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# The Middle-Eastern Mess

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PARTH NANDWANI<sup>1</sup> AND RAJYEVARDHAN SINGH<sup>2</sup>

## ABSTRACT

*The paper talks about the ongoing sectarian tension in the Middle-East and how the two main countries in the Middle-East, Iran and Saudi Arabia, are struggling to expand their influence in the region. The two countries by inciting their respective sectarian groups have caused much damage in the Middle-East. Though they do not fight directly but have set up their proxies in different countries in the region who do the fighting for them. The paper talks about how the two belligerents have had conflicting interests in different countries and how they were able to establish their proxies to fight for them. It also talks about the political conditions which existed and which led to the eruption of sectarian violence in the Middle-East. Doctrinal methodology has been resorted to for the purpose of research.*

**Keywords:** *sectarian, middle-east, proxies, political.*

## I. BRIEF HISTORY OF IRAN

Until 1979, Iran was ruled by the Shah of Iran who was a secular leader. The Shia clerics wanted the Shah to be removed from power and provoked the Iranians to revolt against the Shah. The reason was that the Shah was letting the western countries interfere in the internal economic affairs of the country. The clerics blamed him for working as a puppet of the United States and they saw him as a tool used by the United States to promote western imperialism. The Shah of Iran with the backing of the US was able to suppress the dissidents initially but eventually had to step down in 1979 when the revolution escalated and he lost control. He flew to the US to seek asylum.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile Ayatollah Khomeini, the Shia cleric who led the revolution returned to Iran in 1979 after spending some years in exile. He straightaway advocated that an Islamic government be constituted to govern Iran and turned the country into a theocratic nation and himself became its Supreme Leader.

With the success of the Islamic revolution in Iran, Khomeini preached that the revolution should spread to other parts of the Muslim world in order to overthrow the secular, western-

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<sup>1</sup> Author is a Legal Trainee at Uttarakhand Power Corporation Ltd. (UPCL), India.

<sup>2</sup> Author is a Law graduate from IMS Unison University, Dehradun. India.

<sup>3</sup> Ali M. Ansari, "A Brief History of Iran", Jan 8, 2020

backed leaders of the Muslim states in the Middle-East and to replace their regimes with Islamic governments who would govern the states according to the strict principles of Islam. He called for an Islamic revolution across the Middle-East but since he was a Shia Muslim, the Sunni Muslims in other states, especially in Saudi Arabia, misinterpreted his call for Islamic revolution as a call for a 'Shia revolution.' The monarchs of Saudi Arabia feared that maybe Khomeini is trying to push and provoke the Shias in the Middle-East to revolt and take control. As a result the Sunni governments suppressed any Shia uprising that took place and embarked upon a mission to spread the Sunni doctrines across the Muslim world and support the Sunni governments in order to contain the spread of 'Shia Revolution.'<sup>4</sup>

## **II. BRIEF HISTORY OF SAUDI ARABIA**

Saudi Arabia as a state came into existence in the year 1932. The modern state of Saudi Arabia was founded by King Abdul-Aziz in the year 1932. The governing system in Saudi Arabia is based on a pact signed between Muhammad ibn-Saud (founder of House of Saud) and Mohammad ibn-Abd al-Wahhab (founder of Wahhabism). According to this pact it was agreed that Saud would be in charge of the politics and the economy of the region of Ad-Diriyah which later expanded to the present area of Saudi Arabia and Al-Wahhab would be in charge of religious affairs, religion being a very important aspect of people's life back then. This alliance was formed in the year 1744. Since then the members of House of Saud and the Wahhabi clerics have jointly ruled Saudi Arabia. The members of House of Saud are able to rule politically provided they do not interfere in the religious affairs and the Wahhabi clerics control the Saudi society by compelling the Saudi people to adhere to the ultra-conservative principles of Wahhabism. It is also believed that the monarchs in Saudi Arabia use the Wahhabi clerics to control the Saudi society and to keep their regime intact.<sup>5</sup>

The Saud-Wahhabi pact is the foundation of the present governance system in Saudi Arabia. With the success of the Shia revolution in Iran as perceived by the Wahhabi clerics, they feared that if the revolution is exported to different countries then the Shias might take control and dominate the entire Middle-East. Moreover, the monarchs who ruled Saudi Arabia during the 1970s and 1980s practiced moderate Islam and lobbied for and implemented various social and economic reforms, reforms which the Wahhabi clerics saw as anti-Islam and against the Wahhabi doctrines. Fearing that Wahhabism may fade away and so their control over the Saudi society, they started to oppose the governments' actions to bring about social reforms and

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<sup>4</sup><https://youtu.be/VHcgnRI2x2PM>

<sup>5</sup> Supra Note 4

pushed them to counter Iran's Shia Revolution.

In 1979, another important event in the modern history of Shia-Sunni conflict took place, popularly known as the "Siege of Mecca." The Wahhabi extremists seized Mecca, an act of retaliation against the Saudi government's efforts to undermine Wahhabism. They demanded that the House of Saud be removed from power. The extremists were however neutralized by the security forces of Saudi Arabia and France. The Siege of Mecca however brought about a significant change in Saudi Arabia. The monarchs owing to the pressure from the Wahhabi clerics reinforced certain Wahhabi principles and turned Saudi Arabia towards conservatism.<sup>6</sup>

The Wahhabi clerics were determined to protect Wahhabism in the face of Shia revolution and the Monarchs who too were Sunni Muslims were determined to keep their regimes intact and thereby they jointly resisted any Shia uprising in the State. The government of Saudi Arabia also started to contribute monetarily to support and promote Sunni Islam in other parts of the Muslim World. They supported Sunni governments in other states to resist Shia uprisings or revolts. They did this to reduce Iran's influence in the Middle-East and also to contain the spread of Shia revolution through which Iran was increasing its control over the region. The Saudis supported politically and monetarily not just the Sunni governments but also the Sunni organizations and the Sunni extremists groups across the Middle-East to fight the Shias, whom they perceived as a threat. On the other hand Iran started to support the suppressed Shia minorities by setting up proxies in different parts of the Middle-East.

Saudi Arabia and Iran, both see themselves as the leader of the Muslim World and to increase their influence and to spread their own ideology in the Middle-East they fight with each other, not directly but through proxies. Each is determined to stop the other from gaining ground in the Middle-East.

Thus, the roots of modern sectarian conflict can be traced back to the Islamic Revolution in Iran in the year 1979. The Iran-Saudi conflict symbolizes the sectarian conflict in the Middle-East and this conflict is the main reason for the "Middle-Eastern Mess."

### **III. AFGHANISTAN AND THE MUJAHEDDEEN**

Saudi Arabia got its first opportunity to support and strengthen the Sunni Muslims when the war in Afghanistan broke out between the Soviet Union and the Afghan resistance. Soviet Union determined to keep its control over Afghanistan, because of its strategic location, invaded Afghanistan after political relations failed. The Afghans who were mostly Sunnis did not like

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<sup>6</sup><https://pbsinternational.org/siege-of-mecca>

the idea of a foreign power controlling their territory and so they organized themselves to fight the Soviets. Saudi Arabia saw an opportunity to increase its influence in Afghanistan and believed that the post-Soviet Afghanistan would be ruled by the Mujahedeens, the fighting force, and thereby they decided to help the Mujahedeens in their fight against the Soviet Union.<sup>7</sup>

Saudi Arabia sent in men and money to help the Mujahedeen fight the Soviets. One of the men who travelled to Afghanistan to participate in the so called “holy war” was Osama bin Laden. A wealthy businessman, he organized the Mujahedeens and equipped them with weapons smuggled in Afghanistan by the Americans. The fighters who would fight against the Soviet army were selected by the Inter Service Intelligence (ISI) of Pakistan and they were financially aided by the government of Saudi Arabia and were armed by the Americans.<sup>8</sup>

After the Soviet Union left, the Mujahedeens, now established as Taliban, established their control over Afghanistan and because of their allegiance to Sunni Islam, they were tilted more towards the state of Saudi Arabia than any other nation. This way, Saudi Arabia was able to establish influence over Afghanistan and prevented the Iranian revolution from spreading to Afghanistan. The Taliban ruled the country until the US invasion of Afghanistan in the year 2001.

#### **IV. LEBANON & THE RISE OF HEZBOLLAH**

The Saudis acquired influence over Afghanistan but the Iranians got their opportunity to support and spread the revolution to another Arab country, Lebanon. There were three communities which lived side by side in Lebanon, the Shia Muslims, the Sunni Muslims and Christians. The Shia Muslims were the largest minority living in Lebanon. Meanwhile, the state of Israel, Lebanon’s neighbor and an adversary, was fighting an intense battle with the Palestinians especially with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). As a result of intense fighting in the West Bank, the members of the PLO were forced to flee and they settled in southern Lebanon after the government of Lebanon permitted them to do so. After establishing their base in southern Lebanon, the PLO fighters started to fire rockets into the Israel territory, which led to many Israeli casualties.<sup>9</sup> To avenge these casualties, there is Israeli forces in the year 1982 invaded southern Lebanon and started to bombard the capital city of Beirut. After several days of fighting the Israel troops were able to drive out the Palestinians and they strengthened their position in southern Lebanon. Slowly, the Lebanese resistance

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<sup>7</sup>[www.atlantic.com/the-soviet-war-in-afghanistan](http://www.atlantic.com/the-soviet-war-in-afghanistan)

<sup>8</sup> Supra Note 4

<sup>9</sup>[www.mfa.gov.il/the-lebanon-war](http://www.mfa.gov.il/the-lebanon-war)

started to emerge to fight against the Israeli troops. The resistance reached on all time high when the Israelis troops captured a part of the capital city of Beirut.<sup>10</sup>

The Supreme Leader of Iran, being a Shia sympathizer and an Anti-Zionist, said that it would be a matter of great shame to see an Arab city fall into the hands of Israelis. He vowed to defeat and drive out the Israeli troops from southern Lebanon and the government of Iran sent 1500 men from the IRGC, a unit of the Iranian Army that protects the Supreme Leader, to assist and train the local Shias of Lebanon to fight the invading troops. The Iranians also persuaded the Shias of Lebanon to support their cause of revolution and as a result many Shias aligned themselves with the Iranian ideology and with the idea of revolution.

The reason why Iran chose to support the Shias of Lebanon were firstly, because both the countries had ideological similarities in terms of being anti-Zionists, and secondly, because of considerable number of Shias in Lebanon, the government of Iran wanted to support and arm them and establish them as a ruling community after acquiring their allegiance and thereby have considerable amount of influence and control over the Transjordan region through the Lebanese Shias.

The Iranians thought it would be very difficult to fight Israel from a far distance and thereby they wanted to establish the Shias of Lebanon, working under Iranian directions, as the fighting force against Israel. The IRGC started to train the Shias and established an organization, the Hezbollah (Party of God) to fight against the Israeli troops.

Hezbollah became stronger day by day, however, an incident in 1983 changed its course forever. In 1983 during the day of Muharram many Shias gathered to mourn the death of Hussein. Meanwhile, an Israeli convoy lost its way and came near the crowd. The crowd started to throw rocks at the convoy and the Israelis retaliated which resulted in the death of two people. This infuriated the Shias and the Hezbollah and they retaliated by carrying out suicide bombings against the allies of Israel i.e. the US and the French troops stationed in Lebanon and thus the era of suicide bombing began.<sup>11</sup>

Hundreds of US and French troops were killed in those suicide attacks. In the following weeks the Hezbollah carried out several bombings at various places thus forcing the US peace keeping force to withdraw. After a while the Israeli troops were also pressurized by the international community to withdraw their troops from Lebanon and the Israelis eventually left. The withdrawal of Israel made Hezbollah be recognized as the most effective force against the

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<sup>10</sup> Supra Note 9

<sup>11</sup> Supra Note 9

Israelis, which for the first time had made the Israelis leave an occupied Arab land. As Hezbollah became more popular, it gained more followers and soon established itself as the fighting and the ruling force of Lebanon. It has been designated as a terrorist organization by the western countries

The Hezbollah was established with the help of Iran and it acts under the Iranian directions. The control and influence of Hezbollah had increased to such an extent in the Transjordan region that it made the Israelis declare Hezbollah as their main adversary. Through Hezbollah, Iran has control and influence over the entire Transjordan region, especially Lebanon, because Hezbollah, though indirectly, is the main political force in Lebanon.

## **V. IRAQ AND THE SECTARIAN CONFLICT**

Iraq was a very complicated case during the 1980s. It was a country with a Shia majority but its dictator Saddam Hussein was a Sunni Muslim. In 1979 when the revolution in Iran took place and the Supreme Leader of Iran vowed to spread the revolution to the other parts of the Muslim world, it made Saddam Hussein feel threatened. He feared that the Shias of Iraq after drawing inspirations from the Iranian revolution would revolt against the regime, in which case he would be overthrown owing to the majority of Shias in the country. To tackle this problem, he decided to wage a war against Iran. He believed that Iran's defeat would prevent the revolution from spreading to Iraq and that the Khomeini regime in Iran would be toppled even before it got established. In 1980 the Iraqi military went on the offensive and captured certain parts of Iranian territory.

For Iran and for the Supreme Leader, this was the biggest challenge because the survival of the revolution depended on this war. The Iranian military was completely unprepared for this war and to top it up they were also poorly equipped. However, once again the Supreme Leader called onto the people of Iran to fight for their country the way they fought for the Islamic revolution. He motivated the people of Iran, including boys as young as 14 years, to take up arms against the Iraqi army, saying that it was their duty to defend their nation and the revolution. As a result boys as young as 14 years left their families to be at the frontline.<sup>12</sup>

As the war escalated, the Iranians suffered considerable amount of casualties but they refused to surrender or step back. The young boys who were recruited marched towards the Iraqi army, clearing the way for the more professional Iranian army. On their way the young boys were on several occasions blown up by the Napalm mines planted by the Iraqi army. They faced heavy

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<sup>12</sup><https://www.history.com/iran-iraq-war>

shelling and were constantly under heavy fire from the Iraqi helicopters and fighter aircrafts. However, they carried on and courageously fought the Iraqi army despite being poorly equipped. It was said that there were more humans than weapons on the Iranian side. With the assistance received from the IRGC and the Iranian military, the boys were able to suppress the Iraqi forces and eventually the Iraqi army withdrew from the occupied Iranian territories.<sup>13</sup>

The Supreme leader of Iran saw Iran's victory in Iraq's withdrawal and insisted that the Iranian military go on the offensive and capture certain parts of Iraqi territory, especially the holy city of Karbala. He wanted to take advantage of the defeated and the retreating Iraqi forces. The govt. of Iran wanted to continue with the war till the Iraqis confessed that they were the ones who started the conflict. With Iran on the offensive now, the Sunni states like Saudi Arabia, Qatar and UAE etc. feared that Iraq's defeat would strengthen Iran and its influence in the region, particularly in Iraq because it was likely that the Shias of Iraq would rise subsequently and help Iran export its revolution to other parts of the Muslim world. Moreover the other adversaries of Iran, i.e. the US and the European Countries, also did not want to see Iran victorious as its victory would make it more powerful in the region.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, the Sunni states along with the US and the EU came together to support Saddam Hussein and started to arm the Iraqi army with new weapons. The Iraqi army now equipped with the latest weapons attacked the Iranian military and Saddam Hussein assured of the backing of so many states took the most inhumane step in the war by using chemical weapons against the Iranians. Many Iranians succumbed to the chemical attack. However, the international community turned a blind eye to it. Eventually, the Supreme Leader of Iran decided to accept a ceasefire and end the war.

This way the Iran-Iraq war which lasted for more than 8 years ended in a stalemate. The Iranian government and the Iranian Revolution also failed to influence the Shias of Iraq. The Shias of Iraq saw Iran as a foreign power who had no business in Iraq. They did not align themselves with the Iranian Revolution. They weren't moved by Iran's call to support and spread the revolution.

The Iran-Iraq war failed to provide any strategic advantage to Iran nor could it draw the Shias of Iraq towards Iran, however, Iran got another opportunity when after the 9/11, the US invaded Iraq and toppled Saddam's regime and the Baath Party. It so happened that after the Iraq-Iran War, Iraq faced an acute financial crises and to raise the prices of oil it pressurized its

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<sup>13</sup> Supra Note 12

<sup>14</sup> Supra Note 4

neighbouring country Kuwait to cut down on its oil production, failing which, Saddam ordered the Iraqi forces to invade Kuwait. The Iraqi army invaded Kuwait which marked the beginning of the Gulf War. To liberate Kuwait, the US forces attacked the Iraqi army and drove them out of Kuwait.<sup>15</sup> After the war ended, the US administration considered overthrowing Saddam Hussein, who had since the recent past stopped working in the interest of the United States. The US considered him as a major adversary but instead of using force to overthrow him, the US administration thought that it would be better to incite the people of Iraq to revolt against their brutal dictator.

After the US provocations, the Shias of Iraq who for a long period of time had faced suppression under Saddam's regime started to demonstrate and revolt against the regime, confident that the US will come to their aid. But they were wrong, the United States never came to support them and Saddam started a brutal crackdown against the Shia uprisings. As a result, the Shias of Iraq faced extreme atrocities, since Saddam used lethal weapons to silence them. For the first time the Shias were targeted as Shias in Iraq. Saddam's atrocities against the Shias and US' failure to support them, automatically resulted in Iran's return to the scene.<sup>16</sup> The Shias of Iraq after receiving the sympathy from the Iranians looked at the latter for support and started to believe in the Shia revolution which Iran was advocating as the only way to achieve salvation and liberty. However, though the Shias became tilted towards Iran and its revolution, Iraq witnessed very few uprisings and revolts during the 1990s, especially because of Saddam's brutal crackdown on the dissidents.

Finally, after the 9/11, the Bush administration in the US established a false link between Saddam Hussein and the Al Qaeda and used the connection to justify US invasion of Iraq. Saudi Arabia, however, did not like the idea of an invasion of Iraq because they knew that once Saddam is overthrown, the Shia Muslims of Iraq would automatically become the dominating force and would show allegiance to Iran. The US forces invaded Iraq under the pretext to liberate the Iraqi people from tyranny. In 2003, the regime was toppled and Saddam Hussein went into hiding. The Shias of Iraq who were in majority took to the street assisted by those Shia clerics who had returned from exile. Owing to their large population and their domination in Iraq and with the support of Iran, the Shia Muslims were able to establish their government. The US had no option but to establish and recognise the new Shia government with Nouri-al-Maliki as the new Prime Minister. With Iraq now under the control of the Shia Muslims who were aligned with Iran and their ideology, the influence of Iran over Iraq increased manifold.

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<sup>15</sup>[www.atlantic.com/operation-desert-storm](http://www.atlantic.com/operation-desert-storm)

<sup>16</sup> Supra Note 4

However, the domination of Shias in Iraq after Saddam's regime was toppled was not the reason for the sectarian violence that erupted subsequently but the cause of such the violence was a mistake committed by the Bush administration.

After Saddam was overthrown by US decided to implement the process called "De-Ba'athification" i.e. to ban all the members of the Ba'ath Party.<sup>17</sup> Most of the members of the Ba'ath Party were Sunni Muslims. As a result of "De-Ba'athification" many Ba'ath members were prohibited from holding any public office and from carrying out other government jobs. Many Sunni Muslims who were part of the Iraqi army were dismissed from the armed forces. As a result of "De-Ba'athification." Many Ba'athists, who were mostly Sunni Muslims, became unemployed and had no means of subsistence. "De-Ba'athification" and the subsequent atrocities committed by the Maliki regime on the Sunni Muslims, led the Sunni Muslims who mostly resided in northern Iraq to consolidate themselves and revolt against the Shia Maliki regime. The Sunnis were supported by many Al Qaeda fighters like Zarqawi who believed in sectarianism and wanted to consolidate the Sunnis of Iraq in order to have their support so that they could control northern Iraq.

With the help from organisations like the Al Qaeda and other Sunni states, the Sunni Muslims revolted against Shia domination and ultimately it resulted in a sectarian civil war in Iraq. The Sunnis backed by the Al Qaeda attacked a Shia Shrine and the holiest Shia Mosque in the city of some Samara. The attacks infuriated the Shias and they started retaliation against the Sunni extremist groups. The sectarian violence escalated with the Shias brutally killing the Sunni's. Dead bodies of Sunni Muslims were seen every day on the streets of Baghdad. To support the Shia Muslims of Iraq, Iran started to fund the various Shia militias who were operating from within the government. The most popular of those Shia militias was the Border Brigade whose members were trained and armed by the IRGC, the Iranian Special Force Unit committed to protecting the Supreme Leader and the revolution.<sup>18</sup>

The Shias were able to suppress the Sunni resistance, however, it made the Saudis feel threatened and they believed that Shias' domination in Iraq would mean Iran's control over Iraq. To counter the Iranians support to Shias, the Saudis started to fund and arm the Sunni resistance. The money which they provided probably reached the Al Qaeda as well, who too were backing the Sunni Muslims in Iraq. However the Iraqi government and the Shia militants were able to drive out the sectarian forces and bring an end to the resistance. Subsequently, the

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<sup>17</sup><https://www.aljazeera.com/iraq's-de-ba'athification>

<sup>18</sup> Supra Note 4

Sunnis, backed by the “Daesh”, again went on the offensive but the ISIS and the Sunni resistance was once again defeated with the liberation of the city of Mosul in Iraq. The new Shia government firmly established itself and with their allegiance to Iran, the latter’s influence over Iraq increased. Owing to the majority Shia population in Iraq. This way, Iran was able to establish its influence and control over Iraq and the Saudis faced another defeat in the battle of proxies.

## **VI. THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR**

Syria is ruled by the Assad family who are Shia Muslims. Since 1979, Syria and Iran were allies owing to their similar sectarian ideologies. In 2011, with the onset of Arab Spring, the Syrian people who were mostly Sunni’s started to protest against the Assad regime. They demanded greater political, social and economic reforms. Initially the protest were civil protests with the people demonstrating peacefully. The question as to who gave it a violent turn is contested. The Syrian government says that the protesters resorted to violence to overthrow the Assad regime and protesters version is that the Syrian army used weapons to suppress the peaceful protesters. The Syrian government never saw the protesters as one fighting for better life but saw the protests as apre-fabricated plot hatched by the Sunni states to overthrow the Assad regime. However, the protests and demonstrations turned into a civil war with the Shia Assadregime on one side and the Sunni groups backed by the Sunni extremists and the Salafist groups on the other side.<sup>19</sup>

As the civil war gained momentum, Saudi Arabia decided to give it a sectarian angle and thereby did what Iran had done in other countries i.e. arm and fund the sectarian groups. Saudi Arabia started to arm and fund the Sunni opposition and the Salafist groups, backing them in their fight against the Assad regime. The Sunni opposition was backed by many other countries as well like the United States, the European Union, etc. The Iranian government thought that the downfall of Assad regime would be disastrous for them and for their militant organizations, like Hezbollah which was established in the neighboring state of Lebanon. So Iran, along with all its allies and the Shia militants from across the Middle East, decided to assist the Assad regime to suppress the opposition.<sup>20</sup>

As the war escalated, the Assad regime and its allies turned out to be weak in front of the much powerful and well backed opposition. The Assad regime was on the verge of downfall but Russia’s entry into the civil war turned the tables around. The Russians forces bombarded the

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<sup>19</sup>Ghadry, Farid N., “Syrian Reform: What Lies Beneath,” *The Middle East Quarterly*, 2005.

<sup>20</sup> Supra Note 19

opposition hideouts and at the same time the Iranian government sent in more IRGC personnel to support the Assad regime. The Assad regime came after the Sunni opposition with much greater force and went to the extent of using chemical weapon against the opposition. With Russia's backing the Assad regime was able to suppress the Sunni opposition and the Sunni extremists who were firmly established in northern Syria. The Assad regime with allegiance to and support from Iran established itself firmly when the Syrian civil war reached its climax.

With the survival of Assad's regime, an ally of Iran, in Syria, the competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran to acquire political control over Syria resulted in Iran turning out to be victorious with much greater political influence and control over Syria. So it can be said that Iran won the Syrian game against Saudi Arabia.

## **VII. YEMEN AND THE HOUTHİ REBELS**

The civil war in Yemen had raged for a period of more than 50 years. However, in 2015 the war turned from bad to worse when the Houthi rebels, mostly Shias, captured the capital city of Sanaa. The Prime Minister of Yemen who was backed by the Saudi government blamed the Iranians for sponsoring the insurgency in Yemen. After the capital fell in the hands of the rebels, the Yemeni Prime Minister fled to Saudi Arabia. In Saudi Arabia he was welcomed by the new Crown Prince Md. Bin Salman. The Saudi government feared that if the Houthi rebels take control of the state of Yemen, the chances are high that Yemen would then turn into an Iranian ally. Though there was no evidence to show that whether the Iranians were involved or not but Saudi Arabia and the western countries alleged that the Houthis were receiving financial and military help from the IRGC.<sup>21</sup>

As the war in Yemen escalated, the Saudi government decided to put an end to it and to the Iranian expansion campaign once and for all. The Saudi government launched a military operation in Yemen to drive out the rebels from the capital city and as result series of bombings and air strikes took place in the city. The war in Yemen between the Saudi led coalition and the Iranian backed Houthi rebels kicked off and subsequently it resulted in the death of close to 10,000 Yemenis.<sup>22</sup>

The war has continued since then but the Saudi led coalition failed to weaken or drive out the Houthi rebels from Sanaa. The Saudi led coalition has blamed Iran for supporting the Shia Houthi rebels though the same has been denied by the Iranians. The current position is that the Houthi rebels have strong control over the city of Sanaa and thereby over the entire country

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<sup>21</sup><https://youtu.be/PvKoniTXWsQ>

<sup>22</sup> Supra Note 21

and being Shia Muslims, they see their ally in Iran thus, increasing Iran's influence in Yemen as well.

### **VIII. INDIA'S ROLE IN THE MIDDLE-EASTERN MESS**

India has good relations with both the belligerents in the Middle-East. For India, Iran is important because it gives India strategic advantage in terms of countering Pakistan and is also one of the major supplier of crude oil to India. On the other hand good relations with Saudi Arabia has helped India maintain its strong ties with the Arab world. Strong ties with the Arab world is necessary to counter Pakistan's influence in the Arab world. However, from the security point of view, India would be more pleased to see Iran controlling the Muslim world because Iran is the force which can stop the spread of Wahhabism to other parts of the world. As we know that terrorism, extremism, sectarianism and intolerance are the branches or core principles of Wahhabism and therefore its spread to a country like India has the tendency to ignite communal tensions in the country. Therefore, to counter the Wahhabi ideology it is necessary that Iran is supported and strengthened in the region. Saudi Arabia, and not Iran, has been the major exporter of terrorism to different parts of the world and so in the interest of the international community, it is necessary that the increasing influence of Saudi Arabia in the Middle-East is contained. However, while developing its relations with Iran, India also has to ensure that the strong relations which it has with Israel is maintained because in the Arab world, Israel and Iran are the two main belligerents and balancing relations with both has always been difficult.

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