

# **Arab Sunni-Wahhâbism and Shia Iran: From Sectarian Conflict, to the Domination of the Gulf Region**

**Ahmad Zaenuri**

Institut Agama Islam Negeri Sultan Amai Gorontalo, Indonesia

Email: [zaenuriahmad@iaingorontalo.ac.id](mailto:zaenuriahmad@iaingorontalo.ac.id)

**Ahmad Irfan**

Institut Agama Islam Negeri Bone, Indonesia

Email: [ahmadirfan@iain-bone.ac.id](mailto:ahmadirfan@iain-bone.ac.id)

## **Abstract:**

Discussions regarding the conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the Middle East have always been framed as a sectarian conflict between Sunni-Wahhâbism and Shia. The study data presented in this article provide a distinct, exhaustive empirical picture. This study aims to present a conceptual framework for the relationship between religious theology in Islam (Sunni Wahhâbi and Shia-ism) and the competitive conflict in the Gulf region, the struggle for dominance in the Middle East region, as a variable for the protracted conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and to predict the future of relations between the two countries following the foreign policy of Muhammad bin Salman. A review of the discussion employing an inductive library research methodology. To generalize a deviation from purely accidental phenomena. In order to analyze this topic in greater depth, the author borrows theory from Max Weber regarding the protestant ethic and spirit of capitalism by placing religion as a belief system and state conflict as a structure of social group action. This study's findings assume that the issue of Sunni-Shia sectarianism is religious propaganda used to win the hegemonic competition in the struggle for territory and dominance in the Gulf region of the Middle East. Before the reign of Muhammad bin Salman, this condition had not changed substantially. In Weber's framework, there has been a distinction known as "ethical inter-minism" between two ethics. On the one

hand, the structure of moral ethics is founded on the moral values of Sunni and Shia Islam. But on the political side, moral responsibility confronts the obligation to maintain the disintegration of the nation and state, which is a means to wage war.

Bahasan tentang konflik Timur Tengah antara Arab Saudi dan Iran, selama ini selalu ditempatkan sebagai konflik sektarian antara Sunni-Wahhābisme dan Syi'ah. Studi data dalam artikel ini memberikan gambaran empiris komprehensif yang berbeda. Penelitian ini berusaha menyajikan kerangka konseptual hubungan antara teologi keagamaan dalam Islam (Sunni Wahhābisme dan Syi'ah) dengan konflik persaingan wilayah teluk, perebutan dominasi wilayah Timur Tengah, sebagai variabel konflik berkepanjangan antara Arab Saudi-Iran serta melihat masa depan hubungan kedua Negara pasca kebijakan politik luar negeri Muhammad bin Salman. Bahasannya diulas menggunakan pendekatan library research dengan pola induktif. Berangkat dari fenomena-fenomena kasuistik untuk kemudian digeneralisasi. Untuk menelaah lebih dalam masalah tersebut, penulis meminjam teori dari Max Weber tentang etika protestan dan semangat kapitalisme (*the protestant ethic and spirit of capitalism*) dengan menempatkan agama sebagai sistem kepercayaan dan konflik kenegaraan sebagai struktur tindakan kelompok sosial. Hasil penelitian ini menduga bahwa isu sektarianisme Sunni-Syi'ah merupakan propaganda keagamaan yang digunakan untuk memenangkan persaingan hegemonik dalam perebutan kawasan dan dominasi Teluk di Timur-Tengah. Kondisi demikian belum terlalu berubah hingga masa Muhammad bin Salman. Dalam kerangka pemikiran Weber, telah terjadi perbedaan dua etika "interminisme etis". Pada satu sisi, nilai-nilai moral dalam Sunni dan Syi'ah menjadi landasan struktur etika moral. Namun pada sisi politik, tanggung jawab moral memperhadapkan kewajiban menjaga disintegrasi bangsa dan Negara yang di dalamnya terdapat cara peperangan.

**Key words:** *Arab; Sunni-Wahhābism; Shia Iran; Conflict; Gulf.*

## **Introduction**

So far, the discussion of conflicts in the Middle East—mainly Arab and Iranian—is always associated with several terms such as sectarian conflict<sup>1</sup>, gulf region disputes<sup>2</sup>, and reconciliation efforts being attempted by various countries

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence G Potter, "Sectarianism in the Middle East," *Great Decisions*, May 20, 2015, 29–40, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44214791>.

<sup>2</sup> Tancred Bradshaw, "Book Review," *Middle Eastern Studies* 57, no. 4 (July 4, 2021): 692–93, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2021.1895770>.

worldwide<sup>3</sup>. Not much has been discussed about the relationship between these variables in the contribution of the Arab and Iranian conflicts. However, it is difficult to avoid that the theological sentiments between Sunni-Shi'a have contributed to the history of Muslim divisions in the Middle East. On the one hand, in the Sunni view, Shia ideology is quite dangerous for the socio-political order built in the Middle East. Therefore, Saudi Arabia as a Sunni representative who is quite dominating in the Middle East, tries to prevent the influence of Iran and its Shia on several other countries in the region.<sup>4</sup>

However, on a different side, the Arab and Iranian conflicts are also inseparable from the history of the struggle for the Gulf region. After the Iranian revolution of 1979, Iran tried to expand its power by taking over the Arab Gulf region to become the Persian Gulf.<sup>5</sup> The highlight of the acquisition was Iran's recognition of Bahrain and the League of Nations becoming part of the Islamic Republic of Iran.<sup>6</sup> Iran's unilateral claims are not baseless; during the Safavid Empire ( *Shafawi Empire* ), Iran lost the Persian Gulf region and only captured it five decades later during the leadership of Karīm Khān Zand. During the British colonial period, the bay area became a joint territory between Iran and Arabia, with Britain as the mediator.<sup>7</sup> Because of its quite strategic position—especially in the Middle East region—the Gulf region has always been an arena for Arab states to fight over.

This paper intends to examine the conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran by making the variables of Sunni-Shi'a sectarianism, disputes over the Gulf region, and the struggle for dominance of influence in the Middle East as variables that influence this prolonged conflict.

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<sup>3</sup> Philip Gater-Smith, "Asia and the Saudi-Iranian 'Cold War': The Desirability of Non-Alignment, the Prospects for Détente, and the Chances of an Asian Peace Initiative," *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 14, no. 2 (April 2, 2020): 159–78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25765949.2020.1760540>.

<sup>4</sup> Concerns about Iranian dominance intensified when 2005, the conservative-leaning Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected president of Iran. Ahmadinejad has been called the antithesis of the more outgoing Mohammed Khatami. Iran's involvement in the conflicts in Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine and the exploration of Iran's nuclear program are very worrying for Islamic countries in the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia. Look, David Menashri, "Iran's Regional Policy: Between Radicalism and Pragmatism," *Journal of International Affairs* 60, no. 2 (May 21, 2007): 153–67.

<sup>5</sup> Erzsébet N Rózsa, "Iranian Communities on the Arab Side of the Persian Gulf," *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 16, no. 4 (October 2, 2022): 436–47, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25765949.2022.2141524>.

<sup>6</sup> Rudi Matthee, "Modern History And Politics: The Origins of the Arab-Iranian Conflict: Nationalism and Sovereignty in the Gulf between the World Wars," *The Middle East Journal* 75, no. 3 (2021): 492–94.

<sup>7</sup> Rudi Matthee, "Modern History And Politics, 492-94.

## Method

The method is carried out using *library research* by examining literature, both in the form of books and international journals. In order to discuss the issue of Sunni Arab and Shi'a Iranian sectarianism and its relation to the competitive conflict in the Gulf region and efforts to dominate the Middle East, this research seeks to conduct an analysis using the theory initiated by Max Weber about the protestant ethic and spirit of capitalism (the protestant ethic and spirit of *capitalism*) that the structure and actions of social groups are expressions of their commitment to certain beliefs.<sup>8</sup> However, the author also limits the meaning and theory development carried out by Masykuri Abdullah, that the belief system is not the only driving factor. However, other factors, such as political and economic conditions and public education, determine social behavior.<sup>9</sup> In the relationship between Sunni Arabs and Shi'a Iran, this research places Sunni and Shi'a as the structure of a belief system, while competition and attempts to dominate the territory as social behavior.

## Discussion

Shia in the study of Islamic theology is always associated with sectarian groups supporting the caliphate of 'Âli bin Abi Thâlib in particular, who hold the view that leadership and the caliphate are doctrinal (*iqtiqâdî*) through the affirmation of texts or based on wills.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, Sunnis (the acronym for *Ahlu Sunnah wa Al-Jamâ'ah*) is a group that admits that they have always adhered to the Sunnah of the Prophet, in this case, the prophetic traditions both in terms of speech, deeds, and *taqrîr* and including the words (*aqwâl*) of the companions.<sup>11</sup> As the antithesis of Shia, Sunnis believe that leadership and the caliphate are not doctrinal. However, according to Islam, matters are handed over to the people through legal mechanisms, such as deliberations. Therefore, Abu Hasan Al-Asy'arî—as the main figure in Ahlu Sunnah—made a separate subject in Al-Ibânah about "Al-

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<sup>8</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism* (New York and London: Routledge, 2001), 3-12.

<sup>9</sup> Masykuri Abdillah, *Islam Dan Demokrasi; Respon Intelektual Muslim Indonesia Terhadap Konsep Demokrasi 1966-1993* (Jakarta: Prenada Media Group, 2015), 19.

<sup>10</sup> Muḥammad Ibn Abdu al-Karîm Ibn Abî Bakrin Aḥmad Al-Syakhraṣṭānî, *Al-Milal Wa Al-Niḥal* (Beirut: Dâr Al-Ma'rifah, 1993), 169.

<sup>11</sup> Such a view is believed to have a firm footing in the Prophet's will, conveying that he would leave two cases. If the people adhered to him, they would not go astray forever. The two things mentioned in the testament are the book of Allah (al-Qur'an) and following the Prophet and his companions (*mâ ana 'alaihi wa ashâhbi*). Look, Muhammad Quraish Shihab, *Sunnah-Syi'ah, Bergandengan Tangan, Mungkinkah? Kajian Atas Konsep Ajaran Dan Pemikiran* (Jakarta: Lentera Hati, 2007), 57.; Look, Abî al-Ḥusain Muslim bin Hajjāj al-Qusyairî Al-Naisyāburî, *Shahîḥ Muslim* (Beirut: Dâr al-Kutub al-Ilmiyah, 1998), 87.; Look also, Abu Fadhil 'Iyâdh bin Mūsâ, *Syarah Shahîḥ Muslim* (Beirut: Dâr al-Wafâ', 2005), 417.

*Kalamu Fī Imāmāti Abī Bakrin Al-Shiddiq*" in which he acknowledged the legitimacy of the caliph's Abū Bakar for having gone through a legal *bai'ah* process.<sup>12</sup>

However, Sunnis in Saudi Arabia have quite fundamental differences from the general understanding of Ahlu Sunnah wa Al-Jamā'ah, which is affiliated with *Kalām Asy'ari'ah* or Maturidiyah. Sunni religious understanding in Saudi Arabia tends to be exclusive to Wahhâbi, which results from an explorative (*ijtihād*) understanding of Ibn Taimiyah and Muḥammad bin 'Abdi Al-Wahhâb.<sup>13</sup> The unification of the religious ideas of Muḥammad bin Abdu Al-Wahhâb and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia occurred in 1744. The Wahhâbi doctrine became even stronger when Saudi Arabia proclaimed the founding of a modern state in 1932. After the unification of the Wahhâbi ideology and the State, some researchers say, Saudi Arabia has directed the fundamentalist creed into its domestic and foreign policies.<sup>14</sup>

With the strengthening of the Wahhâbi *kalam ideology* in the Saudi Arabian government, anti-Shia and Iranian sentiments, in particular, are also increasingly widespread. In the view of the Wahhâbi group, the Shia are considered to have deviated from the line of Islamic *aqidah* because they have worshiped their imams and made pilgrimages to graves.<sup>15</sup> Not only in the form of religious doctrine but the Wahhâbi group also massacred thousands of Shi'a adherents in Karbala in 1801. It also persecuted minority Shiite groups in the Al-Hasa Region in the Eastern Arab region.<sup>16</sup> Related to the anti-Shi'a campaign being carried out by Saudi Arabia, an Egyptian politician said that the Saudis gave substantial funds to Salafi-Wahhâbi to portray Shi'a as a dangerous threat.<sup>17</sup>

The campaign carried out by Saudi Arabia, and Wahhâbi can be said to be quite successful. This can be seen in a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, which shows the views of the Islamic world—particularly in the Middle East and North Africa—

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<sup>12</sup> Abī Hasan Alī Ibn Ismā'il Al-Asy'arī, *Al-Ibānah 'An Ushūli Al-Diyānah* (Damaskus: Maktbah Dār Al-Bayān, 1990), 168.

<sup>13</sup> There are fundamental differences between the Ahlu Sunnah as understood by Muhammad bin Abdi Al-Wahhâb and Asy'aria and Maturidiyah. In his book *Al-Tauhīd*, Muḥammad bin Abdi Al-Wahhâb strictly rejects the existence of a *wasilah* (intermediary) in religion. This is different from the general understanding of Ahlu Sunnah, which understands that wash is something that is permissible. Look, Muḥammad bin 'Abdi Al-Wahhâb Al-Najd, *Kitābu Al-Tauīd* (Kairo: Maktabah Ibādi Al-Rahmān, 2008), 155.; Zaenuri, Ahmad, and Habibie Yusuf, "Salafi's Da'wah and the Phenomenon of Religious Piety among Hijrah Artists," *Journal of Islamic Studies and Humanities* 4, no. 2 (2019): 228-49, <https://doi.org/10.18326/mlt.v4i2>.

<sup>14</sup> Carol E B Choksy and Jamsheed K Choksy, "The Saudi Connection: Wahhabism and Global Jihad," *World Affairs* 178, no. 1 (May 22, 2015): 23-34.

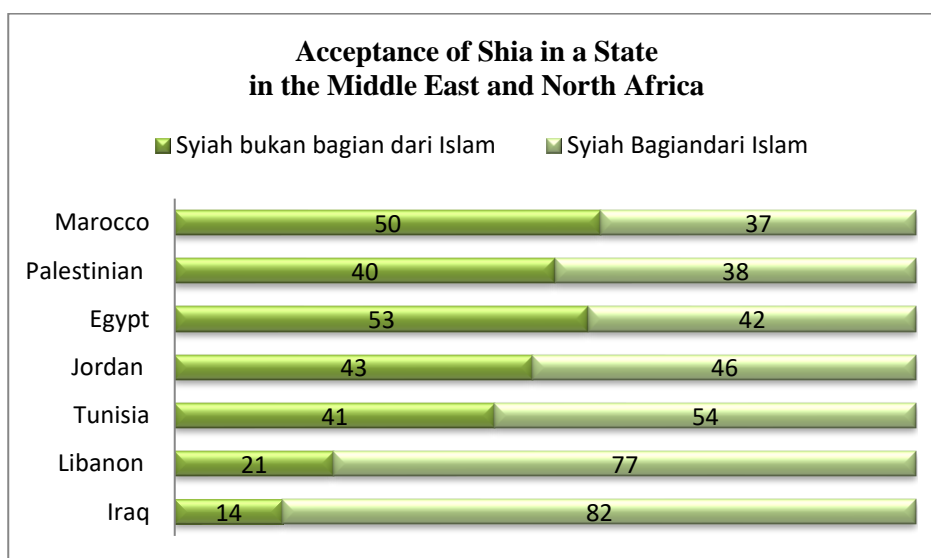
<sup>15</sup> Aḥmad bin Abdu Al-Razzāk Al-Dausyī, *Fatawā; Lajnah Al-Dāimah Libuḥutsi Al-'Ilmiyyah Wa Al-Iftā'* (Riyadh: Al-Mamlakah Al-'Arabiyah Al-Su'ūdiyah, 2005), 459.

<sup>16</sup> Meir Litvak, "Iran and Saudi Arabia:," *Saudi Arabia, the Gulf, and the New Regional Landscape* (Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, May 22, 2017).

<sup>17</sup> Ric Neo, "Religious Securitisation and Institutionalised Sectarianism in Saudi Arabia," *Critical Studies on Security* 8, no. 3 (September 1, 2020): 203-22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2020.1795479>.

regarding accepting Shia as part or not part of Islam.<sup>18</sup> In these data, it can be seen that in Islamic countries, as the basis of the Sunni region, especially Morocco, Palestine, Egypt, and Jordan, the rejection of Shiites as part of Islam is relatively high. On the other hand, in Islamic countries with Shia adherents as the majority, such as Iraq, Lebanon, and Tunisia, the rejection of Shiites is relatively low compared to their acceptance and classifies them as part of the Islamic religion.

The data can be seen in the following chart:



### Shia and Sunni Doctrine and the Arab - Iran Political Split

The religious conflict between Sunni and Shi'a has a long history in Islamic theological debates. This division has strengthened in the modern century because it has political<sup>19</sup> motives and social and cultural ones.<sup>20</sup> Modern scholars in the Islamic world are trying to find common ground between the two sects (*al-taqrīb banana al-Madzâhib*) by

<sup>18</sup> The Pew Research Center processes the data. The Pew Research Center is a research and thought center based in the United States. Through high-quality scientific research, this institute generates data and information on social trends, public opinion, religion, demography, and other topics. Look, Pew Research Center, "The World's Muslims: Unity and Diversity," 2012, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2012/08/09/the-worlds-muslims-unity-and-diversity-executive-summary/>.

<sup>19</sup> It is not uncommon for religious doctrines to be used by the authorities to meet the political needs of their power. In the dispute between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis in Yemen, for example, in 2015, Saudi clerics told a fatwa that the war in Yemen is part of a religious obligation. Look, Willem van den Berg, "Saudi Arabia's Strategic Stalemate – What Next?" (Clingendael Institute, May 24, 2017).

<sup>20</sup> James Moore, "The Sunni and Shia Schism: Religion, Islamic Politics, and Why Americans Need to Know the Differences," *The Social Studies* 106, no. 5 (September 3, 2015): 226–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00377996.2015.1059794>.

conducting integrative dialogue. However, not a few sentiments between schools still occur because each sect tries to strengthen its influence among the world's Muslims.<sup>21</sup>

Shaykh Bin Bâz, a prominent scholar from the Sunni-Wahhâbi circle who is also the main character in *Lajnah Al-Dâimah* when asked his opinion about Shia's opinion;

It should be noted that Shia consists of various groups; we cannot describe them one by one in this short time. In short, among them, some are disbelievers, namely those who worship 'Āli bin Abi Talib and those who glorify 'Āli. Some worship Fatimah, Ḥusain, and others. Among the Shia groups, some think that Jibril has betrayed him. They said prophethood should be left to 'Ali and not to Muhammad. There is also a group called Imamiyyah, or Râfidhah Itsna 'Asy'âriyah, namely 'Ubad 'Ali, where they say their imam is nobler than the angels and prophets.<sup>22</sup>

Based on Bin Bâz's view above, it can be seen that Syaikh Abdullâh bin 'Ābd Al-'Azîz bin Bâz made a mapping of Shia but also made conclusions that were generalized and tended to be pejorative. According to Iik Mansurnoor, such an exclusive attitude can be called *takfiri* towards different groups even though they are fellow Muslims.<sup>23</sup> In order to answer the views of Sunni scholars, especially Wahhâbi, a Shi'a scholar, Sarafuddîn Al-Musawî, answered in the Sunni-Shi'a dialogue conducted in Egypt as follows;

There are some embarrassing questions as to why Shia consider some of the Companions to be infidels and denounce them, and accusations that Shia changes the text of the Qur'an and make Jihâd invalid, as well as things like *Badâ'* (change of destiny by Allah), *mut'ah* (temporary marriage), *Bara'ah* (separation from the enemies of Allah), 'awl (law of inheritance adopted by Sunnis), and others. The answers are most authentic and stem from sound understanding based on evidence and logic, leaving no room for doubt. It contains an introduction to the call for unity and a conclusion about the ignorance of those who raise the issue and propagate such accusations, which he presumes exist in Shia literature, as well as the confusion in some Sunni books.<sup>24</sup>

The forms of ideological debate as above not only have an impact on sectarian disputes but also have an impact on the preventive attitude taken by the two countries, Arab-Iran, in order to develop and maintain their respective religious ideas.

### **Proxy Wars as a Part of Iran's Foreign Policy**

Iran realizes the anti-Shia sentiment echoed by Saudi Arabia in the Middle East that could threaten Iran's aspirations to expand its influence in the Gulf region. Therefore,

<sup>21</sup> Abd. Mukhsin & Mhd. Syahnun, *Perkembangan Literatur Keislaman; Mazhab Syiah Dan Wahabi Di Indonesia* (Medan: Perdana Publishing, 2022), 54.

<sup>22</sup> Abdu Al-Azîz bin Abdullâh bin Bâz, *Majmû' Fatâwa Wa Maqâlâtu Mutanawwi'ah* (Riyadh: Al-Mamlakah Al-Arabiyyah Al-Su'ûdiyah, 2000), 258.

<sup>23</sup> Iik A Mansurnoor, "Revivalism and Radicalism in Southeast Asian Islam: A Pattern or an Anomaly," *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 11, no. 1 (2009): 222–62.

<sup>24</sup> Sarafuddîn Al-Musawî, *Al-Murâja'ât; A Shi'i-Sunni Dialogue* (Kairo: Yasin Publication, 2015), 4.

Iran developed a political strategy that some researchers call proxy wars.<sup>25</sup> Apart from forming pro-Iran or pro-Shia militias in the Middle East, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen, Iran is also very active in defending Palestine against Israeli occupation. This effort, apart from being a form of concern for colonialism experienced by Muslims, cannot be separated from efforts to gain sympathy from the Islamic countries of the world.<sup>26</sup>

Iranian-wing militias with Shia ideology, such as Hizbullāh in Lebanon, have always been active in defending Iran in spreading its interests in the Middle East. This can be seen when there was tension between Iran and the United States in Lebanon, which led to the killing of Qassem Soleimani, the leader of the Iranian IRGC-Quds, Ayatullāh Ali Khamenei calling for revenge for this action (violent revenge). Khamenei's call was welcomed by Hasan Nasrullāh, who at that time served as general secretary of Hezbollah and stated that the call was a duty of retaliation for Hezbollah around the world.<sup>27</sup> This organizational relationship proves that Hizbullah and Iran have an affinity.

Iran's ability to control militias such as Hezbollah and its closeness to Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza can actually reduce Saudi Arabia's control over peace in the Middle East.<sup>28</sup> Such conditions can be seen in the 2006 Lebanon war, which Saudi Arabia described as adventurous. The social fact that Iran's influence is more dominant than Saudi Arabia's in maintaining peace in the Middle East is a distinct threat to Saudi Arabia in maintaining the stability and prosperity of its country.

Iran has also openly challenged Saudi Arabia on legality as the only one with the right to guard the two holy cities of Mecca and Medina. This challenge later prompted King Fahd in the mid-1980s to issue a decree establishing the kings of Saudi Arabia as stewards of the two holy cities (*khâdimu al-hâramain*).<sup>29</sup> These facts further confirm that the

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<sup>25</sup> Cohen and Shamci see Iran's ideas as an effort to expand its influence by creating a pro-Iran government in Iraq. However, unfortunately, the plan failed. Iran then changed its foreign policy by building a functional territorial corridor between Iran and Lebanon that passed through Iraq and Syria. This consolidation of pro-Iranian militias in every Islamic State in the Middle East functions as a proxy war (substitute actor in war) in addition to the central player being Iran. Look, Ronen A Cohen and Gadi P Shamci, "The 'Proxy Wars' Strategy in Iranian Regional Foreign Policy," *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 13, no. 4 (October 2, 2022): 385–405, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21520844.2022.2061789>; Christian Høj Hansen and Troels Burchall Henningsen, "Whose Proxy War? The Competition among Iranian Foreign Policy Elites in Iraq," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 33, no. 6 (August 18, 2022): 973–98, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2022.2064152>.

<sup>26</sup> Shaul Bartal, "Palestinian Islamic Jihad: Between Nationalism and Religion," *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa*, December 28, 2022, 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21520844.2022.2146400>.

<sup>27</sup> Ioan Pop and Mitchell D Silber, "Iran and Hezbollah's Pre-Operational Modus Operandi in the West," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 44, no. 2 (February 1, 2021): 156–79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1759487>.

<sup>28</sup> Saud Mousaed Al Tamamy, "Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring: Opportunities and Challenges of Security," *Journal of Arabian Studies* 2, no. 2 (December 1, 2012): 143–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21534764.2012.734117>.

<sup>29</sup> Saud Mousaed Al Tamamy, "Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring: Opportunities, 143-56.



Iran-Saudi conflict is a political and regional conflict that ultimately results in the legitimacy of sectarian religious ideology.

### **Battle of the Gulf Region**

Iran's recognition of the Persian Gulf region has created tensions in the Middle East—mainly with Saudi Arabia.<sup>30</sup> Iran and Saudi Arabia have the support of the Western Bloc Countries to support their domination in the region. However, the arrival of American troops to the Gulf region has posed a threat and inconvenience to Iran. Iran's worries are not unfounded because the United States military occupies the western part of Iran and all the *Gulf Cooperation Center* (GCC) countries as the center of Gulf Cooperation initiated by Saudi Arabia. This indeed threatens Iran in the midst of a siege by countries that are not in line with its mission.<sup>31</sup>

Apart from trying to carry out regional hegemony, especially in the Gulf region, Iran is also carrying out quite radical methods to achieve victory in the Gulf region. Iranian religious figures echoed the idea that they doubted the legality of Saudi Arabia protecting the two areas that are very sacred to Muslims, namely Mecca, and Medina. They seek to attribute Saudi Arabia and its closeness to "infidel" countries such as the United States and its dependence on Western interests.

The pattern of Iran's rhetorical strategy in framing that Saudi Arabia is pro-West has been quite successful. Several adherents of radical Sunni views, such as Juhayman Al-Utaibi, seized the mosque in Mecca in 1979. Utaibi's actions were motivated by the assumption that the Saudi Arabian leadership had committed corruption and did not have the piety that was in line with what was taught in Islam.<sup>32</sup>

The anti-Saudi Arabia campaign, as carried out by Utaibi, did not end there. After the Iranian revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini expressed his desire to spread his Shia ideas throughout the region<sup>33</sup>, especially to the countries closest to him. In this regard, Pradhan elaborated on Khomeini's statement as follows:

“Our revolution is not limited to Iran's borders. Economic and political difficulties must not force our officials to neglect the main task of exporting the noble goals of our Islamic Revolution. The true meaning of exporting our revolution is to

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<sup>30</sup> Ben Rich identified at least six things that made tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia increasingly prominent besides the Gulf issue. Some of these problems include radical foreign policy, regional arms competition, the complexity of the Arab Spring, the ambition of the nuclear project, and the spread of Iran's internal political model. Look, Ben Rich, “Gulf War 4.0: Iran, Saudi Arabia and the Complexification of the Persian Gulf Equation,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 23, no. 4 (October 1, 2012): 471–86, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2012.712453>.

<sup>31</sup> Prasanta Kumar Pradhan, “The GCC–Iran Conflict and Its Strategic Implications for the Gulf Region,” *Strategic Analysis* 35, no. 2 (February 8, 2011): 265–76, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2011.542923>.

<sup>32</sup> Rich, “Gulf War 4.0: Iran, Saudi Arabia and the Complexification of the Persian Gulf Equation.”

<sup>33</sup> The spread of Shia ideas throughout the region was not only Khomeini's big idea but also Iran's ambition in expanding its religious hegemony. Look, Zulkifli Z, “The Struggle of the Shi'is in Indonesia” (Universiteit Leiden The Netherlands, 2009), 2.

sensitize Muslims and their governments so that they can transform themselves and not leave their precious resources to be plundered by anti-Muslim outsiders."<sup>34</sup>

Khomeini's views indicate the direction of expansion of Iran's Shia Islam, which is local and global. This post-revolutionary era in Iran has strengthened the sectarianism between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shi'a Iran, as well as political competition and tension.<sup>35</sup>

In order to fight ideological and religious pressures, Riyadh carried out a counter-Syi'ism strategy by empowering the Sunni Salafiyah-Wahhâbism ideology as a state school.<sup>36</sup> According to the author, the choice of Wahhâbi kalam theology to become state ideology in Saudi Arabia is based more on its vocals in forming counter-Shia narratives developed by Iran.

### Competition for Regional Influence and Domination in the Middle East

One of the fundamental questions that should be asked in this discussion is why the Middle East is an attractive region for Islamic and Arab countries in particular. The writer finds at least two reasons; *First*, the Islamic countries in the world that are members of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) total 57 countries<sup>37</sup> and cover 1.5 billion Muslims worldwide. Spread mainly in the Middle East, Africa, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia. Because most Muslims live in the Middle East, the Middle East plays an essential role in international politics. In addition, the Middle East has its own *characteristics* with its own Islamic style. Egypt, for example, is a pillar of ancient civilization in North Africa and a regional political power with a large population. Saudi Arabia is the birthplace of Islam, with two holy cities.<sup>38</sup> Meanwhile, Iran has the most extensive Shiite base in the world. The distinctive forms above make the Middle East a highly reckoned zone.

*Second*, the Middle East has abundant fossil energy reserves (oil), which are even the richest in the world. Middle East oil reserves reached 55% of world oil demand (in 1981), while crude oil reserves reached 30%. The Middle East is the key to three continents, Europe, Asia, and Africa. The Middle East also occupies a significant strategic position. 70% to 80% of the oil consumed by Western Europe and Japan comes from the Middle East, and the United States is still heavily dependent on the region for oil supplies.

<sup>34</sup> Pradhan, "The GCC-Iran Conflict and Its Strategic Implications for the Gulf Region."

<sup>35</sup> Chelsi Mueller, "The Persian Gulf, 1919-39: Changes, Challenges, and Transitions," *Journal of Arabian Studies* 8, no. 2 (July 3, 2018): 259-74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21534764.2018.1551984>.

<sup>36</sup> Rich, "Gulf War 4.0: Iran, Saudi Arabia and the Complexification of the Persian Gulf Equation."

<sup>37</sup> The Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) was founded in 1969 at the time of the first Islamic Summit in Rabat, Morocco. The central secretariat is in Jeddah. OIC has four main structures; 1) the Islamic Summit (held every three years), 2) the Minister of Foreign Affairs Conference, 3) Secretary General, and 4) International Islamic Court. Look, Sa'ad S Khan, "The Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and Muslim Minorities," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 22, no. 2 (October 1, 2002): 351-67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360200022000027311>.

<sup>38</sup> Weillie ZHU, "On the Strategic Relationship between China and Islamic Countries in the Middle East," *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)* 4, no. 3 (September 1, 2010): 1-27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19370679.2010.12023159>.

Therefore, as far as Western Europe, Japan, and the United States are concerned, the supply of oil from the Middle East is, at least for now, their lifeline.<sup>39</sup>

With so many regional potentials owned by the Middle East, both geographically, economically, politically, and religiously, it was making the Middle East a center of competition to achieve domination of power in the region. Not only Arab countries; the Middle East is also the target of big countries like America to gain dominance and influence there.<sup>40</sup> The West aims to be aware that political Islam can dominate the area. According to Mohamed Ayoob, Islam (which can also be interpreted as the Middle East) as a political force is exciting because it not only carries religious identity in politics but is also a unique threat because it can be used as an instrument of resistance and sometimes even violence.<sup>41</sup> This form of religious and political identity can later be seen in many disputes in achieving dominance in the Middle East between Shia in Iran and Sunni in Saudi Arabia.

When Iran carries out narrative resistance to Saudi Arabia about its feasibility in managing the two holy cities (*khâdimu al-haramain*), Iran tries to form a socio-religious identity in its country which is referred to as the leader of the Islamic world ( *the guardian of the Muslims*).<sup>42</sup> Such a narrative war is one of the steps taken to gain domination in the Middle East. Apart from the narrative war, the war in the Middle East region also shows that the two countries with their respective ideologies strengthen each other in achieving domination of power.

The Yemen war proves a competitive relationship between Iran's Shia and Saudi Arabian Sunnis driven by Wahhâbism to gain dominance in the Middle East.<sup>43</sup> There are at least two main reasons for the relationship between the conflict in Yemen and the efforts of Saudi Arabia and Iran to achieve regional domination in the Middle East. *First*, Saudi Arabia has a long history of providing financial supplies to Yemen and elite actors there as a form of political favor. Political and economic instability in Yemen can increase immigrants to Saudi Arabia, which borders directly with Yemen. Apart from that, Saudi Arabia is also worried that the political defeat of the local government in Yemen could increase the strength of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian peninsula, which has carried out attacks on Saudi Arabia.

*Second*, financially Saudi Arabia has fully supported the spread of Wahhabi in Yemen, including in the Sa'ada region, which is the center of the Houthis. The majority of

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<sup>39</sup> Fu Zhengluo and An Baojun, "Strengthen Our Economic and Trade Relations with Oil-Producing Countries in the Middle East," *Chinese Economic Studies* 16, no. 4 (July 1, 1983): 27-36, <https://doi.org/10.2753/CES1097-1475160427>.

<sup>40</sup> Mohamed M Mostafa and Mohaned T Al-Hamdi, "Political Islam, Clash of Civilizations, U.S. Dominance and Arab Support of Attacks on America: A Test of a Hierarchical Model," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 30, no. 8 (July 17, 2007): 723-36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100701435779>.

<sup>41</sup> Mohammed Ayoob, "Political Islam: Image and Reality," *World Policy Journal* 21, no. 3 (May 26, 2004): 1-14.

<sup>42</sup> Potter, "Sectarianism in the Middle East."

<sup>43</sup> Maria-Louise Clausen, "Understanding the Crisis in Yemen: Evaluating Competing Narratives," *The International Spectator* 50, no. 3 (July 3, 2015): 16-29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2015.1053707>.

the Houthis are Zaidiyah Shia. However, Wahâbi can attract several followers there because some Zaidiyah Shia followers feel oppressed by the social structure created by Zaidiyah religious leaders. On the other hand, the Wahhabis succeeded in assisting the government in stigmatizing the Zaidiyah as part of global Shi'ism controlled by Iran. Iran, through Wahhabi in Yemen, can influence the military in Yemen, especially in the 2009 Yemen war.<sup>44</sup>

However, one thing is quite unique in the Sunni and Shiite conflict in Yemen and its relationship with Saudi Arabia and Iran. As part of the Shia Zaidiyah, the Houthis have fundamental differences with the Shia Imamiyah (*Istnâ Al-Syarah*), whose base is in Iran and can even be said to have close ties to the Sunni Shafi'i school.<sup>45</sup> In the Yemeni conflict, the Houthis fought the Sunni Wahhâbi, where the concept of Wahhâbi Yamani<sup>46</sup> also has differences with Saudi Arabia's Wahhâbi. Such conditions further confirm that sectarianism is only a layer of foundation in the Yemen conflict. In contrast, political conflicts and interests—Iran and Saudi Arabia—are the main ones in the conflict.

### The Relationship between Sunni-Shia Sectarianism and the Arab-Iranian Conflict

To explain the relationship between sectarian Sunni and Shi'a religious ideologies and the Arab-Iran conflict, it is essential to put forward Weber's thesis (in Davis) about *religion and political responsibility*, that politics must act responsibly and not only based on the beliefs that become its commitment. Weber also believed in an absolute difference between the two ethics—what Davis called "ethical indeterminism".<sup>47</sup> For Weber, it is impossible, or at least challenging, to combine the ethics of belief and the ethics of responsibility. This condition seems to be happening in the conflict between Sunni Arabs and Shi'ites in Iran. On the one hand, moral values in Sunni and Shi'a form the basis of moral ethics. However, on the political side, moral responsibility confronts the obligation to maintain the disintegration of the nation and State.

### Conclusion

The prolonged sectarian conflict between Sunni Islamic groups in Saudi Arabia and Shiite groups in Iran cannot be seen as homogeneous. Many factors include conflict.

<sup>44</sup> Clausen.

<sup>45</sup> One of the Zaidiyah Shiite scholars who has a close relationship with Sunni, in particular is the Shafi'i school, namely Al-Sukânî. The book of Al-Saukânî in the field of interpretation of Fath al-Qadîr is widely referred to in traditionalist Islamic boarding schools. Look, Muḥammad bin 'Alî bin Muḥammad Al-Syaukânî, *Fath al-Qadîr; Al-Jâmi' Baina Fanî Al-Riwâyah Wa Al-Dirâyah Min 'Ilmi Al-Tafsîr* (Beirut: Dâr Al-Ma'rifah, 2007), 5.

<sup>46</sup> Wahhabi Saudi Arabia and Yemen have some differences, especially in the concept of da'wah. Wahhâbi Yamani was developed by Shaykh Muqbil Ibn Hâdi Al-Wadi'i in Dammaj. The rejection of heresy which was taught in the time of the Prophet for Wahhabi Yamani is more extreme than Wahhabi in general. Look, Noorhaidi Hasan, "The Failure of the Wahhabi Campaign," *South East Asia Research* 18, no. 4 (December 1, 2010): 675-705, <https://doi.org/10.5367/sear.2010.0015>.

<sup>47</sup> Winston Davis, "Max Weber on Religion and Political Responsibility," *Religion* 29, no. 1 (January 1, 1999): 29-60, <https://doi.org/10.1006/reli.1999.0177>.

From a political standpoint, Saudi Arabia and Iran want to control the Persian Gulf and gain dominance in the Middle East region. To realize these ideals, religious theological affiliations, Sunni and Shi'a, pioneered by Wahhabism, were strongly echoed by the two countries. The Sunni and Shia sectarian issues in the results of this study are only propaganda for winning regional battles and political disputes. Thus, the results of this study further strengthen Max Weber's theory of religion as a driver of human social behavior.

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