

Syria: Iran's and Saudi Arabia's new playground?

A case study of Iran's and Saudi Arabia's involvement in the
Syrian Civil War

Abstract

This examination addresses the problem of proxy warfare in civil wars by examining Iran's and Saudi Arabia's involvement in the Syrian Civil War. Based on previous theoretical frameworks a new theoretical framework of proxy warfare has been developed which is used to analyze whether Iran's and Saudi Arabia's involvement in Syria is a case of proxy warfare or not, and if their involvement in the conflict is a result of their so called 'New Cold War' as it is portrayed. By doing this, it creates a broader understanding of proxy warfare implications on civil wars and its peace processes. To be able to capture conflict dynamics, this examination shows, the great importance of examining the international dimension in civil wars to see who the external actors are and to what extent they have influenced the conflicts direction, intensity and duration. One of the conclusions drawn are that without satisfying the external actors who are exerting proxy warfare in a civil war, the conflict can essentially last forever and they will continue to prolong it for as long as they please.

Key words: Proxy warfare, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Civil War, Intervention

Characters: 66 299

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Abbreviations

FSA	Free Syrian Army
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps
IRGC-GF	Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp's Ground Forces
IRGC-QF	Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp's Quds Force
LEF	Law Enforcement Forces
LH	Lebanese Hezbollah
MOIS	Ministry of Intelligence and Security
NDF	National Defence Forces
SMC	Supreme military Command
USDOT	U.S. Department of Treasury

1. Introduction

Between 1992 and 2008, after the end of the Cold War, the duration of civil wars became significantly shorter than they had ever been since 1945. The logical reason behind it was that the end of the Cold War finally convinced the United States and the Soviet Union to stop creating and funding proxy wars in countries around the world. The funding to rebels and governments stopped and so did their ability to fight; the combatants were suddenly willing to negotiate with each other and a greater number of wars were settled. However, this post-Cold War trend has reversed with regional powers funding combatants on every side of every civil war in the Middle East and North Africa¹. Due to this, Iran and Saudi Arabia's long standing rivalry has in recent years frequently been described as the 'New Cold War', and both parties have also been accused of exerting proxy warfare. The rivalry is said to have had a return or rebirth through the Arab Spring, which is further said to have been expressed by proxy warfare in conflicts in Lebanon, Yemen, Bahrain and finally Syria². Though, there has been no evidence nor a thorough examination that the claims regarding the conduct of proxy warfare are accurate which I therefore intend to do. Hence my question follows:

How can we understand Iran's and Saudi Arabia's involvement in the Syrian Civil War based upon theory of proxy warfare?

The purpose of this essay is to expand already existing theory framework of proxy warfare as well as examine and analyze whether Iran's and Saudi Arabia's interference in Syria truly is a

¹ Walter, Barbara F. "Why Proxy Wars in the Middle East Are (Probably) Here to Stay" *Political Violence @ A Glance*, August 27 2015, <http://politicalviolenceataglance.org/2015/08/27/why-proxy-wars-in-the-middle-east-are-probably-here-to-stay/>

² Gause, F. Gregory, (2014) "Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War" *Brookings Doha Center*, No. 11, July 2014; Lambaré, Henry – Jozic, Jugoslav – Tzemprin, Athina (2015) "The Middle East Cold War: Iran-Saudi Arabia and the Way Ahead" *Croatian Political Science Review*, Vol. 52, no 4-5, pp. 187-202

case of proxy warfare and a 'New Cold War' as it is portrayed. In order to be one step closer a peace process in Syria and a more stable Middle East it is of great importance to map out which actors and to what extent have influenced the conflicts direction, intensity and duration. Weapons provided by sponsors may not be enough to bring decisive victory for the proxies, but they are enough to maintain a sense of disorder and instability which prolongs the conflict. When external actors keep the weapons and money coming and insurgents stay motivated, a conflict can essentially last forever. By viewing civil wars through a proxy framework it becomes easier to recognize the great and multiple challenges of an international military intervention or a peace process, since it must not only deal with the insurgents on the ground but moreover their influential powerful supporters outside the battlefield. Those interventions or peace processes that do not exert these external supporters from the conflict or persuade them to compromise will be unable to break out of a civil war stalemate. Whether results shows that a conflict is a case of proxy warfare or not it can still contain proxy dimensions and possess some proxy characteristics that affects the conflict. This can further work as a guide to reach a peace agreement since depending on which characteristics it possesses or not the road to a peace settlement will differ. An investigation of external support for warring parties in relation to proxy warfare is further of great relevance in international relations as it is a form of intergovernmental conflict, albeit indirectly, and it too helps to combine the gap between civil war and intergovernmental war as well as the gap between proxy warfare and intervention, instead of treating them as separate units.

2. Proxy Warfare

2.1 Previous research

Historically, scholars have approached their analysis of proxy relationships as elements of other forms of conflicts such as Bertil Dunér's book *Military Interventions in Civil Wars* (1985)³ or Patrick Regan's book *Civil Wars and Foreign Powers: Outside Intervention in Intrastate wars Conflict* (2000)⁴ who sees proxy warfare as an extension of military intervention into intrastate conflicts. In recent years, though, there has been a growing interest and research on proxy warfare and proxy relationships as a separate unit in relation to the conflicts in Ukraine, Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon and now Syria⁵. However, authors often refer to different conflicts as a case of proxy warfare without an examination of it; Gregory F. Gause for example in his work "Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War"⁶ refer to both Saudi Arabia and Iran to be the actors behind a 'New Cold War' as well as performing proxy warfare without any examination to support it. Others have explored the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia⁷ but not since the events of the Arab Spring. So despite the significant growing interest in the field of proxy warfare significant gaps still exist in the literature that need to be filled, both in the area of proxy warfare as well as the regional politics and relationships in the Middle East which I intend to fill.

³ Dunér, Bertil (1985) *Military intervention in civil wars*, Aldershot: Gower

⁴ Regan, Patrick M. (2000) *Civil Wars and Foreign Powers: Outside Intervention in Intrastate wars Conflict*, University of Michigan Press

⁵ Sozer, Brendan (2016) "Development of proxy relationships: a case study of the Lebanese Civil War", *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 27:4; Phillips, Christopher, (2016), *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East*, Yale University Press

⁶ Gause, F. Gregory, (2014) "Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War" *Brookings Doha Center*, No. 11, July 2014

⁷ Fürtig, Henner (2006) *Iran's Rivalry with Saudi Arabia between the Gulf Wars*, New Reading, United Kingdom: Ithaca Press

2.2 Theoretical framework

As already mentioned, proxy wars remain a missing link in contemporary war and security studies and are as Andrew Mumford expresses it “historically ubiquitous yet chronically under-analysed”⁸. Still, some scientists, including Mumford himself, has tried to develop a framework for proxy warfare but it still suffers from definitional ambiguity. Among others, Dunér tried to illustrate the concept of proxy warfare and provided important insights about the phenomena. Dunér does not provide a clear definition of proxy warfare but he mentions two important aspects of proxy warfare. Firstly, he argues that the exercise of *asymmetrical power* is central to the conception of proxy wars; a proxy must be pressured to intervene or perform certain tasks. Otherwise, the proxy is not a proxy and instead serves as a partner and an alliance. For example, in a conflict we may have state A, state B, and state C. State B and state C are two parties in a conflict with each other. State B is losing heavy manpower and territorial losses, State A decides to send state B material support in form of arms. Then state A indirectly intervened in the conflict and have a presence through state B. As the word “proxy” implies, state B is fighting instead of state A. If state B should exist in a true power equity with state A, then there would be no need for material support and therefore asymmetrical power relationship is a necessary criteria for a proxy relationship to exist⁹. Secondly, Dunér provides the aspect of *compatibility* of interest. For example, state B and C are at war with each other. State B is generally more favorable to the policies of state A then C is, and therefore state A decides to support state B. While the interests are different (state B’s interests concern state C while state A’s interest concern state B) they are certainly compatible and can exist together¹⁰.

Nearly thirty years later Professor Geraint A. Hughes further tries to illustrate the concept of proxy warfare in his book *My Enemy's Enemy: Proxy Warfare in International Politics* (2014). He, unlike Dunér, provides a definition of the phenomena and defines proxy warfare as ‘a

⁸ Mumford, Andrew (2013) *Proxy Warfare*. Polity Press, p. 1

⁹ Dunér, Bertil (1985) *Military intervention in civil wars*, Aldershot: Gower, p. 19

¹⁰ Duner, 1985, p. 20

non-state paramilitary group receiving direct assistance from an external power”¹¹, which he builds on to with three criteria for a proxy-relationship to exist:

- There has to be a *direct relationship* of assistance (incorporating funding, training, arming and equipping, the use of sponsor's territory as a sanctuary, the provision of military personnel and formal units to augment proxy forces) between the sponsor state and the proxy.
- Both sponsor and proxy must have a *common enemy* (namely, the target state). The target state might not necessarily be the same as the one in which proxy forces are engaged in combat with.
- The relationship between the sponsor and proxy must be *sustained* over several months, if not years, rather than involving temporary cooperation¹².

Hughes provides an excellent list of criteria for proxy warfare and captures a lot of its features. He discusses the need for a direct relationship of assistance, a common enemy (even though I do not fully agree with this criteria which I will get back to further on) for both the sponsor and the proxy, and a sustained relationship over time between the supporter and the proxy force. However, Hughes' definition excludes states to serve as proxies which by examples from history can show is not an accurate exclusion. For example in the Angolan Civil War where a Cuban force of 12 000 men entered the conflict and were directed from the Soviet Union who wanted to maximize its influence in the region but with no visible signs of intervention¹³. Hughes therefore ignores a large occurrence of proxy war - namely states serving as proxies - and he also misses what Dunér captured in regards of compatibility of interests instead of common interests, and therefore his conclusions are incomplete yet valuable.

Furthermore, Mumford provides another definition of proxy warfare in his book *Proxy Warfare* (2013) where he defines proxy warfare “as the indirect engagement in a conflict by third parties

¹¹ Hughes, Geraint (2012), *My Enemy's Enemy: Proxy Warfare in International Politics*, Brighton/Portland OR: Sussex Academic Press, p. 11

¹² Hughes, 2014, p.12

¹³ Mumford, 2013, p.50

wishing to influence its strategic outcome''¹⁴. His definition first and foremost captures what Hughes missed out on; namely both the sponsor and the proxy can be either non-state actors or states which sums up to four different combinations of proxy relationships: a state uses another state; a state uses a non-state actors; a non-state uses a state; a non-state actor uses another non-state actor. Furthermore his definition highlights two more important aspects; that the conflict must have started before outside intervention and that the intervention must be indirect. However, there is no mention of a warring party receiving the support nor an aspect regarding a sustained relationship, which Hughes on the other hand captures well when discussing a direct relationship of assistance and the aspect of sustainability.

The previous definitions and criterias for proxy warfare are separately incomplete and each inadequate to capture the concept of proxy warfare. For example, Dunér does not provide a clear definition of proxy warfare and like Mumford misses out on mentioning the direct relationship of assistance nor the aspect of sustainability. At the same time as both Mumford and Hughes misses out on mentioning compatibility or asymmetrical relationship. However in symbiosis with each other and with some paraphrase a new theoretical framework can be created to capture the missing pieces. Therefore I have put together a new theoretical framework and a new definition of proxy warfare by using different aspects from both Hughes, Mumford and Dunér's previous works. In this essay my definition of proxy warfare is as follows; *an asymmetrical relationship between an third party (sponsor) and a warring party (proxy) where direct assistance is provided based upon a compatibility of interests in the context of a conflict*. Furthermore, my theoretical framework includes four different criteria necessary to be fulfilled for a proxy relationship to be established;

- *Direct assistance*; There has to be a direct relationship of assistance (incorporating funding, training, arming and equipping, the use of sponsor's territory as a sanctuary, the provision of military personnel and formal units to augment proxy forces) between the sponsor state and the proxy.

¹⁴ Ibid. 11

- *Compatibility of interests*; the interests can be either congruent or different but have to be compatible.
- *Sustainability of relationship*; The relationship between the sponsor and proxy must be sustained over several months, if not years, rather than involving temporary cooperation.
- *Asymmetrical power*; The sponsor state must exercise some form of power over the proxy. If power equity would exist there would be no need for assistance or it would be an alliance.

To be able to classify a party's involvement in a conflict as proxy warfare these four criterias must be fulfilled. In this essay I will use this table of criteria to easier structure and simplify the result:

	Direct assistance	Compatibility	Sustainability	Asymmetrical power
Iran				
Saudi Arabia				

In conclusion, the previous definitions and criterias for proxy warfare have been separately incomplete and each inadequate to capture the concept of proxy warfare. This new theoretical framework, however, creates access to examine external actors interference in different conflicts which I intend to do, and I will below further explain how the execution will be done.

3. Method

3.1 Research design and delimitations

This study will take shape of a structured focused comparison and have a qualitative emphasis. The aim is to create a new theoretical framework based upon previous authors work on proxy warfare which I will apply and exemplify in a case study. The study will mainly have a descriptive character for the purpose of understanding and categorizing Iran's and Saudi Arabia's involvement in the Civil War in Syria by using theory of proxy warfare. As a result of the descriptive part of the study some explanatory purposes will also be fulfilled in terms of an partial explanation of for example why the parties have interfered in the conflict or why some relationships may or may not have been established. The aim of the descriptive purpose is to describe *how*, while the explanatory purpose is to address the question of *why* or the *consequences* of the subject of matter¹⁵. The combination of a descriptive and explanatory purpose has a lot to gain since it is not possible to explain something before describing it. This means that descriptive conclusions are necessary steps on the way to causal conclusions¹⁶, and therefore this study can be seen as a foundation to further studies rather than a completed process as for the explanatory purposes. The explanatory part of this study will also only aim for partial explanations from the angle of proxy warfare, and do not eliminate nor deny other important aspects that may affect the choices and actions of parties to interfere in conflicts.

To be able to examine the theoretical framework in a case study some delimitations regarding its formation had to be made. Therefore I have made certain delimitations regarding choices of actors and time frame; I will only examine two actors in relation to a case study in a specific

¹⁵Svensson, Torsten – Teorell, Jan, 2007. Att fråga och att svara: Samhällsvetenskaplig metod, Malmö: Liber. p. 22

¹⁶ Svensson, Torsten – Teorell, Jan, 2007, p.23

period of time. My case selection, Iran and Saudi Arabia, is founded upon their long standing rivalry, their previous interference in regional conflicts as well as the media's choice to refer to their rivalry as the 'New Cold War' where they accordingly perform proxy warfare. Additionally, these two actors are further of relevance since they are the two biggest powers in the region, each representing the two biggest branches of Islam; Shia and Sunni. There are other regional powers as well as international powers also worthy of examination but most of them are more or less allied with either Iran and Saudi Arabia and therefore I chose to only examine the two biggest regional powers. Furthermore I have chosen to delimit the time frame in which I plan to examine their interference in Syria to the period between 2011-2014 with the motivation that it was in 2011 the Civil War began and, since it has not ended, I find 2014 to be as close in time as possible with still material available for examination. A limitation for a period of four years also creates opportunity to see a change in time regarding for example intensity or level of interference.

Most of the material for this study will consist of secondary sources as for example books, reports and articles written by scientists, journalists and other individuals who are describing certain events that they have not witnessed themselves¹⁷. This delimitation has been made due to the common secrecy regarding proxy warfare and other unofficial interference in conflicts by the parties who do not want to leave any trace left behind hence there is little to find in official documents published by the states themselves. The forms of secondary sources that I will use will mostly consist of written narratives and news reports since they complement each other well in a productive matter. Written narratives often summarize a serie of events and presents it in a more analytical and interpretive insight in what is happening behind the curtains which brings a better picture of a conflict to this study than official documents would have. On the other hand, news reporting portrays the everyday activities with a high degree of detail as for dates, places and actors involved but leave out the context or a more profound analysis of the events taking place¹⁸. Therefore, news reports can in a productive way capture the who, where and what while

¹⁷ Höglund, Kristine – Öberg, Magnus, 2011. Understanding Peace Research. Methods and Challenges. New York: Routledge, p.36

¹⁸ Höglund, Kristine – Öberg, Magnus, 201, p. 83

written narratives can explain why and how. In this study, mainly based upon secondary sources, there has been necessary questions that I have asked in relation to the material to create good reliability. For example; What kind of source is it? Who is its intended audience? Is the author biased in the conflict? When was the material made? Does the writer have any agenda? This is necessary since there is always a risk that secondary sources are biased but by using these questions as well as my choice to constant check the information with multiple sources, it creates a good foundation for reliability.

4. Analysis

4.1 Background

The Syrian Civil War

Since the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2010 a number of countries in the Middle East have been affected and among these Syria has been affected the most. Numbers ranging from 250 000- 500 000 people killed along with half of Syria's 22 million population displaced from their homes makes the Syrian Civil War 'the world's single largest refugee crisis' in recent history and also the most internationalised case as a result of its global backlashes¹⁹. A report by the United Nations has further estimated that by the end of 2013 Syria had already regressed 40 years in its human development²⁰. What started in in Syria 2011 as a local civilian revolt against the Bashar al-Assad regime's corruption and brutality increasingly opened up to multiple complex underlying conflicts in regards of ideology, ethnicity, tribals, religion and sectarian narratives including a repressed majority versus a dominant minority divide and furthermore with an international dimension²¹.

As the conflict intensified, the Syrian state authority collapsed in various parts of the country. The regime, therefore, came to rely more and more on the administration with surroundings, the Alawi minority, and other religious minorities fearful of change. Hence the opposition increasingly became characterized by Sunni sectarian appeals and these armed groups started to play an increasing role in the conflict. The state collapse together with the brutality exercised by those who controlled the state, drove people to look to sectarian identities and groups for the

¹⁹ Gause, 2014, p. 10-11

²⁰ Phillips, Christopher, (2016), *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East*, Yale University Press, p.1

²¹ Christia, Fotini (2013) 'The Political Science of Syria's War' *Project On Middle East Political Science*, p.8

protection and supplience that the stat no longer provided. These groups naturally looked to external actors for support in their domestic political and military conflicts; to Iran for Shia and to Saudi Arabia for Sunnis. Saudi Arabia and Iran did not create the state weakness and sectarian identities in these countries, but they seized the opportunity for advancing their own interests in a classic balance of power game²². The number of actors within the Sunni opposition movement estimates by the Institute for the Study of War to be 1,000 distinct rebel groups²³, but they are often referred to as the Free Syrian Army (FSA) which works as an umbrella for the opposition. The high number of different rebel groups is a direct reflection of Syria's social conflict complexity and the decentralized grassroots origin of the uprising²⁴. Initially, Western states were the first governments to support the Syrian opposition when the uprisings began in 2011, and were soon joined by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey in the other half of 2011. Meanwhile Syria's traditional allies, Iran and Russia, have remained strong supporters of the Assad-regime since the outbreak of the conflict. While the battle on the ground continues to predominantly be fought by Syrians, neighbouring powers has had a growing involvement in the conflict as part of their broader regional aspirations²⁵.

Iran's and Saudi Arabia's rivalry

The rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia dates back to the seventh century when Arab caliphates conquered Persia and drove out the ruling dynasty. However, although they have had their differences due to territorial claims since then, their relationship have been relatively cordial until the Iranian Revolution in 1979. In the years after the revolution, the Saudi-Iranian relations worsened as both countries aspired to be the main regional power as well as having Islamic leadership²⁶. The religious rhetoric of Iran, as well as the events

²² Gause, 2014, p. 10-11

²³ Christia, 2013, p.9

²⁴ O'Bagy, Elizabeth "The Free Syrian Army" (2013) Middle East Security Report. *The Institute for the Study of War*. p.9-10

²⁵ Kinninmont, Jane (2014) "The Syria Conflict and the Geopolitics of the Region" *The Royal Institute of International Affairs*, p.48; Barnes-Dacey, Julien - Levy, Daniel (2013) "The Regional Struggle for Syria" *The European Council on Foreign Relations*, p. 5

²⁶ Askari, Hossein (2013) *Conflicts in the Persian Gulf: Origins and Evolution*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, p.17; Qadir, Muhammad Ihsan - Rehman, Muhammad Saifur "Saudi-Iranian Rivalry in the Middle East: Implications for Pakistan" *Pakistan Horizon*, October 2016, Vol. 69 Issue 4, p. 57

surrounding the revolution, challenged the fundamental base of the Saudi Arabian state and the legitimacy of its ruling family, the Al-Sauds. Iran repeatedly called inherited rule un-Islamic as well as labelling all regional monarchies corrupt and oppressive. The Al-Sauds who responded by expanding its program of spreading its conservative version of Islam to encounter Iran's religious resurgence by funding religious madrassas and building mosques in a number of countries outside the Persian Gulf. Saudi Arabia's hostility toward Iran was also centered around their public criticism of Saudi Arabia as a state that used Islam to advance its own interests in the region. This created serious competition and conflict between both regimes, which "involved elements of religio-politics, ethnicity and nationalism (Arab vs. Persian), spirituality (Sunni vs. Shia), political orientation (pro- United States vs. non-aligned), geopolitics (dominance of the Gulf), ideology (what type of Islam will prevail, the role of Arabism), and regional conflict (different solution for Lebanon)"²⁷.

In more recent years, the turbulent regional events of the last 15 years; the United States-led invasion of Iraq and the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003; the flaring up of the conflict in Lebanon in 2006; the Arab Spring in 2011; the Syrian conflict prosperity have all accentuated tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran²⁸. For example during the uprisings in Bahrain 2011; the ethnic split in Bahrain resulted in a small Sunni minority who were the ruling elite with a much larger Shi'a majority compromising the demonstrators who Iran supported. Fearing that the Al Khalifa family would fall and that Shi'a groups (and thus Iran) would make substantial gains within the state, the Al Saud offered support for the ruling elite, sending troops to Bahrain to strengthen the regime²⁹.

In summary, their rivalry has existed for centuries but expanded and worsened since the Iranian Revolution in 1979. The recent regional conflicts have further stressed the tensions between them and they have often ended up defending different sides of a conflict. Their

²⁷ Askari, 2013, 60-61

²⁸ Qadir - Rehman, 2016, 57

²⁹ Mabon, Simon (2012) "Kingdom in Crisis? The Arab Spring and Instability in Saudi Arabia" *Contemporary Security Policy*, 33:3, p.545

interference in these regional conflicts has, as mentioned, been labelled as proxy warfare without an examination of it which now will follow.

4.2 Iran

When examining proxy warfare the first and often the hardest criteria to prove is the criteria of direct assistance, which implies that there has to be a direct relationship between the sponsor state and the proxy. Utilizing only open-source material, it is difficult and in many cases impossible to verify press reports or public announcements independently. The information below derives from a broad range of sources, including U.S. Department of the Treasury designations, Western and Iranian news outlets, and social media, which have been placed in context to form assessments based on the indicators available and past behavior and together therefore creates credibility.

Direct assistance

To create an understanding of the different types of assistance provided by Iran it is necessary to quickly sum up its military's structure. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is Iran's most powerful security and military organization, responsible for the protection and survival of the regime. It was established in 1979 with its initially main task to protect newly established Islamic rule and has now become Iran's primary internal and external security force operating with around 150 000 soldiers. As an expansion of the IRGC the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp's Qods Force (IRGC-QF) was further created with the aim to support Shi'a militias and other non-state actors abroad that are sympathetic to Iran and provide them with weapons, funds and training³⁰. The suspicions of IRGC-QF's involvement in Syria grew in line with Iranian deaths in Syria but they became clearer in February 2013 when Iranian Brigadier General Hassan Shateri was assassinated in Damascus countryside while travelling to Beirut, after having travelled to Aleppo. The presence of such a high-ranking commander inside Syria's most dangerous locations shows Iran's commitment to achieving its objectives in the country.

³⁰ Nader, Alireza "The Revolutionary Guards," Iran Primer, August 2015, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/revolutionary-guards>.

Additionally, evidence have shown that the IRGC-GF also were involved in advisory and assistance mission in Syria. A releasement, in January 2013, of 48 Iranian nationals kidnapped near Damascus in August 2012 revealed that IRGC-GF troops had been operating inside of Syria since at least that time³¹. The force has also played an important role in creating and supplying the National Defence Forces (NDF) in 2012, a Syrian paramilitary organisation of 100,000 fighters from various religious groups, assisting the regular army. Later on as conditions for the regime worsened, Iran sent members of its Law Enforcement Forces (LEF) and IRGC-GF to advise Assad and to provide training and logistical support to the Syrian army³². The United States did not officially acknowledge Iranian support for Syrian paramilitaries until August 2012, when U.S. Secretary of Defense testified that there were “indications that [Iran is] trying to develop or trying to train a militia within Syria to be able to fight on behalf of the regime”³³, which went by the name Jaysh al-Sha‘bi. In December 2012, the U.S. Department of the Treasury (USDOT) further sanctioned Jaysh al-Sha‘bi, accusing IRGC-QF of providing the paramilitary with training, weapons and funding all in worth of millions of dollars³⁴. The U.S. Treasury designations have shown that Iran has been training Assad’s security forces inside Syria since the beginning of the conflict as well as pro-Assad militants in both Syria and Iran³⁵. This was later confirmed by Reuters in early April 2013 when they published interviews with fighters from the

³¹ Fulton, Will - Holliday, Joseph - Wyer, Sam (2013) “Iranian strategy in Syria” A joint Report by *AEI’s critical threats project & Institute for the Study of War*, p.11; Kamali Dehghan, Saeed “Senior Iranian commander killed in Syria” *The Guardian*. 9 October 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/09/senior-iranian-commander-killed-in-syria-hosseini-hamedani>; Nader 2015

³² Ansari, Ali - Tabrizi, Aniseh Bassiri (2016) “The View From Tehran” in Tabrizi, Aniseh Bassiri - Pantucci, Raffaello (ed.) “Understanding Iran’s Role in Syrian Conflict” *Royal United Service Institute for Defence and Security Studies*, p. 4-5

³³ Simeone, Nick “Panetta: Iran Increases Support to Assad Regime,” *American Forces Press Service*, August 14, 2012; “US says Iran training Syrian militia,” *BBC News*, August 15, 2012 <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-19264236>

³⁴ United States Department of the Treasury “Treasury Sanctions Al-Nusra Front Leadership in Syria and Militias Supporting the Assad Regime,” December 11, 2012, <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1797.aspx>

³⁵ Miglani, Sanjeev “General McChrystal says Afghan insurgents trained in Iran,” *Reuters*, May 30, 2010, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/05/30/us-afghanistan-iran-idUSTRE64T0U920100530>

Homs province, each coming from a separate militia units, who all claimed to have travelled to Iran for warfare training³⁶.

In regards of air support USDOT has likewise sanctioned three Iranian airlines since the beginning of the conflict for transporting military equipment and personnel from Iran to Syria. As early as in June 2011, only a couple of months after the conflict's outbreak, USDOT designated Iran Air for transporting military equipment that included missile and rocket components to Syria³⁷. According to the designation, the IRGC disguised military equipment as medical equipment in order to transport the illegal cargo. Another airline, Mahan Air, was further sanctioned by USDOT in October 2011 for providing travel services for IRGC-QF personnel flown to and from Iran and Syria for military training³⁸. The following year, Yas Air was designated in March 2012 for transporting IRGC-QF personnel and weapons, including small arms, ammunition, rockets, anti-aircraft guns, and mortar shells. The designation describes a series of IRGC-QF-coordinated Yas Air flights from March 2011, at the very beginning of the conflict, and forward for transporting weapons to Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) and Syrian officials³⁹. A separate USDOT designation in September 2012 additionally cited 117 cargo and passenger planes linked to Yas Air, Iran Air, and Mahan Air for their use in arms and personnel smuggling to Syria⁴⁰. These designations demonstrate the use of air transport to deploy IRGC-QF advisors to Syria since at least the start of the uprising.

Additionally, another regional partner that has taken on a more direct combat role on behalf of Iran in Syria is LH, and even more so since the Assad-regime began to lose control over various

³⁶ "Insight: Syrian government guerrilla fighters being sent to Iran for training," Reuters, April 4, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/04/us-syria-iran-training-insight-idUSBRE9330DW20130404>

³⁷ United States Department of the Treasury "Fact Sheet: Treasury Sanctions Major Iranian Commercial Entities," June 23 2012, <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1217.aspx>

³⁸ United States Department of the Treasury "Treasury Designates Iranian Commercial Airline Linked to Iran's Support for Terrorism," October 12, 2011, <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1322.aspx>

³⁹ United States Department of the Treasury "Treasury Targets Iranian Arms Shipments," March 27, 2012, <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1506.aspx>.

⁴⁰ United States Department of the Treasury "Treasury Designates Syrian Entity, Others Involved in Arms and Communications Procurement Networks and Identifies Blocked Iranian Aircraft," Sep. 19, 2012, <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1714.aspx>.

parts of Syria in 2012. From the early stages of the conflict, LH supported Assad with a skilled well-trained force whose involvement in the conflict aligns with Iranian strategic interests. The USDOT designations of LH has accused the organization both for directly supporting Assad as well as facilitating Iranian activity in Syria. Further sources shows that LH has played an integral role in the continued violence and has provided increasing levels of support for Assad since the beginning of the conflict⁴¹; the organization has for example worked with Syrian officials to ensure the passage of Iranian arms shipments to Syria since the summer of 2012⁴². According to the above-cited designations, LH's involvement in Syria includes logistical support, training and advising, facilitation of IRGC-QF activity, and direct combat action⁴³.

Iran's role in creating, arming, financing, using and fighting alongside LH is well documented, and LH's approach to the Syrian conflict should not be understood as being independent of Iran's. Moreover, Iran's own interests in Syria are in large part defined in terms of preserving supply lines to LH, ensuring its survival. Given this symbiosis, Iranian and LH approaches to Syrian political transition and similar issues are likely to be convergent⁴⁴, yet not with the Assad-regime.

Compatibility

As seen, Iran have invested a lot in the Syrian conflict and clearly have a lot of interest in it but even though they are fighting on the same side as Assad-regime they do not share the same interests - only the same enemies. Nonetheless, even though they have a few different interests

⁴¹ United States Department of the Treasury "Briefing on the Designation of Hezbollah for Supporting the Syrian Regime," August 10, 2012, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/08/196335.htm>

⁴² United States Department of the Treasury "Treasury Sanctions al-Nusrah Front Leaders, Militia Groups in Syria," December 11, 2012, <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/article/2012/12/20121211139861.html#axzz2M2qKngyq>

⁴³ Levitt, Matthew "The Hezbollah Connection in Syria and Iran," *Council on Foreign Relations*, February 15, 2013, <http://www.cfr.org/iran/hezbollah-connection-syria-iran/p30005>

⁴⁴ Joshi, Shasank (2016) "The Views of non-state Actors" in Tabrizi, Aniseh Bassiri - Pantucci, Raffaello (ed.) "Understanding Iran's Role in Syrian Conflict" *Royal United Service Institute for Defence and Security Studies*, p. 27-28

compared to each other, their interests in the conflict are compatible which will be presented below.

To start off, the interest for the Assad regime is to remain in power and ‘recapture the whole of Syria’⁴⁵. Iran’s involvement in the conflict, on the other hand, is driven by interconnected strategic interests such as the preservation of a pro-Iranian regime, the withholding of supply lines to LH and the degradation of jihadist groups⁴⁶. To preserve the Assad regime, or at least have a pro-Iranian regime, is essential for Iran’s primary interest; retaining the important supply routes to LH. Though, due to a lot of setbacks for the Syrian regime Iran has become concerned that if or when the Syrian regime falls, the opposition with its allies will without a doubt try to take down the Iranian-allied government and cut off their supply route to LH⁴⁷. Therefore Iran has created a dual-track strategy if Assad falls; they have strategically supported militant groups that can survive with or without Assad. Iran has developed reliable proxies that can continue to pursue Iran’s interests if Assad falls since the militias and the remains of Assad’s security institutions will look to Iran for continued support, fearful of the dominant Sunni opposition. Indeed, even if Assad falls and the Sunni opposition stabilize control over most of Syria, the Assad-regime’s remains are prepared to transform themselves into a capable insurgent network, a transformation that Iran is well situated to encourage and facilitate⁴⁸. While working to preserve the Assad-regime, Iran is therefore also actively preparing to ensure a permissive environment post-Assad. As an Iraqi official who met with Qassem Suleimani, commander of IRGC-QF, explained the Iranian mission in Syria ‘is not limited to protecting

⁴⁵ ‘Syrian President Bashar al-Assad: ‘Our goal is to recapture the whole of Syria’ ‘ Feb 12 2016 *Free Syrian Press* <https://syrianfreepress.wordpress.com/2016/02/13/al-assad-afp/>

⁴⁶ Pantucci, Raffaello - Stephens, Michael (2016) ‘Conclusions’ in Tabrizi, Aniseh Bassiri - Pantucci, Raffaello (ed.) ‘Understanding Iran’s Role in Syrian Conflict’ *Royal United Service Institute for Defence and Security Studies*, p. 45

⁴⁷ Kinninmont, 2014, p. 51

⁴⁸ Fulton - Holliday - Wyer - Sam, 2013, p. 21

the regime from collapsing, rather it also has to preserve Iranian interests in Lebanon and Syria should the regime fall”⁴⁹.

Given these interests, and the pre-eminent role of the IRGC in Iran’s policy on Syria, Iran is likely to maintain its significant involvement in Syria even after the end of the conflict. LH, fighting alongside Iran since 2012, will also continue to play a key role in making sure that Iran’s interests are furthered, in part through the group’s pursuit of an enduring presence in southern Syria⁵⁰. Iran first and foremost want to restore stability and power in the regions connected to their supply line to LH, instead of the most fragile or strategically important locations for Syria as for example Aleppo and Damascus. This was exemplified in Zabadani, a town close to the border of Lebanon, which is a key LH supply line and near core LH territory in Lebanon which therefore makes the city critical for Iran. In early July 2015, LH and regime forces began an offensive to take back Zabadani and defeat the rebel forces there, but the syrian opposition responded by encircling thousands of pro-regime and Hezbollah forces, using this as leverage to force a ceasefire in Zabadani. Sporadic fighting still continues and the city’s fate remains unclear. What is clear, however, is that Iran’s handling of the Zabadani crisis indicates a shift in its Syria strategy, in which it either negotiates on behalf of or ignores Assad and his inner circle, securing its interests directly rather than by proxy⁵¹.

Understanding Iran’s approach requires distinguishing between Iranian and Syrian regime interests. Iran’s efforts in Syria were never about saving Assad as such, but securing its own

⁴⁹ Abbas, Mushreq “Iran’s Man in Iraq and Syria” *Al-Monitor Iraq Pulse*, March 12 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/03/soleimani-iraq-syria-difference.html>

⁵⁰ Pantucci - Stephens, 2016, p. 45

⁵¹ Itani, Faysal “In Zabadani, Signs of a New and Worrying Iranian Strategy in Syria” September 14 2015 Huffington Post, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/faysal-itani/in-zabadani-signs-of-a-ne_b_8097416.html

strategic position in the Levant. This means protecting Hezbollah supply lines in areas like Zabadani and preventing a hostile regime from emerging in Syria. In comparison with the Assad-regime who rather would protect Damascus or Aleppo from the opposition. Yet, despite their different interests they are still compatible and they have continued to fight side by side against the opposition⁵².

Sustainability and Asymmetrical power

As presented above both regarding direct assistance and the compatibility of interests, Iran and the Assad-regime has maintained their relationship for multiple years as the conflict has evolved and continued. Their relationship has been building up for a long time pre-syrian conflict and does not appear to end soon. By looking at Syria's and Iran's long standing relationship the presumption could be made that Iran's involvement in Syria is due to a longstanding alliance but an alliance would implicate a symmetrical relationship on the same terms, which that is not the case.

The relationship between Iran and Syria has always been more geopolitical than ideological; Iran's ideology is very different from the secular Syria, but they still have had a longstanding alliance as part of a 'resistance axis' opposing the western interest in the region⁵³. They are neither natural allies since before the 1970s, the leading Shia religious leaders of Iran and Iraq considered the Alawites of the Mediterranean coast to be heretics. However, when Iraq under President Saddam hussein invaded Iran in 1980, Syria was the only Arab state that did not support Iraq, and they instead supported Iran. Throughout the eight-year Iran–Iraq War, Syria provided Iran with diplomatic support through Libya, Algeria and Oman, all of which opposed Saddam in his conflict with Iran. Syria additionally allowed the Iranian air force to use their airspace, logistics and counterintelligence capabilities, while the Syrian army trained Iranian

⁵²Itani, 2015

⁵³ Kinninmont, 2014, p. 51

army recruits and allowed Lebanese rebels to train Iranian soldiers in guerrilla warfare in southern Lebanon, traditionally an area of strong Syrian influence⁵⁴. Syria was never entirely satisfied with how Iran consequently gained influence in southern Lebanon. However, they responded by, despite and their newly established alliance, adopting geopolitical tactics to gain control of parts of Iraq, even though it would not be to Iran's advantage. In short, Syria has historically been an independent ally of Iran since the Iran-Iraq war, and the interests of these two allies have sometimes diverged but the relationship has still survived⁵⁵.

Today, five years into the civil war, the Syrian elite remains divided on the question of Iran. Iran is in many ways seen as a trusted friend, supporting the Syrian army against the opposition and enabling the survival of the regime, it is also perceived as having played a primary role in the fracturing of the Syrian state and the creation of a parallel security state due to their own hidden agenda. The Assad-regime have officially been careful not to give Iran too much credit for its role in maintaining the regime during the war, even though their support have helped the regime to survive. Furthermore, Iran's presence in Syria makes it difficult for the Assad-regime to maintain the narrative that their relationship is still an alliance and that they are free from influence of Iran⁵⁶. Yet, Iran are dependent on Syria too and their strategic position is only as strong as the supply line that supports it which is something Syria is aware of. Until now, the supply line has been an air route connecting Iran to LH via Iraq and Syria, but the Iranian government wants to strengthen this with a land route running from its own borders to the Mediterranean. These routes are essential to get arms to LH and maintain its regional influence, not least in Lebanon. That explains the importance of Iran's alliance with the Assad government in Syria, and also why Iran and Hezbollah were in such a hurry after 2011 to prop up the Syrian regime when it was threatened with imminent collapse⁵⁷.

⁵⁴ Fulton - Holliday - Wyer, 2013, p. 26

⁵⁵ Alam, Kamal, (2016) "The View From Damascus" in Tabrizi, Aniseh Bassiri - Pantucci, Raffaello (ed.)

"Understanding Iran's Role in Syrian Conflict" *Royal United Service Institute for Defence and Security Studies*, p. 12

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Hiltermann, Joost. (2017) *Syria: The hidden power of Iran*, New York Books, p. 3

However, Syria's dependence on Iran runs much deeper and has made their previous alliance an asymmetrical relationship both militarily and economically. Iran has helped Syria avoid Western and Arab sanctions, and has provided credit lines and other payment facilities to the country's ministries and central bank. Besides economically, Iran proved essential to Assad's military adaptation and resilience; especially their contribution by mentoring and development of the National Defense Forces (NDF), the joint forces of regime militias that enhanced and at times replaced the shrinking conventional force. Iranian officials have claimed credit for establishing this force, with a former IRGC commander bragging that 'Iran has formed a second Hezbollah in Syria'⁵⁸. Even though such comments may exaggerate the force's overall performance, it captures well the centrality of Iran's role in helping Assad adapt to the rebel challenge. Iran has also provided an enormous uninterrupted flow of weaponry to the Syrian forces, through the main civilian and military airports of Damascus, and helped reorganise Syria's battered conventional military for urban warfare⁵⁹. The asymmetrical relationship and deepening dependence was further shown during a prison swap in 2012; the Syrian government released 2,130 opposition prisoners for 48 Iranian hostages but no captured pro-regime Syrians, which indicates the extent to which Syria has been forced to prioritize Iranian interests⁶⁰. Furthermore, Iran is estimated to have spent \$15–19bn on direct support to Assad between 2011 and 2014, according to Western intelligence. The investment has resulted in Assad being financial and military dependent on Iran⁶¹.

In short, the relationship between Iran and Syria has lasted for a few decades and have been able to sustain despite some difference between them. Still, it has always been geopolitical and this has gone to the Assad-regime's disadvantage since Iran has started to break loose from the alliance in exchange for an asymmetrical relationship with them in power.

⁵⁸ Hokayem, Emile (2014) 'Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War' *Survival*, vol.56:6, p. 75

⁵⁹ Hokayem, 2014, p. 75

⁶⁰ Fulton - Holliday - Wyer, 2013, p. 26; Sergie, Mohammed, "Social Media Buzz: Iranian Prisoner Exchange," *Syria Deeply*, January 14, 2013 <https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2013/01/14/social-media-buzz-iranian-prisoner-exchange-cross-dressing-soldiers>

⁶¹ Hokayem, 2014, p. 75

Summary

In summary, evidence have shown the large amount of covertly direct assistance provided by Iran to the Assad-regime in form of funding, ground support, air support and paramilitares. As a typical proxy supporter Iran has to the public denied any assistance to the Assad-regime and have not wanted to leave any footprints. Secondly, despite having separate interest in the conflict Iran and the regime has been able to work side by side against the opposition due to the high degree of compatibility of interests, yet far away from congruent. Furthermore, in the beginning of the conflict Iran and the Assad-regime still pursued their longstanding alliance and were equally dependent on each other, but as the conflict evolved so did their relationship. When it was made clear that the future of the Assad-regime was uncertain Iran started to break loose from the alliance by creating a support net independent from Assad. This stirred their former alliance towards an asymmetrical relationship by proxy with Syria as the underdog under heavy influence of Iran. Iran's interests in the conflict has a higher priority than Syria's even though Iran is the one coming for Syria's rescue. The longstanding alliance that once were has been replaced with an asymmetrical relationship with Iran as the leader. By looking at these four criterias it is possible to draw the conclusions that Iran is using Syria as a proxy for sponsoring and pursuing its own interest in the region. Iran has both supported the Assad-regime with direct assistance, their interests are compatible and their relationship has sustained during a long period of time and is now characterized by asymmetrical power.

	Direct assistance	Compatibility	Sustainability	Asymmetrical power
Iran	x	x	x	x
Saudi Arabia				

4.3 Saudi Arabia

Direct assistance

The scope and nature of Saudi Arabia's involvement in Syria is difficult to describe or pinpoint since Saudi Arabian media sources provide only limited insight, and often only rare public slips. Indeed, Saudi Arabia's assistance in the regional conflict is normally exercised behind the scenes. Money is Saudi Arabia's most important asset to regional influence and when it goes to governments, usually some evidence is left in the public record, however, when it goes to nongovernmental groups such as the opposition in Syria, it is much harder to track. The general consensus among high profile observers is that Saudi Arabia has funded the oppositions for a few years now but the exact scope and nature of the involvement, however, is a bit harder to pinpoint⁶². Nevertheless, there has been a few different types of assistance that have reached the public.

In 2012 Saudi Arabia started to more openly show its discontent against the acts of the Assad regime. The Saudi foreign minister, Prince Saud al-Faisal, was not satisfied with only humanitarian aid being provided to Syria and he expressed that providing weapons to the Syrian opposition was an excellent idea. Soon afterward, an official commented in the press that Saudi Arabia sought to provide the Syrian opposition with the "means to achieve stability and peace and to allow it the right to choose its own representatives."⁶³, which creates credibility to the reports. At the same time, Saudi religious leaders were openly calling for jihad in Syria and disapproved those who waited for Western intervention. One prominent religious leader, Aidh al-Qarni, even publically called for Assad's death. According to news reports confirmed by a member of the Syrian opposition, Saudi Arabia were sending weapons on provisional basis during this same time, 2012, to the Syrian opposition through Sunni tribal allies in Iraq and

⁶² Gause, F. Gregory, (2011) "Saudi Arabia in the New Middle East" *Council on Foreign Relations*, Council Special Report No. 63, p.20-21

⁶³ Ibish, Hussein. (2016) "What's at Stake for the Gulf Arab States in Syria?" *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*

Lebanon⁶⁴. Despite the statements, the opposition openly denied any military or weaponry support, however the issued statements creates credibility for covert action by Saudi Arabia⁶⁵.

Furthermore, in December 2012, one of the biggest findings of Saudi Arabia direct funding the opposition was published. The finding displayed a large purchase of infantry weapons from Croatia funded by Saudi Arabia and funneled to antigovernment fighters through Jordan, according to American and Western officials familiar with the purchases. While Persian Gulf Arab nations have been sending military equipment and other assistance to the rebels for more than a year, the difference in the recent shipments has been partly of scale; officials said multiple planeloads of weapons left Croatia. Louay al-Mokdad, the political and media coordinator for the Free Syrian Army, confirmed that the rebels had received new weapons donated from outside Syria, rather than bought them on the black market or seized during captures of government facilities, but he declined to answer who funded the effort. However, despite the secrecy, the discovery was published by Eliot Higgins, a blogger who uses the name Brown Moses and who tracks rebel activity by watching videos rebel units post on YouTube. In a series of blogs and videos he recognized the new weapons used by the opposition. These weapons included M-79 anti-tank weapons and M-60 recoilless rifles dating back to the existence of Yugoslavia in the 1980s, which are all weapons that the Syrian government does not and can not possess⁶⁶. Also according to unnamed Syrian opposition sources, Prince Salman bin Sultan and his brother Prince Bandar direct all private and state support for the Syrian rebels⁶⁷. It was further reported in May 2013 that Saudi Arabia now had secured their authority towards Syrian policy among the Gulf states; as a Syrian rebel commander expressed “Saudi Arabia is now formally in charge of the Syria issue”⁶⁸.

⁶⁴ Ibish, 2016, p.15; Schanzer, Jonathan “Saudi Arabia is Arming the Syrian Opposition” Feb. 27 2012 *Foreign Policy*, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/02/27/saudi-arabia-is-arming-the-syrian-opposition/>

⁶⁵ Schanzer, 2012

⁶⁶ Chivers 2013; “Saudi Arabia Arming Syrian Rebels With Croatian Weapons Since December 2012” 2013; Sly 2013

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ellison, Danielle “FPI BULLETIN: SAUDI ARABIA AND THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR” *The Foreign Policy*, April 15 2016 , Initiative Accessed 5 May 2017 <http://www.foreignpolicy.org/content/fpi-bulletin-saudi-arabia-and-syrian-civil-war>,

When President Obama later on secretly authorized the Central Intelligence Agency to begin arming Syria's fighting opposition in 2013, the CIA and Saudi Arabia created an arrangement for the rebel-training mission, which Americans code-named Timber Sycamore. The arrangement consisted of, current and former administration officials said, the Saudis contribute of both weapons and large sums of money, and the C.I.A taking the lead in training the rebels on AK-47 assault rifles and tank-destroying missiles. Yet, U.S. officials have not revealed the amount of the Saudi support, which is by far the largest from another nation to the program to arm the rebels against the Assad-regime's military, but estimates have put the total cost of the arming and training effort at several billion dollars⁶⁹.

Furthermore, a top secret memo sent by the Ministry of Interior in Saudi Arabia revealed that Saudi Arabia sent death-row inmates to fight in Syria against the Assad-regime's military in exchange for commuting their sentences. According to the memo, dated April 17 2012, Saudi Arabia negotiated with a total of 1239 inmates, offering them amnesty as well as monthly salary for their families, in exchange for training and fighting of Saudi Arabia's behalf in Syria. The memo was signed by the Director of follow up in Ministry of Interior, and according to the memo, prisoners came from: Yemen, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Jordan, Somalia, Afghanistan, Egypt, Pakistan, Iraq and Kuwait. A former member of the Iraqi parliament confirmed the authenticity of the document and disclosed that many of the Iraqi prisoners sent to fight in Syria returned to Iraq admitting to the agreement as well as requesting the government's help for the releasement of their families who were being held hostage in Saudi Arabia. Initially Saudi Arabia denied the existence of this program, but the testimony of the released prisoners forced the Saudi government to admit its existence⁷⁰.

⁶⁹Apuzzo, Matt - Mazzetti, Mark "U.S. Relies Heavily on Saudi Money to Support Syrian Rebels" *New York Times*, Jan. 23 2016 https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/24/world/middleeast/us-relies-heavily-on-saudi-money-to-support-syrian-rebels.html?_r=0 ; O'Bagy, 2013, 11

⁷⁰"Saudi Arabia Sent Death Row Inmates to Fight in Syria in Lieu of Execution" Jan. 20 2013, *Assyrian International News Agency*, <http://www.aina.org/news/20130120160624.htm>; Winter, Michael "Report: Saudis sent death-row inmates to fight Syria" *USA TODAY*, Jan 21 2013 <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2013/01/21/saudi-inmates-fight-syria-commute-death-sentences/1852629/>

Despite Saudi Arabia's efforts in trying to support the Syrian opposition through direct assistance covertly some has reached the public. By the large amounts of funding it is possible to assume that they have an own agenda behind their support; what this agenda is and if it is compatible with the opposition's will be presented below.

Compatibility

The expressed Saudi Arabian support and their direct assistance to the opposition shows their interest in the conflict, but it does not imply that they share the same interest as the opposition. The interests of the opposition, as far as you can speak of the different groups in general terms, are to ensure absolute national sovereignty and independence for Syria by overthrowing the regime, dismantling the security forces and holding responsible parties accountable for crimes against the Syrian people. The goal is to preserve the unity of the Syrian people, the country and its cities to create a democratic society⁷¹. Saudi Arabia strive for the same goal with the fall of Assad but have another agenda and interest behind it which therefore makes their different interest compatible but yet not congruent.

The efforts put in by Saudi Arabia to support the opposition in its struggle against the Assad regime is a reflection of the interests they have in the conflicts outcome. With Saudi Arabia not sharing a border with Syria along with being largely unaffected by geostrategic issues related to the Syrian conflict in regards of refugee flows and cross-border infiltration of terrorist organisations, the primary concerns of Saudi Arabia is to roll back Iranian influence from traditional Arab territory in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, and further containing the unrest before it reaches Saudi territory⁷². Already, before 2011, Saudi Arabia's primary goal was to achieve greater regional power and with the uprisings in Syria a considerable opportunity presented itself. The aim for supporting the opposition has been to replace Assad with a friendly Sunni-dominated government that they would have helped to put in power through financial and

⁷¹ "Guide to the Syrian opposition" BBC News, 17 October 2013 <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-15798218>

⁷² Hokayem, Emile (2012) "Syria and its Neighbours" *Survival*, Apr/May2012, vol. 54:2, p.12; Stephens, Michael (2016) "The View From The Gulf" in Tabrizi, Aniseh Bassiri - Pantucci, Raffaello (ed.) "Understanding Iran's Role in Syrian Conflict" *Royal United Service Institute for Defence and Security Studies*, p. 41-43

military support. By doing this they would also cut off the land route to LH and further hit Iran's position in Lebanon so both Damascus and Beirut would drift into the Saudi Arabian sphere⁷³. They believe that a friendly regime in Syria will further give them influence over Shia-dominated Baghdad which is seen as a critical player in the regional balance of power and would compensate for the perceived loss of influence over Iraq. For Saudi Arabia, the Syrian conflict is therefore a critical conflict that needs to be won to gain control of a crucial central state in the region; drawing Syria away from the Iran's influence is seen as a way of cementing broader regional influence in the Levant, and of re-establishing the more favourable regional balance of power that they lost following the United States' occupation of Iraq in 2003⁷⁴.

Furthermore, if the Assad-regime survive, it is realistic to assume that the rebels and any civilians deemed to have sympathised with their cause will be offered no justice or sympathy. It is also likely that the Syrian president will emerge from the civil war with an even more uncompromising attitude towards the West and a determination to take revenge on his external enemies. The rebellion's defeat can therefore have severe consequences for the regional stability which Saudi Arabia is well aware of⁷⁵. Therefore, Saudi Arabia has not shied away from making its red lines clear: Assad must leave power; a negotiated settlement must lead to a united Syria, and the opposition should be represented in government, thereby preventing Syria from operating as a proxy of Iran or returning to a structure that allows the Assad family total control over the state⁷⁶. Events in the past acts as evidence for Saudi Arabia's lack of genuine care for the Syrian people when for example the massacre in Hama 1982 occurred and Saudi Arabia remained in silence. This time around the silence were not brokered until LH entered the conflict late in 2011 supporting the Assad-regime which made Saudi Arabia fearful of the regional power balance⁷⁷. In summary, the fall of Assad would mean the beginning of a more democratic society for the opposition meanwhile it for Saudi Arabia would mean the end of a hostile regime; allow

⁷³ Askari, Hossein (2013) *Conflicts in the Persian Gulf: Origins and Evolution*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 330-331; Barnes-Dacey, Julien - Levy, Daniel (2013) "The Regional Struggle for Syria" *The European Council on Foreign Relations*, p. 17; Phillips, 2016, 118

⁷⁴ Barnes-Dacey, 2013, p. 17- 18; Hokayem, 2012, p. 12

⁷⁵ Hughes, 2014, 525

⁷⁶ Stephens, 2016, p. 41-43

⁷⁷ Ibid. p. 44

Saudi Arabia to assert itself as the leader of the Sunni and Arab worlds; reverse the loss of Iraq; and check Iran's advance into the Levant⁷⁸.

Sustainability and Asymmetrical power

Saudi Arabia have invested a lot in the Syrian conflict and clearly have a lot of interest in it. As the conflict has been prolonged now for years the sustainability of Saudi Arabia's support for the opposition becomes clear since it by now has supported them for years, and since Saudi Arabia wants to keep their influence the flow of economical and military supply would continue after the fall of Assad. However, it should not be viewed as an alliance. Already at the surface, the asymmetrical relationship between Saudi Arabia and the opposition shines through. Saudi Arabia, a wealthy oil state, and the civilian opposition with no other income than external funding. Additionally, the opposition heavily relies on external funding and support to keep the battle against the Assad regime alive and when the funding is not continuous it creates a large obstacle which makes them dependent on their suppliers.

The asymmetry of the relationship has been present since the beginning of the conflict. Yet, this was further shown in December 2012 when military commanders of the FSA units from all over Syria agreed to a unified command structure after intense pressure from Qatar and Saudi Arabia who promised more advanced weapons once a central military council took place. According to Ahmad al-Qanatri, the commander of a military battalion in northern Idlib Province, said that they "accepted everything because they promised everything - even paradise"⁷⁹ but that they will probably not see any of the promised weaponries, which shows the desperation and dependence the opposition feels against Saudi Arabia. Later on in May 2013, a delegation from the Syrian opposition visited Saudi Arabia, for an official meeting during a two day period. The Saudi foreign minister, Saud Al Faisal, met with Syrian Brotherhood deputy leader Mahmoud Farouq Tayfour, in private and the meeting was meant to build channels of communication with

⁷⁸ Hokayem, 2012, 12

⁷⁹ MacFarquhar, Neil Saad, Hwaida "Rebel Groups in Syria Make Framework for Military" Dec. 7 2012 *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/08/world/middleeast/rebel-groups-in-syria-make-framework-for-military.html>

the coalition as Saudi Arabia apparently took over sponsorship of the opposition from Doha. Syrian opposition sources, said Qatar had told the coalition's secretary general, Mustafa Al Sabbagh, that "the Syrian dossier is now in the hands of Saudi Arabia"⁸⁰. During the meeting, Saudi Arabia is said to further have promised increased support, under the condition that the opposition agreed to expand the coalition to include minorities, and another source said the opposition delegation was told that around 25 groups should be included in the coalition, including representatives of Kurdish forces. More political and financial support for the opposition coalition would also depend on who would lead it and the new interim government; Saudi officials made it clear that no support will be provided unless the coalition becomes more inclusive⁸¹.

As earlier mentioned Saudi Arabia and CIA worked together on missions in Syria and while there were no strings attached between the two of them, the money to Syria from Saudi Arabia apparently came with expectations according to current and former officials. A former C.I.A. analyst said "they want a seat at the table, and a say in what the agenda of the table is going to be"⁸². This was further shown in November 2012 when the Syrian opposition gathered in Doha for another attempt to unify the different units, which was coordinated by both Qatar and Saudi Arabia. At the same time, Qatar was holding a private meeting for rebel commanders where they promised funding and weapons along with significant money paid up front for attendance. The Saudis saw this private Doha meeting as an attempt to sideline their influence among the opposition and decided to create their own rebel organization by breaking away from the Joint Command structure. They reportedly offered large amounts of money to Military Council leaders and independent brigade leaders to refuse attending the private Qatari meeting and to work directly with Saudi Arabia instead. Although many of the most important rebel commanders ignored Saudi Arabia and traveled to Doha instead, a few high-ranking

⁸⁰ Hassan, Hassan "Saudis overtaking Qatar in sponsoring Syrian rebels", *The National*, May 15 2013, <http://www.thenational.ae/thenationalconversation/comment/saudis-overtaking-qatar-in-sponsoring-syrian-rebels>

⁸¹ Hassan, 2013

⁸² Apuzzo, Matt - Mazzetti, Mark "U.S. Relies Heavily on Saudi Money to Support Syrian Rebels" *New York Times*, Jan. 23 2016 https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/24/world/middleeast/us-relies-heavily-on-saudi-money-to-support-syrian-rebels.html?_r=0

commanders chose side with the Saudi representatives. When the private Doha meetings took place, on November 5th 2012, an announcement on YouTube was published announcing the formation of the Five Fronts Command. In the announcement it was stated that the FSA had devised a new five front command structure to “unite rebel forces based on the strategic alignment of certain areas into five fighting fronts.”⁸³. In Saudi Arabian press the announcement was prominently featured while it was never reported by the press in Qatar which further confirms the role played by Saudi Arabia in the creation of the formation. Many opposition groups believed it to be an attempt by Saudi Arabia to influence and manipulate Syrian opposition groups and create a loyal proxy force inside Syria⁸⁴.

Furthermore, Saleh al-Hamwi, who coordinates the activities of rebel units in the province of Hama, said he suspects the real agenda behind Saudi Arabian efforts is to provide the rebels with just enough weapons to pressure the Assad-regime into accepting a negotiated peace settlement but not enough to enable them to overthrow him. Another source from the FSA further stated that “even if we are getting weapons, it is not enough,” which only prolongs the dependence and asymmetrical relationship between the opposition and Saudi Arabia⁸⁵.

Summary

In summary, Saudi Arabia’s involvement in Syria has been done covertly and they have worked hard not to leave any evidence behind. Still, evidence have been published which displays some of Saudi Arabia’s direct assistance to different opposition groups in form of funding, military equipment and coordinating assistance. The opposition and Saudi Arabia have quite different interests, the Assad-regime being the opposition’s primary goal and Iran being Saudi Arabia’s, but they are still compatible which has made their relationship sustain and last for years. Unlike Iran and the Assad-regime, Saudi Arabia and the opposition began their relationship on unequal terms and the asymmetry is ever present. Without the funding and support from external actors

⁸³ O’Bagy, 2013, 15

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Sly, 2013

the opposition would face severe obstacles and are therefore heavily influenced and dependent on Saudi Arabia. By looking at these four criterias it is possible to once again draw the conclusions that a proxy relationship has been established and that Saudi Arabia is using the opposition as a proxy for sponsoring and pursuing its own interest in the region. Saudi Arabia has both supported the opposition with direct assistance, their interests are compatible and their relationship has sustained during a long period of time and have since its start been characterized by asymmetrical power.

	Direct assistance	Compatibility	Sustainability	Asymmetrical power
Iran	x	x	x	x
Saudi Arabia	x	x	x	x

5. Results

5.1 Discussion

By the expansion of already existing theory framework of proxy warfare and thereafter applying it on the case study it was possible to examine whether it was cases of proxy warfare or not. The result showed that both Iran and Saudi Arabia have exercised proxy warfare in Syria during the given time frame. They have both covertly assisted different actors in the conflict with large amounts of manpower, weaponry and funding as well as sustained an asymmetrical relationship for years due to their own personal agenda. This has profoundly affected the conflict in terms of direction, intensity and duration since without them there would be no money or weapon flow prolonging the conflict neither the external influence to move in a certain direction. This entails that any peace process without satisfying the interests of Iran and Saudi Arabia is doomed to fail

since without their consent the funding and supplying to their dependent proxies will continue and prolong the conflict even further maintaining a sense of disorder and instability. The international community must not only deal with the opposition on the ground and the Assad-regime but also their powerful backers outside the battlefield; Iran and Saudi Arabia. Peace processes that do not cut these external supporters from the theater or persuade them to compromise will be unable to break out the civil war stalemate since both the opposition and Assad-regime are under their influence and rely heavily on them. The results provided by using the theory framework of proxy warfare can therefore work as a guide to future peace processes to whom should be included and why.

Even though the results showed that both Iran and Saudi Arabia have exerted proxy warfare in Syria, the results were not self-evident, especially not in the case of Iran and the Assad-regime. In the beginning of the conflict they still pursued their longstanding alliance and were both equally dependent on each other. However, as the conflict evolved so did their relationship and Iran broke loose from their alliance to secure its interests if Assad should fall and therefore developed a secure system of paramilitaries and supporters under their command. This led to Iran's less dependency on the Assad-regime while the Assad-regime's dependency only grew and the asymmetrical relationship was created which was the last criteria for a complete proxy relationship. The criterias of direct assistance, sustainability and compatibility were still fulfilled from the beginning during the alliance, and worsened the conflict with manpower, weaponry and assistance, but without the asymmetrical power a peace process could have been achieved without Iran in it. The change of relationship has affected future peace process since Iran now has inserted themselves as a separate actor and a peace settlement will never be reached without them at the table. This demonstrates the importance of a thorough examination of proxy warfare, since Iran's involvement in the conflict was from the beginning marked as proxy warfare when it still actually was a longstanding alliance.

Furthermore, one difficulty of the conflict in regards of proxy warfare, resembling the one during the Cold War, is the so called 'balanced interventions'. By both actors in the conflict acting as

proxies to equally strong suppliers the proxy warfare becomes balanced and can essentially last forever. Despite this resemblance, Iran's and Saudi Arabia's interference in Syria can not be understood as part of a 'New Cold War', at least not from both directions nor in this particular conflict. Saudi Arabia's primary goal has been to reduce Iran's regional influence to be able to themselves regain it. Iran's primary goal, however, is not related to Saudi Arabia but instead Hezbollah and to keep their supply line alive. Even though their longstanding rivalry is a fact and they are both interfering in the same conflict it does not conclude a 'New Cold War', at least not in Syria since Iran's focus and interests are at another direction. This once again demonstrates the importance of a thorough examination of proxy warfare since the accusations of a 'New Cold War' implies hard aftermaths and a war that will go on for decades, which does not have to be the reality. What may be a reality though is, if Saudi Arabia won't be included in a peace process, they will only keep funding the conflict in either Syria or other regional fragile states until they regain lost regional power.

5.2 Conclusion

To sum up, by applying the new theoretical framework on the Syrian Civil War an examination of proxy warfare could be completed. The conclusions that can be drawn from this examination are; (1) the Syrian Civil War has been exploited by proxy warfare by Iran and Saudi Arabia; (2) the Syrian-Iranian alliance developed into a proxy relationship during the conflict; (3) a 'New Cold War' between Iran and Saudi Arabia has not been exercised in Syria despite the accusations (4) Iran's and Saudi Arabia's interests need to be satisfied before reaching a peace settlement. These findings have displayed the importance of viewing a civil war in more than internal dimensions and even more so, the importance of viewing a civil war through a lens of proxy warfare.

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