the majority and set forth a political mechanism for the establishment of a Kurdish state, the Treaty was never ratified and the outcome was the merging of Mosul into Iraq and Kurdish with hope for independence extinguished.<sup>65</sup> The establishment of new states and the creation of new borders in the 1920s left the Kurds dreamland divided between Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria and the Soviet Union. Still their sentiment of ethnic identity has remained strong in the communities of Kurds within all four countries, and their narrative is often used as the typical example of a people without a nation in contemporary world. They have a long history of political activism and their own zones of governance across the Middle East: the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) has been legally sanctioned as an autonomous governing entity since 2005, Kurdish-majority areas of northern and northeastern Syria have been governed since 2012 as three de facto autonomous cantons collectively referred to by Kurds as rojava, or Syrian Kurdistan; in Turkey, although many Kurds still support the Turkish state and Kurd decentralization opposition faces fierce resistance from the central government, local and national elections show the Kurdish-majority provinces of the country at clear odds with political sympathies in the rest of the country.<sup>66</sup> The relative success or failure of their movements, whether to achieve national independence or regional autonomy, whether in Iran, Iraq, or Turkey, has varied with the nature of the ruling regimes and the geopolitical interests of the world powers. But the generally

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<sup>63</sup> KREYENBROEK, Philip G. and SPERL, Stefan, *The Kurds: A Contemporary overview*, Routledge, London and New York, 1992, p.51.

<sup>64</sup> YESILTAS, Ozum, "Iraq, Arab Nationalism and Obstacles to Democratic Transition", in ROMANO, David, and GURSE, Mehmet, "Conflict, Democratization, and the Kurds in the Middle East Turkey, Iran and Syria", Palgrave, 2014, p.44

<sup>65</sup> FALK, Richard, "The Kurdish struggle for Self-determination after the Gulf and Cold War", in ALLAIN, Jean, (ed.), "Unlocking the Middle East", Olive Branch Press, New York, 2003, pp.91-92.

<sup>66</sup> WATTS, Nicole F., "Redefining the Kurdish Nation", in POMEPS, "Rethinking Nation and Nationalism", Project on Middle East Political Science, June 2015, pp.45.

repressive policies of the region's states have encouraged many Kurds to conclude that only ethnic Kurds can be trusted to rule, and promote an Identity Politics based on principles of Kurdish ethnic nationalism.

#### **2.1.4. The minorities**

The Middle East is the birthplace of Christianity and home to some of the world's most ancient Christian denominations. Lebanon is the only country in the region where Maronite Christians retain considerable political power. In Egypt, most Christians are Copts who descended from the ancient Egyptians and whose Church split from the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches in 451 because of theological dispute over the nature of Christ. They constitute the largest Christian group in the Middle East. Others, including the Assyrians of Iraq, southeastern Turkey, northwestern Iran, and northeastern Syria, have suffered both ethnic and religious persecution over the last few centuries, such as the Assyrian Genocide conducted by the Ottoman which led to the fleeing and congregating in areas in Iraq and Syria, and the recent persecution of Christian minorities by the Islamic State (IS) within its region of control in Iraq, Syria and Lybia.<sup>67</sup>

Politically, minorities may generally be expected to be prodemocracy, especially if they have experienced marginalization in the existing regime, because they can expect to have greater voice and protection in a more democratic policy. Although the introduction of free and fair elections does not necessarily translate into greater decision-making power for minorities, democratic procedures allow greater presentation of minority interests and, potentially an ability to negotiate some of their key concerns. Moreover, civil rights and liberties, such as the freedom of speech and association or the prohibition of discrimination, are crucial for minorities' sense of security and their ability to participate in politics. However, although the baseline expectation for minorities is a slight preference for democracy, the existence of ethnic, religious, and class cleavages modify this expectation. In the case of minority elite that rules over a majority, whose status and security are threatened by a transition to majoritarian institutions will be more supportive of authoritarianism. As several states in the Middle East are ruled by minority regimes, such as Syria's Alawite minority,

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<sup>67</sup> KATULIS, Brian, DELEON, Rudy, and CRAIG, John, "The Plight of Christians in the Middle East", Center for American Progress, 2015, pp.14-20.

Bahrain's Sunni minority, and Iraq's Sunni minority until 2003, this understanding is important to understand their instability.

In short, the major divisions and conflict in the region suggests that ethnic and religious differences make intolerance, exclusion, and at its worst, strife and violence. However, there are evidences in history that suggest otherwise. The fact that so many ethnic groups and religious traditions came into being in the same region also entail mutual influence through inter-religious connections established by conversion and trade and inter-ethnic links constructed on the peaceful sharing, assimilation and marriage. The Islamic faith, for example, recognizes the Bible and the prophets of Judaism and Christianity, the rights of the Jews and Christians who are characterized as the "People of the Book".<sup>68</sup> If unrest occurred, it was often because it is attached to interest, and political actors used ethnic and religious fervor to stir up support for their cause.

## **2.2. The Political Legacy of the Ottoman and Imperialism**

### ***Ottoman-Islamic legacy***

The Ottoman Empire left a historical legacy on how Middle East states consolidate power. The Ottoman Empire served as the precursor to the modern nation-state for much of the region, with its defining feature of the millet system in which religion was the key organizing principle. The millet system, aside from the dominant and privileged Muslim population, created a network for legal courts under the framework of Islamic law that granted non-Muslim minority groups protection and autonomy with little interference from their Ottoman central rulers. It recognized Jews and various Christian denominations as protected communities, gave them a considerable religious and cultural autonomy in organizing their religious affairs, education and family law, and allowed many religious elites to hold high economic and administrative posts in the empire.<sup>69</sup> As century passed, the millet system molded local societies and governments around religious identity. The traditions of religious authorities became institutionalized in many places, and people widely began to defer to them. Meanwhile, religious elites enjoyed a fairly high level of autonomy and

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<sup>68</sup> COHEN, Mark R., "Sociability and the Concept of Galut in Jewish-Muslim relations in the Middle Ages", *Jewish Studies* no: 27, Leiden, Brill, pp.29-42.

<sup>69</sup> BRAUDE, Benjamin, "Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire", Lynne Rienner, Boulder, 2014, pp.15-16.

became deeply embedded in the institutions that today fall under the purview of the nation-state, including legal, administrative, educational and social welfare structures.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the empire's military prowess began to slip relative to its neighbors, and its rulers were put on the defensive. Gradually, it became clear that if the Ottoman Empire were to survive at all, it would have to adopt some of the strategies used by its Western rivals to organize its military and society. The resulting reforms, known as the *Tanzimat*, aimed to fundamentally reshape the Ottoman state's relationship with its subjects. Previously, the empire's citizens had never been granted rights beyond those guaranteed to Muslims by Islamic law and those that came with the protective status of the millet communities. But in 1839, Sultan Abdulmecid declared that all of his empire's subjects – both Muslims and non-Muslims – also had secular rights that transcended any religious or ethnic affiliation. In addition to this borrowed model of secular citizenship, the *Tanzimat* more clearly defined the millet system and formalized the distinct religious communities. The paradoxical result was that the reforms, originally intended to bridge religious divides, actually reinforced existing fissures within society.

When the Ottoman Empire collapsed in 1923, the distinct religious identities and rifts solidified by the millet system and *Tanzimat* reforms did not dissolve with it. Instead, they were handed down to the states that emerged in the empire's wake, creating serious obstacles to state-building and modernization efforts. Religious elites could be either potential competitors or powerful allies, or both, to governing officials trying to assert their authority. This Ottoman legacy of granting communal rights to non-Muslims but not recognizing different communities within the Muslim community was reinforced by the policies of the great powers. After World War I, Britain and France included minority rights in the legal frameworks of the territories they controlled as colonies or mandates, especially for non-Muslim minorities. They included broad guarantees of nondiscrimination and freedom of conscience, as well as collective rights, such as language rights and autonomy in education, religion, and family law.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> MAHMOOD, Saba, "Religious Freedom, the Minority Question, and Geopolitics in the Middle East", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol: 54, No: 2, pp.418-446.

### *Imperialism legacy*

Imperialism left another legacy that has left profound and tremendous influences on Identity Politics and conflicts in the region. The secret Sykes-Picot agreement divided the Middle East into two spheres of influence: with Britain taking over what is now known as Syria and Lebanon, France gulped the lands stretching over Iraq, Jordan, and Palestine. During the colonization era after World War II, the artificial borders under Sykes-Picot divided the one geographical and social entity into several squarish states with irregular straight borderlines without taking into account the social, economic, geographical, and historical factors.

At the defeat and dissolution of the Ottoman Empire a vacuum of power was left and caused interest clashes and tensions among local inhabitants and external powers. Then in the hands of the West, Middle East was partitioned into the spheres of influence for Britain and France. In 1920, Allied leaders gathered at the San Remo Conference in Italy, where they created two mandates-commissions for territorial administration in the Middle East: the mandate for Syria and Lebanon gave France control of Syria and Lebanon, and The mandate for Palestine assigned administration of Iraq and Palestine to Britain. Transjordan, which later became Jordan, was created from Palestine in 1921. The British mandate also called for the creation of a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine. The Balfour Declaration spurred the mass immigration of Jews to Palestine, sparking the three-year revolt in the Palestinian Arab community starting 1936, complicated the situation, and became the base for Jewish struggle for the forceful carving in Palestine a Jewish nation – Israel today, as well as the ongoing conflict and violence in Palestine.<sup>71</sup>

On the other hand, different ethnic and sectarian groups were clubbed together into one nation or the same ethnic and sectarian group was divided among different states as a method of European colonizers to divide the land and its people. For example, both Syria and Iraq were a amalgam of substantial Sunni, Shia and Christian communities plus smaller numbers of Druze (the Arabs who follow the Druze faith), Yazidis (the Kurds who follow the religion of Yazidism) and Alawites (the Shias who are Twelvers), Lebanon - which was supposed to be a homeland for the Maronite

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<sup>71</sup> CLEVELAND, William L., and BUNTON, Martin, "A History of the Modern Middle East", Westview Press, Boulder, 2013, pp.221-253.

Christians – had a Muslim majority with the addition of Druze, Greek Orthodox and Greek Catholic. On the other hand, a large Kurdish population was scattered in four countries of Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey.<sup>72</sup> To make the situation worse, leaders of new states were brought in from outside such as the cases of Iraq or Jordan, or states were handed over to those who could safeguard imperial interests. The case of Saudi Arabia, for example, it was the Hashemite Arabs, not the Saudis that had launched the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Turks and had been the most involved in the campaign. However, King Hussein of Hashemite family rejected every feature of the postwar Middle East as a betrayal of Britain's promises to him: he rejected to limit his kingdom to the Hijaz, a French mandate in Syria, the policy of a Jewish national home in Palestine. In short, the West can not control him. That was why the Saudis got the position in the Middle East, now until today.<sup>73</sup> The imperial policy of “divide and conquer” the region - that also puts the minority Christians in charge of Lebanon to keep down the majority Sunnis and Shias, the minority Alawite Shias in Syria to head up the army that ruled over the majority Sunnis, or the Sunni king in Iraq where the majority is Shias - is just the beginning, the imperial legacy, of a much more complicated story of identity tensions and conflicts that is still going on, and worsening today.<sup>74</sup> This imperial legacy directly affects the Middle East today in two aspects: the regimes created by the West still exist and hold power in Middle Eastern countries, and the West continues with its strategy of “divide and conquer” and control of regimes in the region with new tactics and under new names.

As consequences, most ambitious projects also aim to unify the whole of Arab world, to transfer Arab identity into national identity, and to resist from Western interventionism, including Nasserism in Egypt, Baathism in Iraq and Syria, and the IS nowadays in the announcement of Caliph – Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2014: “This blessed advance will not stop until we hit the last nail in the coffin of the Sykes-Picot conspiracy”.<sup>75</sup> Other states, backed by world powers, get involved in a regional game

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<sup>72</sup> MILTON-EDWARDS, Beverley, and HINCHCLIFFE, Peter, “Conflicts in the Middle East since 1945”, Routledge, Oxon, 2008, pp.60-85.

<sup>73</sup> ROGAN, Eugene, “The Arabs: A History”, Basic Books, Perseus Books Group, New York, 2009, p.185.

<sup>74</sup> KUMARASWAMY, P.R., “Who Am I? The Identity Crisis in the Middle East”, Middle East Review of International Affairs, Vol: 10, No: 1, March 2006, p.64.

<sup>75</sup> SHANKAR, Vijay, “Of Laurence, Sykes-Picot and al-Baghdadi”, Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, 2014, <http://www.ipcs.org/article/terrorism/of-lawrence-sykes-picot-and-al-baghdadi-4732.html>

for influence and interests, and weak states become the battleground with ethnic and sectarian diversity turned into divisions and violence. In that manner, the further divide occurred within the region, with political actors and political movements using ethnic and sectarian identities to further their objectives.

In general, the region's new states tended to follow on of three paths as they consolidated power, influencing by the legacies of Ottoman and Imperialism. The first usually occurred in states that European powers failed to occupy and that had a single dominant religion. In these circumstances, state usually just co-opted the religious majority's institutions and leaders in an effort to centralize their authority. In doing so, piety and nationalism were fused into an "official religion", thus weakening religious institutions, domesticating religious rhetoric, binding religious authorities to the state and facilitating the state's growth. Secularizing reforms were more about asserting the state's control than a genuine attempt to separate religion and state. In the long run, these states were more stable, but they bred exclusionary policies and forced migrations that were largely based on religion. For the religious minorities left behind, inequalities became entrenched. The states, now more homogenous and constantly skeptical of outsiders, often relapsed into authoritarianism. Alternatively, some states, usually those with colonial occupiers and a solid religious majority, took a hands-off approach to religion instead. Such states tried to sidestep religious institutions as they consolidated power, often accommodating religious minorities. Because this meant religion was not weakened by early cooptation, governments later found it difficult to nationalize the institutions of the biggest religions. Leaders of the dominant religious often positioned themselves in opposition to the state, fueling radicalization and undermining any attempt to create an official Islam friendly to the government. The final path states in the Middle East followed was to rely heavily on alliances with religious minorities while quashing other religious rivals. This outcome usually occurred in places ruled by colonial powers and rivened by religious factionalism. European colonizers would often resort to indirect rule, designed to prevent nationalist uprisings and maintain minimal authority by forming strategic partnerships with privileged minority groups, such as certain Christian sects in the French-held Lebanon. More often than not, this gave rise to repressive minority regimes, which in turn led to sectarian strife, militia politics and attempts by third parties to meddle in



domestic affairs. All impeded efforts to create strong national identities and establish state sovereignty, while at the same time empowering non-state actors with religious agendas.

### **2.3. Middle East's rich Resources**

The abundance of natural resources, especially oil, is correlated to corrupted regimes, poor growth as well as the higher incidence, intensity and duration of conflict. “There are twenty-three countries in the world that derive at least 60 percent of their exports from oil and gas and not a single one is a real democracy”.<sup>76</sup> The study on 161 countries and 78 civil wars between 1960-1999 shows that a state's dependence on natural resources – measured as the ratio of primary commodity exports to GDP, has a significant, non-linear influence on the likelihood that a civil war will begin in the next five years: it increases the likelihood of conflict and civil war from 1% to 22% until the resource-GDP ratio is 32%; once it exceeds this point resources diminish the likelihood of conflict.<sup>77</sup> There are two variants of the argument on resources curse: The first one suggests that oil abundance, dependence on primary commodities, with the possible inclusion of economic decline in less developed countries generate valuable rents and that the existence of these rents tends to generate violent forms of rent-seeking that take the form of “greed-based” insurgencies and might result in secessionist wars.<sup>78</sup> Most of the states and governments in the Middle East “rentier states” depending heavily on oil, either directly through the sale of oil (such as governments of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Libya, Qatar) or indirectly via trade, aid and worker remittances (for example, Jordan, Syria and Egypt earn large locational rents from payments for pipeline crossings, transit fees, and passage through the Suez Canal while workers' remittances have been an important source of foreign exchange in Egypt, Yemen, Lebanon, ect). These rentier economies produced too few jobs and too much wealth that their citizens neither controlled nor generated, creating the vulnerable sentiments in the ruling elites which dictate them to use any

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<sup>76</sup> PATRICK, Stewart M., “Why Natural Resources are a Curse on Developing Countries and how to fix it”, the Atlantic, 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/04/why-natural-resources-are-a-curse-on-developing-countries-and-how-to-fix-it/256508/>

<sup>77</sup> COLLIER, P., ELLIOT, V., HEGRE, H., HOEFFLER, A., REYNA-QUIROL, M., SAMBANIS, N., “Breaking the Conflict Trap”, Washington, D.C., World Bank and Oxford University Press, 2003, p.54

<sup>78</sup> COLLIER, Paul and HOEFFER, Anke, “Greed and grievance in civil war”, Centre for the Study of African Economies, Working Paper, Oxford University, 2002.

means to ensure their power and a suffering population which may gather up in insurgencies and become the sources of instability and conflicts. Moreover, if oil fields happen to be concentrated in a region populated by an ethnic or religious minority, resource extraction may promote an exacerbation of ethnic tensions as federal, region, and local actors compete for control right.<sup>79</sup> The second one is used to explain the mechanisms through which resource abundance generates violent conflict. Its main premise is that when states gain a large proportion of their revenues from external sources, such as source rents, the reduced necessity of state decision-makers to levy domestic taxes causes leaders to be less accountable to individuals and groups within its society. Based on this, it is further argued that oil states are more likely to have weak state structures because they have less need to create strong bureaucracies to raise revenue, or to produce the type of social change that is conducive to democratization; rising levels of education and specialization. This in turn increases economic and social divisions, weakens institutional capacity, breeds corruption, and makes the state more vulnerable to insurgency.<sup>80</sup> In short, as opposed to basic intuition that resource wealth and economic growth is a package, vast natural capital endowments do not necessarily generate prosperity and stability. Indeed, it may be associated with authoritarianism and conflict, and other deleterious impacts on the communities.

Equally important, the wealth of natural resources is also a source of foreign intervention. While civil wars constitute more than 90 percent of contemporary armed conflicts, about two thirds of all civil wars over the period of 1945 to 1997 see intervention by foreign countries or international organization, whose motivations range from proximity to conflict, humanitarian concerns, ethnic or religious ties, economic interests to the goal to prolong wars by preventing specific outcomes that would result in the absence of further intervention.<sup>81</sup>

#### **2.4. Weak regimes and strong identities in conflict**

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<sup>79</sup> ROSS, Micheal L., "Does Oil Hinder Democracy?", *World Politics*, Vol: 53, 2001, p.336.

<sup>80</sup> FEARON, James D. and LAITIN, David D., "Ethnicity, insurgency, and civil war", *American Political Science Review*, Vol: 97, No: 1, 2003.

<sup>81</sup> REGAN, Patrick M., "Third Party Interventions and the Duration of Intrastate Conflict", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol: 46, No: 1, 2002, pp.55-73.

Throughout the Middle East, ethnic and sectarian identities have become more and more salient in political life. Middle Eastern political systems are in a profound crisis of legitimacy, resulted from a broad range of socioeconomic, cultural, exogenous pressures, and the low capacity of political structures. Ethnic and sectarian conflicts, which are debilitating the system by inflaming or igniting the fundamental problems of identity and authority, take a variety of forms. In some cases, the dominant solidarity groups use the state's power to attack a subordinate solidarity group; in others, an illegal opposition uses ideologized religion in the effort to overturn incumbents; or hostile societal solidarity groups fight each other while the state tries to mediate.<sup>82</sup>

In the Middle East, on one hand, weak governments generate instability through the tactic of Identity Politics: When political leaders do not have a secure hold on power, and when they feel particularly threatened, they often turn to ethnic, religious, or national identities to bolster their legitimacy and improve their chances of survival. This tactic works not only within a single state but also among many. Indeed, politicized identities stay at the heart Middle East identity conflicts. On the other hand, the lack of harmony between ethnic and sectarian boundaries and national borders of the states in this region has exacerbated the situation. Moreover, the process of globalization requires free stream of information, idea, and the knowledge, which allows subjectivity and objectivity to grow while encompassing every aspect of life. In this context, ethnic and religious mobilization is often justified as being necessary to defend and protect the religion or the people against restrictions or suppression. This process is often accelerated by the existence of threats to the affected community. When a group feels threatened it is more likely to gravitate towards an identity that differentiates itself from the threatening party. Also, material motives partly contribute to identity affiliation: supporters are often drawn from the unemployment, or those with low incomes in times when the governments fail to provide for their citizens.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> BINDER, Leonard, "Ethnic Conflict and International Politics in the Middle East", University of Florida, Florida, 1999, pp.92-93.

<sup>83</sup> IANNACONE, L.R. and BERMAN, E., "Religious Extremism: the good, the bad, and the deadly", Public Choice no:128, 2006, pp.109-129.

On the other hand, domestically weak states create political vacuums into which outsiders can tamper and vie for power by promoting their clients in those inside-state struggles and thus building up their regional influence. The overlapping conflicts in weak states incurred state collapse, which in turn led to a shift from national and more inclusive identities toward narrower sectarian or ethnic identities.

A brief look into Iraq would provide a clearer understanding: The minority Arab Sunni population began its authoritarian rule at the beginning of Iraq's establishment. Sunnis dominated in the state and the Shias – whose community located mainly in the south of Iraq - were brutally suppressed, marginalized, and deprived of Shia festivals and celebrations, especially under Saddam Hussein and the ruling of the Ba'ath Party. At the worst, Shia popular religious figures were murdered.<sup>84</sup> After the Gulf War, the capacity of Iraqi state had eroded severely, but it was the US invasion in 2003 that turned a player in regional politics into a battleground for regional politics, by tearing down the authoritarian state's three major pillars: the ruling Ba'ath Party was banned, military was dissolved, and the bureaucracy of experienced cadres who were members of the party was removed. The collapsed political system created a power vacuum and the opportunity for not only domestic parties but also for outside political influence. With the diverse pool of diverse identities, Identity Politics has become a means at hand ready to be used. Shia community, led by Iraq's grand ayatollah – Sayyid al-Sistani, grasped the opportunity in their efforts to sway the US to their side for reviving Shia and gaining political dominance. In contrast, Sunnis including religious and political leaders felt deeply alienated and angered by the bringing down of Ba'ath party and the disbanding of Iraqi national military. As a result, they use the sectarian identity as a campaign against Shias and Iranian influence. When Nouri al-Maliki came to power he used the de-Ba'athification laws to keep members of Saddam Hussein's regime out of the government. Sunnis, facing marginalization and more pronounced attacks on mosques and clerics, believed that many of the Iraqi security operation were sectarian provocations. This led to rebellion including the massive suicide bombings aimed at Shias, from policemen, community leaders, to ordinary people and even children. Sectarianism in this case of Iraq, is as much the result of the

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<sup>84</sup> NASR, "The Shia revival: How conflicts Within Islam Will shape the Future", p.187.

US invasion and the toppling of the regime as it is the exploitation of Identity Politics in a wrecked state.

In Syria, the beginning of violence was about the Syrian people - who had been suffering severe political and economic grievances and had been subjected to massive government corruptions and human right abuses – against their tyrannical government. However, Assad who ruled Syria through the Ba'ath Party and used its secular ideology to bring the Alawite minority into key positions, used sectarian identity politics as a means of governance. By playing on sectarianism and a deep historical distrust of the Sunni population, Assad established himself as the protector of minorities and thereby bound the minorities to the regime. With the Alawites in positions ranging from commanders of Special Forces to armored corps, Assad exploited the minorities' existential fear with regard to the Sunni majority and even campaigned against the Sunnis through massive and indiscriminate violence, deliberately radicalizing them.<sup>85</sup> He opted to use the tools of Alawite-heavy Special Forces and regime protection units from the army; Alawite-heavy armed units from the various regime intelligence service; and mainly Alawite auxiliaries loosely formed into militias for this goal of crushing resistance.<sup>86</sup>

Another failing state is Yemen, a domestically weak and impoverished country, indeed the poorest in the Arab world. It was divided into two states until 1990, and this division and unification both to some extent created political resentments in the diverse country where two thirds of the population are Sunnis while the other third are Shias, including the Zaydi Shias. While Zaydi Shia-Shafi'i Sunni sectarianism played no major public role in Yemen in the past, religious politics held sway across the country and none of Yemen's political parties were far removed from religious sectarianism: sectarian and denominational parties were established despite provisions in the constitution and the political party law that banned the creation of any political party on sectarian or region-centric grounds. The Islah Party – which managed to secure the second-largest parliamentary party bloc for three consecutive elections

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<sup>85</sup> PIERRET, Thomas, “The Reluctant Sectarianism of Foreign States in the Syrian Conflict”, Peace Brief 162, United State Institute of Peace, Washington, D.C., 2013.

<sup>86</sup> HOF, Frederic and SIMON, Alex, “Sectarian Violence in Syria's Civil War: Causes, Consequences and Recommendations for Mitigation”, The Center for the Prevention of Genocide, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, p.1.

cycles, for example, was generally considered the largest Sunni party in Yemen though it never explicitly mentioned so. On the other hand, the Haqq party was established to represent political Zaydism. Meanwhile, the Houthi movement was shaped by a local conflict with the Dar al-Hadith Center – a Sunni religious institute that promoted the orthodox version of Sunni Islam known as Salafism in a Zaydi-populated Saada Governorate of Yemen. Before the Arab Uprising, Yemeni government had sponsored six years of Salafi-aided fighting against the politicized Zaydi tribes aligned with the Houthis. Since the collapse of the government due to the Arab Spring unrest of 2011, the operation of Yemen has been based on two elements: tribalism and patronage networks.<sup>87</sup> In short, Yemen is a host to the Sunni al-Qaeda community whose members are arch-rivals to Houthis while the Houthis, allied with the former Zaydi president of Yemen – Ali Abdullah Slaeh, consider their major enemy the current Yemeni president, Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi. On the regional scope, throughout history, the weak government of Yemen has been subjected to outsiders, especially Saudi Arabia, who has consistently intervened in Yemeni domestic politics under the policy of “containment and maintenance” based on funding to the government and political elites in exchange for political influence, supporting Wahabbism, and “stigmatizing the Zaydis as part of a global Shia, Iranian conspiracy that seeks to diver the Muslim world”.<sup>88</sup>

Similarly, Lebanon has been a weak state since the ending of its civil war from 1975 to the early 1990s, a government which “irritates or demeans a majority of Lebanese citizens, leads to stalemate, power vacuums, deteriorating economic” with a government debt runs roughly 134 percent of GDP, and interest payment account for 40 percent of government revenues,<sup>89</sup> and has other problems including “corruption, nepotism, waste, misuse of resources, abuse of power, and structural political immobility”.<sup>90</sup> For centuries it had been the refuge for regional minorities, and a fourth of the current Lebanon’s population is refugees. Despite of its claiming pride of

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<sup>87</sup> DINGLI, Sophia., “Is the failed state thesis analytically useful? The case of Yemen”, *Politics: Political Studies Association*, Vol: 33, No: 2, 2013, pp.91-100.

<sup>88</sup> CLAUSEN, Maria-Louise, “Understanding the crisis in Yemen: Evaluating competing narratives”, *The International Spectator*, Vol: 50, No: 3, 2015, p.21.

<sup>89</sup> BANDOW, Doug, “Ambitious Politicians Play as Lebanon Teeters on Sectarian Brink”, *Forbes*, 2015, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/dougbandow/2015/10/19/ambitious-politicians-play-as-lebanon-teeters-on-sectarian-brink/2/#2f4346343e87>

<sup>90</sup> KHOURI, Rami, “The Delusion of copying Lebanon’s Political system”, *Agence Global*, 2016.

being a land of liberty, tolerance and culture; the fact that it contained a pool of diverse ethnic and religious identities has created a source for instability: Similar to other Middle Eastern states, Lebanon has a minority government – the Maronites. Although elections are free, the seats are divided along sectarian lines. The Lebanese capital is a short drive away from the Syrian imbroglio, the Hezbollah acts as a state-within-a-state, confronting Israel to the south and anti-Assad insurgents to the east. Sunni radicalism is growing and the minority Christian community is badly broken, creating political deadlock and paralyzing the government. Indeed, in Lebanon “today’s dynamics bear an uncanny similarity to those that preceded the civil war”.<sup>91</sup> Meanwhile, Lebanon’s history has been marked by foreign intervention, notably the ones by Israel and Syria especially during Lebanese civil war. Iran and Saudi Arabia and even Iraq also intervened through their clients inside the state.

In Bahrain, the Khalifa monarchy has abandoned all experimentation with parliamentary democracy in favor of rule by royal decree, and employed the divide and rule strategy in dealing with its own domestic affairs and manipulating sectarian affinities for political gains.<sup>92</sup> In response to the Arab Spring uprising in 2011, similar to other Arab states, Bahrain’s security forces cleared the protest camps with tanks and live-fire, and kept the country in lockdown for months. At the same time, the government swiftly eliminated the cross-sectarian undercurrent of the uprising, immediately arresting Sunni participants at early stage while promoting the narrative that protests were a Shia uprising orchestrated by Iran.<sup>93</sup> The government conceded to set up the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, a fact-finding mission headed by independent international legal experts with the power to make public recommendations to the government. However, the failure to meaningfully implement its recommendations ultimately deepened mistrusts.

Similarly, in Libya, Muammar Gaddafi started his ruling after the 1969 coup, centralizing the government around Gaddafi’s rule characterized by an underlying

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<sup>91</sup> International Crisis Group, “Lebanon’s Self-defeating Survival Strategies”, Middle East Report No.160, 2015, p.i.

<sup>92</sup> GENGLER, Justin J., “Group Conflict and Political Mobilization in Bahrain and the Arab Gulf: Rethinking the Rentier State”, Indiana University Press, Indiana, 2015, p.143

<sup>93</sup> MCMURRY, David and UFHEIL-SOMERS, Amanda, “The Arab Revolts: Dispatches on Militant Democracy in the Middle East”, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, Indiana, 2013, p.234.

monopoly of processes. This system of control, while bestowed with large welfare programs to buy loyalty, drove Libya into economic distress and failed to reap the benefits of oil endowments. Gaddafi was toppled by Libyan rebels in the uprisings in 2011.

To conclude, weak regimes in oil and resource-rich Middle East where ethnic and sectarian identity diversity has been a feature since the inception of states have been one of the major sources for identity-related conflicts, in which political actors of all level – from domestic to regional to international, to manipulate the perception and sentiments on differences for mobilization and affiliation in order to gain their political influence, interests and power. While sectarianism has emerged as a salient phenomenon in international politics, especially the Middle East, it is worthwhile to note that ethnic identity politics and ethnic conflicts have been one of the major sources of instability and violence in the modern world since the formation of state boundaries. As effective as it is to drive international attention to issues of sectarian identities in the Middle East today, the use of similarities and differences have been proved to be useful in international politics to disguise political interests and goals under the card of identities, be it ethnic, sectarian, or ideology; be it the sufferings and struggles in the uncivilized world against the civilized imperialists in the imperial era, the rivalry between Capitalism and Communism in the Cold War, the racial or religious segregation anywhere in this developed world, or the discrimination in treatment the worth of lives in the West and the ones elsewhere. The strategies of Identity Politics can only be useful when they are used as a means to enhance soft power to bridge the differences and guide the international communities to the shared global issues. However, the Middle East provides materials, sources, and context for the use of Identity Politics otherwise.

## **2.5. Foreign Intervention**

### ***Tradition of US intervention***

The British announcement of withdrawal from hits historic position east of Suez in 1968 came when US forces were increasingly strained by commitments in Vietnam and Southeast Asia and public opposition of costly foreign commitments was growing in the US. US had to change its strategy, from reliance on the British presence as an



essential component to contain Soviet along the immense arc from Suez Canal to the Malacca Straits, to the reliance on security cooperation with regional states which was stipulated in the Nixon Doctrine. In the Gulf specifically, the foundation of this policy based on two key states of Iran and Saudi Arabia, which is also known as the “Two Pillar Policy”.<sup>94</sup> Besides the reliance on two US-backed regimes in the Middle East, this policy also involved a tripartite covert action with Israel to destabilize Iraq by supporting a Kurdish rebellion against Baghdad, but this plan collapsed in 1975 when the Shah unilaterally came to an agreement with Saddam Hussein and abandoned the Kurds. It established a precedent for viewing the Persian Gulf as an extension of the Arab-Israeli conflict and for US-Israeli cooperation in the region.<sup>95</sup>

The pattern of militarism that began in the Persian Gulf in the 1970s was partially the product of American support for and deliberate militarization of brutal and vulnerable authoritarian regimes. Massive weapons sales to oil autocrats and the decision to build a geopolitical military order in the Gulf that depended on and empowered those rulers resulted in a highly militarized and fragile balance of power. The overthrow of the Shah by the Islamic Revolution and the 1979 Yemenite war between North Yemen and the Marxist South Yemen, the Soviet coup in Afghanistan in 1978, as well as Turkey and Pakistan’s withdrawal from the Central Treaty Organization, following Iran, created the impression that the US had lost its capacity to influence to regional events. In response, Jimmy Carter claimed: “*Any attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force*”.<sup>96</sup> This policy was put into practice, protecting the weak but loyal monarchy of Saudi Arabia and the oil cartel it controlled from the potential threats posed by its oil-rich neighbors of Iran and Iraq as the US did not trust these two: Iran’s nationalists had popular support and could remove the Shah while Iraq’s leadership embraced a secular socialist Ba’athist ideology and had the ambitions to lead Arab nationalism that posed the threats to both Saudi Arabia’s

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<sup>94</sup> BROMLEY, Simon, “American Hegemony and World Oil: The Industry, the State System and World Economy”, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991, pp.116-117

<sup>95</sup> BILL, James A., “The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations”, Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut, 1988, pp.204-208.

<sup>96</sup> CARTER, Jimmy, “The State of the Union Address Delivered Before a Joint Session of the Congress”, 1980, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=33079>

monarchy and the Israel's state surrounded by the hateful Arabs. The Reagan administration adopted the Carter Doctrine and over the following years put more substantial military power and organization, notably the reorganization of The Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force with its basic mission was "*to assure continued access to Persian Gulf oil and to prevent the Soviets from acquiring political-military control directly or through proxies*".<sup>97</sup>

### ***Intervention in Iraq***

After the World War II, despite the influence of Soviet military power, all threats to oil supplies and to regional stability came not from Russia and its allies but from political developments within the region. For example, the Arab oil boycott at the time of Arab-Israeli war in 1973 nearly tripled the price of oil and sent Western economies spinning into a serious recession. Another example is the Iran-Iraq war started in 1980.

The US asserted its neutrality at the beginning. However in 1985-1986 US and Israel undertook a series of secret contracts and substantial arms transfers to Iran. But as the revelation of these arrangements threatened its relations with its oil producing allies, it reversed and adopted an openly pro-Iraq position.<sup>98</sup> In addition to providing Iraq with satellite data and information about Iranian military movements, the US arranged massive loans for Iraq's burgeoning war expenditure from American client states such as Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.<sup>99</sup> It was also the sole country who voted against a 1986 Security Council statement condemning Iraq's use of mustard gas – a chemical weapon - against Iranian troops<sup>100</sup>. In deed, the US also ignored the killing of 50,000 to 100,000 Kurds based on their ethnicity using chemical weapons by Saddam's regime in the Anfal Campaign of 1988.<sup>101</sup> In fact US support for Iraq during Iran-Iraq war was just to exhaust two regimes. After Iraq's invasion of Kuwait due to its

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<sup>97</sup> SICK, Gary, "The United States in the Persian Gulf: From Twin Pillars to dual Containment", in LESCH, David W and HAAS, Mark L., "The Middle East and the United States", Westview Press, Philadelphia, 2015, pp.30-31.

<sup>98</sup> DRAPER, Theodore, "A very thin Line: The Iran-Contra Affair", Hill and Wang, New York, 1991.

<sup>99</sup> Research Unit for Political Economy, "Behind the Invasion of Iraq", Monthly Review Press, New York, 2003, p.31.

<sup>100</sup> BBC News, "Saddam's Iraq: Key Events: Chemical Warfare 1983-1988", BBC, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/middle\\_east/02/iraq\\_events/html/chemical\\_warfare.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/middle_east/02/iraq_events/html/chemical_warfare.stm)

<sup>101</sup> DUNCAN, Gillian, LYNCH, Orlan, RAMSAY, Gilbert and WATSON, Alison, "State Terrorism and Human Rights: International Responses since the end of the Cold War", Routledge, Oxon, 2013, p.91.

inability to pay the debt after the Iran-Iraq war as well as its accusation of Kuwait's sealing its oil, the US-led coalition forces launched a massive military assault on Iraq and Iraqi forces. With the civilian deaths range from 100,000 to 200,000,<sup>102</sup> the US did not topple Saddam's regime. The possible reason would partly be because the US did not want the Iraq's Kurds to succeed in demanding for partition of Iraq, as it would raise the issue of control over the vital oil resources and fuel rebellion the Kurdish population in Turkey – America's close ally.<sup>103</sup> Moreover, the US was hoping to induce Iraqi generals to following its scripts to oust Hussein themselves, which would deliver the best option: "an iron-fisted Iraqi junta without Saddam Hussein".<sup>104</sup> America's using of the card of Identity Politics in Iraq can also be seen in its policy towards the Kurds: President Bush, while encouraged several times the people of Iraq to rise against Saddam, but when Saddam's strong military exterminated the Kurdish rebellion of both Iraqi Kurdish organization and their two leaders turned to America for help, the US refused.<sup>105</sup> Instead, the US opted for economic sanctions which were denounced by the General Assembly as "wantonly brutal", a policy that "in effect punished the Iraqi people in the cruelest possible manner without weakening Saddam Hussein's grip on power in the slightest".<sup>106</sup>

### ***Energy, Oil and Currency***

Control of oil has been one major interest in US foreign policy since the World War II. The Middle East and North Africa holds 48 and 52 percent of world oil and gas reserves respectively.<sup>107</sup> Therefore, the US has long recognized that the Gulf's energy sources are "a stupendous source of strategic power, and one of the greatest material

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<sup>102</sup> BBC News, "Flashback: 1991 Gulf War", BBC, 2003, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/2754103.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/2754103.stm)

<sup>103</sup> MALANCZUK, Peter, "The Kurdish Crisis and Allied Intervention in the Aftermath of the Second Gulf War", *European Journal of International Law*, Vol: 2, No: 2, 1991, pp.117-118.

<sup>104</sup> FRIEDMAN, Thomas L., "The World: A Rising Sense that Iraq's Hussein must go", *The New York Times*, 1991, <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/07/07/weekinreview/the-world-a-rising-sense-that-iraq-s-hussein-must-go.html>

<sup>105</sup> GUNTER, Micheal, "Foreign Influences on the Kurdish Insurgency in Iraq", *Conflict Quarterly*, Fall 1992, pp.17-18.

<sup>106</sup> RIEFF, David, "Were Sanctions Right?", *The New York Times*, 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/07/27/magazine/27SANCTIONS.html?pagewanted=all>

<sup>107</sup> COCKX, Lara and FRANCHKEN, Nathalie, "Natural Resource Wealth and Public Social Spending in the Middle East and North Africa", *Institute of development Policy and Management, University of Antwerp*, march 2015, p.6.

prizes in world history”.<sup>108</sup> Accordingly, in the US foreign policy towards the Middle East, it has carried out the modern version of the colonial tactics in controlling the region. The understanding that “regime change” is another similar strategy to the practice of strongman replacement in colonial era reasonably explains Iraqi King Faisal’s concession with the Iraqi Petroleum Company in the 1920s. In Iran, the Shahs, who signed the similar oil deal with European and Soviet companies, had ruled Iran for many years until a nationalist prime minister - Mohammed Mossadeq nationalized Iran’s oil industry in 1951 and carried out a long power struggle to the extent that the Shahs ended into exile in 1953. The Shah was put back into power by the USA and the UK, which resulted in the new oil concession with an international consortium, led by American companies.<sup>109</sup> Similarly, the ruling of the Sauds in Saudi Arabia in the assured Western backing also came with the expense of oil concession in the 1930s.<sup>110</sup> US deep ties with this regional ally may explain its “otherwise baffling decision” to ignore the fact that 15 out of 19 men who hijacked the planes used in the attacks on the World Trade Center in September 2001 were Saudi nationals and pursue Saddam Hussein who had no known connection to the attacks.<sup>111</sup>

Oil is one important factor in explain the relationship between Russia and Iran. On the energy front, Russian oil companies, while not as advanced technologically as their Western counterparts, have the capability to increase the productivity of the older Iranian fields and develop new ones as they are found. More important, Gazprom, Russia’s state-owned oil and gas giant, offered Iran to coordinate and facilitate Iran’s gas export. According to one estimate, Russia and Iran together control almost 20 percent of global oil and 50 percent of the world’s proven reserves of natural gas. *“If they coordinated their production and marketing decisions, these two countries could be twice as dominant in the international gas market as Saudi Arabia is in the global*

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<sup>108</sup> Foreign Relations of the US (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1945) vol: 8, p.45, cited in Sheldon L. Richman, “Ancient History”; US conduct in the Middle East since WWII and the folly of intervention’, Cato Policy Analysis, No.159, 16 August 1991.

<sup>109</sup> KINZER, Stephen, “All the Shah’s Men: An American Coup and teh Roots of Middle East Terror”, John Wwiley & Sons, Inc., New Jersey, 2008, pp.167-209.

<sup>110</sup> YERGIN, Daniel, “The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power”, Free Press, New York, 2008, pp.385-386.

<sup>111</sup> COOK, Jonathan, “Isareal and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East”, Pluto Press, London, 2008, p.16.

*oil market*".<sup>112</sup> According to some scholars, there is an emerging "axis of oil" constituting Russia - a major producer, China - a growing consumer, and the nationalist oil-producing states – most notably Iran. Their interests converge, and they are now challenging US hegemony on a wide range of issues globally. It should be noted that 72 percent of global petroleum reserves are now controlled by nationally owned companies (NOCs). Unlike privately owned companies, NOCs are the arms of states and may not function according to the laws or logic of the marketplace. As the demand for oil, spurred by impressive economic growth in China and India, has outstripped global supply, it has put upward pressure on price. This, in turn, has provided abundant petro-dollars to producers such as Russia and Iran and has enabled them to assert their political agenda internationally. Iran's increasing financial support for Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Shias in Iraq, and Hamas in Palestine, as well as a 2 billion USD joint-development project signed with Venezuela in January 2007 that is partially aimed at bolstering "anti-imperialist" movements in the Third World, must be seen in this light. Increasingly, oil-producing nations are using the leverage that their petro-power gives them to push back against the US when they perceive infringements on their vital interests.<sup>113</sup>

Oil itself is important, but what currency the oil is sold to the world is equally, if not more, important. Crude Oil and its derivatives such as heating oil and gasoline constitute the most commonly trade commodity in the world.<sup>114</sup> The agreement with OPEC in the 1970s to price oil in dollars has provided tremendous artificial strength to the dollar as the preeminent reserve currency. This has created a universal demand for the dollar, and soaks up the huge number of new dollars generated each year. Therefore, it is important for the US that the dollar – oil relationship has to be maintained to keep the dollar as a preeminent currency, and thus sustain the demand of US dollar. *"This phenomenon is known as dollar hegemony, which is created by the geopolitically constructed peculiarity that critical commodities, most notably oil, are*

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<sup>112</sup> LEVERETT, Flynt, "The Race for Iran", The New York Times, 2006, [http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/20/opinion/20leverett.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/20/opinion/20leverett.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)

<sup>113</sup> LEVERETT, Flynt & NOEL, Pierre, "The new Axis of Oil", The National Interest, No: 84, Summer 2006, p.68.

<sup>114</sup> InvestorGuide, "What are the Most traded Commodities?", 2016, <http://www.investorguide.com/article/11836/what-are-the-most-commonly-traded-commodities-igu/?gcs=1>

*denominated in dollars [...] Everyone accepts dollars because dollars can buy oil*".<sup>115</sup> Any attack on this relationship will be forcefully challenged. But in November 2000 Saddam Hussein demanded Euros for his oil, detached himself from the US dollar, under the United Nations Oil-for-Food program. This switch to Euros netted windfall gains for Iraq, spurred on by rapid growth in the value of the Euro against the dollar, and its success may become a symbolic and economic gesture encouraging other OPEC nations to consider the similar move. Within a very short period after the US military victory, all Iraqi oil sales were carried out in dollars.<sup>116</sup> Thus, with the lifting of the sanctions so that Iraqi oil can flow, this "*sales from the country with the second largest oil reserves on the planet would have been moving to the euro... [This] could cause massive, almost glacial, shifts in confidence in trading on the dollar*".<sup>117</sup> This may have played a significant role in US's motivation to wage war in Iraq, along with the factors of Iraq's being the world's second largest reserve of oil underexploited, as well as its geostrategic location on the routes of the Silk Road between Asia, Europe, Arabia and North Africa.<sup>118</sup> Similarly, National Iranian Oil Co has stated that Iran would charge in Euros for its recently signed oil contracts as well as its trading partners who own it billions of dollars "for political reasons", which reflects signs of an "uneasy truce" between Iran and the US even after the lift of its sanctions.<sup>119</sup> It also somehow explains why the oil countries which have bitter relations with the US such as Russia or Venezuela do not use dollar for their oil currency.

Before US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Middle East, though simmering as ever, looked like this: Libya was stable, ruled by the same strongman for 42 years; Hosni Mubarak had been in power since 1983 in Egypt; Syria had been run by the Assad family since 1971; Saddam Hussein had been in charge of Iraq since 1969; the Turks and Kurds had an uneasy but functional ceasefire; and Yemen was quiet enough. This

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<sup>115</sup> SHIPLEY, Tyler, "Currency Wars: Oil, Iraq, and the Future of US Hegemony", *Studies in Political Economy*, No:79, 2007, p.12.

<sup>116</sup> PAUL, Ron, "Pillars of Prosperity: Free Markets, Honest Money, Private Property", *Luwig von Mises Institute*, Alabama, 2008, p.265.

<sup>117</sup> COOPER, M., "Soldier for the Truth: Exposing Bush's talking-points War", *LA Weekly*, 2004, pp.20-26.

<sup>118</sup> AHMED, Nafeez, "Iraq Invasion was about oil", *The Guardian*, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/earth-insight/2014/mar/20/iraq-war-oil-resources-energy-peak-scarcity-economy>

<sup>119</sup> VERMA, Nidhi, "Exclusive: Iran wants Euro payment for New and Outstanding Oil Sales- Source", *Reuters*, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-oil-iran-exclusive-idUSKCN0VE21S>

intervention was referred to as “the precipitating event”, the one that may not actively cause every plot twist to come, but that certainly sets them in motion. Now Libya is a failed state, bleeding mayhem into northern Africa; Egypt failed its Arab Spring test and relies on the US to support its anti-democratic militarized government; Yemen is a disastrously failed state now the scene of a proxy war between US-backed Saudi Arabia and Iranian-backed Houthi rebels; and situations in Syria and Iraq are worse. Yet with the media is full of coverage on ethnic and sectarian origins and their histories of divisions and conflicts that overlook other important and core issues, identity conflicts become a card in international powers’ intervention in the Middle East – either to cover their mismanagement of approach to Middle East’s affairs or to hide their true political interests and goals in the region.

In conclusion, the sources of identity conflicts in the Middle East include ethnic and sectarian composition and constructional factors. Due to the nature of political structures in Middle Eastern states, the influence of identities on politics forms the base of Identity Politics. On this construct, identities have been used, firstly through recognizing the primordial characteristics of these identities as an inherent part in social and cultural lives of groups and communities; second through manipulating of social forces in the ceaselessly process of identities development to create identity boundaries and politicize identities for political affiliation, mobilization, or alliances; and thirdly by taking advantages of instrumental identities in order to serve - covering under the more altruistic shell - the real political goals for political actors of all levels. Factors affecting social forces include the legacy of Ottoman Empire and Imperialism, with their remnants still in existent in both social and political structures of the Middle Eastern countries nowadays; the rich resource which is a two-edge sword that – for the majority of Middle East’s authoritarian regimes and weak states, is a curse as much if not more than a blessing; the weak regimes that either silenced discussion on ethnic or sectarian differences, or propagating the teaching of one religion, while using Identity Politics as a means of governance through the tactic of divide and rule to gain political interests; and foreign intervention, either direct or indirect, which either mismanage the situation of Middle East without due understanding of the region, or intentionally aim at ethnic and sectarian divisions in order to carry out the tactic of divide and rule, to gain or to cover the real political ambitions.

## **CHAPTER 3: IDENTITY POLITICS ON REGIONAL SCOPE IN MIDDLE EAST'S GAME OF POWER AND INTEREST**

The best way to understand Identity Politics in the Middle East is through the examination of conflicts that have been considered and ostensibly seem to originate from Identity issues including ethnic and religious divisions or sectarian schism. The three conflicts that cover the wide ranges of regional problems are: first, the Sunni-Shia rivalry with Saudi Arabia and Iran described as the regional major actors, which have resulted in not only instability and violence in Middle East countries and the collapse of weak states but also a wide range of regional and international problems, including terrorism, the refugee crisis, and humanitarian crisis; second, the Israel – Palestine conflict in which Israel hostile actions are exceeding the limits of self-defense against Hamas and Hezbollah with indiscriminate attacks on Palestinian civilians, proving clearer the real goals of not only becoming the political majority but also expansionism, and using Identity Politics from their laws that marginalize citizens based on ethnicity to the regional foreign policy that either creates or makes the best use of the divisions in the Arab world in pursuing their political objectives; and third, the conflicts that the Kurds are either engaging in or getting involved in which have rekindled the Kurdish question of identity, minority treatment inside countries based on ethnicity status, and statehood. Equally important in the narrative of regional Identity Politics and identity conflicts is the intervention of the west, which has partly caused and partly exacerbated the situation – from the legacy of imperialism which not only created the state boundaries surrounded an amalgam of ethnicity and religion and put or supported authoritarian regimes who used these ethnic and religious lines to secure their political power, but also the tradition of meddling with regional affairs for political influence.

### **3.1. Identity Politics in regional Sunni-Shia schism and Saudi Arabia and Iran's Rivalry**

The beginning of 2016 has seen a series of executions across Saudi Arabia. Prominent Shia cleric and dissident Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr was among the 47 prisoners executed. After news broke of his death, a group of demonstrators stormed the Saudi embassy in Iran's capital in protest, to which Saudi Arabia responded by cutting off diplomatic



ties with Iran, worsening the already hostile relations between two powers<sup>120</sup>. This event has been the most recent illustration and symbol of Sunni-Shia schism in the Middle East. Then, debates has broken out and while many has described the event as a manifestation of a fight that has been brewing for centuries, many others have argued that religious conflicts is just the surface of the whole picture of Middle Eastern politics if not the outcomes that political actors seek to serve their political goals and interests. The former argues that the position of Islam as one of the key components of identity is entrenched in the Middle East and deeply rooted in its history and culture, while it also offers a strong mandate for political activity. It has been, and is still seen as the foundation of movements challenging the colonial and post-colonial order in the region with fundamentalist movements originating either from the tradition of the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood, or Khomeini's Shia revolution.

However, there is one essential question to ask about this Sunni-Shia schism - the religious war and violent sectarian conflicts that are going on in the Middle East is: Why now? If this tension really dates back to the sixth century when Islam took root, and if it represents the "reopening of old sectarian wounds" to determine "which form of Islam should dominate the Middle East: Shia or Sunni?"<sup>121</sup>, then why has it been rekindled now in the twenty first century rather than anytime in the past? While understanding sectarianism as an important aspect of the conflict, focusing only on the religious side is to fall in the trap of the simplified primordialism while ignoring the complex territorial struggles for influence, control and power of regional and global forces that are manipulating identities for political gains. The framework to examine this conflict on regional scale is analyzing first from the Iranian Revolution, which has been considered as the historical juncture when sectarianism was first resurrected in the region because Middle Eastern states started to get out of the iron-fist of the Ottoman or Imperialism that had held the region with all its simmering ethnic and sectarian conflicts for centuries. The second fundamental step is to look at the process of forging alliance in which regimes instead of unified states, opposition groups and

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<sup>120</sup> HUBBARD, Ben, "Iranian Protesters Ransack Saudi Embassy After Execution of Shiite Cleric", The New York Times, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/03/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-executes-47-sheikh-nimr-shiite-cleric.html>

<sup>121</sup> BRENDAN, O'Neil, "Saudi Arabia vs Iran: Much more than a Religious War", Spiked, 2016, <http://www.spiked-online.com/newsite/article/saudi-arabia-vs-iran-much-more-than-a-religious-war/17786>

movements within states and supranational organizations are actors. This step should determine whether Identity is the foundation of affiliation and alliances, or Identity Politics is just a means in many means to pursue political and economical means that is used when it is deemed useful and dismissed when it is dissonant with political goals, or Identity Politics is the artificial background that actors created in order to manipulate the others and drive the situation following the direction that is best serve their interests. The last step is to address the dynamics and interests in this rivalry. In parallel with studying regional actors, it is of significance to identify influence of foreign forces on regional political actors, which might reveal that the regional picture resembles its miniatures inside weak states – where ethnic, sectarian and identity conflicts are either created to enhance the right of the ruling parties and the actors who hold the power, or are the results of mismanagement of regional affairs.

### **3.1.1. The Iranian Revolution**

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 is considered as the turning point of Saudi Arabia-Iran's relations and open the era of rivalry as well as the proliferation of regional sectarian conflicts. It was nurtured since Iranian population grew increasingly discontent with the Shah when it made efforts to modernize and westernize Iran in the 1970s, and severely marginalized Iran's Shia clergy in the process. Moreover, the economic downturn in 1977 dramatically reduced the faith of the population in the Shah's ability to produce economic decentralization while increasing political repression in the country. This led to the enlistment of the masses towards revolution with Ayatollah Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini playing a central role, which would overthrow the government of Mohammad Shah Pahlavi and signified a great transition there.<sup>122</sup>

Religion played a major role in the mobilization of this Revolution as Khomeini devised the ultimate Islamic transformation to a pure Islamic government from the Shah's corrupt regime and this idea was at the center of the success that the revolution achieved. The reinstatement of "true Islam" attracted Iranian population because it contained both "domestic and indigenous origins" and equipped the state with dual

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<sup>122</sup> KEDDIE, Nikki R., "Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution", Yale University Press, New Haven, 2006.

legitimacy of both religious doctrines and popular consent.<sup>123</sup> They believed that freeing Iran from Western dominance and “cultural colonization”, as well as riding Iran from Pahlavi’s secular influences and instead setting up Islamic politics and economic institutions would provide solutions for all of Iran’s problems. The overthrow of the Shah not only marked a rare occasion where Islamists have successfully taken over a constituted political authority, but where Shia Islamists, who have long maintained a quietist political stance towards government, were able to accomplish this feat.<sup>124</sup> Khomeini advocated for direct clerical rule, the rule by supreme Islamic jurisprudence, thus politically empowered the *ulama* and imposed his theocratic doctrine. While many revolutions have had religious ideologies, the establishment of clerical rule was an entirely new concept. He also re-established the legal and religious authority of the Shia mujahid and was ultimately concerned with reinforcing the “Islam of the past”. The most important aspect of this transformation was its assignation of political authority to the political figure of the Shia jurist – a role that transcends the traditional organization of command and obedience in Shia.

This formation of the first Islamic Republic and the popularization of Islamic fundamentalism were a rude shock to Saudi leadership and posed substantial challenges to Sunni sensibilities, thereby directly affecting the Saudi Kingdom. It brought to power in Iran “*a man who had explicitly argued that Islam and hereditary kingship were incompatible, a threatening message to say the least, in Riyadh*”.<sup>125</sup> Khomeini also made it clear that his ambitions extended beyond Iran and that he wanted to be accepted as the leader of the Muslim world. Khomeini was vastly popular in the Shia world and quickly rose to be seen as Shia leader through his appeal to Shia popular beliefs and myths. He also aimed to transpose the Iranian Revolution as an Islamic Revolution, so that Sunnis would accept his authority. Iran began its Islamic experiment by trying to inspire Islamic revivalism throughout the Muslim world. Although it preached Muslim unity, Iran supported groups that had specific Shia agendas. Much of Khomeini’s activist tendencies are a product of historical

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<sup>123</sup> DABASHI, Hamid, “Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundation of the Islamic Revolution in Iran”, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, 2006.

<sup>124</sup> EUBAN, Roxanne L. And ZAMAN, Muhammad Qusim, (eds.), “Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought: Texts and Contexts from Al-Banna to Bin Laden”, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2009, p.155.

<sup>125</sup> QUANDT, William B., “Saudi Arabia in the 1980s: Foreign Policy, Security, and Oil”, The Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., 1981, p.39.

context. He focused his attention on anti-Israel and anti-American rhetoric and activism and sought to delegitimize Saudi Arabia as it viewed the corrupted and dictatorial Saudi monarchy a mere extension of American interference.<sup>126</sup>

In the meantime, Saudi goals have been to spread Wahhabism across the Muslim world. As the “Custodian of the two holy sites” of Islam, the host of the annual Muslim pilgrimage, and equally if not more important, the owner of tremendous oil and wealth from oil, it has enormous influence in the region. To promote Wahhabism, it funded the construction and operation of religious and educational institutions that sermonize Wahhabism as well as the training of imams, and provided financial resources for the teaching and propagating Wahhabism abroad.<sup>127</sup> This also solidified its role in regional identity politics in its pursue to consolidate authority and power in the region.

Behind the scene of the Iran-Saudi rivalry marked by this Revolution is an unhappy US – who had supported the Shahs in Iran as much as it backed the Saudis and guided it to use the oil wealth to buy advanced American weapons while the US and Israel advised the regime, to finally see the Shah overthrown. The Shah regime, similar to the Saudis – the traditional ally of US in the region, is the result of US methods of “propping up repressive elites that support the West’s business and military interests” after the World War II when the US took over the place of Britain to dominate the Middle East. This approach has two outcomes: the first is that the prospects for the emergence of more popular and democratic governments are undermined; the second is that it helps “to fan the flames of religious extremism that is often the only alternative available to those being repressed”.<sup>128</sup> These two outcomes are exactly two problems of the Middle East nowadays. In Iran, Iran had nurtured a secular political opposition, which paved the way for an independent Iran - until the US-backed Shah regime removed the actual political opposition, which left a void that was filled by the religious factions in the country. After the Islamic Revolution in 1979 that replaced the Western-backed Shah, Shia militias also emerged, including Hezbollah. This

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<sup>126</sup> NASR, “The Shia Revival: How conflicts within Islam will Shape the Future”, p.150.

<sup>127</sup> LEWIS, Bernard, “The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror”, Modern Library, New York, 2003, p.126.

<sup>128</sup> CURTIS, Mark, “Web of Deceit: Britain’s Real Role in the World”, Vintage, London, 2003, pp.253-257.

approach to the Middle East by the US also accounted for not only the success of the Taliban fundamentalists, nurtured in the madrasas of Pakistan with CIA training<sup>129</sup> and Wahhabism ideology of the Saudis<sup>130</sup>, who drove the Soviet army out of Afghanistan and then went on to take over the country, offering a base to Islamic militants from across the region;<sup>131</sup> but also the rise of the Sunni jihadi movements labeled al-Qaeda, and other jihadist groups who have expressed a destructive longing for Islamic self-sufficiency, unity and revolt against Western interference in the region.

On the consequences of the Iran Revolution, it should be noted that even with the salience of political Islam in its height after the Iranian Revolution and the presence of sectarian identities in the region, Arab governments did not fall though some faced crisis and upheaval. It was because the regimes had stronger political institutions that were better able to control and repress their population, which also were not intervened by foreign forces. In weak states, Iran and Saudi Arabia have tried to position themselves as the patrons of their respective religious clans so as to assert influence, and they have sustain the sentiments of sectarianism to promote fear of the other side or to mobilize for their side. Sectarian identity has become a useful instrument in creating violence and an umbrella under which Middle Eastern militias and political parties are mobilized and forged into alliances.

### **3.1.2. Forging Alliance in the Games of Identity Politics**

Saudi Arabia and Iran are gripped in a zero-sum game, contesting for land, resources, weapons and generally, influence. In addition to Saudi's export of Wahhabism, another manner in which Saudi Arabia pursued reciprocal containment was through the formation of alliances and the support of any event that would counter Iran's ideological and geopolitical interests in the region.

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<sup>129</sup> MUFTI, Mariam, "Religion and Militancy in Pakistan and Afghanistan", A Report of the CSIS Program on Crisis, Conflicts and Cooperation, Center for Strategic & International studies, 2012, p.33.

<sup>130</sup> ALIKUZAI, Hamid Wahed, "A concise History of Afghanistan in 25 Volumes", Trafford Publishing, 2013, p.558.

<sup>131</sup> TAYLOR, Alan, "The Soviet War in Afghanistan, 1979-1989", The Atlantic, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2014/08/the-soviet-war-in-afghanistan-1979-1989/100786/>

Iran-Iraq war instigated by Saddam's Ba'athist regime was a battle to contain Iran's ideological and geopolitical role in the region.<sup>132</sup> The ostensible issues that divided two countries based on the long-standing rivalry between two different and influential identities. On the surface, it seems like the advent of the Islamic Republic and its militant Shia outsourcing caused Saudi Arabia and its allies in the international system to provide highly advanced weaponry to the Ba'athist regime, which in turn drew in conservative Arab countries including Kuwait, Qatar, Egypt, and Jordan as they perceived Iraq's fight as an extension of their own security struggles against Khomeini's anathema.<sup>133</sup> The alliance against Iran's religious identity resulted in the formation of organizations and coalitions including the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) which aside from curbing Iran's role in the region's politics also served as a dominant instrument for US influence – the world power that lost its share in Iran's oil when the Islamic Revolution overthrew the Shah regime<sup>134</sup>. By coordinating military and security arrangements in the region, Saudi Arabia and other GCC members received large advanced weapon deals and the protection from the defensive nuclear umbrella, and joined the West in their coercive economic sanctions against Iran and helped implement campaigns to pass political resolutions condemning Iran. In 2013, Saudi Arabia pushed for an integrated command structure for the GCC military forces that is similar to NATO, including 100,000 troops. In 2014, this was followed by a common naval force. These projects are progressing slowly. In 2015, Saudi Arabia initiated, along with Egypt, the creation of a common anti-terror force under the umbrella of the League of Arab States. This "Joint Arab Force" was to have 40,000 troops, as well as standing command structure. Unity purpose was at an all-time high, with Egypt's President Sisi even declaring that national security in the Gulf was an integral part of Egyptian security. In spite of these enthusiastic declarations and several defence chief meetings, the project has been put on hold since summer 2015 until "further notice". Saudi Arabia, supported by Kuwait and Bahrain, allegedly has not been in harmony with Egypt on strategic priorities: while the Saudis focus on Yemen, Egypt sets its sight on Libya, and while Egypt, like Russia, wants to see the IS

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<sup>132</sup> TIRMAN, John and MALEKI, Abbas, "US-Iran Misperceptions: A Dialogue", Bloomsbury Academic, New York and London, 2014, p.92.

<sup>133</sup> CLEVELAND, "A History of the Modern Middle East", p.417.

<sup>134</sup> HERATH, R.B., "A new Beginning for Humankind: A Recipe for Lasting Peace on Earth", iUniverse, Inc., Bloomington, 2012, p.21.

defeated but Syrian President Assad's army remain in control, Saudi continues to seek regime change in Damascus. Although Saudi Arabia has patched up relations with Qatar since the 2014 fallout, Gulf cohesion remains weak. Oman has rejected the proposed Gulf Union in 2013, and was the only Gulf state which declined to even symbolically support Saudi Arabia in its Yemen intervention two years later. Despite these somewhat disappointing experiences, Saudi Arabia continues to seek allies which display its will and capacity of projecting power, which has been materialized most recently under the form of the Islamic Alliance. Its purposes are to counter-balance Iranian influence, to restore Saudi's Muslim reputation that has somehow been tarnished, and to create military synergies between signatories.

On an international scope, Saudi Arabia is considered America's traditional ally in the Middle East. The alliance, based on oil cooperation, between the Saudis and US, which survived the oil embargo in 1973 and the attacks of September 2001, have had a number of strains, including differences on issues of Palestine-Israel conflict, the 2011 Arab protest movements, while new generation of Saudi Arabia leaders is adjusting to what it sees as a resurgent Iran leaders is adjusting to what it sees as a resurgent Iran and a retreating US, which has announced a strategic rebalancing to Asia by taking a more assertive military role in the Middle East. However, both sides understand the importance of the relationship and common interests in the region.

Similar with Saudi Arabia, Iran has also made effort to create an alliance gathered around the Islamic Republic of Iran. Its alliance with Syria's Assad regime dates back to the Iran-Iraq war as Iraq had long been Syria's competitor for supremacy in the Arab world, while claiming the Alawites as branch of the Shia. However, at its essence, it is the political relations based on Syria and Iran's shared perception of anti-imperialism and anti-Zionism that kept them together. Both countries had clear geopolitical interest and this alliance provided them with the opportunity to promote their influence in the region. Additionally, for Iran, Syria represented the access to Shia community in Lebanon – a state which was suffering from civil war. Iran wanted to both increase its influence in the region by exporting its revolution through Lebanon and target attacks against Israel. After the foundation of Hezbollah in Lebanon's civil war was Hamas in the aftermath of the Israeli invasion of 1982, Iran

supported both, and its alliance with Hezbollah has been in existence for over 30 years. In contemporary political map of the Middle East, Iran is actively supporting proxies in major conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories. With the conclusion of the nuclear agreement, with the prospect of the release of impounded funds as part of sanction relief, the commitments with its allies are more ensured.

While the alliances of Iran with Hezbollah and Hamas are widely depicted as the alliances based on Shia solidarity, it can be said with greater evidence that they have actually shared interests in countering what they perceive as US-Israeli plan to reshape the region. This is why it supports Hamas, the Palestinian wing of the Muslim Brotherhood and a patently Sunni movement. Hezbollah leader also has downplayed his movement's Shia origins by emphasizing the Arab nationalist character of its fight against Israel: "*Here was a national resistance movement holding out against a colonial and predatory occupying power*".<sup>135</sup>

Iran and Russia also had a long history, in which nuclear connection was the factor that drew them close. When Iraq used chemical weapons against Iran in their war and the US blocked the UN punishment for Iraq, Iran decided to develop a nuclear program.<sup>136</sup> The West refused due to pressures from America, but Soviet Union at the time was more than willing to take the job, first as it provides it with foreign currency, and then as Russia wanted to use Iran's nuclear program as a bargaining chip in negotiations with the West. One more factor that defines the relations between Russia and Iran is its contentious relations with the US, which led it to the emergence of "Asia Look".<sup>137</sup> Iran and Russia's interests in Syria have been the new factor in their relationship. Currently, as sanctions have been lifted in Iran, Russia wanted to cooperate for new economic opportunities.

The alliances with international power are relevant in regional Identity Politics, as foreign states use these relations to exert their version of Identity Politics on the

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<sup>135</sup> HILTERMANN, Joost, "A new Sectarian Threat in the Middle East?", *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol: 89, No: 868, 2007, p. 805.

<sup>136</sup> MOSTAGHIM, Ramin and MCDONNELL, Patrick J., "Iran's Nuclear resolve fueled by Iraq's Chemical Assault in the war", *Los Angeles Times*, 2013, <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/oct/17/world/la-fg-iran-chemical-20131017>

<sup>137</sup> MILANI, Abibas, "Russia and Iran: An Anti-Western Alliance?", *Current History*, October, Vol:106, No:702, 2007, p. 332.



region. Not to discuss their role behind identity-conflicts, their mismanagement which leads to identity divisions and violence, or the policy of creating or accentuating the aspect of ethnic and sectarian identities in conflicts, those “ancient” fissures which quickly and widely accelerated into conflicts have been integrated into their strategies towards the Middle East. For example, RAND Corporation has suggested several approaches to America’s long war described by some as an epic struggle against adversaries bent on forming a unified Islamic world to supplant Western dominance in the Middle East, in which the “Divide and Rule” proposes to exploit “*fault lines between the various Salafi-jihadist groups to turn them against each other and dissipate their energy on internal conflicts*”, or the “Inside Out” strategy recommends the use of “decisive conventional military force to change the regime in certain key Muslim countries and impose democracy in its place”.<sup>138</sup> When they take their sides in Middle East’s conflicts, it may be true that their roles are not defined by sectarianism, but they surely are taking part in the game of Identity Politics and conflicts in the region.

### **3.1.3. Dynamics and Interests in the Political Rivalry of Identities**

#### ***Domestic affairs and vulnerabilities***

The tensions, which on the surface are the results of regional competition between opposing sectarian identities, correlate to a range of other issues, from regime security, domestic security, to oil policy, and relations with the West. The sectarian lens provides a convenient and easy prism to understand the ongoing Saudi Iran rivalry, but it has enhanced the use of Identity Politics, which can make the best use of ethnic and sectarian identities – which can bring regional effects – for gaining political interests and power while distracting domestic populations from crises of governance.

As the ruling family of Saudi Arabia views the toppling of longstanding authoritarian regimes across the Middle East as an alarming development that threatens its rights, it has expanded its policy of buying political loyalty through the financing of economic, health, education benefits, the propagating of Wahhabism, and the invoking of sectarian fissures throughout the Middle East to be able to crack down on dissents and

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<sup>138</sup> PERNIN, Christopher G., NICHIPORUK, Brian, STAHL, Dale, BECK, Justin and RADAELLI-SANCHEZ, Ricky, “Unfolding the Future of the Long War”, RAND Corporation, 2008.

opposition movements, ensure its influence and power in regional and domestic affairs, and thereby sustain its social welfare for its own security and stability.

For Iran, it has its own problems: the Green Movement protests erupted in the aftermath of the 2009 presidential elections, initially challenging the legitimacy of the election; the population is frustrated by unemployment rates as high as 40 percent; social and political repression and flagrant disregard for civil and human rights are in presence. In this context, Identity Politics appears to be useful in drawing attention away from domestic problems.<sup>139</sup>

Saudi Arabia has implemented its political goals in the Middle East by a series of Identity Politics strategies, which was commented by Iran's foreign ministry spokesman, Hossein Jaber Ansari: "*It seems that Saudi Arabia considers not only its interest, but also its survival in the continuation of tensions and conflicts and is trying to settle its domestic problems through blame games*". In accusation of Saudi's for the wreaking havoc in the region, the head of Iran's judicial system also stated: "*The Muslim world today is witnessing numerous crimes committed by Saudis in different regions and in all instances of belligerency happening in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and Bahrain, Saudis' fingerprints and their support for terrorists are seen*".<sup>140</sup> These statements about the Saudis not meddling in regional affairs are the statements about something that would not happen. Neither Saudi Arabia nor Iran is going to stop generating their regional influence or supporting proxies and allies in the regional battleground in the Middle East.

### ***The Arab Uprisings***

The Arab Uprisings of pro-democracy protests in 2011 brought down regimes in the Arab world, from Tunisia, Egypt, Libya to Yemen, and created the domino effects in many other countries ranging from Morocco, Algeria to the Palestinian territories, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, the United State Emirates and Saudi

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<sup>139</sup> VAKIL, Sanam, "The Saudi-Iran standoff is not really Sectarian", Middle East Eye, 2016, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/saudi-iran-standoff-not-really-sectarian-706746842>

<sup>140</sup> BLACK, Iran and DEGHAN, Saeed Kamali, "Bahrain, Sudan and UAE follow Saudis in Diplomatic action against Iran", The Guardian, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/04/bahrain-cuts-diplomatic-ties-with-iran-in-row-over-saudi-execution-of-shia-cleric>

Arabia.<sup>141</sup> It came as a shock to regimes' leaders and many experts and observers of the region. However, except for case of Tunisia, it led to instability in the region through the toppling and transformation of existing power structures that increased intrastate aggression, threatening socio-political and economic security.<sup>142</sup> For Saudi Arabia and Iran, both had interests in the outcome of the struggle. While the Uprisings brought Saudi Arabia acute worries, Iran viewed the events as the spread of its revolutionary message coming to fruition, called the political upheaval as a defeat for the US and a liberating Islamic movement, part of an Islamic awakening.<sup>143</sup> However, in the case of Syria, as it is not only Iran's close ally but also provides Iran with access to its most important proxy, the Hezbollah; Iran did not support the civil resistance of the rebel groups but contributed funds, weapons and personnel to support the Assad regime. As such, the Arab Uprisings create new dynamics for the struggle of political influence in the Gulf and Levant with the use of Identity Politics, with the consequences of direct military interventions in the countries in their spheres of influence.

### ***The Nuclear Issues***

Israel has an ambiguous nuclear status as it does not confirm its arsenal and is highly committed to a self-help model in providing for its own national security. It is estimated that the country has 100-200 nuclear weapons,<sup>144</sup> and the country is not a party to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty not its agreement. Iran - as a full member of the NPT - insists that its nuclear program is for peaceful purpose. However its security outlook suggests otherwise when it is isolated and surrounded by hostile Arab neighbors to the west, two regional nuclear neighbors and an openly hostile United States with forces in several neighboring states. With Saddam's regime destroyed and North Korea armed and dangerous to the West, Iran was the only member of the "axis of evil" left exposed to the prospect of regime change.

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<sup>141</sup> GELVIN, James L., "The Arab Uprisings: What everyone Needs to Know", Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 4-6..

<sup>142</sup> SHKOLNIK, Micheal, "Arab Uprisings and al-Qeada's Peripheral Infiltration: A Tour d'Horizon", Security and Defence Officer, United Nations Association in Canada, 2012.

<sup>143</sup> NAYSAN, Rafati, "Iran and the Arab Spring", LSE Research online – London School of Economics and Political Science, 2012, pp.49-50.

<sup>144</sup> International Panel on Fissile Material, "Global Fissile Material Report 2013, Increasing Transparency of Nuclear Warhead and Fissile Material Stocks as a Step toward Disarmament", p.9, <http://fissilematerials.org/library/gfmr13.pdf>

Surrendering its right to enrich uranium as demanded by the US and its allies means giving up nuclear deterrence – which is proved to be useful - and the path to a nuclear weapon in the future. Yet, the history of the past half century indicates that the only effective way to deter Washington from overthrowing their regime is by nuclear weaponry, especially in the context that Iran now is surrounded by hostile actors Saudi Arabia, Israel which is equipped with nuclear weapons, an Iraq awash with Sunni extremists in the form of IS, Syria which is endangered of falling to the same Salafist terrorists – all of which are direct and existential threat to Iran. Little wonder that they consider giving up the right to enrich uranium tantamount to giving up the right to protect their regime.<sup>145</sup> Saudi Arabia, expressing concerns over both Iran and Israel’s nuclear programs, hinted that it may follow suit. When Iran and the US reached a nuclear deal and improved relations under Obama administration, Saudi Arabia has got frustrated. Recently, it has stated again that “all options, including the acquisitions of nuclear weapons, to face whatever eventuality might come from Iran”.<sup>146</sup> However, this statement, along with the recent statement of a possible partnership with Israel,<sup>147</sup> suggested the threat of nuclear issue, based on a broader picture about the threat of a Iran- a dangerous powerful rival that bears Shia identity, is just a product of a series of tectonic shifts in the region’s power politics.

### *The Power of Oil and Geopolitics*

The world has witnessed the devastating slump in oil prices since mid-2014, partially because of the new supplies from Iraq and the expanding shale fields of the US. This has significantly affected the Middle East politics as major countries here are heavily dependent on oil exports to finance their governments and keep restiveness among their populaces at bay. However, the OPEC (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) meeting in Vienna in November 2014 led by Saudi Arabia failed to agree on either production cuts or a freeze. The failure has been widely attributed to the Saudi’s desire to kill off new output elsewhere and punish regional rivals, Iran and

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<sup>145</sup> HIRO, Dilip, “Nuclear Weapons Programs are about Regime Survival: The Iranian Bomb in a mad world”, [http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/174808/dilip\\_hiro\\_a\\_catch\\_22\\_nuclear\\_world](http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/174808/dilip_hiro_a_catch_22_nuclear_world)

<sup>146</sup> GAOchette, Nicole, “Saudi Prince: Getting Nukes an Option if Iran Breaks deal”, CNN, 2016, <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/05/06/politics/saudi-israel-officials-talk-nuclear-u-s/>

<sup>147</sup> Times of Israel Staff, “Time is right for Arab partnerships, Israeli minister tells Saudi-owned website”, The Times of Israel, 2016, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/time-is-right-for-arab-partnerships-israeli-minister-tells-saudi-owned-website/>

Russia for their support of Assad regime in Syria. However, after two years, experts believe that the Saudi royals begin to feel more belt-tightening by low oil prices, which demands them to cut back on the benefits they had been able to provide for their large and potentially restive population while sustaining the funding of military interventions and a costly war in Yemen.<sup>148</sup> As a result, many believed that Saudis would be amenable to a production freeze in Doha meeting in April 2016. The draft document produced by preliminary negotiations among Russia, Venezuela, Qatar and Saudi Arabia was considered by participants as essentially ready for signature, turned out to be a failure due to one factor: the presence of Iran. The recent deal to limit Iran's nuclear program has resulted in the lifting of international economic sanctions on Iran, which led to Iran's determination to raise their production. The "ongoing geopolitical tension with Iran is clearly a key consideration in Saudi Arabia's oil policy".<sup>149</sup> Saudi Arabia wants Iran to do the same instead of obtaining added oil revenues from the agreed freeze. This is just the nearest manifestation of the old rivalry of two oil-powers in the region in the battle for political power, in which Identity today is involved.

To conclude, Identity Politics not only helps Saudi Arabia to minimize its domestic challenges including the battle to succeed King Salman, ramifications of cheap oil and unprecedented budget deficits, but also soothes its sentiment of vulnerability. It is true that Saudi Arabia is strong in Arab politics at the moment, as it can rely on the momentary close partnership of the United Arab Emirates and the temporary weakness of traditional powers such as Egypt, Syria and Iraq. Its primary intra-Sunni state rivals, Turkey and Qatar, have been chastened by multiple setbacks, and each has sought to rebuild relations with the Saudis. For the moment, it has also defeated the challenge of the Arab uprising. At the same time, it feels vulnerable with its floundering wars in Syria and Yemen, the rise of Islamic State and the Iran nuclear deal. This combination of strength and vulnerability plus the desire to become the leader of the Arab world has made for erratic policies. In sum, the dynamics that have

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<sup>148</sup> KLARE, Micheal T., "Debacle at Doha: The Collapse of the Old Oil Order", 2016, [http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/176134/tomgram%3Amichael\\_klare%2C\\_the\\_coming\\_world\\_of\\_%22peak\\_oil\\_demand%2C%22\\_not\\_%22peak\\_oil%22/#more](http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/176134/tomgram%3Amichael_klare%2C_the_coming_world_of_%22peak_oil_demand%2C%22_not_%22peak_oil%22/#more)

<sup>149</sup> MOONEY, Chris, "Doha oil meeting ends without a deal to freeze production", the Washington Post, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2016/04/17/whats-so-important-about-the-oil-meeting-in-doha/>

dictated Saudi's Identity Politics in the region include concerns over interests and political power: First, as the nuclear deal is viewed as a threat to Saudi's regional position in the context that it has opposed to its US policies in the region, Identity Politics is useful in mobilization against Iran and hindrance to the settling of Syria's war. Second, while its foreign policy of backing insurgency in Syria has failed to remove the Assad regime despite massive human suffering as well as the radicalization and emergence of IS, the intervention in Yemen is also recognized as a strategic failure. Identity Politics thus distracts domestic and regional audiences from these failures by drawing attention to the sectarian tensions. Third, in its struggle to consolidate a Sunni leadership, Qatar and Turkey have competed with Saudi Arabia for influence with the insurgency while the Gulf Cooperation Council is not severing ties with Iran. The Saudis, thus, hope that the ideas of an Islamic Coalition against terrorism with Yemen war coalition as a model would strengthen its leadership intra-Sunni community. Meanwhile, Sunni Islamist networks also constitute a challenge as the domination of Syrian insurgency by sectarian jihadist factions has created powerful groups with their own agendas including al-Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood. Sectarian identity confrontation with Iran helps to keep these actors on board for a time.

With powerful states seeking to gain advantage, extend their own power and diminish that of their rivals, the Middle East are becoming fractious, while the collapse of states, in turn, has broken the national identities and stimulated the growth of ethnic and sectarian identification as a political factor. In Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria, Sunni-Shia rivalries form a central dynamic, which are also important in terms of the geo-strategic rivalries among major states competing in the region. When the regional order collapsing, and regional states are falling, the two-oil rich powers in the Middle East, each of which claims to be the leader of the Islamic world and a leader of the Middle East, are drawn into the vacuum, where they try to wield control as much as are controlled by the broader forces. What matters most in the Middle East identity conflicts is the interplay between political actors and identity, not sectarianism or any identity based on which conflicts are destined to be.

### 3.2. Israel's Political Ambitions and Identity Politics

As discussed in the second chapter, no matter how vehement both Jewish and Palestinians argued about their ethnic, religious, national identities attached to their rights of establishing their states on Palestine, the core issues of the conflict has been land and being the majority with the relevant political power to control their state. However, Identity Politics has played an important role in the struggles for both sides. Israel's Declaration of Independence in 1948 stated: "*The Land of Israel was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here their spiritual, religious and political identity was shaped. Here they first attained to statehood, created cultural values of national [...] significance*".<sup>150</sup> Clearly, Jewish identity was emphasized as the core of the Israel state. On the other hand, Palestinians see themselves as the victims of the conflict and the state of Israel, which "carry out policies of subjugation and oppression in excess of those of the apartheid regime in South Africa", and consider their acts of resistance, such as the events of Land Day in March 1976 and the Jerusalem and al-Aqsa Day in October 2000 as "milestones traversed in our collective journey, which served to strengthen our identity".<sup>151</sup> It should also be noted that Identity Politics is not only about the political actions that exclude others due to their different identity, but also about the branding under the labels of "anti-Semitism", "Islam-phobia", "terrorists", etc. in order to eliminate their power and silence fair discussions on the struggles or to gloss over important events in order to cover the truths and serve one's political aims.

To understand the subtleties of their Identity Politics in the region, the important step is to analyze their behaviors to be aware of the whole picture, of what Israel really want, and what it would do to realize its goals.

#### 3.2.1. Identity Politics in Expansionism and the Goal of becoming the Majority

Expansionism through occupation and settlement has always been one of Israel's core policies since the establishment of Israel state in 1948. In Israeli Prime Minister Moshe Sharatt's personal diaries, there is an excerpt from May of 1955 in which he

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<sup>150</sup> BEN-GURION, David, "The Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel", 1948, <http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/foreignpolicy/peace/guide/pages/declaration%20of%20establishment%20of%20state%20of%20israel.aspx>

<sup>151</sup> Mada al-Carmel, "The Haifa Declaration", Mada Research, 2007, p.9-13.

quotes Moshe Dayan: “[Israel] must see the sword as the main, if not the only, instrument with which to keep its morale high and to retain its moral tension. Toward this end it may, no – it must – invent dangers, and to do this it must adopt the method of provocation-and-revenge [...] And above all – let us hope for a new war with the Arab countries, so that we may finally get rid of our troubles and acquire our space”.<sup>152</sup>

Since the war of 1967, as Palestinians have come to accept the reality of Israel within the 1948 boundaries, the land dispute has increasingly focused on Israel’s occupation of the remaining territories – the West bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem. This is a direct violation of the Geneva Conventions Israel has signed, which stipulates in Article 49: “The occupying Power shall not deport or transfer parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupies”.<sup>153</sup> Since 2002, Israeli government has been building a “security fence” that winds deep into Palestinian territory, claiming the barrier would keep Palestinian suicide bombers from striking Israeli citizen. However, this separation wall has been a major de facto annexation of Palestinian territories while physically separated Palestinian communities, cutting them off their agricultural land and vital service, which was held to be contrary to international law and by the International Court of Justice in 2004.<sup>154</sup> In Gaza, the Jewish settlers numbered only 8,000 compared with 1.4 million local Palestinians in 2005; yet the settlers controlled 25 percent of the territory, 40 percent of the arable land and the lion’s share of water resource.<sup>155</sup> In August 2005, Israel withdrew all 8,000 settlers from Gaza, presented it as the contribution to peace based on a Two-State solution. But in 2006, another 12,000 Israeli settled on the West Bank. In West Bank, 2013 witnessed the 520,000 Israeli settlers use approximately six times the amount of water that the 2.6 million Palestinians use, while it should be taken into consideration that in the Middle East water is of significant importance. Israel has demolished over 15,000 Palestinian structures here over the period from 1993 to 2013, and Israeli settlers had control over

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<sup>152</sup> ISACOFF, Jonathan B., “Writing the Arab-Israeli Conflict: Pragmatism and Historical Inquiry”, Lexington Books, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., Oxford, 2006, p.68.

<sup>153</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross, “Geneva Conventions of 1949 and Additional Protocols and their Commentaries”, <https://www.icrc.org/ihl/WebART/380-600056>

<sup>154</sup> International Court of Justice, “Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory”, July 2004, <http://www.icj-cij.org/docket/index.php?pr=71&code=mwp&p1=3&p2=4&p3=6>

<sup>155</sup> SHLAIM, Avi, “How Israel brought Gaza to the Brink of Humanitarian Catastrophe”, The Guardian, 2009, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jan/07/gaza-israel-palestine>



more than 42 percent of the land in West Bank.<sup>156</sup> Facts pointed out that the real purpose behind the move was to redraw the borders of Greater Israel, and the pulling out of Gaza was not a step to peace deal but a step towards Zionist expansion on the West Bank. Moreover, Israel's settlers were withdrawn but Israeli soldiers continued to control all access in Gaza Strip by land, sea and air. Indeed, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has said recently: *"The creation of new facts on the ground through demolitions and settlement-building raises questions about whether Israel's ultimate goal is in fact to drive Palestinians out of certain parts of the West Bank, thereby undermining any prospects of transition to a viable Palestinian State"*.<sup>157</sup>

More importantly, the West has been vociferously condemned Hamas and joined with Israel to claim that it is a simply a terrorist organization, it has kept silent on the extrajudicial killing of Palestinians carried out by the Israeli forces. A short look into just one escalation of 50 days in July 2014 shows the disproportionate force and callous disregard for civilians of Israeli forces: the Palestinian fatality toll is 2,131, in which 1,473 are civilians including 501 children while the cumulative Israeli fatality toll is 71, of whom 66 were soldiers.<sup>158</sup> Report by UN Human Right Council also states that massive escalation of Israeli violations of Palestinian human rights in the occupied West Bank including East Jerusalem in the weeks preceding and during the Gaza assault was "overshadowed by the tragic events in Gaza". The mass destruction and killing inflicted by Israel "may have constituted military tactics reflective of a broader policy, approved at least tacitly by decision-makers at the highest levels of the Government of Israel".<sup>159</sup> In fact, Hamas was elected in free and fair elections for the Legislative Council of the Palestinian Authority in 2006, but soon proved to be a young and weak organization which got denied the fruit of its electoral victory and had to confront with adversary including Israel and the West, and has resorted to terror, weapon of the weak.

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<sup>156</sup> OXFAM, "20 Facts: 20 Years since the Oslo Accords", Oxfam International, <https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/oxfam-oslo-20-factsheet.pdf>

<sup>157</sup> UNSC, "Accelerated Settlement Activity Casts Doubt on Israel's Commitment to Two-State Solution, Secretary-General Tells Security Council", UN Meetings Coverage, 2016, <http://www.un.org/press/en/2016/sc12327.doc.htm>

<sup>158</sup> UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Occupied Palestinian TerritoryL Gaza Emergency", United Nations, 2014, [https://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha\\_opt\\_sitrep\\_04\\_09\\_2014.pdf](https://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_sitrep_04_09_2014.pdf)

<sup>159</sup> Human Rights Council, "Report of the Independent Commission of Inquiry on the 2014 Gaza Conflict", UNGA, pp.7-11, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/CoIGazaConflict/Pages/ReportCoIGaza.aspx#report>

Furthermore, in order to realize Israel's goals of expanding its territory and making and ensuring the goal of having the Israeli majority in its land and occupied territories, Israel continues to apply laws and policies that discriminate on the basis of ethnic or national origin. Since 2002 Israel has prohibited Palestinians from the occupied Palestinian territories who are spouses to Israeli citizens from joining their partners in Israel. In 2007, the Knesset – Israel's unicameral national legislature - extended the ban through 2008 and expanded its scope to include citizens of Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon married to Israeli from living with their spouses in Israel.<sup>160</sup> Meanwhile, in 2011, two new Israel's laws affecting Israel's Palestinian Arab residents "which would promote discrimination and stifle free expression" were passed by the Knesset: One law would authorize rural, Jewish-majority communities to reject Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel and other unsuitable applicants for residency; and the other would freeze expression regarding a key moment in the history Palestinian citizens.<sup>161</sup> Even the US acknowledges in 2015 the "institutional and societal discrimination against Arab citizens of Israel", confirms that Israeli government forces are responsible for unlawful killings and the use of excessive force and torture against Palestinian in a US State Department report.<sup>162</sup>

Israel's expansionism does not stop in Palestinian land, though. Recently, Benjamin Netanyahu traveled the occupied Golan Heights which it seized from Syria during the 1967 Six-Day War and then essentially annexed it in 1981 when it extended Israeli civil law – versus military rule – to the territory, without international recognition, to declare that "*the time has come after 49 years for the international community to finally recognize that the Golan Heights will remain forever under Israeli sovereignty*" and never to be returned to Syria. Although Syria's Deputy Foreign Minister said that the Syrians would retake the territory, by force if necessary, Netanyahu asserted with US Secretary John F. Kerry that Golan Heights was not a bargaining chip in the Syria talks. He added that Israel did not oppose the Syrian

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<sup>160</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Israel/Occupied Palestinian Territory", 2008, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2009/country-chapters/israel/palestine>

<sup>161</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Israel: New laws Marginalize Palestinian Arab Citizens: Measures Threaten Discrimination; Chill freedom of Expression", 2011, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/03/30/israel-new-laws-marginalize-palestinian-arab-citizens>

<sup>162</sup> Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, "Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2015: Israel and the Occupied Territories", US Department of State, 2015, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm?year=2015&dclid=252927#wrapper>

peace effort, “on the condition that it does not come at the cost of Israeli security”, that Israel wanted to see Iran-backed Hezbollah fighters and IS out of Syria.<sup>163</sup>

At the beginning of the occupation in 1967, the Golan Heights was very tempting for Israel since unlike Gaza and West Bank, it was not heavily populated. Israel thus wanted to “grab a piece of land and keep it, until the enemy gets tired and gives it to us”.<sup>164</sup> This strategy, along with the tactic of settlement that Israel has implemented on other Palestinian territory, is typical for Israel’s behavior of occupying and expanding its territory. Syrian population of the Golan Heights before the Israeli occupation was estimate at 130,000 people, today the population is around 36,000 people including 16,000 Druzes, while the number of Israeli settlers amount to 20,000. The Israeli government claims that the Golan Heights is a strategic territory for Israel’s security, but it is also a fact that a third of Israel’s water supplies comes from this occupied territory; and the discovery of oil in the Golan Heights will make Israel self-sufficient, that dictates Israel’s policy towards this land.<sup>165</sup>

To sum up, the demolitions of people’s homes in occupied East Jerusalem, the expropriation of large tracts of land in the Jordan valley, the repeated destruction of Palestine villages such as Al-Araqid in the Naqab, the unrestrained building of illegal settlements, the revoking of the residence permits of Jerusalem Palestinians are part and parcel of Israel’s plan to annex Palestinian land. Identity Politics in the hands of Israel’s government proves to be useful in this case, as it is the foundations for Israel’s blaming of Palestinian, Arabs and terrorist groups to attack the State of the Jews, while in fact, it is carrying out the tactic of expansionism while making sure Jews constitute the majority in its communities.

### **3.2.2. Israel’s Interests in the chaos of Middle East**

Whether Israel has been the perpetrator of the chaos in the Middle East or it has tailored it to fit its own objectives, the collapse of Middle Eastern states would serve

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<sup>163</sup> BOOTH, William, “Netanyahu vows that Israel will never give up Golan Heights”, The Washington Post, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/netanyahu-vows-that-israel-will-never-give-up-golan-heights/2016/04/17/c7639e16-04a7-11e6-bfed-ef65dff5970d\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/netanyahu-vows-that-israel-will-never-give-up-golan-heights/2016/04/17/c7639e16-04a7-11e6-bfed-ef65dff5970d_story.html)

<sup>164</sup> REINHART, Tanya, “Israel/Palestine: How to End the War of 1948”, Seven Stories Press, New York, 2011.

<sup>165</sup> GUZMAN, Timony A., “The Israeli Occupied Golan Heights: An Occupation for Natural Resources, Water, Land and Oil”, Global Research, 2016, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/the-israeli-occupied-golan-heights-an-occupation-for-natural-resources-water-land-and-oil/5521207>

Israel with four main beneficial consequences, all of which contribute to the goals of strengthening Israel in the background of its isolation in the region and the opposition of the Arabs; and weakening the ability of the Palestinians under occupation as well as the support from the Arabs to resist Israel's long-standing plan to ethnically cleanse them from within its expanded 1967 borders. First, in the Sunni-Shia schism and sectarian conflicts between two strands of Islam, there is a chance to bolster the influence of other minorities - from the Kurds to the Druze and Christians, all of which have been facing marginalization, exclusion, or opposition in the existing nation state system imposed by the European imperialism – against a more dominant Islam. Second, with the Middle Eastern states broken down and their citizens feuding and weak, Israel could more easily dominate the region militarily, play the role of region's policemen to keep control of the region, and maintain its privileged alliance with the US. Thirdly, instability in the region, especially in Iraq and Iran, would lead to the break-up of the Saudi-dominated oil cartel OPEC, sabotaging the Saudis' influence in US and its wealth which allows it to finance Islamic extremists as well as Palestinian resistance movements. Fourth, with a Middle East in chaos, and much of the Palestinian resistance dispersed to refugee camps in neighboring states, Israel could continue and complete the cleansing of the Palestinians in resistance from the occupied territories, thus quell Palestinians' nationalism as well as the voice of support for a two-state solution to its conflict with Palestine.<sup>166</sup> If one questions the legitimacy of the claims on Israel's goals in the region, its actions prove just as much of its goals of settlement and expansionism.

Regionally, the disintegration of Syria will allow Israel to tackle Iran unopposed. This is important to Israel as Iran is viewed as serious threats for Israel for a number of reasons: After the Gulf War of 1991, with all the crippling sanctions and the imposition of no-fly zones, Iran has been recovering gradually in terms of economic and military, with the possibility of becoming Israel's nuclear rival in the region, while nurturing Israel's main foe in Lebanon – the Hezbollah, and sustaining a strong alliance with Syria – Israel's recalcitrant neighbor. Micheal Oran, a former ambassador to Washington has said that *“If we have to choose between ISIS and*

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<sup>166</sup> COOK, Jonathan, “Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East”, Pluto Press, London, 2008.

*Assad, we'll take ISIS. ISIS had flatbed trucks and machine guns. Assad represents the strategic arch from Tehran to Beirut, 130,000 rockets in the hands of Hezbollah, and the Iranian nuclear program*".<sup>167</sup> In addition, Iran was suspected of assisting Hamas in the occupied Palestinian territories. Indeed, the proof of using Identity Politics as a strategy to tackle Iran can be found in Netanyahu's assertion that "*what you're seeing in the Middle East today in Iraq and in Syria is the stark hatreds between radical Shias, in this case led by Iran, and radical Sunnis led by al Qaeda and ISIS and others*", and his statement that "when your enemies are fighting each other, don't strengthen either one of them. Weaken both"<sup>168</sup>. Besides the advantage of eliminating an ally of Iran, the weak and chaotic Syria is significant for Israel also because it looks for expand settlement in Golan Heights. With Syria disintegrating after years of civil war, Israelis argue that it is hard to imagine a stable state to which the territory could be returned. Further, in the bargain for international, or at least American, recognition of the annexation would be an appropriate salve to Israeli security concerns in the wake of the nuclear deal with Iran.<sup>169</sup> Similarly, Iraq in chaos which would be carved out later into statelets including Kurdish partition would be beneficial to Israel in many ways.

### **3.2.3. Tactics of Identity Politics on regional scope**

#### ***Israel's lobby – the role in the invasion of Iraq***

Pressure from Israel and the lobby was not the only factor behind the US decision to attack Iraq in 2003, but it was a critical element. The war was motivated in good part by a desire to make Israel more secure. Apart from Kuwait which Saddam conquered in the 1990 war, "Israel is the only country in the West whose leaders support the war unreservedly and where no alternative option is voiced".<sup>170</sup> Israel made considerable efforts to urge US officials not to delay a military strike against Iraq's Saddam

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<sup>167</sup> TROFIMOV, Yaroslav, "Israel's Main Concern in Syria: Iran, not ISIS," The Wall Street Journal, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/israels-main-concern-in-syria-iran-not-isis-1458207000>

<sup>168</sup> DUNHAM, Will, "Netanyahu urges US not to work with Iran to stabilize Iraq", Reuters, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-security-usa-israel-idUSKBN0EX15L20140622>

<sup>169</sup> RUDOREN, Jodi, "As Syria Reels, Israel Looks to Expand Settlements in Golan Heights", The New York Times, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/03/world/middleeast/syria-civil-war-israel-golan-heights.html>

<sup>170</sup> LEVY, Gideon, "A deafening Silence", Haaretz, 2002, <http://www.haaretz.com/a-deafening-silence-1.32374>

Hussein.<sup>171</sup> By this point, strategic coordination between Israel and the US has reached unprecedented dimensions, and Israeli intelligence officials had given Washington a variety of alarming reports about Iraq's programs on Weapons of Mass Destruction. As it was put later, "Israeli intelligence was a full partner to the picture presented by American and British intelligence regarding Iraq's non-conventional capabilities".<sup>172</sup> In an uniformed manner and efforts, Israel's former Prime Minister Ehud Barak warned that "the greatest risk now lies in inaction"<sup>173</sup>, while his predecessor, Benjamin Netanyahu wrote "The case for toppling Saddam" in which he described Saddam as a dictator who had rapidly expanding his arsenal of biological and chemical weapons while also posing a danger of nuclear arming, and then declared: "*I speak for the overwhelming majority of Israelis in supporting a preemptive strike against Saddam's regime*". "*Today nothing less than dismantling his regime will do*".<sup>174</sup>

Within the US, the main driving force behind the Iraq War was a small band of neoconservatives, many with close ties to Israel's Likud Party. In addition, key leader of the lobby's major organization lent their voices to the campaign for war.<sup>175</sup> "*As President Bush attempted to sell the war in Iraq, America's most important Jewish organization rallied as one to his defense. In statement after statement community leaders stressed the need to rid the world of Saddam Hussein and his weapons of mass destruction*", as "*concern for Israel's safety rightfully factored into the deliberations of the main Jewish groups.*"<sup>176</sup> Thus, the war was due in large part to the lobby's influence neoconservatives within it. As important as the neoconservatives were for making the Iraq war happen, they needed help to achieve their aim, which arrive with the attack on September 11. Specifically, the events of that fateful day led Bush and

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<sup>171</sup> MILBANK, Dana, "Group Urges Pro-Israel Leaders' Silence on Iraq", The Washington Post, 2002, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2002/11/27/group-urges-pro-israel-leaders-silence-on-iraq/62c32dc1-580a-4468-a482-6ba918085c83/>

<sup>172</sup> BROM, Shlomo, "An Intelligence Failure", Strategic Assessment, Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, Tel Aviv University, Vol: 6, No: 3, p.9.

<sup>173</sup> BARAK, Ehud, "Taking Apart Iraq's Nuclear Threat", The New York Times, 2002, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/09/04/opinion/taking-apart-iraq-s-nuclear-threat.html>

<sup>174</sup> NETANYAHU, Benjamin, "The case for Toppling Saddam", The Wall Street Journal, 2002, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB1032480479501791755>

<sup>175</sup> MEARSHEIMER, John J. and WALT, Stephen M, "The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy", Middle East Policy, Vol: 13, No: 3, 2006, p.54.

<sup>176</sup> WALT, Stephen M., "I don't mean to say I told you so, but...", Foreign Policy, 2010, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2010/02/08/i-dont-mean-to-say-i-told-you-so-but/>

Vice President Cheney to reverse course and become strong proponents of a preventive war to topple Saddam. Neoconservatives in the lobby reportedly played especially critical roles in persuading the president and vice president to favor war. With Bush and Cheney on board, the die was cast for war. Outside the administration, neoconservative pundits lost no time making the case that invading Iraq was essential to winning the war on terrorism. Their efforts were partly aimed at keeping pressure on Bush and partly intended to overcome opposition to the war both inside and outside of the government. On September 20, a group of prominent neoconservatives and their allies published another open letter, telling the president “*even if evidence does not link Iraq directly to the attack, any strategy aiming at the eradication of terrorism and its sponsors must include a determined effort to remove Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq*” while reminding Bush that “*Israel has been and remains America’s staunchest ally against international terrorism*”.<sup>177</sup>

It should also be noted that the key part of the campaign for the invasion of Iraq lay at the manipulation of intelligence information, which involved two organizations that were created after 9/11: The Policy Counterterrorism Evaluation Group which was tasked with finding links between al-Qaeda and Iraq; and the Office of Special Plans which was tasked with finding evidence that would be used to invade Iraq; both are headed by neoconservatives.<sup>178</sup> Given the neoconservatives’ devotion to Israel, their obsession with Iraq, and their influence in the Bush administration, it is not surprising that many Americans suspected that the war was designed to further Israeli interests, though this suspect was not widely discussed. “*The lack of public discussion about the role of Israel is the proverbial elephant in the room: Everybody sees it, no one mentions it*”. The possible reason for this reluctance was fear of being labeled an anti-Semite.<sup>179</sup>

The disintegration of Iraq, in fact, serves Israel in many ways: Saddam’s regime was anti-Israel, pro-Palestinian, and attacked Israel during the first Gulf War with missiles.

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<sup>177</sup> “Open letter to the President”, The Weekly Standard, 2001, <http://www.weeklystandard.com/open-letter-to-the-president/article/1401>

<sup>178</sup> BORGER, Julian, “The Spies who Pushed for War”, The Guardian, 2003, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/jul/17/iraq.usa>

<sup>179</sup> HAGOPIAN, Elaine C., “Civil Rights in Peril: The Targeting of Arabs and Muslims”, Haymarket Books and Pluto Press, Chicago and London, 2004, p.179

Israel had feared its potential to develop weapons of mass destructions. Kurds, on the other hand, suffered from suppression under Saddam's regime, while also have observed the Arabs support Palestinian rights to self-determination but rarely those of the Kurds. Iraq invasion has acted as a catalyst for the disintegration of other states in the Middle East – the Arab threat that had surrounded Israel since its establishment: Syria and Iraq first by changing of authoritarian regimes and military interventions that broke those countries into pieces despite the fact that this chaos has created the vacuum for IS that has carried out mass killings of Arabs as well as terrorist attacks in Europe and US, as they feared only Israel, and then Iran by aiming at it as a Shia country who generates the Shia-Sunni schism and violence in the region.

### ***The Kurds as pawns on political chessboard***

The success of the Kurds to establish a Kurdish state would be another strategic move of Israel on the chess board of Middle East. While Israel's explanation for its 75 percent of the fuel imported from Iraq's semi-autonomous Kurdish north has been that this is a contribution in the international campaign against DAESH providing a vital source of funds to the "cash-strapped region" as it fights militants of the IS, this also contributes to the Iraqi Kurds' growing assertiveness which has long harbored fears that the Kurds' ultimate objective is full-scale independence from Iraq.<sup>180</sup> Israel's keenness to cooperate with the Kurds and interest in strengthening the economic and military capacity of Iraqi Kurds come as Israel is mainly interested in enabling the Kurds to secure the terms and conditions that will help it to declare its independence from Iraq. No other country but Israel shows such enthusiasm for the concept of turning the region into a state. It was Prime Minister Netanyahu who announced Israel's support for the "aspiration of the Kurdish people to achieve self-determination and to establish their independent state", on the grounds that Iraqi is already more or less divided.<sup>181</sup>

For Israel, there are numbers of goals that would be achieved if a Kurdish state is formed, and preferably, acts as a nucleus for an extended Kurdish state that annexes

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<sup>180</sup> SHEPPARD, David, REED, John and RAVAL, Anjili, "Israel turns to Kurds for three-quarters of its Oil supply", The Financial Times, 2015, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/150f00cc-472c-11e5-af2f-4d6e0e5eda22.html#axzz47pF7XEQE>

<sup>181</sup> RAVID, Barak, "Netanyahu Calls for Kurdish Independence From Iraq", Haaretz, 2014, <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-1.601997>



the Kurdish areas in Syria, Turkey and Iran. Firstly, as Israel recognizes that the “ties between Israel and Kurds run deep” as reports of Israel training Kurdish commandos continue to surface and “*Nationalist Kurds tend to see Israel as a role model for an independent Kurdistan, a small nation surrounded by enemies and bolstered by a strategic partnership with the US*”<sup>182</sup>; the alliance between Israel and this Kurdish state would reduce its isolation and increase its room for maneuver in terms of influence across the region. The establishment of such a state would also cut down the risk of an eastern front along which Israel could be attacked. Secondly, international recognition of Kurdistan as a state would be the de facto announcement of the break-up of Iraq by international consensus. Meanwhile, this Kurdish state would serve Israeli interests in Syria, considering the ongoing conflict and the division of Syria into ethnic and sectarian cantons and the following consequence of the Kurds ceding to Kurdistan, because it would liquidate the state of Syria and the threat it poses to Israeli hegemony. Thirdly, except for the Kurds with good fighting performance in north Iraq and Syria, there is no local power that Israel can rely on in the face of Sunni Jihadi organizations. Fourthly, as most of the Kurds are in Turkey, an independent Kurdistan in Iraq, or in Syria, right next to the Kurdish areas of Turkey might encourage separatists or even efforts of autonomy in the southeastern part of Turkey. Therefore, the formation of a Kurdish state would contribute to the besieging of both Turkey and Iran in the regional game of power balance.<sup>183</sup>

In the absence of a unified Arab strategy, Israel is trying to recruit the regional shifts and the raging identity conflicts as tools to help it bring about more breakthroughs in the Arab world, in a manner that best serve its own strategic interests. Meanwhile, US policy in the Middle East is largely determined by the factor of Israel, and accords with Israel’s policy of breaking up strong Arab countries and encouraging, by rhetoric or intervention, sectarianism in the region while ignoring Israel’s expansionism and discriminative policies.

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<sup>182</sup> BERMAN, Lazar, “Is a Free Kurdistan, and a new Israeli ally, upon us?”, The Times of Israel, 2013, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/is-a-free-kurdistan-and-a-new-israeli-ally-upon-us/>

<sup>183</sup> Middle East Monitor, “Strategic dimensions of the relationship between Israel and Iraqi Kurdistan”, 2015, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20150901-strategic-dimensions-of-the-relationship-between-israel-and-iraqi-kurdistan/>

### **3.3. Non-state entrepreneurs and Identity Politics in Middle East's conflicts**

The widespread threat to the unity of Middle Eastern nations is not the traditional inter-state war but rather conflicts by ethnic or sectarian non-state armed groups with states or other entrepreneurs. In the Middle East's contemporary politics, the two most important non-state entrepreneurs are the Kurdish national movement in Iraq, Turkey and Syria; and the Salafist Sunni Muslim formation of IS – together with the al-Qeada offshoot al-Nusra.<sup>184</sup>

#### **3.3.1. The Kurdish National Movements**

There are about 14 million Kurds in Turkey, 6 million in Iran, about 5 million in Iraq, and under 2 million in Syria. They have been living under different regimes, they have different interests and speak significantly different versions of Kurdish language. They constitute the world's largest stateless ethnic group, sometimes referred to as “the world's largest stateless nation”.<sup>185</sup> For decades, in their countries of residence, they were regarded primarily as a threat to the territorial integrity and the stability of the Middle East. However, as the Middle East today is suffering state collapse, rampant terrorism, and signs of unraveling in the established system of states, there have been fundamental changes in the position of the Kurds and the role they play in regional politics. On their side, being the ethnic groups in separate countries where they have experienced repression and marginalization, the Kurds movements and Politics revolve around their distinct identity, especially now when the Iraq and Syria are falling apart.

#### ***Kurds in Iraq***

As early as the establishment of Iraq after the extinguishment of the Ottoman Empire after WWI, Kurdish tribes rebelling against central rule and urban Kurdish nationalists were the manifestation of Kurds' struggle for autonomy in Iraq. The Kurdistan Democratic Party founded in 1945, for example, promoted the slogan of “Autonomy for Kurdistan, democracy for Iraq” to oppose the British-backed monarchy and pan-Arab forces presented in Iraq's political society then in support of a more pluralistic

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<sup>184</sup> SEUFERT, Gunter, “The Return of the Kurdish Question”, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, SWP Comments, 2015, p.1.

<sup>185</sup> HAGUE, Rod and HARROP, Martin, “Comparative Government and Politics: An Introduction”, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p.21.

and democratic order. In doing so, the Kurdish elites drew a parallel between the Arab nation in which Iraqi Arabs reside and the greater Kurdish nation comprised of all Kurds in Turkey, Iran, Syria and Iraq to which the Iraqi Kurds belong, thus gave rise to the idea of “symbiosis” between Arab and Kurdish nationalism.<sup>186</sup>

With the status of being scattered among different nations and under various forms of suppression, aside from the policies in their states of residence, policy of the US – the greatest influence generator in the Middle East plays a significant role in Kurds’ political calculations. Thus, in the case of the Kurds, the players of the game of Identity Politics have not only been the Kurds and the regimes they have been under, but also the US.

For example, in the 1950s and 1960s, US attention to the Kurds focused mainly on Iraqi Kurds under the cover of the promotion of “liberal idealist US ideology” and the prevention of “authoritarian communist one”. Emphasizing the rhetoric of an altruist cause to protect the “territorial integrity and political independence of [Middle Eastern] nations”, the US granted economic aids to Iraqi Kurds in 1969 and marked the foundation for a direct US-Kurdish relationship at an official level. It was, however, a move of covert political interference in order to forestall Soviet expansion into the region and weaken Iraq – USSR’s ally at the time.<sup>187</sup> The formation of US foreign policy towards the Kurds was revealed when it did not favor the Kurds who followed PKK in Turkey but supported the Kurds under Mustafa Barzani in Iraq to revolt against the Iraqi government during the early 1970s. Under US policy towards self-determination of peoples of different identities all over the world (which was the newly emerged and widely debated at the time), in this case, self-determination of the Kurds, lies several layers of its calculations: first, to support the Shah-ruled Iran – its ally at the time; second, to gain control of an internal counter to Iraq – USSR’s ally then and prevent the probable participation of Iraq into an Arab federation to attack Israel; and third, to have the shares of Middle East’s oil as Barzani had committed to ensure the preferential treatment for the US once the oil-rich Kurdistan achieved

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<sup>186</sup> ROGG, Inga and RIMSCHA, Hans, “The Kurds as Parties to and Victims to conflicts in Iraq”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol: 89, No: 868, December 2007, p.286.

<sup>187</sup> CHAROUDTAKI, Marianna, “The Kurds and US Foreign Policy: International Relations in the Middle East since 1945”, Routledge, October 2010, p. 50.

independence. This also explains why the US broke trust with the Kurds when the Shad decided to make a deal with Saddam Hussein.<sup>188</sup>

In the Iran-Iraq War from 1980 to 1988, due to guerilla activities of Kurdish movements and the alliance of Iraqi Kurdish parties with Iran, Iraqi government carried out brutal repression using chemical weapons and mass execution and forced Kurds' resettlement in the rural areas pushing Kurds into detention camps with harsh conditions, in which the cruelty of Anfal Campaign in 1988 is one peak.<sup>189</sup> To cover its political aims, the Iraqi government spread the propaganda portraying the Kurds as the "traitors" or "the saboteurs – the agents of Iran".<sup>190</sup> During the Anfal Campaign, Iraqi government sought to justify their genocide as religious excommunication – takfir. The Kurdish parties in Iraq had to retreat to their hideouts in the mountain with their status reduced from occupying the "Autonomous Region" to being referred to as "the beloved North", while a Iraqi young generation was born knowing only the discourse of "Iraqi heroism vs. the treason and sabotage" of the Kurdish opposition groups. As a consequence, 1.5 million Kurdish refugees fled the country to the Iranian and Turkish frontiers while the casualties caused by hostile weather and lack of provisions soon became the political problem for the related countries or Turkey and Iran, and forced the US to step up.<sup>191</sup>

Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), which is the closest form of an independent state for the Kurds was created in Iraq in the period after the 1991 Gulf War. In the Gulf War, the Kurds in Iraq were urged by the US to rise against Saddam Hussein. However, Saddam's strong military was able to brutally exterminate the Kurdish rebellion of both Iraqi Kurdish organizations, the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) – two governing parties that form the majority of KRG. The two leaders Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani turned to the US for help on behalf of their nationalist movements, for which the US responded by

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<sup>188</sup> CHAROUNTAKI, Marianna, "Conceptualizing US foreign policy towards the Kurds", Today's Zaman Online, May 2012 [http://www.todayszaman.com/op-ed\\_conceptualizing-us-foreign-policy-towards-the-kurds-by-marianna-charountaki-281770.html](http://www.todayszaman.com/op-ed_conceptualizing-us-foreign-policy-towards-the-kurds-by-marianna-charountaki-281770.html)

<sup>189</sup> BRUINESSEN, Martin van, "The Kurds between Iran and Iraq", MERIP Middle East Report, no.141, July-August 1986, pp.14-27.

<sup>190</sup> HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, "Iraq's Crime of Genocide – the Anfal Campaign against the Kurds", Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1995, p.55.

<sup>191</sup> MEHO, Lokman I., "The Kurdish Question in US Foreign Policy: A Documentary Source Book", Documentary Reference Collection, Praeger, 2004, p.5.

its refusal to intervene. This may be explained if American interests in the region as a whole are taken into consideration: the US did not mean to support a division of Iraq in the wake of the Shia insurrection in the south and a corresponding Kurdish uprising in the north. The territorial integrity of a defeated Iraq needed to be secured in order to preserve Iraq's function as a balance, primarily against Iran. The US perceived Iran as having an interest in a successful Shia revolution in the south of Iraq. Besides, if an independent Kurdistan were established in the north of Iraq, it would have raised the issue of control over the vital oil resources and posed a threat to Turkey.<sup>192</sup> On the other hand, the US did not want to commit itself into an unwanted and permanent war since it came to the conclusion that Saddam could win. In addition, if Kurdish uprising succeeded in Iraq, it might provoke the same events in Turkey, Syria or Iran – with whom its relationships must be prioritized.

In the end, the humanitarian disaster of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis fleeing to Turkey and Iran (in which approximately 20,000 lost their lives in the mountains and minefields) forced the UN Security Council to execute humanitarian intervention and the Gulf War allies to create a “safe haven” for the Kurds.<sup>193</sup> KRG gradually gained control of Dohuk, Arbil and Sulaimaniya and held Parliamentary election in 1992. This Regional Parliament in Arbil voted for federalism instead of autonomy as the solution for the Kurds' problems in Iraq.

However, the Kurds themselves are not a unified group. In Iraq, Kurds are sharply divided between KDP and PUK. This division somehow illustrates that Identity is not the essential factor of utmost importance that defines affiliation. Specifically, these two Kurd parties in Iraq fell into a civil war in 1994 due to a local quarrel on land rights, which led to a letter by President Clinton to curb the clashes.<sup>194</sup> Due to its defeat to Talabani's PUK in August 1996, Barzani – leader of the KDP, unexpectedly turned to Saddam for military assistance and retaking of Irbil – the land that is considered the capital of the Kurds. The US then presented new peace initiatives and

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<sup>192</sup> MALANCZUK, Peter, “The Kurdish Crisis and Allied Intervention in the Aftermath of the Second Gulf War”, *European Journal of International Law*, Vol:2, No: 1, Oxford Journals, 1991, pp.117-118.

<sup>193</sup> BACKER, Ralf and OFTERINGER, Ronald, “Republic of Statelessness: Three years of Humanitarian Intervention in Iraqi Kurdistan”, *Middle East Report*, 187/188, March-June 1994, pp.40-45.

<sup>194</sup> MEHO, Lokman I., “The Kurdish Question in US Foreign Policy: A documentary Source Book”, *Documentary Reference Collection*, Praeger, 2004, pp.5-7.

made attempts to reconcile the conflict, as a Kurds-Saddam alliance was not America's preference. In September 1998, Barzani and Talabani finally met personally in Washington and reached a tentative agreement to cease their fighting to establish a "cold peace" relationship. In September 1999, Bill Clinton issued Presidential Decision Directive 99-13 which authorized the KDP and the PUK to receive US military assistance through the Iraq Liberation Act.<sup>195</sup>

Although the US constantly paid lip service to the Kurds' rights, the choice of America was always based on their interests in cooperation with separate countries in the Middle East on the Kurdish issue. The Kurds have started seeing the chance only since the US saw them as a useful tool to remove Saddam's government. The US invasion marks the beginning of a period when the Kurds suddenly receive much more attention and support. The Kurds, however, are cautious in its approach to others' political calculations. In 2002, when the intention of the Bush's administration to invade Iraq became clear, the Kurds, while generally wanted to support a regime change to get rid of Saddam Hussein, also hesitated in full approval of a military intervention. Although mistrusting the regime - which was built on the same ideal as Arab nationalist and Islamist opposition groups of a unitary, centralist state - the Kurds considered it as "at least temporarily contained" and doubted the perspective of a new government which would not challenge the existing status quo. Thus, in the US invasion, the Kurdish leadership maintained a neutral profile and the Kurdish forces served the US troops variously.<sup>196</sup>

On its side, the US made mistake during its occupation of Iraq that worsened the identity-based division in Iraq. For example, the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, L. Paul Bremer, issued Order Number 2 in May 2003 that formally dissolved the Iraqi army, leaving a Sunni-dominated officer corps and 400 thousand soldiers unemployed. However, it was unprepared to carry out armed nation building in the critical period immediately after the fall of Saddam's regime, which contributed to the release of deep division between Shias and Sunnis as well as between Arabs and Kurds.

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<sup>195</sup> MOCKAITIS, Thomas R., "The Iraq War Encyclopedia", ABC-CLIO, August 2013, p.239.

<sup>196</sup> ROGG, Inga and RIMSCHA, Hans, "The Kurds as Parties to and Victims to conflicts in Iraq", International Review of the Red Cross, Vol: 89, No: 868, December 2007, pp.830-831.

In the ensuing process, the Kurds emerged as a key player in the new Iraq and in post-Saddam Iraq, the Kurds' self-rule has been widely and officially recognized when the new Iraqi constitution, adopted by a national referendum in October 2005, granted Kurdistan the status of a federal region which has its own institutions including regional government, parliament, presidency and internal security forces. Formula in the constitution, ranging from normalization process to a census and ultimately a referendum, has paved the way to integrating the lowland areas (such as the oil-rich Kirkuk in dispute for decades) into the Kurdistan Region. KRD has also passed an "Oil and Gas Law" for the development and exploitation of its hydrocarbon resources.<sup>197</sup> In the recent political picture of Iraq, the Kurds have been labeled America's only true friends in Iraq and rewarded with many weapons. As the Kurds have fought well against IS, Obama administration began sending arms and equipment to the Kurds while flying close air support for their militia, the peshmerga. The US military also helped Kurdish forces move into northern Syria, right along the Turkish border. While fighting IS, the Kurds also began retaking territory they traditionally considered their own. However, it is noteworthy to mention that the Kurds do not have enough of political or military power to determine their future trajectory. Kurds' long term success as a force in regional politics will depend on their ability to create cooperative relations among various Kurdish political movements, as well as the actions of regional and international actors in the chaos of Middle East, and their ability to taking advantages of the opportunities.

In the most recent announcement in May 2016, KRG President Barzani stated has stated that "Kurdistan is ripe for independence", stressing "the fact that our 40 million – 50 million-people nation has to have a state of its own, but we must also consider the fact that we are divided into four parts" with each having "its own situation" and its own responsibility to "find a solution with its central governments".<sup>198</sup> His statement, to a certain extent, denotes that ethnic identity is not the decisive factor or central core in the political calculations of the Iraqi Kurds in their struggle.

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<sup>197</sup> ROGG, Inga and RIMSCHA, Hans, "The Kurds as Parties to and Victims to conflicts in Iraq", *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol: 89, No: 868, December 2007, p.824.

<sup>198</sup> DAILY NEWS, "KRG is ripe for Independence, says Barzani", [www.hurriyetdailynews.com/Default.aspx?pageID=517&nID=99603&NewsCatID=352](http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/Default.aspx?pageID=517&nID=99603&NewsCatID=352)

### *Kurds in Turkey*

In the Turkey under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the equality and unity of Turks and Kurds in the struggle against the sultan and the occupying Western powers was at the center of Turkish policy for the Kurdish issue. The core of this Kurds' support to the cause against Western intervention under a unified Islamic Community lay at the belief of a "future Turkish-Kurdish common multiethnic state". Kurds' autonomous governance had even been mentioned by Kemal on some occasions.<sup>199</sup> After the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923 as a modern nation-state and unitary polity, the tenet of exclusively Turkish nationhood was at the center of Turkish government's policy, in which the assimilation of the Kurdish population was actively promoted. As a result, a significant number of Kurds "integrated successfully into Turkish society and adopted the languages, values, and social organization of the republic". Indeed, there was never a strong ethnic distinction between the Kurds and the Turks throughout history. However, a large portion of Kurdish society remains distinct. For the Kurdish-dominated southern Anatolia, until the 1990s, Turkey resorted to the policy to co-opt tribal leaders between the two strategies that are common in state's practice to control the predominant tribal areas: co-optation and integration. This is not only because integration requires the forcibly breaking down of the tribal structures, which would result in violent resistance, but also due to the distinct advantage of winning large numbers of votes in the regions where people's tribal leaders are endorsed in the parliament.<sup>200</sup>

The Kurds, on the other hand, viewed Turkish policies towards them as suppression, with the prohibition of their language and other manifestations of their cultural distinctiveness. PKK – an underground Marxist-Leninist organization – was formed as early as the 1970s declaring to defend Kurdish rights. It became violent in the 1980s, demanding self-determination through independence from Turkey. The PKK, the most important Kurdish political faction in Turkey, has been involved in the brutal, violent and prolonged conflicts with the Turkish military until today.

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<sup>199</sup> BARKEY, Henri J and FULLER, Granham E., "Turkey's Kurdish Question", Carnegie Commission of Preventing Deadly Conflict, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1998, p.9.

<sup>200</sup> CORNELL, Svante E., "The Land of Many Crossroads: The Kurdish Question in Turkish Politics", *Orbis* 45, No: 1, 2001, pp.34-36.



Turkey's opposition to the Kurds' identity and its strategic alliance with the US since Truman Doctrine in 1947 had been two of the main reason that the Kurds could not create an autonomous status.<sup>201</sup> However, the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 was the event that opened the way for the Kurds to the chance of establishing a statelet, even if it is confined within Iraq's borders. The US first saw the Kurds as a useful tool to remove Saddam's government and took a pro-Kurdish position. This support did not prevent Turkey from unilaterally engaging in northern Iraq to trace PKK during the 1980s and 1990s. Thus, the differences in approaching the Kurdish issue in Iraq, especially after the US war to remove Saddam Hussein from power in 2003; the refusal of Turkey to allow the US to use its territory as a base for a northern front – a key component to US military plan - to attack Saddam Hussein despite pledges of up to \$30 billion in financial assistance, and thus the failure of a parliament bill allowing US troops to deploy on Turkish soil gradually eroded US-Turkish alliance.<sup>202</sup> Turkey's decision in this event originated from its fear that KRG might serve as a pole of attraction for Turkey's restive Kurds, that it might become emboldened enough to lend them direct support, and that the war could raise the risk of an enlarged, oil-rich and more autonomous Kurdish self-governing entity emerging from northern Iraq.<sup>203</sup> This, in turn, put the Kurds into the position of America's ally. Taking full advantage of the new condition, the Iraqi Kurds occupied the oil-rich Kirkuk and Mosul, unattainable lands if Turkish still docked in the northern front. Turkey, in fact, lost its *blank cheque* to operate freely in northern Iraq, and had no choice but to acquiesce.

The event of the US apprehending eleven Turkish commandos in the Iraqi Kurdish city of Sulaymaniya undoubtedly marked the worst crisis in US-Turkish relations since the creation of NATO<sup>204</sup> and illustrated the extent that US was willing to protect the Iraqi Kurds. This has cast influences on Kurds in other areas. For example, the KRG's conducts of an active foreign policy has served as an important point of reference for Kurds outside Iraq, especially in Syria, where the Kurdish community has been consolidating its own autonomy.

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<sup>201</sup> GUNTER, Micheal, "Re-evaluating the Kurdish Question", in JENKINS, Crag J. and GOTTLIEB, Esther E., (eds.) "Identity Conflicts: Can Violence be Regulated?", Transaction Publisher, 2007, p.118.

<sup>202</sup> MOCKAITIS, Thomas R., "The Iraq War Encyclopedia", ABC-CLIO August, 2013, p.206

<sup>203</sup> PARK, Bill, "Iraq's Kurds and Turkey: Challenges for US policy", Parameters, Vol.34 no.3, 2004, p.22

<sup>204</sup> BRYZA, Matthew J., "Turkey's Dramatic Shift toward Iraqi Kurdistan: Politics before Peace Pipelines", Turkish Policy Quarterly Vol.11 no.2, p.54

### *Kurds in Syria*

Approximately 10 percent of the whole Syrian population of 23 million people was made up by ethnic Kurds scattering across the country. Even before the Baathist regime came to power in 1963, the relations between the Syrian state and its Kurdish minority had been strained since Syria's 1958 adoption of Arab nationalism and backlash against non-Arab ethnic minorities. It can be notably illustrated by the event of 1962 where the authorities stripped roughly 120,000 Kurds of their Syrian citizenship alleging that they had immigrated illegally to Syria from Turkey. They became the "stateless Kurds", and with their descendants, making up 15 percent of Syrian Kurds, they have lived in a legal vacuum without any identification or passport, deprived of important rights (from basic rights such as travelling within Syria and abroad, owning properties; entering legal marriage, to participating in elections or employment in public sector, etc.).<sup>205</sup> With the spread of Nasserism ideology, the Baathist government since its ascendancy enhanced the discriminatory policies towards the Kurds with the intention to eradicate the presence of Kurds in public life. Important elements that form the essence of Kurdish identity, from language, music to cultural customs and traditions were forbidden. Since the early 1990s, Syria state issued interdicts to stop Kurdish parents from officially registering their children with Kurdish names. Syrian Kurds also have been banned from using their own language since the 1958 decree which outlawed the publication of materials or the teaching in Kurdish and changed the Kurdish names of towns and villages into Arabic ones.<sup>206</sup> In 2008, Decree 49 stipulated the restriction of Kurds' property ownership, transfer and other land rights in border regions, thus denying the Kurds who have legal citizenship status the right to own real property.<sup>207</sup>

Since its establishment, the Baathist Party adopted prejudicial policies towards the Kurds and their political organizations. By 1965, the Kurdish parties had fragmented, conflicting within themselves over various issues, such as whether to work for

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<sup>205</sup> KURD WATCH, "Stateless Kurds in Syria: Illegal Invaders or Victims of a Nationalistic Policy?", Report 5, European Center for Kurdish Studies, Berlin, 2010, pp.6-9.

<sup>206</sup> MCDOWALL, David, "A Modern History of the Kurds", I.B. Tauris, London and New York, 2004, pp.466-484.

<sup>207</sup> KURD WATCH, "Decree 49: Dispossession of the Kurdish population? Commentary on the political implications and economic consequences of a decree", Report 6, European Center for Kurdish Studies, 2010, pp.3-6.

Kurdish autonomy or cooperate within the Communist Party and reject Kurdish affiliation. Political participation was restricted so that Kurdish parties remained outsiders or marginal actors in national politics.<sup>208</sup>

The Syrian regime not only carried out its discriminatory policies towards the Kurds, but also at times sought to use the PKK and its affiliate as potential cards in political game with Turkey and Iraq. For example, in the period from 1980s to 1990s when the relations between Turkey and Syria were at a tenuous hold as they disputed over the territories of Hatay province, Turkey's decision to build the Ataturk Dam on Euphrates river just north of where it flows into Syria, and the Turks strengthened ties with Israel. Syrian President then, Hafez Asad, supported the PKK by giving it shelter in Syria and in Syrian-controlled areas of Lebanon, in retaliation, until 1998 when Turkey threatened military action, forcing Syria to deport the PKK. As soon as the relations between Turkey and Syria improved, Syria's relationship with the PKK deteriorated, betokened by the 1999 Adana agreement between Syria and Turkey to crack down remnants of PKK inside the country.<sup>209</sup> The most influential, well-organized, trained and armed Kurdish group in Syria nowadays, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), founded in 2003, which is often referred to as the Syrian Kurdish offshoot of the Turkish PKK, has seen as a respond of PKK to this Syrian government's move. Although PYD denies affiliation with the PKK, it is a member of the union of Kurdish Communities – an umbrella organization with the same leadership and charter as the PKK. Moreover, the People's Defence Corps – armed branch of the PYD – was under PKK's training. As a result, the Kurds' uprising in Qamishli in 2004 was met with Syrian regime's ruthless repression focused heavily on PYD members.<sup>210</sup> The situation changed after the 2011 when Turkey broke off relations with Syrian regime and began its support for Syrian opposition. The constant changes in Syria's political environment make the relations between Syrian regime and the PYD both complex and in flux. It gets more complicated when PYD's main

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<sup>208</sup> ZIADEH, Radwan, "The Kurds in Syria: Fueling Separatist Movements in the Region?", Special Report, United States Institute of Peace, 2009, p.5.

<sup>209</sup> DIBNER, Gil, "My enemy's enemy: Turkey, Israel, and the Middle Eastern balance of Power", Harvard International Review, Vol: 21, No: 1, 1998, pp.34-39.

<sup>210</sup> HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, "Group Denial: Repression of Kurdish Political and Cultural Rights in Syria", Middle East and North Africa Division of Human Rights Watch, November 2009, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2009/11/26/group-denial/repression-kurdish-political-and-cultural-rights-syria>

competitor, the coalition of small Kurdish parties – the Kurdistan National Council (KNC), formed in 2011 mainly from the breakaway factions of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Party, Syrian first Kurdish Party established in 1957, under the patronage of President Barzani of the Iraqi KRG.<sup>211</sup> Inevitably, the Kurdish movements in Syria are deeply divided with different Kurdish representatives and opposition groups holding diverging views about both the nature of Kurdish rights in a post-war Syria and demands into the program of the Syrian National Coalition. Despite repeated negotiations and power-sharing agreements between the PYD and KNC, most importantly the Duhok Agreement in 2014, relations among Syria's Kurdish movements have remained tense.

After the Arab revolution in Syria in March 2011, experts wondered whether the Kurds would join the protest movement or try to maintain the fragile political balance. However, the Kurds were relatively calm until October 2011 and most Kurdish parties were reluctant to get involved in the revolution. This may be explained by Syrian regime's concession for the Kurds, issuing a decree to grant tens of thousands of Kurds with Syrian citizenship and repealing Decree 49 in 2011. Therefore, the Kurds were waiting on their watch for more possible bargains from the government (which were then declined due to social pressure). Another factor is Kurds' calculations about their final goals of their struggles have not been finalized. The abovementioned fragmentation within the Kurds themselves made the consensus over important issues an impenetrable task. In other words, they could not agree whether the political objectives would be more cultural and political rights, the downfall of the government, or regional autonomy.<sup>212</sup>

However, the demise of state authority has created an unprecedented opportunity for Syrian Kurds, who have acted with speed to organize themselves politically and militarily. In 2012, as Syria collapsed into warring factions, the PYD grasped the chance to assert control over three swaths of land with the majority of Kurdish populations in northern Syria: Jazira, Koban and Afrin. By 2013-2014, the PYD

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<sup>211</sup> INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP, "Syria's Kurds: A Struggle within a Struggle", Middle East Report No:136, January 2013, pp.1-3.

<sup>212</sup> TEJEL, Jordi, "Toward a Generational Rupture within the Kurdish Movement in Syria?" in BENGIO, Ofra (ed.), "Kurdish Awakening: Nation Building in a Fragmented Homeland", University of Texas Press, Austin, 2014, p.226.

named their occupied land Rojava to represent a Western Kurdistan, held elections to local assemblies and committed to political pluralism as well as agreements to other Kurdish parties - the moves which have been seen as PYD's practice of autonomous government. In 2014-2015, along the battle for Kobane, the Kurds constructed a new "Kurdish nationalist myth of heroism and liberation, a famous victory and a huge symbolic value for Kurdish sentiment across the region" with their fighting.<sup>213</sup> As the Kurdish parts of Syria border Turkey and have strong bonds with Kurdish society and politics in Turkey; to many Kurds in both Syria and Turkey, they are one people and share the struggle, and thus the border between them is irrelevant – they celebrated the establishment of Rojava and viewed it as a remarkable hallmark in Kurdish nationalist discourse.

### **3.3.2. The emergence of IS**

Middle East has been considered the world's most vibrant center of terrorism over the last century. Irrespective of the differences that could be observed over time and space in terms of the underlying identities, ranging from Arab and Israel's anti-colonial and independence movements to radical Muslim movements, the phenomenon has been permanent in the Middle East. In recent years, Islamic terrorism has described as the greatest challenge. In the case of Sunni Islam, it refers to the organizations that subscribe to Wahhabism, the embedded ideology of al-Qaeda and IS's movements; while Shia terrorism has emerged, for example Hezbollah from Lebanon and Hamas on Palestinian territories have been branded acutely dangerous.

Under the surface, sectarianism was encouraged by sectarian identity entrepreneurs. A close look at their role indicates that sectarianism was not just a government invention but the result of an amalgam of political, religious, social, and economic elites who all used sectarianism to further their aims.

After the US invasion of Iraq, America was unprepared to carry out armed nation building in the critical period immediately after the fall of Saddam's regime, which contributed to the release of deep division between Shias and Sunnis as well as between Arabs, Turks and Kurds. By late 2004, this mix of mistakes helped triggered

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<sup>213</sup> GUNES, Cengiz and LOWE, Robert, "The Impact of the Syrian War on Kurdish Politics across the Middle East", Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House, July 2015, pp.13-15.

a Sunni-dominated insurgency and a civil conflict where Sunni Islamists gradually replaced the supporters of Saddam, and the leading insurgent movements became tied to Al-Qaeda.<sup>214</sup>

While civil wars in weak states including Iraq, Syria, or Yemen continue to be exploited by political actors of all levels, jihadist organizations are coming into the play, taking advantages of the chaos and grievances to gain popularity and legitimacy. Emerged from the remnants of al-Qaeda, IS has posed an acute threats to stability and security of not only the Middle East but also international community. Its roots link back to the fundamentalist beliefs of al-Wahhab and his partnership with the Saud family in the eighteenth century. Using the sectarian language to construct the IS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi calls himself the revived Caliph.<sup>215</sup> With the founding base of Wahhabism, IS claimed that they embraced violence to reform Muslim states and societies, purify the Islamic community by killing masses of infidels, the impious, venial sinner, and the depraved, act against foreign domination, and drive Islam to its Golden Age. The fight in Syria provided IS with a base of operation and with the ability to openly recruit fighters who can move between the Syrian and Iraqi battlefields. Using the Identity Politics of sectarian mobilization, IS has attracted Sunnis from all across the region and over the world from all political spectrums. It is estimated that about 27,000 to 31,000 foreign fighters have travelled to Iraq and Syria since fighting broke out in 2011.<sup>216</sup> It has taken control over vast territories in Iraq and Syria, estimated to be more than 100,000 square kilometer in total and inhabited by around 8 million people, where it enforces its interpretation of Sharia law. At least 12 groups outside Iraqi and Syria have made a formal pledge of allegiance to IS.<sup>217</sup> No matter how repugnant IS is, the jihadis offer a clear ideological choice to young people growing up in a political wilderness in a region dominated by corrupt,

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<sup>214</sup> CORDESMAN, Anthony H., KHAZAI, Sam, "Iraq in Crisis", Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 2014, p.17.

<sup>215</sup> KURKPATRICK, David D., "ISIS' Harsh Brand of Islam is Rooted in Austere Saudi Creed", The New York Times, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/25/world/middleeast/isis-abu-bakr-baghdadi-caliph-wahhabi.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/25/world/middleeast/isis-abu-bakr-baghdadi-caliph-wahhabi.html?_r=1)

<sup>216</sup> THE SOUFAN GROUP, "An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq", 2015, [http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG\\_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf](http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf)

<sup>217</sup> ZAVADSKI, Katie, "ISIS now has a Network of Military Affiliates in 11 Countries around the world", New York Daily Intelligencer, <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2014/11/isis-now-has-military-allies-in-11-countries.html>

autocratic regimes that give scant attention to the economic and social needs of their people; as well as those suffering discrimination and exclusion in their communities and societies by their differences of identities.

IS's military actions are notorious for its brutality and totality, with the killings of prisoners, extermination of civilians, ethnic and confessional cleansing, mass rape and alleged use of chemical weapons. For example, in 2014 it drove Iraqi government forces out of key cities in the Western Iraq Offensive, captured Mosul – a rich oil region, and carried out the Sinjar massacre killing up to 5000 Kurd Yazidi men.<sup>218</sup>

Sectarian tension and the tactics of Identity Politics are surely one important source in the emergence of IS, who in turn, are using this strategy of using Identity Politics and the Islamic exclusionism to mobilize, and resorting to violence for its goals, in which political power is one sure objective. IS's political ambition is to establish a state in the Middle East. Currently, besides its army, IS has created a security apparatus and a judiciary system, an education system and an economic system complete with taxes, enterprises and its own currency. It exerts real influence on the social and political situation, specifically by eliminating potential enemies through marginalization, forced emigration, enslavement or mass killings, co-opting potential supporters and building up its own support base. Also, IS is in practice conducting a foreign policy, in particular by developing cooperation with similar racial groups, but also by negotiating on contentious issues with other states. The heart of IS's policy is religion, which refers not just to Islam and Islamic law as its foundations; but the declaration of a caliphate also means that the IS claims a supernatural right to lead the entire Muslim world, aspires to restore its mythical unity and strength, and lends a clearly cosmic and moral character to its fight against its enemies. Its millenarian vow to unleash a world war, by first taking jihad to Europe, end global history, initiate the end of times and bring on Judgment Day is a symbolic measure of its ambitions. While the leaders of IS are essentially pragmatic, and the role of such declarations is mainly propagandistic, it would be a mistake to downplay such views and beliefs among IS's elites and supporters. IS has become attractive to smaller terrorist organizations

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<sup>218</sup> SPENCER, Richard, "IS carried out Massacres and Mass sexual Enslavement of Yazidis, UN confirms", The Telegraph, 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/islamic-state/11160906/IS-carried-out-massacres-and-mass-sexual-enslavement-of-Yazidis-UN-confirms.html>

scattered around the world, which in turn has elevated IS's prestige and lent more credibility to its ambitions.

To sum up, while even al-Qaeda targeted the "far enemy", specifically the US, IS has placed anti-atheist, anti-Shia and even anti-Sunnis who are not following its strict interpretation of Islam, at the center of its poisonous ideology and carried out mass killing mostly in the Middle East and some elsewhere in the world with the consequences of more mass bombings on Middle Eastern civilians. Meanwhile, "Islam-phobia" is spreading all over the world which results in more branding, more marginalization, and more struggles and hardships for the lives of the ones who suffer the most.

Besides these two non-state entrepreneurs that stand out the most in Middle East's affairs, there are many other ethnic or sectarian groups, which have been used by the nominal state authorities as additional armed forces parallel to the army and deployed in military operations, such as the Shabiha Alawi militias operating under the umbrella of the ruling Ba'ath party in Syria; or Shia militias which have been one of the main forces in Baghdad's counteroffensives against IS in Iraq. These non-state entrepreneurs conduct their own international activities, specifically, they receive foreign volunteers, money and weapons, and in some cases maintain official bureaus abroad, and consequently, they are the addressees of other player's foreign policy.

#### **3.4. The Battlegrounds of Identity Conflicts in the Middle East**

The Middle East is currently in the mist of widespread instability, civil strife and the collapse of contraction of state authority. With the invasion of Iraq in 2003 playing the role of catalyst in conflicts that has drawn in deep ethnic, sectarian, and identity divisions; Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, the West Bank and Gaza Strip, Tunisia and Egypt have all experienced major instability over the last half decade. The first four of these have effectively ceased to exist as unitary states, and are now partitioned de facto between warring entities, organized according to ethnic, sectarian or tribal loyalty.



### 3.4.1. The battleground of Iraq

Prior to the 2003 US invasion, Sunnis and Shias led a fairly well-integrated existence in Iraq, especially in the larger cities. Indeed, nearly a third of marriages were between members of different sects, while the country also had thriving populations of Christians and other ethnic and other ethnic and religious groups such as the Kurds, Turkmen, Shabaks, or Yazidis, living together. The reason is widely considered that Saddam Hussein's regime did not allow overt sectarianism to flourish, forbid all Islamic organizations, regardless of whether their movements were peaceful or violent. It was considered taboo to inquire about or divulge one's religious persuasion then. Saddam's Sunni-dominated regime boasted a significant Shia presence even in the upper levels of power. He ensured that no one group or individual grew too strong, while his security forces would indiscriminately purge anyone perceived as a threat. While trying to oppress ethnic and sectarian differences by silencing any discussion and eliminating any possible threat, Saddam used Islamic discourse when it suited his political goals, first to maintain legitimacy in the wake of the Iranian revolution of 1979, and then, toward the end of his reign, as a response to a potential US invasion.

During the early stages of the US occupation, the insurgency was fairly broad-based, with Sunni and Shia militias united around driving out the occupiers. But Paul Bremer, the US-appointed head of the Provisional Authority of Iraq, obsessively referred to Saddam's regime as "the formerly ruling Sunnis", "rank-and-file Sunnis", "the old Sunni regime", or "responsible Sunnis", claiming that "Shia conscripts were regularly brutalized and abused by their Sunni officers".<sup>219</sup> It was true that Sunnis were overrepresented in the officer corps, but there were Shia ministers and generals under Saddam, and at least a third of the famous deck of cards of Iraqi leaders most wanted by the Americans were Shias.<sup>220</sup> Under US occupation, citizens were forced to declare a sect on all state-issued documents. Sectarian identity formed the basis of political organization: Each sect was allocated a quota in the governing council on the basis of this new social contract. Islamism became the primary and nearly exclusive mode of political expression. Politicians vying for political power pitted Iraq's ethnic

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<sup>219</sup> BREMER, Paul L., "What We Got Right in Iraq", The Washington Post, 2007, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/05/11/AR2007051102054.html>

<sup>220</sup> ROSEN, Nir, "Aftermath: Following the Bloodshed of America's Wars in the Muslim World", Nation Books, New York, 2010, pp. 19-20.

and religious groups against one another, carrying this precedent into the new government. On the one hand, the realignment gave the majority Shia population a radical stake in the elected government. As long as the Shias remained a united political bloc, their dominance of Iraqi politics could not be meaningfully challenged. This was a watershed moment for the Shias, who despite accounting for more than 60 percent of Iraq's population, were long relegated to political disenfranchisement. In fact, although Shias account for roughly half the Muslim population in the Middle East, the regional power dynamics favor the Sunnis. This imbalance continues to manifest itself even in Shia-majority countries such as Bahrain. Iraq's transformation into a Shia state promised to radically upend the balance of power in the region – a prospect that the US was not entirely comfortable with, given its fears about Iran. On the other end of the spectrum, US policies of de-Ba'athification of Iraqi military and bureaucracy disproportionately affected the Sunnis, who were over-presented in Saddam's Ba'athist regime. It removed overwhelmingly Sunni social and military elites from positions of power and limited their stakes in the new Iraq. The move also left them with plenty of means to undermine the political process. The broader Sunni population found itself disempowered, with little political recourse to rectify its grievances. As a result, it grew increasingly susceptible to calls for armed resistance from disgruntled Sunni elites. Consequently, the insurgency against the state and its foreign patrons grew increasingly sectarian and radical. These trends culminated with the rise of IS. The IS's reign of terror led to the purge of Christians and Assyrians from Iraq. Shias and Sunnis grew segregated geographically, intermarriage rates dropped and political discourse became overtly sectarian. The 2007 US surge temporarily halted its advance, capitalizing on a growing Sunni disaffection with its excesses, but ultimately the measure failed to resolve Iraq's underlying sociopolitical dysfunction, resulting in the implosion that followed the US withdrawal. This was amplified in the wake of the 2011 Arab uprisings, with regional powers jockeying to expand their influence and undermine rivals amid its revolutions and counter-revolutions.

The civil war that broke out in Iraq has been the favorable condition for Iran and Saudi Arabia to get involved and pursue their aims and goals of promoting their version of Islam, and then using Identity Politics for mobilization and gaining more

influence in the race to reach hegemony. As Iraq was considered one big player in the region, both Iran and Saudi Arabia do not want to content with the emergence of a new hostile regime in the country. For Iran, Iraq is not only a country of Shia majority, but also home to the Askari Shrine and two holy cities of Shias - Najaf and Kerbala. Moreover, the experiences of the protracted Iran-Iraq war made Iran understand that it needed to seize the opportunity to influence Iraq. Iran's conventional forces were aging and a fight against modern Western equipped Iraq would be inimical to its power. For Saudi Arabia, it fears that the Shia dominated governments in Iraq will allow them to organize themselves diplomatically and perhaps even make the subversion efforts, which would ultimately be detrimental to Saudi's interests in the region.<sup>221</sup> In chief, it wants to prevent instability and conflict in Iraq from threatening its homeland security, prevent the repression of Iraq's Sunnis by the newly dominant Shia government, and limit Iran's regional influence. Therefore, Iran sought to influence Iraq through diplomacy, economic investment, and efforts to cultivate Iranian clients within the Iraqi political system including the leadership of armed militias. In the meantime, Saudi Arabia is critical of US policies in Iraq, claiming that it fought a war to keep Iran out of Iraq after Iraq was driven out of Kuwait to see the whole of Iraq handed over to Iran, and severed ties with Iraq while exploiting sectarian Identity Politics to join hand with domestic actors. Nevertheless, it has not limited its alliances simply to fellow Sunnis, nor did it adopt every Sunni group as an ally. It backed the Iraqiya party in the Iraqi elections of 2005 and 2010, although Allawi – leader of the party – is a thoroughly secular politician who is a Shia by birth and the party included an ethnic and sectarian cross-section of Iraq.<sup>222</sup> In sum, Iraq remains divided while sectarianism has become an instrument used by political entrepreneurs with mutual suspicions and communal mobilization influencing the behavior of a political elite looking to create constituencies and rally popular support.

This surge in sectarian competition across the Middle East had particularly fateful consequences for Iraq. Seeing the success of al-Qaeda affiliate Jahbat al-Nursa in Syria, the IS moved to expand its sphere of influence. It established an emirate in

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<sup>221</sup> TERRILL, Andrew, "The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry and the Future of Middle East Security", US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2011, p.45.

<sup>222</sup> BLANCHARD, Christopher M., "Saudi Arabia: Background and US Relations", Congressional Research Service, Washington, D.C., June 2010.

Syria in defiance of al-Qaeda leadership, and then made a triumphant return to Iraq after pillaging unprecedented levels of wealth and resources from Syria. As the Shia alliance struggled to form a new government, IS began to capitalize on Sunni disenfranchisement to secure a wider territory, declaring a caliphate occupied on a territory that transcends the borders of Iraq and Syria.

### **3.4.2. The battleground of Syria**

Before the revolution, the balance of identities including Arabs, Kurds, Sunni Muslims, Shia Muslims, Alawites, Ismailis, Druzes, Christians, among many more, did not suffer any drastic shift in Syria. On one hand, the relations of peaceful coexistence that prevailed among the various ethno-religious groups in Syria undoubtedly stood out as a social specificity, and the tolerance shown by the various groups towards each other was a source of pride for many Syrians. On the other hand, free discussion on the differences among the various ethno-religious groups was not allowed, to the extreme extent that “inciting sectarian tension” was one of the standard accusations leveled at political dissidents in court, and it incurred a sentence of many years of imprisonment. In a country ruled by a regime that openly appointed people to positions of power and influence on the strength of their sectarian credentials, talking about ethno-religious differences was equivalent to political dynamite and therefore taboo. However, the silencing of all debate on the sectarian makeup of the country did not succeed in banning it from reality. On the contrary, it fostered ignorance about the religion of the “others” and thus nourished prejudice and sometimes far-fetched ideas about the way of life of people belong to other sects. Exploiting the mistrust created by ignorance, the Syrian regime has learned to play the sectarian card, namely to play off the various groups against each other in order to maintain its hegemony.

Pro-democracy protests erupted in March 2011 in the southern city of Deraa after the arrest and torture of some teenagers who painted revolutionary slogans on a school wall. The government’s use of deadly force to crush the dissent, which resulted in four dead and many injured, soon triggered nationwide protests demanding the president’s resignation.<sup>223</sup> The uprising, first under the Free Syrian Army – the main opposition group formed in 2011 - soon turned into a vicious struggle for power among myriad

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<sup>223</sup> LESCH, David W., “Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad”, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2012, pp.55-57.

groups, for whom identities served as a powerful weapon. So who is playing the sectarian card in Syria? The opposition accuses the regime of seeking to sow panic and fear in a country where there are 29 religious minorities and ethnicities. Meanwhile, the regime accuses the opposition of militarizing the conflict and of “Wahhabism”, and Arab states of betrayal and support of the rebellions.

Either way, as the violence increased inside Syria, the historical societal divisions became more apparent and the battle lines more closely resembled ethno-religious boundaries. On the other hand, once Syria’s descended into chaos, groups with terrorist links and extremist ideologies traveled to embattled nation to fight. Jihadist groups such as Jabhat al-Nursa the al-Qaeda affiliate and IS have been some of the most effective and disciplined fighting for the Syrian opposition, helping it to win strategically vital battles across Syria. The regionalized civil war has partitioned Syria into three general areas in which US-designated terrorist organizations are dominant. In Syria’s more diverse west, the Alawite and minority-dominated Assad regime, and a mosaic of Shia militias trained and funded by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC), hold sway. In the center, Sunni moderate, Islamist, and jihadist groups, such as IS and Jabhat al-Nursa, share control. And in the northeast, the Kurdish-based People’s Protection Units (YPG) has united two of three cantons in a bid to expand “Rojava”- Western Kurdistan. As the country has hemorrhaged people, neighboring states that tear at the fabric of Syrian society, with Iran and Russia propping up the Assad regime; Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Jordan, Qatar and the U.A.E. supporting the Sunni-dominated opposition; and the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK) supporting the YPG.

On regional scope, Syria is the battle ground for both Iran and Saudi Arabia’s struggle for power. For Iran, Syria is the strategically important gateway to Hamas and Hezbollah. The removal of Assad from power would be catastrophic, as it threatens Iran’s access to Hezbollah, and thus its fortress in the Levant.<sup>224</sup> This also helped Tehran attract Shia militias from Iraq and Lebanon that would fight for Iranian interests. Moreover, Syria is a potential transit route for Iran’s vast natural gas reserves.

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<sup>224</sup> ABDO, Geneve, “How Iran Keeps Assad in Power in Syria”, Foreign Affairs, 2011, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2011-08-25/how-iran-keeps-assad-power-syria>

The relationship between Syria and Iran was forged immediately after the Iranian Revolution in 1979, and enhanced during the Iran-Iraq war of 1980s when Syria supported Iran. As the Syrian government is allied with Iran – the Saudis view it as holder of an opposing sectarian identity card and the hostility towards Saudi Arabia, and thus, an enemy. However, at the roots of Iran-Syria relationship are strategic calculations rather than sectarian similarities. The sociopolitical systems of Syria and Iran are secular, Ba’athist state and Islamic republic, respectively. *“It may be fair to acknowledge a Syrian-Iranian axis, but it is patently incorrect to include the Sunni-majority country of Syria as part of an emerging Shia crescent from Iran to Lebanon.”*<sup>225</sup> The relations between Saudi and Syria have been considerably strained since the 1970s. After the Arab Uprisings in 2011, the Saudis and other Sunni gulf states armed Syrian rebels who are Sunni hard-liners and provided material support and training to them, knowing their anti-Shia views made them more hostile to Iran and more loyal to Saudi. A closer look into the beginning of the civil war in Syria and its transformation into sectarian conflict will equip us with a better understanding of Identity Politics in the country. The opposition that emerged in 2011 was peaceful movements that were decentralized, local, but with national goals in the sakes of “the people”, and “Syria”, rather than any ethno-sectarian group, although Sunnis were present largely in the protests.<sup>226</sup> As armed groups gradually displaced the peaceful opposition, many adopted inclusive names regardless of ethnic or religious identities, including the Free Syrian Army, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, despite the fragmentation or political opposition in exile.<sup>227</sup> However, as Syria becomes more chaotic, it draws in actors with ethnic and sectarian agendas. Taking advantage of the situation, the Saudis patronized the sectarian of the rebel groups among which the Free Syrian Army.<sup>228</sup> It has intended to build and strengthen additional Sunni militias, with the aim of backing the future leadership in Syria, and worked with other Sunni states to ensure the implementation of these

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<sup>225</sup> LESCH, David W., “Fight or Talk: US-Syria Relations since 2000”, in LESCH, David W and HAAS, Mark L., “The Middle East and the United States”, Westview Press, Philadelphia, 2015, p.305.

<sup>226</sup> ISMAIL, Salwa, “The Syrian Uprising: Imagining and Performing the Nation”, *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, Vol: 11, No:3, 2011, pp. 365.

<sup>227</sup> PHILLIPS, Christopher, “Sectarianism and Conflict in Syria”, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol: 36, No: 2, 2015, p.359.

<sup>228</sup> KHALAF, Roula, “Arms Deliveries to Syrian Rebels Delayed”, *Financial Times*, July 2012, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/36d84430-cb11e1-b896-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2xIJMaFMMy>

objectives. The strategy of Identity Politics that use sectarianism in the game of balance of power was expressed in the statement that Arab would continue to resist Iranian involvement in the Syrian civil war, that it “will be there to stop them wherever they are in Arab countries”, because it “can not accept Revolutionary Guards running round Homs”.<sup>229</sup> This card of Identity Politics has contributed greatly to the transformation of Syria to become a chaos, and in turn, the battlefield for the clashes of geostrategic, political and economical interests in the form of the clashes of identities, with the spill over effect into the neighboring Iraq and the contribution to the emergence of IS.

Covered by Identity Politics in the webs of alliances of countries and international powers in the Middle East, there are economical and political dynamics that are hidden but could explain the chaos in totality. Take, for example, oil into analysis for a different angle of understanding might shed a different light on the conflicts in Syria. In 2009, Assad announced a “four seas strategy” aimed at transforming the country into a regional hub for oil transportation between the Persian Gulf and the Black, Caspian and Mediterranean seas. When Qatar proposed a pipeline from the Persian Gulf via Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria and Turkey, Assad refused.<sup>230</sup> However, in July 2011, Iranian officials announced a 10 billion USD gas pipeline deal between Syria, Iraq and Iran that would transport gas from Iran’s South Pars gas field, the world’s biggest one, through Iraq to Syria, exporting directly to Europe out of the Eastern Mediterranean Sea and the plan for construction is 2016. This idea of Syria as a regional oil transit hub is based on its situation between Europe and major producing areas in the Persian Gulf and Caspian Sea. Syria’s pipeline also includes the Arab Gas Pipeline from Egypt to Tripoli in Lebanon and the old IPC oil line from Iraq, which has been off line since US invasion in 2003.<sup>231</sup> This explains a lot about alliances in the conflict. Russia would rather see the Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline built or no pipeline at all, so that it can control gas supplies to Europe. This explains even the minor Egypt’s

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<sup>229</sup> MCELROY, Damien, “Iran nuclear deal: Saudi Arabia warns it will strike out on its own”, The Telegraph, 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/10472538/Iran-nuclear-deal-Saudi-Arabia-warns-it-will-strike-out-on-its-own.html>

<sup>230</sup> AHMED, Nafeez, “Syrian Intervention plan Fueled by oil interest not chemical Weapons”, The Guardian, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/earth-insight/2013/aug/30/syria-chemical-attack-war-intervention-oil-gas-energy-pipelines>

<sup>231</sup> ESCOBAR, Pepe, “Blood for Oil: Syria is the Ultimate Pipelinstan War”, Russian Insider, 2015, <http://russia-insider.com/en/politics/blood-oil-syria-ultimate-pipelinstan-war/ri11709>

attitude of supporting Assad at the expense of tension in its relations with the Saudis.<sup>232</sup> Meanwhile, the Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline – if it's ever built, would not only solidify a predominantly Shia axis through an economic, steel umbilical cord, but would also create an Anglo-American-independent alliance on oil and gas resources. Therefore, the US and its allies support the Qatari pipeline as a way to balance Iran and diversify Europe's gas supplies away from Russia.

On another level, international stake holders in Syria include Russia and the US. Russia has taken a firm position in support of the Assad regime, most recently by intervening militarily through air strikes. The foundation of this support bases on the strong relations stretching back to a history of Soviet support for Syria's leadership throughout much of the Cold War. Many also viewed this support as driven by President Vladimir Putin's intent to project power and challenge American dominance in the region where Russian leadership considers as its traditional spheres of influence. Another factor is Russia's economic relations with Syria: Syria is host to Russia's only foothold in the Mediterranean Sea, a land that connects three continents and provides Russia maritime access from the Black Sea to East Asian markets via the Suez Canal and the Indian Ocean, and a major procurer of Russian military equipment who has spent billions especially since the start of the civil war. Alliance with Iran is another factor in Russia's involvement in Syria. Meanwhile, the US supports Syrian's main opposition alliance, the National Coalition. Since September 2014, the US has been conducting air strikes on IS and other jihadist groups in Syria as part of an international coalition against the jihadist group. Strategically, US, as its closest ally in the region, Israel, want to destroy the Iran-Syrian-Hezbollah nexus, which would result in an isolated and weakened Iran.

In sum, there are too many narratives on the Syria's conflict: one describes the conflict as a civil war of government against people; another depicts it as the religious war pitting Assad's minority Alawite sect, aligned with Shia fighters from Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon, against Sunni rebel groups; while on a wider perspective, it is viewed as a proxy war featuring Russian and Iran against the US and its allies. Until today and to an unknown future, Syria is still one battlefield divided into ethno-

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<sup>232</sup> SIEVERS, Marc J., "Questions About Egypt's Syria Policy", The Washington Institute, 2015, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/questions-about-egypts-syria-policy>



religious camps where political actors of all levels engage and carry out their own political calculations; while the fate of Syrians – who suffered from 470,000 deaths, 4.1 having fled the country, and 6.5 million having been internally displaced,<sup>233</sup> is still in question.

### **3.4.3. The battleground of Yemen**

Yemen is home to two major religious groups: the Zaydi Shia Muslims in the north and the Sunni Muslim of the Shafi'i school in the south and east, yet the religious division has historically been of limited importance as it remained as an undercurrent. While internal conflicts have been endemic to Yemen, they have typically been driven by political, economic or regional disparities. However, the Yemen civil war now is widely viewed as a battleground of regional Sunni-Shia rivalry: while Saudi Arabia wants to maintain a high level of political influence with the monarchy, Iran seeks for local Shia clients as a means to create leverage pressure on the government's political power. Therefore, Iranian leadership has aided and supported the Houthis – a minority with sectarian identity of Zaydi Shia Islam - rhetorically to advocate a religious solidarity and make them effective in anti-Saudi proxies; and Saudi Arabia backs President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi and his supporters and accuses Iran of supporting sectarian groups based on sectarian difference. Indeed, Houthi rebels would not have got so far without the support of the former president, Ali Saleh, who is angling to return to power, or at least show that the country is ungovernable without him pulling the strings. Nor would the Houthi advance have aroused so much attention without the fact that the rebels have the support of Iran. On March 2015, the Houthis took over Aden and disposed the “pro-Saudi and pro-American president” Hadi. Immediately, Saudi Arabia carried out an intervention under the name “Operation Decisive Storm” in Yemen, in a coalition of nine Arab states with the logistic support and weapons from the US, France and Britain. The formal pretext of the invasion was the restoration of the deposed president, but the actual goal of the Saudis was to suppress the Houthis rebels. And this political aim was realized by the deliberate extermination

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<sup>233</sup> Global Conflict Tracker, “Civil War in Syria”, Council on Foreign Relations, 2016, <http://www.cfr.org/global/global-conflict-tracker/p32137#!/conflict/civil-war-in-syria>

of the civilian population of Yemen through Saudis' targets on Yemeni civilians.<sup>234</sup> The president returned to Aden on November 2015.

However, in fact, in the beginning the Houthis called their social movement the "Change Revolution". It should also be mentioned that they cooperated with Islah – a supported client of Saudi Arabia - in Yemen's popular uprising.<sup>235</sup> However, the transitional national unity government brokered by the Gulf Cooperation Council and endorsed by the United Nations, while doing little to address key anti-corruption demands by Houthi protesters, over-presented Islah and defined the Houthi conflict as the major challenge facing the country. Moreover, the relationship between Iran and Yemen's Zaydi Shia is "more pragmatic than ideological" as Houthis itself is a schismatic Shia branch distinct from the Twelver Shia practiced in Iran.<sup>236</sup> In fact, the description of opposition of Houthis, including large-scale, nonviolent mobilization of protesters, as a sectarian force rather than a political contest for power was more likely a tactic of Identity Politics for political actors to make use of the situation and direct it to their desired political outcomes. From the anti-Houthi side, President Hadi has on occasion described the Houthis as "Twelver Shia"; Hamoud al-Mikhlafi, leader of a Taiz-based group fighting against Houthi militias and forces loyal to Saleh also described his opponents as "Persians" in reference to their Shia religious affiliation and support from Iran, and the anti-Houthi tribal leader Hussein al-Ahmar called himself "the powerful lion of the Sunnis", portraying himself as a defender of Sunnis in Yemen. Meanwhile, the Houthis also invoked sectarian concepts by repeatedly referring to their opponents as *takfiris* or *daeshites* (the Arabic term for IS), which did not appear in Yemen at the time.<sup>237</sup>

The sectarianism narrative in Yemen's conflict serves to the geopolitical narrative about a Shia power gaining foothold in the Arabia Peninsula, the stronghold of the

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<sup>234</sup> MACASKILL, Ewen, "UN report into Saudi-led Strikes in Yemen raises questions over UK role", The Guardian, January 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/27/un-report-into-saudi-led-strikes-in-yemen-raises-questions-over-uk-role>

<sup>235</sup> TAYLER, Letta, "Yemen's Hijacked Revolution: New protests Pushed aside by Old Rivalries in Sanaa", Foreign Affairs, 2011, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/persian-gulf/2011-09-26/yemens-hijacked-revolution>

<sup>236</sup> KHATIB, Lina, "Saudi Arabia's Comeback Via Yemen", Carnegie Middle East center, 2015, <http://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=59556>

<sup>237</sup> AL-MUSLIMI, Farea, "How Sunni-Shia Sectarianism is Poisoning Yemen", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2015, <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=62375>

Sunni powers led by Saudi Arabia. The growth of Shia power and Iranian influence in Iraq coincided with a parallel process in Lebanon, the rise of a Iranian-backed Hezbollah armed militia and a vacuum in the Sunni leadership after the assassination of Rafiq Hariri. This guided the social media on how Arab world is exploding, gave pan-Arab voice to salafists to denounce the weakness of the Arab states while blaming everything on Iran. Meanwhile, The US is supporting its oil-supplying ally Saudi Arabia against the Shia rebels in Yemen, who want the former president instead of the current Saudi-allied Sunni president. Saudi Arabia, however, has been committing war crimes against its Shia population, and the US is therefore implicated since it is militarily supporting the Saudis.

For observers and scholars of international relations and conflicts, the current civil war in Yemen is considered as following one of the three narratives: the narrative of Saudi-Iranian proxy war, the sectarian narrative, and the al-Qaeda, failed state narrative.<sup>238</sup> In fact, each narrative holds one piece of the puzzle, and the understanding of the conflict as the consequence of regional and international games of Identity Politics in order to gain political and geopolitical power and interests in states with weak government and different identities in existence would somehow provide an understanding of the situation on the whole.

#### **3.4.4. In Lebanon**

With a territory bordering Israel to the south and Syria to the northeast, Lebanon has received a large refugee influx from both Palestine and Syria. Thus, the support networks for groups on all sides of the neighboring conflicts have been mobilized in Lebanon, and cross-border skirmishes and increased weapons smuggling have become a security problem. Indeed, many of the regional axes of conflict run through Lebanon: the Sunni-Shia divide, the Saudi-Iranian rivalry; the Arab-Israeli conflict, the status of minorities particularly Christians, Alawites and Druze, and the rise and empowerment of Sunni Islamists.<sup>239</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> CLAUSEN, Maria-Louise., “Understanding the crisis in Yemen: Evaluating competing narratives”, *The International Spectator*, Vol: 50, No: 3, 2015, p.16.

<sup>239</sup> FABRA-MATA, Javier, SAEVERAS, Arne and CARTER, William, “The Syrian crisis and its impact on Lebanon: A Conflict Analysis”, *Norwegian Church Aid, ActAlliance*, 2015, p.4.

Iran has its important ally in Lebanon – the Hezbollah – which has become one of the most powerful political organizations in Lebanese affairs and thus provided Iran with a superior ability to influence Lebanon’s politics. On one side, Hezbollah is considered a global terrorist threat and perilous to stability in the Middle East; on the other, it is described as a state within the state as it manages an extensive security and military apparatus, political and social service organization in Lebanon which serves not only as an extensive welfare and education network but also as a means to resist Israeli and Western involvement in the region. It has called for the expulsion of the United States, France and Israel from Lebanese territory and for the destruction of the Israeli state.<sup>240</sup> Thus it is also important for Iran as a threat to Israel and the US, ensuring that if Israel attempted a strike against Iran’s nuclear facility, Hezbollah would be ready to retaliate.<sup>241</sup> Hezbollah’s founding manifesto vowed its loyalty to Iran’s supreme leader, while other non-Hezbollah Shias are followers of Iraqi Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.<sup>242</sup> Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, has viewed Lebanon as its background. Based on religion and petrodollars, Saudi Arabia saw the civil war in Lebanon as a means to pursue its campaign to spread Wahhabism, promote Arabism, and Islamicize Lebanon. Its main client in the region was the Sunni Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri who had both Lebanese and Saudi Arabian citizenship and became the symbol for Saudi’s interests in Lebanon, before his assassination in 2005. The Israeli military intervention in Lebanon in 2006 was launched as a response to Hezbollah’s continuous attacks and kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers. This did not destroy Hezbollah but elevated its status in the country and thus tipped in the balance in favor of Iranian influence. In 2013 and 2014, Hezbollah areas in southern Beirut had been targeted mostly by Sunni militants who opposed Hezbollah’s decision to join the fight in neighboring Syria. In November 2015, IS targeted a Hezbollah stronghold in Beirut, killing 43 people and injuring over 200 in double suicide bomb attacks, which marked the deadliest since the end of Lebanon’s civil war.<sup>243</sup> Hezbollah’s decision to get

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<sup>240</sup> MASTERS, Jonathan and Laub, Zachary, “Backgrounds: Hezbollah”, Council of Foreign Relations, 2014, <http://www.cfr.org/lebanon/hezbollah-k-hizzbollah-hizbullah/p9155>

<sup>241</sup> BYMAN, Daniel, “Understanding proto-insurgencies”, *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol: 31, No: 2, 2008, pp.165-200.

<sup>242</sup> QASSEM, Naeem, “Hizbullah: The Story from Within”, Saqi, London, 2005, p.56.

<sup>243</sup> Global Conflict Tracker, “Sectarian Conflict in Lebanon”, 2016, <http://www.cfr.org/global/global-conflict-tracker/p32137#!/conflict/sectarian-conflict-in-lebanon>

involved in Syria has earned it a degree of admiration from many Lebanese Christians and even from some Sunnis.

The confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Saudi has translated into a political deadlock in Lebanon. It has been almost two years the country has been without a president, as the parliament has been unable to elect one when Hezbollah and its allies have boycotted the legislature's sessions, and politicians and factions backed alternatively by Iran and Saudi Arabia are at odds over the appointment of a new president.<sup>244</sup> A Lebanese government, which unites all the main political forces, still exists. However, as the ministers have been unable to do much actual governing due to the lack of elusive consensus for important decisions, the situation is suffocating economic activity.

#### **3.4.5. In Bahrain**

Domestically, the Shias constitute 70% of Bahraini population but political power remains in the hands of Sunni minority. Shias are far less likely than Sunnis to obtain jobs in the public sector, and those who hold government jobs fill lower ranking occupations on average compared to equally-qualified Sunnis. They are almost entirely disqualified from police and military service. In addition, Shia citizens are systematically under-presented in Bahrain's elected lower house of parliament due to rampant electoral gerrymandering. In the last fully-contested election in 2010, for example, the average Shia-majority district represented about 9,500 electors, the average Sunni district only about 6,000.<sup>245</sup> This minority government has a close relationship with Saudi Arabia due to several reasons: Bahrain shares the borders with Saudi Arabia on eastern province and is deeply connected with the eastern Saudi region, to the extent that some have referred to Bahrain as a "province of Saudi Arabia" because of its heavy dependence on Saudi support.<sup>246</sup> The country's main oil revenue is derived from Saudi Arabia as it shares the Abu Safa offshore field with the

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<sup>244</sup> WILLIAMS, Micheal and CARRION, Doris, "The Perils of Lebanon's Deepening Sectarianism", Chatham House, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2015, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/perils-lebanons-deepening-sectarianism#>

<sup>245</sup> GENGLER, Justin, "How Bahrain's crushed Uprising spawned the Middle East's sectarianism", in Project on Middle East Political Science, "Reflections Five Years After the Uprisings", 2016, p.45.

<sup>246</sup> KAPLAN, Micheal, "Could Saudi Iran Tensions Destabilize Bahrain? Unrest Sparks Protests in Sectarian – Divided Gulf State", International Business Times, 2016, <http://www.ibtimes.com/could-saudi-iran-tensions-destabilize-bahrain-unrest-sparks-protests-sectarian-2248342>

Saudis, making its economy and state budget largely dependent on Saudi Arabia. Bahrain is also a member of the GCC.

In February 2011, opposition movements in Bahrain began calling for constitutional reforms, free elections, and the release of prisoners of conscience from the firmly established Khalifa monarchy. It was followed by violent repression by the government to the Shia community under the divide and rule tactic, with Saudi's support through direct military intervention which was strongly condemned by Iran. While US criticized the Saudi action without explicitly condemning its ally, the American Fifth Fleet which is station in Bahrain, has been considered one factor in the sustenance of the Sunni autocracy in the country.<sup>247</sup> While Saudis and Bahraini government tried to emphasize the extreme sectarian rhetoric by accusing Iran of instigating a coup attempt, Iran denied these claims.<sup>248</sup> Experts and observers also doubt the possibility of Iran's intervention in the country as Bahraini Shia clergy maintains a quietest stance and opposition groups in Bahrain rejected accusations of foreign ties. Some factions within Bahrain's Shia opposition groups, on the other hand, condemned the country's ruling family as well as Saudi Arabia. Some claimed that their spiritual leader is Ayatollah Khomeini, they stand in line with the doctrines advocated by him.<sup>249</sup> This raised Saudi's vulnerability and fears, as it took a vested interest in supporting the Khalifa family in their brutal crackdown against the uprising through troops sent under the GCC security framework to suppress the protests. Khalifa even halted the Bahrain airlines to Iran, Iraq and Lebanon in an attempt to distance Shia populations from one another, intensifying the politicization of Sunni and Shia identity divisions, and presenting the struggle in Bahrain as a regional battle for Sunni-Shia identity conflicts. In anyway, the ferocity of the government's repression has some how led to the development of unprecedented deep mistrust and fear between Bahrain's Shia and Sunni communities. While activists repeatedly assert that their movement is secular based on universal values including democracy and human rights, wider political developments appear to suggest that the nation has

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<sup>247</sup> HASHMI, Taj, "Global Jihad and America: The Hundred-Year War beyond Iraq and Afghanistan", SAGE Publications, New Delhi, 2014, p.278.

<sup>248</sup> QAIDAARI, Abbas, "Does Iran have a Card to Play in Bahrain?", Al-Monitor, 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/03/iran-bahrain-saraya-mukhtar.html#>

<sup>249</sup> MATHIESEN, Toby, "Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab Spring that wasn't", Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2013, p.41.

become deeply polarized along sectarian lines. This has resulted in the emergence of Sunni activist movements, including vigilante groups seeking to pit themselves against Shia protesters, and extreme elements condemning the government for not doing enough to crack down on Shia “traitors”.<sup>250</sup> The political awakening of Bahraini Sunnis - once content to stay out of politics in exchange for the benefits of their preferential status, the suffering and marginalized Shias, plus the financial crisis that has resulted in the introduction of taxation and withdrawal of welfare benefits that citizens have come to expect and depend upon since the beginning of the oil era, have the potential to further entrench Bahrain’s increasingly dangerous sectarian politics. And the key battles of politics are fought not along distributive lines but along the very defining lines of the regime: the nation’s history and cultural identities, the bases of citizenship, and the conditions of government and its institutions.

#### **3.4.6. Libya**

In Libya, tribal affiliation is not a rigid system of alliances and divisions, but a very flexible reality. Some Libyans greatly value their tribal identities while many openly dismiss tribalism as a relic of the past, yet other do not even know what tribe they originally belong to. There are some 300 tribes in Libya, but many of them, far from being homogeneous groups located in a unitary area, are simply networks of people who live far from each other and barely know the identity of their tribal leaders. Such considerations help to explain both how a member of a historically minor tribe like Muammar Gaddafi could take power in 1969, and why for many Libyans, there is no necessary conflict between tribal affiliation and national identity. Moreover, Libya’s tribal dynamics must be viewed in the context of the effects of Gaddafi’s political project on Libyan society. For four decades, the Gaddafi regime has prevented the formation of a real civil society. In the absence of political parties or autonomous organizations, many Libyans were in practice forced to resort to tribal connections in their everyday life. The problems of Libya do not lie in the amalgam of “tribes with

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<sup>250</sup> WEHREY, Frederic M., “Sectarian Politics in the Gulf: From the Iraq War to the Arab Uprisings”, Columbia University Press, New York, 2014, p.98.

flags” where “each tribe lives by the motto rule or die” – the motto that blocked democratic rotations in power and resulted in tribal civil war.<sup>251</sup>

Mass uprisings in Libya began on February 2011 in the city of Benghazi, focusing on human rights abuses, social program mismanagement, and political corruption and finally demanding the end of Gaddafi’s rule. The National Transitional Council (NTC), a coalition body of anti-Gaddafi forces was formed to consolidate resistance efforts nation-wide. The uprisings have not been a tribal skirmish but a national revolution – albeit fought with tribal means, and taking place against a backdrop of political manipulation of tribal loyalties by the previous regime. Thus both the regime and the TNC have used the card of Identity Politics and sought tribal support during the war. The colonel Khalifa Haftar – general under Gaddafi, organized and televised meetings with tribal representatives in Tripoli until the siege of the city, and his speeches made constant references to Libya’s tribes. The TNC promoted a series of declarations where tribal leaders, among their members of the Qaddahafa, the colonel’s own, expressed their desire to remove Gaddafi. In each case, however, the regime and the council have cultivated a tribal consensus only to prove their legitimacy to rule Libya as nation. As the NTC solidified its agenda and mobilization and Gaddafi cracked down in retaliation, the peaceful protests developed into a bloody civil war that was only officially ended with Gaddafi’s death on October 2011 and the NTC’s declaration of victory. This conflict developed into an internationally recognized civil war with influences from five isolated independent variables: Gaddafi’s harsh and repressive regime, territorial division of Libya into NTC and loyalist strongholds, NTC armament and military training, coalition rebel forces, and the influence of the UN, NATO intervention, and the Arab League jointly propelled Libya’s conflict inexorably from peaceful protest to bloody civil war.<sup>252</sup> While the civil war has been fueled by detrimental foreign intervention, the local actors have been justifying their conflicts under banners of fighting “terrorism” or standing up to a “counter-revolutionary forces”. The state has transformed into two parallel civil wars raging the east and west of Libya, with two separate conflicting parliaments and

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<sup>251</sup> FRIEDMAN, Thomas, “Tribes with Flags”, the New York Times, 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/23/opinion/23friedman.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/23/opinion/23friedman.html?_r=0)

<sup>252</sup> BHARDWAJ, Maya, “Development of Conflict in Arab Spring Libya and Syria: From Revolution to Civil war”, Washington University International Review, Vol: 1, 2012, p.81.



governments emerged: the government of the Council of Deputies, known as the “Tobruk government” which has the loyalty of the Army under General Khalifa Haftar the support of Egypt and UAE, was recognized internationally as having been elected democratically in 2014; and the rival Islamist government of the General National Congress, also called the “National Salvation Government”, backed by the Muslim Brotherhood and aided by Qatar, Sudan and Turkey, based in the capital Tripoli after its supporter, the armed Dawn Coalition took control of the city.

According to the media, the conflicts in the Middle East, aside from ethnic divisions, are all about sectarianism, and they are fights between competing religions or between sects within the same region. However, while the sectarian feelings have been rising since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, this is not the whole story. Sectarianism is usually the result, not the cause, of Identity Politics in the face of a wide variety of tensions – between states, tribes, regional identities, classes and ethnic groups, or between the ones who possess everything and the ones who owe nothing in society. If one would ask a question, it would be: these tensions exist throughout the world but why have they become unmanageable in the Middle East? The answer is that all factors have been gathered in the Middle East: the rich resources and strategic location of which the control would ensure anyone the huge share of power globally; most of the authoritarian weak regimes that were put in place by outside force with political structures inherited from imperialism era in which divide and rule are one speciality; the continuous intervention including direct military intervention from regional and international actors; the suppressed population – mostly the majority in countries ruled by the minority who consider the guarantee of power as their top priority, who not only suffered from marginalization and exclusion by their own countrymen, but indirectly from foreign and supra-state actors including extremist groups; and the emergence of these extreme terrorist groups that spreading terror all over the world, with daily coverage blame their ferocity and brutality in fighting and killing to a religion that the majority of population here follow as inheritance of their cultures and inherent part of their lives. With all these factors, identity conflicts can occur anywhere in the world be it ethnic, religious, ideological or belonging to any other feature of group’s identity.

## CONCLUSION

Identity Politics can be observed the best in identity conflicts, including the ethnic and sectarian conflicts that have seemed to become omnipresent problem for the Middle East. However, understanding Identity Politics in Middle East's conflicts requires a look that transcends the primordial nature of identities. As identities are not only a natural phenomenon, but also a result of social processes which are open to construction and modification in its formation and maintenance, they can be used, exploited or manipulated. Identity Politics, partly bases on the identities that are inherent in group's primordial characteristics, but mainly bases on political activities that make the best use of identities, either inclusive identities for affiliation and mobilization, or exclusive ones for forming alliances in the game of power balance. There are many political and economical interests behind the card of ethnic and sectarian Identity Politics. In conflicts, these interests are either covered by the identity-conflict-narratives, or identity differences would be the tools to manipulate the situation and maneuver to the best outcomes by political actors of all level. To understand the multilayered Identity Politics in Middle East's divisions and conflicts requires the clarification on its influences as well as its role as power-amplifier on all ranges, from the socio-cultural domestic conditions that facilitate the politicization of sub-state identities, to state-scale that is governed by state capacity and bound more or less by a state identity, and the spheres of regional and international effects and involvement.

Specifically, the sources of Identity Politics in the Middle East can be traced back to the sub-state identities (or non-stae identities in case when identities formation dates back to the far-fetched history passing beyond the establishment of modern states). The major sub-state identities that emerge in the most notable regional conflicts nowadays include Sunni-Shia sectarian identities, Jews and Arabs' identities (in which the clear classification of these identities in either religious/ethnic or racial/national categories might be controversial), and the Kurdish ethnic identity. As the theoretical framework mapped out, the sources of Identity Politics do not come only from the primordial ethnic and sectarian compositions of the major regional conflicts. Indeed, all other factors must be taken into consideration: the political legacy of the Ottoman

Empire and Imperialism, the factor of regional rich resources (which has steered the region to chaos as much as it has driven oil countries to wealth), the weak regimes in the face of strong sub-state identities, and foreign intervention through either the debilitation of states' immunity from the conflicting sub-state identities or the support to the sub-state identities (in which the power status of one sub-state identity in the struggle to rule the state does not make it the one that represents that whole nation). These factors form "the social-constructionism" of identities, nurture the potential power of identities to be politicized and set out the conditions for the politicization of those identities, in which political actors from the sub-state to state level have the privileged rights to instrumentalize those identities in favor of their political struggles/ access the politicized identities for mass mobilization/ rule and at times, maneuver of the mass – as well as the obligations accompanying these rights that constrained political actors in the public eyes.

Putting these sources of ethnic and sectarian Identity Politics of regional divisions and conflicts in the state level immediately as the next step, however, would not capture the regional scale of these conflicts as the center of the research. Moreover, the most high-profile conflicts in the Middle East defy state boundaries. Therefore, looking straight at those conflicts as what they are without being limited by state boundaries and setting the "materials" of Identity Politics in those conflicts on the whole region would serve best the goals of this research. It is worth noting that state level is the buffer between sub-state and regional levels. In other words, the "reaching out" from sub-state level and the "reaching in" from the regional levels complete theigsaw puzzle of Identity Politics in conflicts in state level.

In detail, the regional level of Identity Politics analysis focuses on three conflicts that have emerged as the most conspicuous in the Middle East: First, Identity Politics in regional Sunni-Shia schism manifested through the "Cold War" between Saudi Arabia and Iran<sup>253</sup> can be traced back to the Iranian Revolution, where two important sectarian forces of Islam were put in opposing powers to define the mobilization and forging of alliance in the regional political struggle in the name of Identity Politics.

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<sup>253</sup> JOYNER, Alfred, "Iran vs Saudi Arabia: The Middle East Cold War explained", International Business Times, 2016, <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/iran-vs-saudi-arabia-middle-east-cold-war-explained-1535968>

Sectarian Identity Politics in the case of Saudi Arabia – Iran’s rivalry has proven to be important as well as effective as it could best satisfy the problems concerning both dynamics and interests of the two powers including domestic affairs and vulnerabilities, challenges from the Arab uprisings, difficulties and instabilities arising from nuclear issues, and their struggles in regional petroleum politics and geopolitics. Second, the Identity Politics in the case of Israel-Palestinian case is defined by the more powerful – Israeli government. As early as the establishment of the state of Israel, one of the justifications for the occupation on the wider part of Palestinian land was based on the presence at the time of a “national identity”. Being clearly the most successful user of Identity Politics for its political goals of expansionism and becoming the majority in the territories it acquired, Israel also has regional interests which could be carried out through the tactics of Identity Politics. Third, to non-state entrepreneurs, among which the Kurdish national movements are those on the most noticeable front Identity Politics is not only a political instrument as they reside in different countries where Identity Politics has been the reality that more or less leads to their assumed conscience of unequal status. All of these political actors on regional level have casted influences on the certain battlegrounds of Identity Conflicts in the region. In Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Palestinian territories, as well as in Lebanon, Bahrain, Lybia, Identity Politics has merged itself into the chaos of clashing ethnic and sectarian identities that is not only spreading instability and violence wider but also deepening more the divisions comprised of identities and interests, and complicated by the ties between these two sides of Middle East’s power: identities and interests.

The consequences of this Identity Politics on many levels by many political actors with overlapping interests would create the struggles that eventually, civilians are the ones who suffer the most. The mosaic of Middle East ethnic and sectarian diversity, as well as its deep and long history and culture, which constitute one of the splendors of human civilization, are becoming the objects of wars and bloodshed. Sunni-Shia conflicts are spreading all over Middle East, while Palestine-Israel conflict – the Gordian knot of Middle East unrest, seems to stuck on impasse forever as it seems Israel only want to expand and the US only supports it. Meanwhile, people in the Middle East get more and more conflicts, accusation, and brandings and labels as violence-craving, uncivilized, backward, underdeveloped.

Ten years after the US invasion in Iraq, almost 4,500 US troops were killed and more than 32,000 wounded, including thousands with critical brain and spinal injuries. The monetary cost could exceed 3 trillion USD. For the Middle East, the “flagrant transgression of international law” in the invasion contributed decisively to the “still-expanding” colossal disaster here. Estimates of the number of Iraqi civilian fatalities are staggering, ranging from 100,000 to 600,000.<sup>254</sup> In Syria, more than 200,000 have been killed in the four-and-a-half year civil war.<sup>255</sup> Meanwhile, a recent study in 2013 has shown that, for every life terrorism claimed on US soil or where Americans abroad were killed by terrorist, more than 1,000 died from firearms inside the US during the most recent period for which comparative data is available. Specifically, from 2001 to 2013, number of deaths caused by terrorism is 3,380 in totality, while the number of people died in gun violence amounts to 405,496.<sup>256</sup> Similarly, actual annual diabetes deaths were estimated in the tens of thousands while fewer than 1,000 people died in tornadoes. Not only in the US, even countries that have claimed to be the targets of intensive terror campaigns, such as Israel, the weekly number of casualties almost never comes close to the number of traffic deaths.<sup>257</sup> These data once again put forward the question of the Iraq case. While many argues that Islamic terrorism not only kill people, that they are using sword to spread Islam and take over the world; that not only people are killed, but Western values and ideas, and Western civilization are under attack; many can counter argue by asking that whether it is the West who is applying their values and ideas to others - like they have been doing for centuries under different umbrellas in which the similarity is that their values have always been higher than others’ - with mass attacks by their state-of-the-art weapons on civilians in a disproportionate manner that tremendously exceed even the worst notion of reprisal for or prevention of terrorism, or whether the lives of Eastern people are not as valuable as Western ones. Indeed, the fears of terrorism more likely are the

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<sup>254</sup> MACEDA, Jim, “Ten years after Iraq invasion, US troops ask ‘Was it worth it?’”, NBC news, 2013, <http://worldnews.nbcnews.com/news/2013/03/18/17326297-ten-years-after-iraq-invasion-us-troops-ask-was-it-worth-it>

<sup>255</sup> YOURISH, Karen, LAI, Rebecca and WATKINS, Derek, “Death in Syria”, The New York Times, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/09/14/world/middleeast/syria-war-deaths.html>

<sup>256</sup> JONES, Julia and BOWER, Eve, “American Deaths in Terrorism vs. Gun Violence in one graph”, CNN News, 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/10/02/us/oregon-shooting-terrorism-gun-violence/>

<sup>257</sup> SHAVER, Andrew, “You’re more likely to be Fatally Crushed by Furniture than killed by a terrorist”, The Washington Post, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/11/23/youre-more-likely-to-be-fatally-crushed-by-furniture-than-killed-by-a-terrorist/>

results of “extremely vivid images of death and damage” from terrorist attacks that are “reinforced by media attention and frequent conversations”.<sup>258</sup> If ethnic and sectarian complexity of the Middle East is the basis source of Identity conflicts including ethnic separatist movements and sectarianism in the region, it is the branding of the world and the biased report of the media that spread fears and understanding of regional problems as founded solely on ethnic or sectarian identities. These data question not only the international intervention on Middle East lives and politics, but also prove that identities, be it ethnic, religious, ideological, are not the causes of violence. They are factors that can be used in Identity Politics by political actors of all levels for different political and power interests, and are the cover for social, economical or political problems.

Surely the Middle East has a lot of social, economical, and political problems. But people in the Middle East need time and peace to build democratic countries. It may be a long and difficult process, with many problems arises along the way. However, it is the rights of Middle East’s people to construct their own political structures, with the constructive support from international powers. The states that are intervening in Middle Eastern affairs under the name of counter-terrorism, prevention of weapons of mass destruction, or humanitarian intervention are carrying out the other form of Identity Politics using other cards to get involved in the chaos of the rich land and obtain the political gains they want, which either ignite extreme responses in the form of radial Islamist groups or identity violence, or exacerbate the situations.

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<sup>258</sup> KAHNEMAN, Daniel, “Thinking, Fast and Slow”, Farrar, Straus and Girous, New York, 2011, pp.322-323

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