THE SUNNI-SHIITE RIVALRY IN THE MIDDLE EAST: THE IRAQ AND SYRIA EXAMPLES

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that, apart from the sources cited in this work which are duly acknowledged, this study is the result of an original research conducted under the supervision of Dr. Kennedy Ahorsu and that this research has not been presented either in part or in whole for any other purpose.

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DATE:.................................... DATE:....................................

INTEGRI PROCEDAMUS
DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the Late Felix Oduro Owusu for the good foundation he gave me.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Jehovah God for his mercies and blessing throughout the study.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AQI - Al Qaeda in Iraq
CPA - Coalition Provisional Administration
GCC - Gulf Cooperation Council
ISIS - Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
IS - Islamic State
NATO - North Atlantic Treaty Organization
SAM - Surface-to-Air-Missile
UNSC - United Nations Security Council
USSR - Union Soviet Socialist Republics
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ABSTRACT

This study examines the Sunni-Shiite rivalry in the Middle East and its impact on the stability of Iraq and Syria. The study is structured into four main chapters. Chapter One looks at the research design and literature review. Chapter Two Historical overview of the Sunni-Shiite rivalry in the Middle East. Chapter Three analyses of the Iraq and Syria crises. Finally, Chapter Four presents a summary of the research findings draws conclusions and makes recommendations. The study is purely qualitative and relies primarily on both primary and secondary sources of data collection. From the study, findings reveal that, the Sunni-Shiite rivalry has caused instability in Iraq and Syria. At the international level, the United States and Russia have played various roles to fuel the conflict. Iran and Saudi Arabia have been the Shiite and Sunni leaders respectively of the divide, with one sponsoring proxies against the other. Extremist on both sides of the divide have taken entrenched positions and made the realization of peace arduous. The study finally suggests that the United States should change its policy towards the region by accommodating and/engaging Iran. Also, the Gulf States must control the funding of extremist by their citizens. The study also suggests that, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) must cooperate to find lasting solutions to the conflicts in Iraq and Syria.
CHAPTER ONE

RESEARCH DESIGN

1.1 Background

The period that followed the death of Prophet Mohammed in 632 AD was dominated with events that led to an Islamic schism, with roots in disagreement on succession. Who was to succeed the Prophet? This question had two answers from two factions that would later become sects—Sunnis and Shiite. One group who would later become the Shiites, from the phrase shi’atu Ali’, supported Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Mohammed, to be his successor by virtue of his blood relation to the Prophet.¹ To them succession should be in the bloodline. Another group who would become the Sunnis, from the word ‘Sunna’ meaning ‘followers of the Prophets customs’, favoured Abu Bakr, a companion of Mohammed, to be the Caliph or successor.² Ultimately, his companion Abu Bakr became the new leader, or caliph of Islam, despite protests from the supporters of Mohammad’s cousin, Ali³. After Abu Bakr came Omar, and then Uthman, the last of who was assassinated in 656 AD. Ali, (the son-in-law of Mohammed), was subsequently named a successor, and was assassinated in 661 AD. After the death of Ali, there was a period of civil war between the factions as his followers rejected the Caliphs that followed.⁴ The tension eventually led to the death of Hussein, the grandson of Mohammed, and son of Ali, in 680 AD in Karbala in present day Iraq. The death of Hussein at the hands of the Sunnis marked the climax of the rivalry and is up-till this day commemorated by Shiites in ‘sombre and sometimes violent ritualistic’ event named Ashura.⁵

After the period described above, the two sects generally antagonized each other. Except for a brief period, which saw a Shiite caliphate established in Egypt and the later establishment of the Safavid Empire in the 16th century, for hundreds of years Sunnis have controlled the region.⁶ The Sunnis, constituting over 80% of the world’s Moslem population continued to dominate...
this rivalry in modern history. Politically most states in the Middle East under the control of Sunnis and have majority Sunni populations except Iran, Iraq and Bahrain that have majority Shiite populations. With the exception of Syria, Iraq, Iran all other states in the region have Sunnis dominating their political leadership.

The above historical antecedent of the sectarian divide in the Middle East helps explain the sectarian dimensions to conflicts in Iraq since the aftermath of US invasion in 2003, and in Syria since 2011 uprising against the Assad regime. It also explains how the divide underlines the instability currently plaguing the two states.

A long rule by Saddam Hussein, a Sunni secular ruler over a state that had a majority Shiite population had ended in 2003. It was time for the majority to take control of the state, even if that meant opposing the ‘liberator’-the United States of America. The removal of Saddam therefore finally allowed the Shiite, after several centuries, to get back at the Sunnis. The disappearance of a Sunni-dominated strong Iraq had shattered the power balance between that country, Iran and Saudi Arabia and seems to have tipped the scale in favour of Iran. This development, in spite of its domestic origin, had regional ramification as the Sunni states in the region, particularly Saudi Arabia, became uncomfortable with a win for Shiism, and worse of all, for its leader-state-the Islamic Republic of Iran. This led Saudi Arabia to intensify her opposition towards Iran by rallying Gulf Sunni-led states and courting Western powers to achieve its goal of countering the mullahs’ influence. The role Iran plays as an ardent supporter of some groups including Hezbollah and Hamas that are designated as terrorist ‘organizations by the West as well as its nuclear programme, further strengthen the credibility of Saudi distrust and opposition towards Iran in Western capitals.
In Syria, a minority Alawite (an offshoot Shiite sect) government had been in power for over forty years and used brute force and cunning manipulation to muzzle opposition from a Sunni majority. It is worth noting that like the Shiite in Iraq, before the overthrow of Saddam, the Alawite in Syria, had faced oppression for centuries under Sunnis before French colonial rule. The only difference, as stated above, is that, unlike in Iraq where Shiites are majority, the Shiite (Alawite) in Syria constitutes a minority. Hafez al-Assad, Syria’s first Alawite leader built what was believed to be ‘the most feared security state in the Middle East, employing multiple intelligence services reporting to him to establish a vast network of overlapping and competing surveillance and informers, sowing fear and enforcing political conformity throughout the country’. That did not change much during the rule of Bashar al-Assad-his son. In March 2011 when Syrians decided to take advantage of the Arab Spring that had brought the downfall of the most stubborn of dictators in the region to bring out their discontent against the Assad regime, it did not look like the beginning of a civil war that would kill over two hundred thousand people, three years later. However, the heavy-handedness of the regime ensured that the protest did not only spread, but also over time became militarized. When after sometime it became clear Assad could not be easily deposed as other autocrats, coupled with the unflinching support from Iran, the Saudis and other gulf states made frantic effort to support the Sunni rebels.

The Sunni-Shiite rivalry in Iraq further exacerbated as the result of the overthrow of the Sunni Regime could ‘hardly be described as a triumph for democracy, given the authoritarian drift under…Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.’

The actions of Sunni Salafist terror groups that have a principle of seeing Shiite adherents as heretics in Islam have not helped in any way to calm the sectarian strife in Iraq. This they have
demonstrated, by continuously murdering Shiite pilgrims in Iraq—events development that have become so common on Western media. In 2013, Christian Caryl in his article ‘It’s not about us’ clearly emphasized the uniqueness of the hatred al Qaeda and the Taliban have towards the Shiite and went further to substantiate his point by pointing out that al Qaeda in Iraq duly claimed responsibility for bombings in Baghdad.\textsuperscript{15}

The Sunni-Shiite divide and its violent nature in Iraq and Syria therefore has multi-players and parties. At the domestic level in Iraq, there is the Shiite population that constitutes about sixty percent of the population that is now the domestic top dog in control of the state. Then, the Sunni minority of powerful tribes that having been in charge of Iraqi affairs for decades, if not centuries vehemently opposing the status quo. In Syria, is a minority Shiite-Alawite government led by strong man Bashar al Assad that has ruled the country for the past forty years. Rebels of mainly Sunni adherents oppose the Syrian regime. There are also domestic terror groups, initially al Qaeda and currently the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria who acting on their own accord with some suspected support from some private individuals in the Gulf States that have increasingly assumed the centre-stage of the conflict in both countries.\textsuperscript{16} Often the extremist side with Sunni tribes as in the case of Iraq, and sometimes fight them, as is often the case in Syria.

At the regional level is Saudi Arabia with Qatar that has largely assumed the role of leadership of Sunni states and populace in the region with its vast oil money. The Shiites on the other hand take inspiration and receive significant support from Iran as a regional Shiite power.
1.2 Problem Statement

After the 1979 revolution, an Islamic State formed in Iran was dominated by the mullahs of the Shiite sect, led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was created. The introduction of Islam as a form of government stunned the world, with its consequential change in the balance of power in the region.\textsuperscript{17} The changing balance of power after the revolution stemmed from Iran’s unflinching willingness to export the revolution to other states in the region. This was a threat to the Saudi monarchy and its influence in the Middle East.\textsuperscript{18} In response, Saudi Arabia led Sunni-led ‘ultra conservative Gulf monarchies to form the Gulf Cooperation Council, to ‘counter and contain’ Iranian influence.\textsuperscript{19} Of all the Sunni led states in the Gulf, only Iraq, a republic, was not part of the alliance, and Jordan being the only monarchy not included because of its geographic location.

Iran’s rapprochement with Syria, (a state dominated by minority Alawite Shiite population over a majority Sunni population), and they taking a ‘mutually antagonistic position against Iraq’, (a state with a minority Sunni dominating a majority Shiite population) helped draw the line between the Shiite and Sunni actors in the region.\textsuperscript{20} Iran and Iraq subsequently fought a bloody war during which time the latter could count on the support from Sunni led states like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in the payment for arms to sanction the war.\textsuperscript{21} Saudi support for Iraq under an ideologically secular Sunni leader, Saddam, was a clear message that sectarian interest was of a prime importance to the house of al Saud than political ones. The rivalry between the two states raged on, even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, as Iran apart from its state-ally Syria, had established and or supported non-state actors like Hezbollah and Hamas.

The invasion of Iraq and the subsequent supplanting of Sunni political dominance with that of the Shiites greatly changed the political dynamics of the region as far as the sectarian rivalry is
concerned. Lee Kuan Yew, the late Singaporean leader was of the view that the invasion allowed ‘the emergence of the first Shiite dominated Arab state [that] stirred the political aspirations of the 150 million or so Shiites living in Sunni countries elsewhere in the region.’ This shook the very core of Sunni power, Saudi Arabia, and some Sunni led Arab States.

When the Arab Spring sprung in North African in 2010, many were not anticipating its Pan-Arab spread. The protest against the Syrian regime however, erupted on March 15, 2011 after the regime had tortured fifteen children who had written anti-regime words on the walls in one of the cities of the country. These children were Sunnis who lived in a Sunni populated city of Daraa. The over reaction from the regime subsequently ‘militarized’ the struggle and turned it into a sectarian one. As F. C. Hof puts it, ‘[on] one side of [that] increasingly stark divide stands Assad’s own Alwite sect, an offshoot of Shia Islam whose adherents have, historically, been persecuted at the hands of the Sunni majority…[on] the other stands majority demographic of Arab Sunni Muslims…, largely alienated from what many of its members view as a despotic minoritarian regime.’

Iran and Saudi Arabia upon the eruption of both the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts supported the Shiite and Sunni factions respectively in both countries. In 2013, the Saudi foreign minister Prince Saud al-Faisal declared that ‘Syria an occupied land’, and mentioned Iran to be occupier. While this accusation was not far from the truth, as Iran had members of its elite Republican Guard on the ground, the Saudis had taken sides as well in Syria. According to Zack Beauchamp Saud Arabia took sides and provided ‘large numbers of weapons’ to the rebels in Syria, and sometimes to extremists.
Scholarly investigation and research on the Sunni-Shiite divide and its concomitant rivalry has been many. However, this research seek to explore the historical events that have fuelled the divide; the role the various actors, (state and non-state) play in its Middle East theatre; the emergence of ISIS; and how all these aspects of the divide have had effect on the current instability in Iraq and Syria.

1.3 Research Questions

- What is genesis of the Sunni-Shiite divide crisis?
- What contemporary politics and incidence have led to the awakening and exacerbation of the divide?
- What impact would the emergence of ISIS have on the Sunni-Shiite divide?
- Does the management of Iraq and Syria crisis have any implications?

1.4 Objectives

This research has a main objective to explain and narrate the Sunni-Shiite dichotomy in the Middle East and its impact on Iraq and Syria stability. The specific objectives, however, are the following:

- Overview of the Arab Sunni-Shiite divide.
- To ascertain the factors that feed into the Sunni-Shiite divide.
- Dangers posed by the divide to peaceful co-existence in the Middle East in general and Iraq and Syria in particular.
- Offer suggestions based upon the findings as to the way forward.
1.5 Scope

Look particularly in Iraq and Syria from the time of Saddam Hussein’s overthrow to the current Syrian crisis. There is also a fair insight on specific events and periods in history, mostly in the twentieth century, that have a bearing on the study.

1.6 Rationale

Many regard the ramifications of the Sunni-Shiite divide as a Muslim or Middle East problem. However, recently when President John Dramani Mahama stated in the UN that, “It would now be far too simplistic, not to mention myopic, for a nation to believe that they are just dealing with any one terrorist organization, such as Boko Haram, Al-Shabaab, Ansar al Dine, Al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, the Taliban, ISIS and the Khorasan group. Because of the assistance and cooperation that exists between them, they have in fact become several tentacles of a single organism…” , Shiite clerics in Ghana were upset, and their reason was “the inclusion of Hezbollah as one of the terrorist cells…”

Given the vice of religious militancy, especially Muslim fundamentalism and its spread to West Africa, understanding the dynamics of the Sunni-Shiite divide, which is partially the reason for Islamic fundamentalism, would be positive towards formulating policies and adequate measures in managing religious militancy in the sub-region, as well as communicating them to the citizenry for a better appreciation of the problem. That is, according to the Shiite community in Ghana, Hezbollah, which is a Shiite group, is not a terrorist organization notwithstanding the fact that some states and international organizations including the European Union have labelled it so. Considering the good relations Ghana has with Iran, (the de facto leader of the Shiite world) there is the need for the latter to be conscious of the former’s consciousness with regard to labelling Hezbollah. That is, whereas Saudi Arabia (a Sunni state), will not be agitated
by the inclusion of Hezbollah to the list of terrorist organizations in a UN speech, Iran and many Shiite dominated communities may be upset with that same move. As a result, states including Ghana must understand the Sunni-Shiite divide, so as, to devise a foreign policy that would soothe the region and help maneuver through the delicate politics that comes with it.

Again, the fact that conflicts in the Middle East usually affect the international economy through hikes in international oil prices makes the study of the Sunni-Shiite dichotomy worth with the effort. Historically, three months after the start of [a] crisis event in the Middle East, oil prices have risen by 9.2% from their pre-crisis levels. With Iraq being a major oil producer and Syria producing a significant quantity, an examination of how the Sunni-Shiite split has destabilized these states would help appreciate how the divide, latently, has ramifications on the international economy. By implication, when there is any Sunni insurrection against the Shiite dominated government in Iraq, as has often been the case after the overthrow of Saddam, the heat waves of such clashes are often felt by a taxi driver in Accra, Ghana, who has to contend with the increments in fuel prices that is often a corollary of the conflict. Sheldon Filger of the GlobalEconomicCrisis.com rightly posits in a journal article, “it should be remembered that in the summer of 2008 oil's climb to a [above]$140 per barrel was a key element in the unleashing of the global economic crisis, from which a feeble recovery is still underway.” This period was preceded by an escalation in sectarian violence in Iraq in 2006 and 2007.

Again, it would be quite rational to opine that understanding the Sunni-Shiite dichotomy particularly in Syria and Iraq, and generally in the Middle East would be essential to tackling effectively, the threat the Islamic State and other terrorist organizations pose. Nussaibah Younis in an article with The Wall Street Journal titled, To Defeat Islamic State in Iraq, Bridge
the Sunni-Shiite Divide, commenting on the United State’s approach in the fight against the Islamic State she believed that:

“If the U.S. wants to lead the fight against ISIS(4), it needs to make good on its commitment to restore cooperative government in Iraq. This will not be easy. Pressure from the U.S. to give concessions to the Sunni minority is resented by many Iraqi Shiites. They accuse the U.S. of double standards, pointing to Washington’s failure to hold allies like Saudi Arabia and Bahrain to account for their systemic mistreatment of their own Shiite minorities. Bahrain, for instance, is today aggressively prosecuting pro-democracy Shiite activists for “insulting the state,” even as the U.S. pursues strong political and military ties with the country. Iraqi Shiites blame U.S. allies in the Gulf for propagating extremist interpretations of Islam that brand Shiites as heretics. Indeed, many Iraqi Shiites see ISIS not as an isolated problem, but as the product of a regional network of intolerance rooted in the preaching of state-sponsored clerics in the Gulf.”

The above assertion by Younis goes to confirm how the two major Islamic sects in the Middle East are very important to tackling the aggressive actions of the Islamic State and other terrorist organizations. It further confirms how the Shiites in Iraq mistrusts important players including the United States in the latter’s quest for peace in the region. Another article in the same journal titled, ‘Obama Loses the Sunni Arabs’, takes the argument from the other side, by elaborating how Obama finds it difficult to convince the Sunni Arab states on Iran’s nuclear negotiations. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman and the United Arab Emirates are not convinced of any positive outcome of the United States reaching a nuclear deal with Iran, a state these states see as a threat, because of its leadership of the Shiite world among other things. To exhibit their resentment towards this deal, the leaders of these states were reluctant to respond to an invitation by the United States president to the White House. For instance the “New
Saudi King Salman of [Saudi Arabia] pulled out on the weekend only days after confirming his attendance, and he [sent] lower-level officials instead. Bahrain’s king …also bowed out. These rejections can only be described as political snubs rooted in distrust of President Obama and his diplomacy’. Clearly, the sectarian rivalry in the Middle East needs understanding in any serious push for peace in the volatile region—there is so much suspicion even of third parties.

### 1.7 Hypothesis

Different actors at various levels continue to play significant roles in the Sunni-Shiite rivalry in the Middle East and its concomitant instability in Iraq and Syria.

### 1.8 Theoretical Framework

The nature of the sectarian divide and its concomitant conflict would make the usage of social constructivism an appropriate theory in explaining its dynamics. Constructivism as explained by Anne-Marie Slaughter in her work, *International Relations, Principal Theories*’ gives a set of assumptions about the world and human motivation and agency’, and therefore cannot be strictly classified as a theory, but rather an ontology’. Ganjar Nugroho differentiates it from the two dominant theories of international relations by positing that ‘constructivism differs itself from neorealism and neoliberalism by highlighting and illuminating the ontological reality of intersubjective knowledge’. Referring to Alexander Wendt, Slaughter further explains that, to Constructivist, variables like international institutions, military power and leadership can only be relevant if one comprehends their social meanings. That is, they are not important in themselves, as the essence of such variables depends on the social milieu in which they exist. These social meanings, according to her emanate from a combination of beliefs, history, ideas and norms that need comprehension, in order to elucidate the actions of the state. That is, while much of international relations theories, especially neorealism, is
materialist, hence focuses on how the distribution of material power such as military forces and economic capabilities define balance of power between states, and explains the behaviour of states, constructivists reject such a one-sided material focus. Nugroho explains further that the material world, (military, economy, and others), does not totally determine how people or states behave but rather shapes, and is shaped by the social world, (culture, identity, beliefs, history and others). For instance, the actions of Iran in the Middle East since the assumptions of power by the mullahs is better explained if one can understand the history of Shiite persecution in the region as explained in chapter 2 of this work.

Maysam Behravesh like Slaughter also postulates that, Constructivists believe that the concept of “identity” matters immensely as it plays a crucial part in interpersonal and international interactions. That is, they accept that states have interest, and are rational in pursuing these interests. They however stress that ‘varying identity and beliefs belie the simplistic notions of rationality under which states pursue simply survival, power, or wealth. For instance when Bashar al Assad had to make decisions on his political survival, he devised a ‘sectarian strategy-targeting Sunni civilians, labelling the opposition “al Qaeda”, and portraying himself as protector of Syria’s religious minorities…” That is, he quickly resorted to politics of identity, as he targeted Sunnis and protected his Alawite tribesmen, notwithstanding the fact that both sides are predominantly Arabs. The sectarian ‘identity’ further, ‘reinforced the Assad regime’s close alliance with the Shiite regime in Tehran…” Constructivists like Mari Luomi believe that ‘inter-state relations are contingent upon the way identity is constructed’, and links it to how ‘supra-state and national identities, such as the [Shiite] identity, compete with state identity in the Middle East’. The Sunni side of the sectarian divide face this competition as well.
On anarchy, constructivist like Wendt, as Nogar puts it, do not think of it as a cause for self-help as states perceiving threat can come together to offset such by, in his own words, probably constructing ‘a concert of security or collective security to balance the threat’. For instance, the establishment of the Gulf Cooperation Council by Sunni led monarchies after the emergence of theocratic Iran explains Wendt’s argument.

Slaughter, further argues that constructivists give adequate attention to the role of non-state actors than other actors do. This makes the theory appropriate in explaining the Sunni-Shiite rivalry, as non-state actors like al Qaeda, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, Nusra Front, Hezbollah and Hamas fall into the system of things in the conflict.

Neorealists criticize constructivists for attaching too much importance to norms in international relations, without acknowledging that many states do not consider norms that do not serve their interest. For instance, the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime against rebels is to protect its interest, notwithstanding the fact that it is against international law and norms to do so.

Jackson and Soresen also posit that Marxists like Wallerstein use the ‘material structure of the global system of capitalism’ in explaining their systems theory, which does not give enough room for social interaction—an important ingredient of constructivism. With the weakness of constructivism notwithstanding, it is the best theory to explain effectively the Sunni-Shiite rivalry in the Middle East. The concept of identity, which is very central to the theory, is particularly essential to demystifying the topic.
1.9 Literature Review

In an article ‘It’s not about us’ Christian Caryl posits that the 21st century is going to be ‘dominated by the political reverberations of the rivalry within Islam’ and not the war on terror as suggested by many. According to him the persecution and terror attacks against Shiites in Iraq and Pakistan, which dominate international headlines, substantiates his claim. He goes on to explain that most of these attacks are by terrorists groups like Al Qaeda who ‘regard Shiites as heretics’. The article brings to our attention how Sunnis in Iraq though a minority, have not ‘reconciled’ themselves to being ruled by Shiites. It goes to explain how the Sunni-Shiite split has also fuelled Syria’s civil war. That is, Iran continues to support Bashar al-Assad because he is an adherent of the Alawite branch of Shiism and has over the years, cooperated with the Ayatollahs. This has made the hatred towards the Shiite by the Sunnis more pronounce. Of interest in this article is how Caryl answers the question ‘so why should non-Muslim care?’.

He argues that the hatred between the two camps is on the ascendancy, and considering the significant population involved in the rivalry, the rest of the world cannot be immune to the ‘shock waves.’

He goes further to elaborate the origin of the divide by going back to AD 1400 when the death of the Prophet Mohammed prompted a leadership struggle that eventually led to the schism that has plagued Islam to this day. He however posits that, until the assumption of office by Ayatollah Khomeinei after the Islamic Revolution in 1979 the Sunni-Shiite difference ‘[did not] seem to matter much (not least because Shiites only make up a tenth or so of the world’s Muslims, tend to be dispersed across many countries, often as relatively small minorities)’. By making Iran an officially Shiite Islamic Republic and with its relatively huge population, that changed unprecedentedly. Iran emerged to challenge dominant states of the Islamic world like Egypt and Saudi Arabia, as its [profiled] itself as the new vanguard in the fight against Israel.
According to Caryl ‘Shiite became proliferated’ as Iran sponsored adherents in Lebanon and Iraq. Notably in 2003, the new Shiites political leaders in Iraq came under the influence of Iran and that aggravated the sectarian rivalry. With reference to Oliver Roy, a leading scholar on Islam at the European University Institute in Florence Italy, Caryl mentions another major cause of the escalation in sectarian antagonism to be the ‘salafization of Islam’. This has been the emergence of a puritanical version of Sunni Islam, which is similar to Wahabism. This radicalized the divide over the past years, as preachers of its extreme interpretation of the Koran are of a conviction that ‘Shiites are not mainstream Muslims’. This has massively created a justification among Sunni communities of their hatred towards the Shiite with the worse culprits being the Jihadist groups like Al Qaeda and ISIS.

The article ends with a suggestion from Caryl that supports Roy that, the intensity of the polarization is stoppable when there is reform in the revolutionary regime in Iran that would moderate its role in fomenting Shiite activism in other states among others.45

Caryl, however refuses to give a balanced suggestion on the likely solution of the sectarian divide as he refuses to comment on how the West must deal with the Sunni side of the divide. This is important as McCants posits that ‘…Gulf monarchies [who are Sunnis] have not been able or willing to stem the tide of private money their citizens are sending to the Salafi charities and popular committees.46 Since these money goes to fuel the sectarian divide, Caryl’s silence on it makes his concluding remarks on the way forward to the conflict one sided and biased towards the Sunnis.

In a journal article titled ‘Gulf Charities and Syrian Sectarianism’, William McCants writes about how the Syrian civil war had assumed a sectarian nature, even though sectarian language
was largely absent at the beginning of the popular protest in 2011. As the protest turned violent however, ‘extremist on both sides recast the conflict as a sectarian apocalypse…’ for their own interests.

The article further throws light on how Bashar al Assad exploited sectarianism in the conflict to be brutal to the Sunni civilians, naming the opposition ‘al Qaeda’, and labelling himself as a protector of Syria’s minority of which his sect is the largest. Of significance also, is how the author clarifies the kind of support the various groups in Syria receive in their fight against Assad. He posits that while western pundits blame Sunni ruled Gulf States, like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates and Qatar for sponsoring Sunni extremist in Syria, the reality is that these governments only give support to the moderate factions in the conflict. It is rather private charity organizations and individuals in these states that sponsor extremists and Jihadists in the conflict, a development their governments find difficult to stem. He mentions Kuwait, as one country that claims to lack adequate legislations to do so effectively and has the tendency not to offend extremists within its borders in the process.

He however, acknowledges that not all sponsorships go to extremist from private individuals and organizations from the Gulf States. He makes the point that many other Islamic oriented charities give genuine humanitarian aid to civilians in Syria and sometimes do so by teaming up with Christian humanitarian organizations.

McCants concludes by urging the United States’ State Department to fight the arduous battle of stopping the flow of funds from Gulf States charities to extremist. He believes Gulf States’ governments would have their interest served if they effectively control the activities of these
In a journal article titled “Iraq’s Sectarian Inheritance”, Fanar Haddad, a Middle East expert, explained how unfortunately, the root causes of the sectarian divide as witnessed in Iraq ‘is reduced to the confines of an ill-conceived U.S military adventure in 2003’. According to Haddad, the current sectarian crisis is attributable to a number of causes that include actions of the ‘coalition authorities, Iraqi political elites, regional actors’ as well as ‘pre 2003 history, and post-2003 events’. He believes that the invasion by the U.S, while it aggravated the sectarian divide in Iraq, was only an inflammation of an ‘already extant fissures in Iraqi society’. He firstly posits that Saddam Hussein’s Baath party was not necessarily a Sunni regime neither is the post invasion Shiite dominated regime led by Nouri al Maliki. The problem however is that, in both regimes there were, and has been, a political culture that had resulted in worsening levels of sectarian discrimination of one group against the other, depending on which is in control of government. That is, under Saddam, particularly before the 1990 gulf war, while the regime did not proclaim itself to be Sunni albeit with a Sunni leader and Sunni dominated political elite, there was indirect discrimination against Shiite, as allocation of resources and availability of opportunities were heavily dependent on ties. This situation also occurred under Maliki, with Sunnis as the victims of the discrimination. The article goes on to explain how this discrimination whether real or perceived, made the Shiite consider the fall of Saddam and the Baath party as their salvation. The Sunni as beneficiaries at the time had no reason to support the dictators fall.

Haddad also points to the pre-2003 sectarian nature of Iraq by mentioning how the Iraqi opposition exploited sectarian sentiments by politicizing ethno-sectarian differences in the
country. Consequently, Sunni Iraqis became alarmed after Saddam’s fall, as Shiite politicians were bent on getting back at them, and this was manifest in the de-Baathification policy. Secular politicians who were returning from exile could not do better as they had over the years demonized the Baath party, which was Sunni dominated. Domestic factions in the country further created the environment for sectarianism as Shiite factions like the Sadrist\textsuperscript{49} enforced their own form of justice. On the Sunni side of the dichotomy, the Salafist Sunni adherents and preachers, even before 2003 had begun an aggressive agenda to fan sectarian animosity as their words and actions targeted negatively, the Shiite majority.

The problem with Haddad’s insightful article, and which he recognizes is his refusal to explain the roles played by the Saudi monarchs and Iranian mullahs. This does not allow us to ascertain the regional dynamics of the sectarian conflict in Iraq. The piece also does not explain the international dimension to the conflict, such as the U.S and Russia’s role in Iraq. Again, the governance style of Nouri al Maliki, and an explanation of how that escalates the conflict, is lost in the article.

Finally, Haddar, asks the following very pertinent questions about the way forward which I would like to answer in subsequent chapters of this piece: ‘Who should Iraqis unite against’? ‘…what should they unite for…”\textsuperscript{50}

In his article ‘The Iraq Crisis and its Geopolitical Implications’ Zenonas Tziarras looks at the sectarian violence in Iraq and explains its ramifications with emphasis on the blitzkrieg-like occupation of territories in Iraq and Syria by ISIS.\textsuperscript{51} He delves into the implication of the emergence of the terrorist group on the region, as well as U.S policy towards the region.
He goes further to explain the aims and ideologies of ISIS by being emphatic that it is ‘an Islamic extremist movement with a Sunni-Arab identity’. He goes on to point out that, the group is ideologically ‘anti-western, anti-imperialist and anti-Semitic’ without leaving out how its sectarian character makes it regard Shiites as infidels, and subject them to fatal attacks.

Tziarrras outlines the conditions that led to the emergence of ISIS among which he included the decentralization of al Qaeda, and military support to Jihadists by the US, Turkey and the Gulf states. He again attributes ISIS success to the land its ability to capture and loot territories, as well as winning the support of other Sunni groups and Saddam loyalists.

To him, the failure of U.S Middle East policy has manifested in its engagement in activities in Iraq that has rendered Iraq a puppet-state of Iran, and consequently led to more polarization and sectarian violence. Similarly, he describes Western and regional support for extremist in Syria to have ‘prolonged and enhanced’ the geopolitical strife between Sunnis and Shiites. Tziarras explains the partitioning of Iraq into three zones controlled differently by ISIS and Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds, with the last group benefiting from the clashes between the first and the second. Israel and Turkey, he maintains, support the Kurds in their quest for independence amidst the crisis, because of old alliance and strategic reasons.

On Syria, Tziarras posits that, the events in Iraq with respect to the threat from ISIS have benefitted Assad, first, because he has been vindicated for labelling the opposition as ‘terrorist’ and second, Iran, Syria’s patron has become integral in the quest to dislodge the terrorist group from Iraq, thereby strengthening Assad’s position in his own country. He also recognizes that the U.S could be bogged down in the Iraqi crisis as it sent military advisers to Iraq and promises
to deliver fighter jets to Iraq. Russia has not been out of the picture as it has actually sent some Sukhoi fighters to Iraq.

The article finally suggests that to halt ISIS advances and brutalities, there must be an effective coalition air support. Again, he is of the view that whereas international support, particularly from the US is inevitable, owing to the fact of its actions in the country since 2003, the actual solution to the crisis lies with the moderation in the actions of Iraqi political leaders. That is, abolishing ‘sectarian and polarizing policies’ and building more inclusive and participatory democracy.

While Tziarras elaborates the ramifications of the rise of ISIS on the geopolitics of the region, he does not explain the sectarian dimension of this rise albeit mentioning the various divisions in the region. Considering the fact, that Christian Caryl is of a vivid opinion that ‘the 21st century will be dominated by the political reverberations of the rivalry within Islam’ and which is accepted, Tziarras silence on it is not ignoble. 52

In a journal article titled ‘To Defeat Islamic State in Iraq, Bridge the Sunni-Shiite Divide’ in the Wallstreet Journal, Nussaibah Younis emphasizes the importance of mitigating sectarian grievances in Iraq as a sine qua non for fighting ISIS and building peace. 53 The title of the article seem to be a direct advise to the United States which suggests that the U.S had relented on its push for reforms in Iraq, which would enhance inclusive government devoid of the gulf that have been created by the Sunni-Shiite strife.

Younis posits that the U.S cannot have a successful air campaign if the Sunni minority is not included in the process. According to him, reforms is needed in Iraq to bring every section of
the state on board to defeat ISIS on the ground, as they are bombed from the air by US and coalition jets. To this end, he sees the U.S as, if not the only, the most influential state, to impress on the Shiite led government in Iraq to implement the needed reforms. He does so, with the acknowledgement of the fact that such reforms face a strong opposition from Shiite political and religious leaders as they consider themselves as the worst losers of the ISIS onslaught. They have been targets for suicide bombers, they have sent and have many of their young men die on the frontlines in fighting ISIS, and blame the Sunnis for collaborating with the extremist group by surrendering to them.

The article is however of a position that, for ISIS to be effectively tackled, and Iraq to function as a united state, satisfying the Sunni grievances and addressing their concerns would be very necessary and urgent. He mentions among other things, such as halting the de-Baathification policy of the government, and ending the ‘arrest and indefinite detention of Sunnis accused of terrorism without evidence’. Again, he suggests that the new National Guard proposed by the new Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi should include Sunnis some of whom would lead units in Sunni dominated areas of the country. The lack of consensus between the two factions has however made the talks about reforms mere rhetoric.

Younis concedes that U.S effort towards pushing the Shiite politicians and community leaders to make concessions have been met with opposition, as the latter accuse the former of ‘double standards pointing to Washington’s failure to hold allies like Saudi Arabia and Bahrain to account for their systemic mistreatment of their own Shiite minorities’. The Iraqi Shiites also blame Gulf States for ‘propagating extremism’ through the sponsorship of radical interpretation of Islam that has them labelled as heretics.
The article maintains that for U.S to have some credibility to push for the needed reforms, it must condemn overtly, the suppression of Shiite populations by its allies within their own countries. He further suggests that the U.S must urge Gulf States to invest in Sunni areas in Iraq, with regard to infrastructural development. That, he believes would be necessary to offset the financial challenges of the government resulting from the nosedive in international oil prices. He is convinced such a move, would be appreciated by the majority Shiites and would furnish al-Abadi with more advantage to implement reforms.

Younis concludes by taking a stand that, it would be less expensive for Sunnis and Shiite to work together to dislodge ISIS than maintaining the status quo to achieve the same goal.

Harold Rhode’s ‘The US Role in the Sunni Shiite Conflict’ starts by arguing that even though the United States ‘has no theological stake’ in the sectarian strife between the Sunni and the Shiite, it affects its interest in the region and the nation as well. He goes further to write that, while the United States concentrates so much on having an anti-Shiite strategy as it had done in Iraq, the most dangerous groups against its interest are Sunni. He adds that these groups are ironically, sponsored by U.S allies in the region including Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

While admitting that Iran is overtly the ‘most bellicose adversary’ to the US, Rhode maintains that Saudi Arabia and Qatar who pose as friends keep bankrolling ‘forces who hate America’. He therefore argues that in the long term, a possible fall of the Iranian regime would leave US with Sunni states who pour far more resources vis-a-vis Iran in supporting Jihadist bent on targeting Western interests.
He explains that many Western politicians are been made to believe, however erroneously, over the years that Shiism is a militant branch of Islam. The West’s perception of the Shiites has over the years made the U.S and its allies remained indifferent as they faced persecution by Sunni rulers in Iraq, Bahrain and other places before 2003.

Rhode suggests that Iran, as the largest Shiite state in the Muslim world, many adherents of the sect in the region and over who feel persecuted would naturally run to it. The caveat to this argument as he recognizes is the fact that some Shiite communities outside Iran have expressed reservations about the posture of Iran in addressing pan-Shiite issues. The United States according to the article must also bear in mind that domestically, the people of Iran have serious disagreement with the Islamic regime and, are repulsive to how their country is ‘being thought of as a pariah state’. He makes an appeal to Western states to be generally positive towards Shiite political leaders in Iraq.

He postulate that that ‘[a] non expansionist cultural Iran-as opposed to a transnational Shiite one’, which is possible would likely strengthen the US morally, to confront states in the region who oppress their Shiite populations and further allow it to make them cease the support these states give to extremist who are undoubtedly anti-Western.

He advises that, the United States should currently avoid supporting one side of the Sunni-Shiite strife, since it would not inure to her benefit. The United States should rather protect oil routes like the Strait of Hormuz and eliminate terrorist organizations that threaten its interest. He holds the view that Iran should not be allowed to own nuclear weapons, and, America should back only forces that would advance their interest and do so with every effort.
Alternatively, he believes the United States can exit the troubled region if it explores alternative energy sources and develop to viable capacity. He says this would then make the Middle East ‘retire into quiet insignificance’.

‘The United States, Iraq, and the War on Terror’, is the title of an article by Lee Kuan Yew, the Late Singaporean leader suggests that ‘… a wide coalition and a proper attitude could help the United States prevail in Iraq’.

He is of the view that United States unlike its struggle with the Soviets did not ensure inclusiveness with the war on terror apart from the ‘coalition of the willing’. He believes this posture by the great power alienated very important states like Russia, China, India, and some states in Europe, as the unilateralist direction of the US was to them an ‘encroachment on their respective interests.’

Lee while supporting the war in Iraq admits that the US did not grasp the depth of the divisions in the country before invading. He goes on to say the deposition of Saddam, subsequent debaathification, and the disbanding of the security forces in Iraq by the US was remedy for chaos as a huge vacuum was created. This brought about the replacement of Sunni dominance with Shiite after a very long period of the former’s subjugation of the latter.

The article further opines that notwithstanding the goodness of democracy, it is not to be imposed on a state within a short time, as every society has unique characteristics and, the practice of democracy is not achieved through holding elections, as happened in Iraq. This suggests that issues like education, liberties for women, and economic opportunities have to precede the institution of democracy. Writing the article back in 2007, Lee thought that a successful institution of good structures and cooperation within Iraq would be a yardstick for
emulation by other states in the region. He however cautioned that early exit by the US from the country without stability would adversely affect the whole region.

The article further blames the influence of the Iranian regime on Iraq to be as result of the assumption of Shiite political elites to the helm of control after the invasion. He believes Iran has an interest in the continuous conflict between the Palestinians and Israel as it uses it as a point to project itself as the leader of the Muslim world in opposition to the Sunni Arab states. He concludes by positing that, ‘An Iraq that coheres as one state; includes Shiites, Sunnis, Kurds, Turkmen, and others; and not manipulated by any of its neighbours represents an outcome that would accord with the interests of the United States, Iraq’s neighbours, and the wider world.’

With the weapons of mass destruction, (as US and its coalition claimed Iraq had) not found, and no evidence of Saddam’s link to the September 11 attack, Lee’s support for the invasion as he admitted in his article is questionable. He then places so much emphasis on the United States’ unilateralism that the justification of the war itself, which exacerbated the sectarian strife in Iraq. President Bush Jnr. has called the invasion of Iraq a ‘mistake’. Lee’s neglect of that fact is hence very significant.

In an article written by Farhad Arian headed ‘What Motivates Jihadi Terrorism?’ he sought to explain the various motivations for Jihadi terrorism. He begins by explaining that Jihadi terrorism as differentiated from other forms of terrorism, emanates from ‘extreme interpretation of Islamic texts’. That is, fundamentalist take advantage of the flexibility with interpreting Islamic texts to justify their violent acts of terrorism. The article gives the different motivations to emanate from historical, socio cultural, political and ideological narratives.
The historical narrative as explained by Arian constitutes how Jihadist draw inspiration from the past glories of the Islamic world and see themselves as fighting to restore that glory. To them the achievements of the Islamic world are overshadowed by the current dominance of the Christian world and Western imperialism. This makes them ‘advocate jihadi terrorism as a means of confronting the West and restoring the [Islamic] caliphate.

The article further explains the socio-cultural narrative that counts the protection of Islamic cultural values as a factor that motivates jihadi terrorism. Jihadists talk of the diminishing of Islamic culture by foreign culture and deem it legitimate to use violence to rectify the situation. To them, Islamic values must be defended against Western values, and that is their responsibility.

The political narrative has jihadist blaming all the political injustices, the ‘humiliation of the Palestinians’ in Israel, human right abuses among other things on the West. The jihadist feel Western actors denied the Islamic world the opportunity to live in a single Caliphate. The West support of repressive regimes and its military presence in some Islamic state is inimical to Islam and, violent resistance, is the solution, hence terrorism.

Arian admits that extreme interpretation of Islamic texts allows jihadist to have an ideological basis for their violent acts. As a corollary, many critics of Islam have labelled the religion as violent and intolerant. The ideological narrative has had its propagation through the writings and advocacy of hardliners and fanatics who have exploited ambiguous Islamic text to their advantage. It has according Arian, ‘become one of the biggest motivational factors contributing to the emergence of jihadi terrorism.'
The problem with these narratives and as Arian admits, is first, the political narrative is too centered on Western interference and refuses to look at domestic political factors that influence jihadi terrorism. Second, the generalization of ‘Islamic culture’ is also vague, Islamic states or Muslim states have varying culture. For instance while Indonesia and Iraq are both Muslim states, they have a vastly different culture.

Arian conclude by admitting that notwithstanding the effort by scholars to unearth the motivations behind jihadi terrorist, there still exist significant uncertainty about the real causes behind its rise.

1.10 Sources of Data

Data from both primary and secondary sources are used for this study. Primary data will be obtained through interviews with leadership of the Shiite community in Ghana. Officials of the Saudi and Iranian embassies would be contacted and interviewed. Data from secondary sources are gathered from journal articles, books, reports etc. Online sites are also consulted.

1.11 Methodology

This study will be based on qualitative analysis, as quantitative data will be difficult to obtain. This is a result of lack of access to Syria and Iraq. Again, financial impediments will not make travelling to the region feasible. The unrest in both countries also makes them dangerous to travel. The qualitative method would therefore be the best option for this study.

1.12 Organization of chapters

The study is presented in four (4) chapters. Chapter One constitutes the Research Design and provides the background to the study. Chapter Two presents overview of the Sunni-Shiite
divide and its politics in the Middle East. Chapter Three focuses on the Iraq and Syrian crisis. Chapter Four concludes the study with Summary, Observations, Conclusion and Suggestions.
ENDNOTES

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44 Ibid.
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49 Explained in chapter 3
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The Strait of Hormuz links the Persian Gulf to the Indian Ocean and is a passage for about a quarter of international oil supply.

Yew, L. K., op. cit.

CHAPTER TWO
OVERVIEW OF THE SUNNI-SHIIITE DIVIDE AND ITS POLITICS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

2.0 Introduction

This chapter presents an overview of the Sunni-Shiite sectarian rivalry of the Middle East with attention to the modern history of the region, and the actors and factors that contribute towards it. The chapter will encapsulate the colonial history of the region, with special attention to the First World War, Inter-War, Second World War and Post War periods without ignoring sixteenth and seventeenth centuries’ Safavid and Ottoman empires. There is further explanation of the politics of these periods and its effects on the Sunni-Shiite divided. Events such as the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 are explained in detail to clarify its contribution to the status quo in the Middle with a map in figure 0.1. A narrative of the various roles played by state and non-state actors in the region and the world is also provided to appreciate the dynamics. These include the roles of Superpowers like the United States and the erstwhile Soviet Union; regional powers of Saudi Arabia and Iran; and non-state actors like Hezbollah, ISIS, and other jihadist groups. Roles of individuals are inclusive with Abdul Gamal Nasser, Hafez al-Assad, Mohammed Shah Pahlavi Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Saddam Hussein, Hasan Nasrallah featuring in the chapter. The chapter generally seeks to introduce the reader to the next chapter that uses the Iraq and Syria examples to give a much clearer picture of the rivalry by giving a bigger picture with a regional overview.

2.1 The Sykes-Picot Agreement

The Sunni-Shiite rivalry or divide as is seen today has been partly a consequence of events that occurred during the First World War. At the time of the war, the Arab world was largely under the control of the Ottoman Turks, with the Sultan as the Caliph. Turkey was with the Central
Powers against the Allies during the war, as it had signed a secret treaty with Germany for each other to aid themselves against possible Russian attack. Britain and France, upon realizing the potential threats Turkey poses to their interest, devised a plan that could neutralize ‘the sick man of Europe’. They knew Turkey could close key shipping routes and cripple the economies of Britain and France.

As a strategy, Britain and France of the Allied Powers, resolved to induce an internal rebellion in the Ottoman Empire that was intended to weaken it from within. The assignment went to Sir E.T. Lawrence, a British military officer who encouraged strong Arab men and tribes to rebel against the central government in Istanbul. He induced them with the promise of self-rule after the war—a promise worth fighting for in the eyes of the Arabs. According to Erica Ritz in her article, ‘The 100-Year-Old Agreement You Need to Know About to Understand What’s Driving the Islamic State’ ‘Sir Lawrence promised the Arabs rule over a new united Arab kingdom of greater Syria—which encompassed present day Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and parts of Iraq and Jordan—he succeeded.’

Interestingly, the British and the French, as Sir Lawrence was carrying out his clandestine mission, were having negotiations on how to actually partition the Ottoman Arab territories of the Middle East and place them under their respective control after the war. They wanted to make sure there was no Pan-Arabic kingdom that would threaten their interest in the future. This was the Sykes-Picot Agreement, named after its chief architects Sir Mark Sykes and Francois-Georges Picot of Britain and France respectively.

While the agreement was reached secretly between the two Allied Powers, Britain in 1915 was already supplying some local leaders in Arabia with weapons, in preparation for a clash with
the Ottoman authority. The New Zealand History website explains it further, by elaborating how covert British shipments of weapons and money from Egypt in 1915 helped leaders in Arabia to expand their tribal alliances and ‘build up their forces while waiting for the most opportune moment to strike’ at the Ottoman rulers.\textsuperscript{6}

The manifestation of the Sykes-Picot agreement was preceded by a final agreement in San Remo, Italy, which finalized the partitioning of the territory after Allied victory in 1920. The present-day Iraq was formed from former Ottoman provinces of Mosul, Baghdad and Basra. Iraq was subsequently placed under British authority, while Lebanon was carved from Syria and both territories placed under French authority and influence.\textsuperscript{7}

![Diagram of the Middle East after World War I](http://ugspace.ug.edu.gh)

**Figure 1**

The partitioning of the territory has immensely influenced the political dynamics of the region as it sowed the seed of inter and intra religious attrition. That is, as one scholar argues, the Sykes-Picot agreement paid little regard to ethnic or religious communities, and later amendments at San Remo ‘paid scant regard to geography, terrain or ethnicity.\textsuperscript{9} The haphazard
division of the region into areas of control and areas of influence as shown in figure 0.1, placed sects and ethnicities that have long been rivals under common administrations—a recipe for unhealthy strife and intra-state subjugation that happened in many of these states, especially in Iraq and Syria.

For instance, the Republic of Syria was derived from an amalgamation of the state of Aleppo with its Sunni population in the North; the state of Damascus also with a Sunni dominated population in the South; the Alawite and Druze communities with their respective communities in the East. That is, the term Syria was a mere geographical expression with several autonomous entities under the Ottoman Empire, before the Sykes-Picot agreement and San Remo conference.

In Iraq, the European partitioning brought together, the Ottoman provinces of Basra, with an overwhelming Shiite population; Mosul, a Sunni hub; and Baghdad, a mixed province. Kurdish territories and other minorities in the region also became part of the state and placed under British authority. Even Lebanon, a relatively small state carved from Syria, could not evade this arbitrary mixing of different tribes, religions and sects. It has been very detrimental to its stability as it suffered a devastating civil war, years back. Borders in these states were drawn and, not only were different groups placed under common administrations, but divided nations or people who shared common values and goals. For instance, the Kurds were divided between several states, and to-date, do not have a state of their own, despite their significant population. Sunni Muslim people was separated by borderlines drawn without their consent and placed under different authorities in either side of these lines in Syria and Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, Syria and Turkey, Iraq and Turkey, and in many other states in the region. The story is similar with the Shiite communities in the region.
This has contributed to a spillover of the Syrian conflict across the region, as borderlines is only recognized by international law, and would not erase history from the minds of the people. They still keep and value historical, religious and cultural ties. Concerns and opposition with and to the whimsical partitioning of the region by then, was not only from the Arabs, but from the United States as well. President Woodrow Wilson stated his position on the issue that, ‘peoples and provinces are not to be bartered from sovereignty to sovereignty as mere chattels and pawns in a game’. He further advised that ‘every territorial settlement involved in this war [First World War] must be made in the interest and for the benefit of the population concerned.\textsuperscript{11} The European powers definitely made ‘chattels and pawns’ of the Arabs through Sykes-Picot in 1916 and San Remo in 1920, as nothing was done ‘in the interest and for the benefit’ of the Arabs. Considering the isolationist\textsuperscript{12} policy of the United States after the Great War, it could do next to nothing to help the situation. Britain, for instance wanted to hold unto Mesopotamia owing to the oil resources, ignoring the divergent population of Shiites, Sunnis, Kurds and other religious minorities.

The Agreement and the Conference, and their consequences in the Middle East have been immense and far-reaching. It influenced leadership, politics, and resource allocation for decades in the region. The rise of extremist and terrorist organization like ISIS has its roots in this arrangement.

Relevant to this research, is how the Sykes-Picot Agreement and its concomitant San Remo Conference with their arbitrary partitioning of the Ottoman Empire, has influenced and helped rekindle, decades later, the Sunni-Shiite sectarian rivalry and violence in the Middle East in general, and Syria and Iraq in particular.
For instance, the two sects have been in power struggle in Iraq after the agreement put them together in a single state. The Sunnis despite being the minority in that country have been the ruling class for decades to the displeasure of the Shiites. This situation continued until the overthrow of the Saddam regime and the subsequent ‘debaathification’ of the state which made the Sunnis the underdogs in the power relation of that country. In Syria, the Alawite minority has been in firm control since the assumption of Hafez al Assad to power in the 70s to the discomfort of the overwhelming Sunni majority. Michael Williams sums the situation up in this manner: ‘Iraq, like Syria, was a consequence of World War One and of the infamous, in Arab eyes, the agreement between Sir Mark and Francois-Georges Picot which led to the division of the former Ottoman Turkish domains by the two leading European powers, Britain and France’. In Lebanon, the placing of Sunnis, Shiites, Christians and other minorities uncomfortably under a single political authority did not also help. A bloody protracted civil war and political volatility was the result in the tiny state. Other states including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar have had Sunni-Shiite tensions in different magnitude that threatens the stability of individual entities and the region as a whole.

2.2 Events after the Second World War and Emergence of Strong Actors

The post-World War 2 period, especially the three decades that followed politics and dynamics in the Middle East was dominated by two main factors. First was the creation of the Jewish state of Israel, and, second, a revival of Arab nationalism. While the former is not the focus of this work, its influence on the latter is very significant. For three decades, the state of Israel became the focal point of several wars fought in the region. Before 1978, exactly 30 years after the existence of the Israeli state, the Arabs had fought not less than four wars with the tiny state. Interestingly, the creation of Israel in 1948 had its genesis in Sykes-Picot when Britain controlled Palestine after the First World War. Consequently, the east of River Jordan became
Transjordan and the west became a Jewish territory. When the Arabs later discovered that, parts of their territory would go to the Jews, and the rest shared between France and Britain they were upset. The Arabs protested to this development and expressed their disappointment of the denied opportunity to have a Pan-Arab state as promised by Sir Lawrence. The subsequent creation of the state, hence, stirred the anger of the Arabs and gave impetus to an already boiling nationalism in the region.

These event therefore brought into the existence, a common enemy of the Arabs; Israel. Who according to the Arabs and factually, had the backing of the West or, as the Arabs put it, ‘Western conspirators’.

Arab disappointment and upset fuelled a pan-Arab nationalism that had the emergence of strong men as a corollary. The prime and most prominent of these men was Gamal Abdel Nasser who was viewed a national hero by the Egyptian people, rose to power and resolved to challenge Western dominance of the region. His posture and policies culminated into war when he took a bold decision and attempted to nationalize the Suez Canal, (an important artery of international trade). The war had Israel, Britain and France on one side against Egypt. Unfortunately, for the former alliance, the international community, including the United States criticized and condemned their invasion vividly. A later withdrawal by the European powers after an ultimatum from the Soviet Union was as seen a win for Nasser and Pan-Arabism.

Nasser and his audacity may not be of much interest to this research as far as the Sunni-Shiite rivalry is concerned, however, the influence it had on other strongmen, and how they used it to their advantage as they suppress rival groups and sects with their power, was immense. That is, Nasser became a source of inspiration to many Arab leaders who later emerged in the region
and whose heavy handed rule and sectarian opportunism (a clear difference from Nasserism), brought about inter sectarian violence and antagonism in some states in the region. According to Tarek Osman in an Article ‘Nasser’s Complex Legacy’, later leaders tried to legitimize their rule by linking their aims and aspirations to that of Nasser notwithstanding how contradicting theirs were to his.\textsuperscript{19} He further substantiates his argument by giving how these ‘latter day leaders’ claimed to be standing up for ‘Arab dignity’, championing the ‘Arab struggle against Israel’, and representing the ‘needs and wants of the poor, oppressed Arab masses.’\textsuperscript{20}

Arab nationalism after the Second World War and its champion Nasser, paved the way for strongmen who emerged after the overthrow of the political elites who had succeeded the colonial powers after independence or more conservatively, after the Europeans had left. In Syria and Iraq, the formation of the Baath party laid the grounds for the emergence of ‘strongmen’, Hafez al Assad and Saddam Hussein respectively, two leaders who used their strengths to entrench sectarian divisions within their respective states, being it consciously or otherwise.

In Syria, Hafez al Assad from the minority Alawite sect, after serving as a Defence Minister in the Baath government, which had assumed power through a coup, became the President after some intrigues. He made the Baath Party the country’s ‘leading party…the only one with any real authority.’\textsuperscript{21} From a minority tribe Hafez al-Assad realized creating an understanding between the Sunni merchant class and Alawite security elites dominating the political arena would help him maintain his power.\textsuperscript{22} He did that while building a very ‘brutal’ police state that kept dissent in check. He faced opposition from the Muslim Brotherhood-Islamist who abhorred secularism. In 1980 after Hafez al Assad had escaped an assassination attempt allegedly orchestrated by the Sunni based Muslim Brotherhood, the military responded brutally
as tens of thousands were killed in an uprising in Hama, after several commando raids and mass executions.\textsuperscript{23} The massacre consolidated his grip on power until he passed in 2000. The domination of the Alawite minority sect after Bashar al-Assad had succeeded his father is evidence of how Sunnis have been under dogs in Syria.

Similarly in Iraq, Saddam had risen through the Baath party there, after it had taken over the state in a 1968 coup. Saddam gained notoriety for his ability to hunt down and kill ‘former communist rivals’ of the Baath party and the Shiite religious leadership.\textsuperscript{24} With a Baath party dominated by Sunnis who formed a minority in Iraq, his political interest was served as that kept the majority Shiite in check. Saddam was successful for using brute force and terror to stay in power until his deposition in 2003. The intensification and the macabre sectarian conflicts, which followed his deposition, are explained in the chapter three of this work.

The emergence of these great men and the resultant reaction takes us to another group of actors, the monarchs. After the Second World War, Arab nationalism became an issue of apprehension to the Arab monarchs especially those of the gulf region and Jordan. This was because the principles of Arab nationalism as envisioned and espoused by activist and leaders like Nasser were a threat to the very survival of their dynasties and kingdoms. Nasser’s radical vision of Arab nationalism did not go down well with King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, King Hussein of Jordan and President Habib Bourguiba of Tunisia. These leaders were pro-western and conservative as opposed to Nasser’s radical, nationalist and anti-imperialist ideological leanings (cite). While Habib Bourguiba was a head of state of a republic, and not a monarch, his pro-western stance, equally made him oppose Nasser’s radicalism. Pan-Arabism under Nasser promoted nationalism, anti-imperialism and socialism. These tenets made the monarchies of Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the republic of Tunisia uncomfortable as they were.
friendly to the West and enjoyed some level of protection there. Nasser denounced King Faisal for forming an Anglo-American influenced alliance made up of Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Tunisia and whom he believed, Arabs could not have confidence in, as ‘they all toed the imperialist line’\textsuperscript{25}. The rise of the Baath Party to power in Syria and Iraq did nothing to assuage the discomfort of the monarchs, with as its tenets of socialism, secularism, and pan-Arab unification—an anathema to western-capitalist allied monarchs.\textsuperscript{26} The gulf monarchies sensing the rise of secular-anti western elements in the region increased their alliances with the West, particularly the United States, they domestically increased their intolerance for such elements within their territories. The monarchs were resolved to clamp down on dissent and that affected adversely the Shiite population within their territories, as they protested against discrimination, systemic persecution and economic deprivation within their own countries. Shiites in Saudi Arabia have for decades, been outspoken about ‘sectarian discrimination in religious practices, government employment, and the judicial system’ which make them feel treated like ‘second-class citizens’.\textsuperscript{27} Marc Lynch, a political science professor is of the opinion that Gulf States find Sunni-Shiite tensions a useful tool to ‘delegitimize the political demands’ of their significant Shiite populations.\textsuperscript{28} This has been pronounced after the 1979 revolution in Iran.

Discrimination by gulf regimes of Shiite populations in particular, and the general crackdown on dissent has partly resulted from the continuous support by the United States and its allies continue to give them. The support strengthens the monarchs and their security against any uprising that may result from oppressing their significant Shiite populations. Sunni-led Bahrain, with a majority Shiite population, used force to quench the protests that erupted during the Arab Spring. With a relatively weak security apparatus, Bahrain had the support of other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council to stop the protest.
2.3 The Islamic Revolution and the Iran Factor

'Tehran, Iran’s capital was in a state of revolution on January 19, 1979. The Shah, Iran’s ruler for four decades, had fled the country. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomenei, the Shiite Muslim cleric who had worked for years to overthrow the shah, was still in exile in Paris, but vowing to return and form an Islamic government. A million people took to the streets to cheer on Khomenei and denounce the Shah’. This is how Roger Cohen, in an article in the New York Times described the revolution that changed the Middle East and intensified later, the Sunni-Shiite divide in the region. True to his word, the Ayatollah returned from exile and formed an Islamic state that has been in place to-date.

Before the revolution and its implication is understood, there is the need to understand the regime that existed before it and how it attracted the wrath of the Iranians to seek it demise, together with an appreciation of the nature of the state Iranian state.

Iran is the eighteenth largest country in the world in geographic mass and among the first twenty most populated states on the planet. Iran is strategically located as it shares border with important regions that include the Arab Middle East to the West, the Asian sub-continent to the east, and the Caucasus and Central Asia to the north. For millennia, its strategic location has made it a geography where different powers access, either as an end in itself or a means to an end. Alexander the Great captured Persia before advancing to his farthest campaign in India. In the advent of the indispensable use of oil to power great economies, Iran, as one of the major sources of the vital resource and its geographic proximity to states that have it, has had its strategic importance to global powers more pronounced. Ethnically, Iran is a very diverse state with the largest group, Persians, constituting a little over half of the total population of over 75 million. The rest are Azeris, Turkoman, Kurds and Baluchis together with other minority
groups (source needed). Religiously, the country is about 95 percent Shiite. The Shiite identity is one that the current regime under the mullahs, has exploited as a uniting factor of the state to which all other allegiances are secondary, or so it seems. There are also minority Sunnis, Zoroastrianism and interestingly, one of the oldest Jewish communities in the world. Politically, Iran is currently a theocracy with some level of democratic elements, but until 1979 had been ruled by monarchs and been stable albeit not without foreign influence.

In the 16th century, the Safavid Empire was established covering a land mass that had the modern boundaries Iran as its core territory. The empire adopted Shiism as the official sect consequently made Shiite clerics powerful. According to Robin Wright ‘the Safavid dynasty actually converted to Shiism in the 16th century…to create a separate identity and prevent the encroachment of Sunnis in the neighbouring Ottoman Empire. It is worth appreciating therefore, that the portrayal of the Iranian rulers as protectors of Shiites has not been a 20th century and 21st centuries’ development.

At about the time the Safavid Empire was at its peak, the Ottoman Empire was already reputable and potent. Not long, their interest clashed over not only territorial causes, but sectarian as well. Shapur Ghasemi explains how an Ottoman Sultan, in the 16th century, in a congratulatory letter to the first Safavid emperor for his exploits, advised him to desist from destroying the mosque and graves of Sunni Muslims. Later, another Ottoman Sultan ‘warred against [Shiites] Muslims under his rule, killing thousands and relocating others. From these tensions it is obvious the Sunni-Shiite identity informed many decisions great powers in the region back in the 16th and 17th centuries made. Each of the empires persecuted adherents of the opposing sect in his territory in defining the kind of sectarian identity it wanted for its entity territory.
At the dawn of the 20th century, Iran experienced the Constitutional Revolution—a call by the populace to have a say in how they are govern. It was however, short lived when a military Colonel, Reza Khan systematically took control and created the Pahlavi dynasty. In the early years of the Second World War, he was made to abdicate by the allied forces for a suspected sympathy they believed he had for the Germans. His 22 year old son, who became Shah Mohammed Pahlavi was put in charge by the allies, and subsequently became the last of the Iranian shahs.

Upon his assumption of power, the shah’s international loyalty tilted to the west, especially after the Second World War when the Soviets had to leave Iran only after much diplomatic and international pressure. Not too long afterwards, there was another uprising championed by a nationalist, Mohammed Mossadeq that drove the shah away from the country on an exile. Mossadeq became the prime minister with much nationalist fervor that rekindled activism in Iran. The support he had from the Iranian nationalist was so overwhelming that he decided to challenge British control Iran’s oil industry by nationalizing the oil fields. The reaction of the West to Mossadeq’s action was one that has contributed immensely to the distrust the state of Iran and its political elites continue to have for the United States and its allies. The Central Intelligence Agency CIA engineered a coup that brought back Mohammed Reza Pahlavi and established the United States a dominant power in the region, supplanting Britain as a major stakeholder in the oil industry.

After he regained power in 1953, the Shah abolished the multiparty system in place and sanctioned a one-party-police-state, as he ‘violently suppressed dissent’. Detecting that Iran was a potential target for the spread of Soviet communism, the United States supported the shah to stay in power. Having assurances for his security, he set out to ‘modernize’ Iran in
what was termed, the ‘White Revolution’ to the displeasure of the mullahs who found his reforms to be too secular. His reforms had economic, political and socio cultural facets as ‘he created a modern economy almost from the scratch, and with it a growing middle class, and extended suffrage and other basic rights to women’.\textsuperscript{39} Despite all the unprecedented reforms, the shah could not avoid the label of a puppet to the West by nationalist; and an oppressor and secularist by the mullahs who had much influence on the religious section of the population. Among his most vocal critics was Khomenei who earlier had to leave the country first for Najaf in Iraq and later to France on exile.

The White Revolution, the Shah’s closeness to the United States and the West, and his intolerance for dissent, subsequently brought about his fall in 1979. Despite the friction between the various ideologies in the country, ‘they were all unified in the overriding objective of bringing down the shah and overthrowing the state’. Obviously, the Marxist Leninist had a very different agenda for Iran’s future to what the Islamist had. With the return of Ayatollah Khomenei, a towering and influential figure who had no single individual rivaling his standing, an Islamic republic was established.

Khomenei had openly argued that ‘Islam and hereditary rule were incompatible’, and Saudi Arabia become obviously threatened with him at the helm of affairs in Iran.\textsuperscript{40} The concern was not only limited to Saudi Arabia since the Islamist takeover shook the entire region as the ‘revolution launched Islam as a new liberating force’ in the eyes of many in the Middle East.\textsuperscript{41} On the world scene, the occupation of the US embassy by some youth in Tehran sent a chilling message to Western capitals of how the new rulers of Iran are sensitive to, would not tolerate any level of interference from the West. The occupation and hostage taking was in response to America allowing the deposed Shah seek medical care within its territory in 1980. The Iranians,
going back to 1953, had a precedent to think the way they thought, notwithstanding the
difference between the two situations. Washington therefore became the ultimate enemy of the
revolution.42

The mullahs set out to reverse most of the liberal and pro-women policies of the shah as
religious doctrine became the basis for rules and regulations. A powerful Revolutionary Guard
was set up as a parallel security force to the Iranian Army, with unwavering loyalty to the
Ayatollah and the revolution. It recruited Shiite youth and activist who propelled the mullahs
to power and to-date, well-resourced sometimes, at the expense of the national army.

As part of its strategy to ‘export the revolution, and encourage resistance to Israel, the regime
propped up and supported Hezbollah and Hamas, two non-state entities in the region who have
over years become prominent and more militant, and continue to contribute immensely to the
power play between the Shiites and Sunnis. With such proxies, Iran is capable of influencing
political and conflict events far from it shores in the Mediterranean-Lebanon and Palestine.
According to Alyssa Fetini, Hasan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah rose to his position after
claiming ‘a spot under the ideological umbrella of Iran’s ayatollah’.43 While Hamas, resulting
from the Syrian conflict, is not close to Iran like before, the group has received huge support
from the mullahs over the years that strengthened it against Israel, and even Fatah-a rival
political opponent. Lately, when Israel was threatening to attack Iran with respect to the nuclear
programme of the latter, one of the main deterrence was the possibility of Hezbollah attacking
the former from the north. Iran has aided Hezbollah with enormous volume of arms that have
allowed the group to confront the invincible military machine of Israel, with audacity, in recent
times.
Very important to this work, however, is Iran’s relations with Syria and Iraq under Ayatollah Khomenei. Iraq, a Sunni-led state at the time engaged in a hostile relation with Iran shortly after Khomenei took office. Saddam invaded its eastern neighbor and began a bloody eight-year war that consumed millions of lives, with Iran suffering the most casualties. This was a departure from what happened under the Shah, who managed Iran’s relations with respect to the border disputes between the two countries—which was very tense. In 1975, the two countries signed the ‘Treaty Concerning the State Frontier and Neighbour Relations between Iran and Iraq’, and also the, ‘Protocol Concerning the Delimitation of the River Frontier between Iran and Iraq’, which helped both countries to have a thaw in relations, and helped improve consensus building on some issues including Kurdish secessionism. With the overthrow of Pahlavi, Saddam did not see it prudent to keep faith with the agreement that had been reach half a decade ago and which favored Iran. Saddam also had the support of the Sunni led states, especially Saudi Arabia and Kuwait (David segal). The United States also found a friend in Saddam as he fought the regime of an anti-American ayatollah. Mari Luomi, however notes that Saddam did not portray the Iran-Iraq as an anti-Shiite war, but rather a struggle against Persians, thereby adopting Arab Nationalist rhetoric not only to keep Iraqi-Shiite loyalty but also to gain the support of the Arab world. After that war, and the first Gulf war in 1991, Saddam became sectarian with his policies after his defeat by the United States in Iraq led to uprisings by the Shiites in the South. He ‘brutally quashed’ the protests with ‘the army and were followed by systematic mass killings and by targeting individual Iraqi Shiites clerics’. During the period, many Shiite political activist sought refuge across the border in Iran. Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki was one of these political refugees. Iran continued to support the Shiites in Iraq until the invasion of the latter and final overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003. Syria, in the days of the shah had no good relations with Iran, resulting from the fact that it is anti-Israeli and anti-American Baathist position was not in tandem with a shah that was a
puppet to the United States, and friendly United Kingdom and Israel. In 1982, when Iraq was at war with Iran, Syria signed an economic accord with the latter and subsequently closed the oil pipeline of the former running through its territory, while it remained as a beacon of diplomatic support for the Ayatollah. The move, away from most Arab countries supporting Iraq during the war, by Syria reflected ‘the rivalry between its form of Baathism and that of Saddam Hussein’. Figure 0.1 shows the convenience with which Iran could support its Shiite proxy Hezbollah as it concretized its alliance with Syria in the face of an existential war with Iraq. Iran sees any opportunity to attack Israel as one that gives its regional credibility, proves it reach and boosts its influence in the region. While majority of Syrians were Sunni Arabs, political control by Alawite-Shiites made the state a comfortable sectarian ally to the mullahs of Iran. With the end of the Cold War and collapse of the Soviet Union, Syria could no longer rely on Soviet arms supply and made it heavily dependent on Iran for its supply and essentially, its security against external threats. The two countries, despite their differences over the support for the Iraqi Baath Party, after 2003, have had warm relations. This has particularly manifested in the civil war raging in Syria currently, on which, much is explained in the next chapter.

Iran under the Ayatollahs, maintained cold relations with the Sunni-led Gulf States that have Shiite populations, and who saw it as a sectarian threat to their regimes. Iraq with support from some Sunni-led states and the United States, and with its military capacity, fought a bloody war with it from 1980 to 1988. The United States became an ‘ultimate enemy’ of Iran after the overthrow of the Shah and subsequent hostage taking by Iranian fundamentalists of US citizens in the US Embassy in Tehran worsened the situation. Iran propped up non-state actors like Hezbollah and Hamas in an effort to resist Israel and export its revolution in the region. Syria
became a major state supporter of Iran after 1979 and largely maintained warm relations even before the Arab Spring.

2.4 The Sunni-led Gulf Monarchs and the Saudi Arabia Factor

The population, sheer land size and the economy of Saudi Arabia surpass all the other gulf monarchies or sheikhdoms. With vast oil reserves and periodic hikes in international oil prices, Saudi Arabia, with the Gulf States has huge foreign reserves that make them afford to challenge their adversaries in the region, particularly Iran. While some of these states, especially Saudi Arabia have gotten some domestic issues like high unemployment to tackle, it is the Shiites populations within their territories and their perceived or actual patron Iran, that occupy them most in recent times or since 1979. These states; Bahrain, Kuwait, United Arab Emirate, Saudi Arabia Qatar and Oman have enjoyed stability without any catastrophe, except for Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990. 

Like other actors in the region in the Sunni-Shiite rivalry, Saudi Arabia as the principal Sunni opponent of Iran with the two holiest shrines of Islam in its territory, has an antecedent and political make-up that drives it actions in the sectarian struggle. The geography that is associated with modern-day Saudi Arabia was the cradle of Islam where the Prophet, Mohammed, started his preaching and still has Mecca and Medina, two cities that form the basis of the religion. The modern foundation of Saudi Arabia, as a state, is traced to the mid-18th century when Mohammed Abd al-Wahab and the great grandfather of the current Saudi dynasty, Mohammed al Saud, decided to merge their spiritual and political influence respectively. Al-Wahab preached puritanical Islam, which he saw to be devoid of the worship of saints and based on literal meaning of the Koran. Al-Saud on the other hand was a leader of a tiny desert community in the peninsula who was brave and well respected. A strong alliance was formed that became a formidable movement with a strong religious conviction that influenced the region immensely-by will or by force. The fervor with which the movement...
swept the peninsula was however temporarily halted by the Ottoman Empire and other domestic rivals.

At the dawn of 20th century, there was a reinvigoration of the movement as the grandson of al-Saud, Abdul Aziz ibn Saud, started conquering territory in the peninsula in 1902 with the capture of Riyadh. By 1926, al-Saud had captured a vast territory that included Mecca and Medina. In 1932, he unified the various towns and cities and named it Saudi Arabia and made himself, king. All along, he had the support of the followers of the 20th century supporters of al-Wahab, who fought ferociously as part of his army. To-date, the Kingdom does not have a constitution, but the Koran binds the king. Since its establishment, Saudi Arabia has been in warm relationship with the United States and the West, albeit not too close to colonial Britain in its early years. The Second World War delayed the Saudis in the production of oil, and initially imported oil from the US, and later in 1943, with the help of the US, established the Arab-American Oil Company, (Aramco) which brought much wealth to the kingdom. The state did not however have a share in Aramco until 1972 when it took 20 percent of the company’s stock. The United States sold arms to the kingdom to ensure its security, especially after the Second World War when communism was becoming highly contagious around the world.

The strengthening of its security and the influence of Wahabist on government, made it conveniently discriminate against its significant Shiite population and other liberals who per Wahabi interpretations of the Koran are not true Muslims. Toby Matthesiesen described the Shiites living in the east, to be living in decaying cities and having high unemployment rate, above the national rate.
The situation of the Shiites worsened after 1979 when Iranian revolution had denounced hereditary kingship to be incompatible with Islam. Saudi Arabia emphasized the sectarian and ethnic divide by employing tougher anti-Shiites discourse and started investing in fundamentalist movement, which contributed to the spread of Salafi Islamist movements. The Kingdom is described later, as ‘one of the foremost exporters of radical [Sunni] Islamic ideology in the world’. The monarchy was obviously concerned about its survival in the face of Iranian quest to export the revolution. The shah was a monarch and the clerics had driven him from his Peacock throne, and the most suspicious group within Saudi Arabia in the eyes of the ruling family, was the kingdoms Shiite population that was closer to Iran in terms of sectarian ideology and geographical proximity. The sensitivity of the Saudi monarchs to events and movements that threatened their political survival is very familiar. As earlier explained, they could not tolerate Pan-Arabist like Nasser and secularist of the Baath Party whose ideals clashed with the Saudi system and ideals. The kingdom, to counter Iranian aggression put the Gulf States together and quickly formed the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

They sponsored radical salafi preachers who propagated hatred against the Shiites over the years. The Gulf States have also harboured charities that sponsor terrorist organization who have salafist ideologies. During the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 80s, these state sponsored the mujahideen in fighting off the communist. Currently, many Western analysis of the region have blamed the fuelling of conflicts, particularly that in Syria on incessant financial and arms support from the Sunni-led Gulf States. Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait have been the three state mostly pointed at in such accusations.

The support Gulf countries give to this hardliners has not had its problems amongst them as recently Qatar and Saudi Arabia had cold relations as result of their support for different
rivaling groups in the fight against Assad. The Saudi often blame Qatar for supporting hardliners like the Muslim Brotherhood and other radicals in Syria. This clash has not happen only in Syria but Egypt as well. For example, Qatar gave significant support to Mohammed Morsi in his one-year rule, while the Saudis sponsored his overthrow—a clear sign of intra-Suni rivalry, which though not the main focus of this work, is worth mentioning.

In the Sunni-Shiite rivalry, Saudi Arabia has led the fight against Iran. Its role is akin to that played by the United States during the Cold war, as it led the West against the Soviet Union and its satellite state. Through the formation of the GCC, the sponsorship of salafist preachers, the propping up of radical movements, and modernization of its security apparatus and its alliance of with the United States, the ruling dynasty has Sunni-led Gulf States to oppose Shiism. This, they do outside their borders against Iran in Iraq and Syria through proxies and, within their territories where they suppress the Shiite citizens and deny them of equal opportunities.

2.5 The United States

The policy of isolation was what defined US foreign policy before and after the First World War. The founding fathers of the new nation preferred this approach in the 18th and 19th centuries, as they did not want to be involved in European affairs. Moreover, many of the forebears of the new state had arrived in North America, to evade turbulent Europe, replete with war and persecution. The United States kept this policy until 1917, when it entered the First World War, after the Germans had threatened its interests and targeted them. President Woodrow Wilson joined the war in Europe.
After the war, Woodrow had candid concerns about how the allied powers in Europe were portioning the Middle East without consideration for the diversities and the intricacies of the region. He was of the view; the locals were treated like ‘pawns and chattels’.

With the US congress still not willing to be entangled in European issues, it voted for the US to stay isolated in its North American nest. The British and the French went ahead with the Sykes-Picot and received a multilateral endorsement from the League of Nations in San Remo, Italy. With the exception of some few US business entities that were present in the Middle East, the state itself was loudly absent.

The Second World War in 1939, between mainly aggressive Germany-Italy-Japan axis and the allied powers, was initially by Britain. The United States eventually joined the war, and afterwards, never became an isolationist state to-date. The US realized how it could not stay aloof in the face of growing technology that made its territory more and more vulnerable to attack, as the Japanese had proven that with the Pearl Harbour attack in 1941. Again, it saw the threat communism posed to its allies and interest after the war, when the Soviets were refusing to withdraw from territories they occupied-Iran was an example.

While the US became interested in many regions including Eastern Europe, the Asian Pacific and Latin America after the war, the Middle East became another unique area of its interest for various reasons.

First, is the region’s abundant oil resource; an important commodity was in huge quantities in the area, and was very essential to every growing economy-US being the best by then. The US felt its presence there would secure its investments in the industry and the transportation of the commodity to fuel its economy and her allies’. Second, the state of Israel needed special
protection from America against its hostile Arab neighbours. With a significant Jewish population in America; Jews in Europe having experienced the horrible holocaust; and a location in a religiously important geography, Israel had gotten the United States attention in the form of funds and arms-this is not achievable in an isolationist foreign policy. Third, is the threat the spread of communism posed against Western interest in the region. Already, the Soviets had to be forced to leave Iran after the war. The US was therefore alarmed of the possibility of the ideology spreading across the region against its economic interest.

The last reason resulted in the deposition of Mohammed Mossadeq by the CIA of the US. The nationalist had nationalized the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company-a move that was not favourable to Western interest. The US with her allies feared his stay in power could prompt similar takeovers in the region. As soon as they found possible he was deposed and the shah, reinstated. With the shah in power, the United States controlled extensively, much of the major decisions in Iran. It equipped the Iranian Army and the internal security agencies with enough weapons to keep the shah in power, as he oppressed the masses and the influential Shiite clerics. This created much hatred among the Iranian populace towards the United States.

During the period, the United States maintained a close relationship with the Gulf States, especially Saudi Arabia where it had almost total control of the oil business through its companies. The Saudi monarchy in turn had access to US arms. In the region, Israel, Iran and the Saudis benefited immensely from US military hardware. This was part of the Truman Doctrine that sought to contain the USSR. The Iran and the Saudis however competed for US attention at the time. States like Egypt, Syria and Iraq were however not in the good books of the United States as, Egypt under Nasser espoused an anti-Western and anti-imperial ideology, and Baathist Syria and Iraq apart from their anti-Western socialist ideologies, were secularist-
an ideology that irritated the Gulf monarchs. For example, Saddam nationalized Iraqi oil resources.

After January 1979, the United States lost an important ally, Iran, to the mullahs; suffered humiliation, as it had to yield to the terms of the ayatollah to get its citizens taken hostage in the US Embassy in Tehran released. A new power had emerged, and it was a Shiite power that was radical, militant and hostile to its interest. What was more worrying, the mullahs promised to export the revolution that brought them to power to the rest of the region. With Shiite populations in many of the states in the Gulf, the United States sought to protect its friends among them. Apart from the Ayatollah quashing its economic interest in the country with the reduction of Iranian oil export to them, he further propped up Shiite group, Hezbollah to threaten Israel. This was of a particular concern to the US owing to the fact that, the Camp David Accord made Egypt officially recognized Israel in 1979. An Iranian proxy in the southern Lebanon meant supplanting the Egyptian threat, (the most formidable enemy of Israel before 1979) with a non-state actor that was not predictable.

The United States imposed sanctions on Iran and equipped its allies in the region against threat from the latter. During the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88) the United States supported Saddam against Iran. It saw a lesser evil in Saddam. While there was no clear winner in that war, Iran was able to push Saddam back after he had first invaded. Saddam’s attempt to capture Kuwait as a compensation for the war, to himself, was met with a US coalition force in 1991 in the Gulf War. After the war, Saddam brutally killed thousands of Shiite in Iraq—a development the US paid no attention to. Iran continued to be an arch-rival to the US throughout the 90s and the latter continue to view it as a sponsor of terrorism and a destabilizing factor in the volatile
region. George Bush Jnr. listed it as part of the ‘axis of evil’-a group of countries that included Iraq, Syria North Korea, Venezuela and Cuba-that the US saw dangerous to international peace. In the 2000s, the United States while battling terrorism in a ‘global war’ was concerned about Iran’s nuclear programme. While Iran insisted that, the programme was for peaceful purposes and it reserved the right to pursue it, the US and, more radically, Israel thought Iran plans to obtain a nuclear bomb. Pakistan, a Muslim state, has nuclear weapons, however the United States and its allies consider that tool in the hands of the ayatollahs, as very dangerous to the their interest in the region. Upon the assumption of office, Barack Obama, the United States President after George Bush Jnr., in 2009 sought to sit Iran down and negotiate with other international stakeholders. After several years of overtures and negotiations, in mid-2015, Iran finally reached a preliminary deal with the US and other powers, to lead to a final deal that would halt move towards achieving the enviable feat of obtaining a nuclear bomb-Israel and the Sunni-led states were not so happy.

The United States of America and its allies, particularly Britain, from the above has been an ardent supporter of Sunni-led states in the Middle East without regard to how they treat their Shiite minorities. The Saudis have benefitted immensely from US arms sales all along and, especially since 1979. The invasion of Iraq by the United State ended Saddam’s Sunni-led dictatorship and led to the emergence of Shiite control of the state. US however continued to be antagonistic towards Syria under the Assads, while the Alawi-Shiite led government depended on Russia for it weapon supply, even as it fought a civil war. Chapter 3 explains how the US relationship policy in the region affects the sectarian divide in the entire Middle East in general, and Iraq and Syria in particular.
2.6 Soviet Union and Russia

It was the Bolsheviks, who leaked the secret deal between Sykes and Picot to the Arabians to discover how the European powers had deceived and denied them of their independence. After the First World War, the communist revolutionaries had partly inspired nationalism in the Arab world with that exposure of the Europeans colonialists. The colonialist quenched brutally, the uprisings that were a corollary, particularly in Egypt, Syria and Iraq in the 1920s. According to Fred Halliday of the Middle East Research and Information Project: *By the mid-1920s, the prospect of social upheaval in the Middle East receded and the USSR was forced to come to terms with the trio of reconstituted nationalist states on its southern frontier. Amanullah in Afghanistan, Reza Khan in Iran, and Kemal Ataturk in Turkey blocked the way to southern expansion of the Bolsheviks revolution, leaving British imperialism secure in its position from Calcutta to Cairo.*

This restraint on Soviet influence in the region general limited it role in Middle East politics in the interwar period.

After the Second World War, the early event that started the Cold War did not happen in Europe but in Iran, where the Soviets were reluctant to abandon northern portion of the state. As has been explained earlier, it took much diplomatic pressure to force the communist out of the country. The Tudeh (Iranian communist) had to be on the defensive after Soviet exit from the state, as the Western powers had a pro-Western shah, Mohammed Pahlavi. In 1955 and onwards, the USSR as part of its Cold War politics found a ‘promising start and fertile grounds’ in Syria and Egypt; the latter, because of its political and cultural prominence in the Arab setting and the former, as a result of its vulnerability with the Israeli threat. As a result, Egypt and Syria received massive military and economic support from the Cold War superpower. Egypt had economic aid to build the Aswan Dam, a landmark project (SPA). Until Anwar Sadat took over the control of Egypt and his subsequent recognition of Israel, when the country tilted
to the west, it continued to enjoy Soviet support. Syria has however continued to be close to Moscow even after the fall of communism as it kept resisting Western influence and refused to recognize Israel. Syria’s loyalty has been rewarded by Russia in the raging civil war, as its keeps receiving arms from Russia. All Security Council sanctions targeted at Syria as a result of civil war were vetoed by Russia.

After the 1979 Iranian revolution, the Soviets could not keep any close relations with it as the revolutionaries in principle abhorred any external interference in Iranian affairs—the reason the shah had to leave. While the USSR, at the early stage of the Iran-Iraq war, supplied arms to both countries, they later shifted much of their attention to Saddam—a leader they were aligned with, ideologically. Shahram Chubin argues that, the Iranian regime had proven ‘less brittle and more tenacious than expected, making its control by any outside power difficult’. After the Cold War Tehran and Moscow had some interests clashing in central Asia, as both countries sought to influence the newly independent states in the region. States like Azerbaijan had significant Shiite populations, which Iranian mullahs wanted to bring under their orbit. Russia also sought to assert itself as the successor of Soviet influence of the geography.

In 2002, when it became apparent, Iran was moving fast with its nuclear programme, Russia perceived it as a security threat that can embolden the latter in its will to influence central Asia, albeit not so alarmed as Israel and the West. Russia subsequently supported UNSC sanctions against Iran. It however keeps selling arms to Iran.

All the while, Russia did not have any significant influence on the Gulf Monarchs since United States influenced the region immensely with its military presence and arms supplies. After the Cold War, only Syria, Iraq and Libya were still under some relative influence of Russia. Syria
still provided a naval base for the Russians—the only one in the Mediterranean—and Iraq after falling out with the US after the Gulf War, had to rely on Soviet support.

2.7 The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

From the establishment of the Jewish state in 1948, through US establishment of military bases in the Gulf, to the invasion Iraq in 2003, many events are attributed to the rise of Jihadi terrorism in the Middle East and beyond. Farhad Arian as stated in chapter one, gave historical, socio-cultural, political and ideological narratives to have been widely accepted as the motivation for jihadi terrorism’s rise.\(^{64}\) It is no hidden fact that Osama bin Laden the ‘champion’ of international terrorism had serious, and even militant reservations about the stationing of US forces in Saudi Arabia—a development he considered to be very inimical to a state where the two holiest shrines in Islam are located. Already, he had supported the Mujahideen in Afghanistan to fight and repel the invasion of communist-atheist-the Soviet Union. In the Iraq and Syria conflicts, a powerful jihadi-terrorist force has emerged in the name of Islamic state of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

ISIS started as al-Qaeda in Iraq after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and virtual chaotic state of Iraq, which made it a safe haven for the group to establish its branch. The brutal nature of its operations was so much worrying that bin Laden had to express his concern with its first leader, Abu Musab-al Zarqawi. The United States and Iraqi forces subsequently took care of al-Zarqawi and his successors until Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, its current leader was elected on 16 May 2010. By this time, the group’s name had changed to Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). He established his control by being more violent and adaptive to changing circumstances in the sectarian mistrust and tensions in the country. He even became bolder with the withdrawal of US forces in 2011, since the relatively less formidable Iraqi army could be outmanoeuvred.
By 2013, al Baghdadi decided to send troops to Syria to fight Alawi-Shiite al-Assad and to take advantage of the unrest to expand his influence in the region. It was an opportunity worth exploiting. The addition of a new area to his jihadi struggle necessitated a corresponding change of name, and ISIS was the result. Not long after he and his forces had entered Syria had he gained the notoriety as the most brutal of the aggressive and sophisticated group of all the groups fighting Assad. Other jihadi groups and the recognized Free Syrian Army soon felt the aggression of ISIS. The al-Nusra Front, also of al-Qaeda, had several clashes with ISIS and later had to seek settlement with the global leader of the mother group, Ayman al Zawahri whose intervention, ISIS rejected and established itself as independent of al-Qaeda. Al-Baghdadi did not agree with Zawahri that he had no business going to Syria when the scope of its operations should be in Iraq. By late June 2014, ISIS had taken control of Raqqa in Syria and established a base there, and launched a surprise attack in Iraq, taking and took its second most populous city Mosul. The blitzkrieg-like nature with which ISIS swept western Iraq took the world by surprise. It was reported that western intelligence did not know anything about it.

Not long after, he stood at the balcony of a popular mosque in Mosul and renamed ISIS, Islamic State.

The ideas and mode of operations of ISIS is however of much essence to this research than the chronology of its rise. ISIS sees the use of excessive violence and calculated brutality as a means to instil fear and command obedience in and from the populations in the areas it controls. To this end, it has carried many indiscriminate bombings and slaughter, which does not differentiate between civilians and combatants. As Dong Manyuan puts it, ‘[from] 2004 to the end of August 2014, the majority of terrorist attacks against civilians occurred on the borders of Iraq and were initiated by the newly renamed Islamic State’. More than half of terrorist attacks against civilians in Syria have also originated from ISIS. Again, ISIS is vehemently
anti-Shiite and like al-Qaeda, sees Shiite as heretics. This has resulted in frequent bombings of
Shiite mosques and pilgrims in Iraq by the group. These events are so common and rampant
that it has become a cliché in international news outlets to report on them. Its hatred for the
Shiites has made it relatively popular with Sunni tribes in Iraq and Syria, especially in these
times of sectarian conflicts. The group is also anti-Western. This has exhibited in the cold-
blooded executions of Western civilians it takes hostage. It has also made pronouncements and
issued orders for its sympathizers in the west to launch attacks in states they reside. ISIS further
engages in mass slaughter of captured combatants and minority religions’ adherents who refuse
to convert to Islam. Women from minority groups are made sex slaves. The most impacting
strategy of ISIS is its use of information technology and social media in its propaganda. The
group has been able to recruit citizens from the west through the internet and have used the
same medium to justify almost all its actions with Koranic interpretations. Financially, ISIS
has been very efficient in raising funds to sponsor its activities. Apart from receiving support
from the Gulf States, the group has looted banks in areas they take; sold out antiques stolen
from museums and archaeological sites; and operated oil wells and sold produce. These
activities have been the lifeline for the group. It is unprecedented of any terrorist group in recent
history.

The exploitation of ISIS of the sectarian divide in Iraq and Syria to establish itself is very
significant. As a convenient move, the group has been in alliance with former Baath
functionaries and forces that had been taken out of office and, had their armies disbanded after
the overthrow of Saddam and the subsequent de-Baathification of the state. The Baathist are
generally Sunnis and see ISIS as an enemy of an enemy. Sunni tribes in both Iraq and Syria
that have been sidelined by Shiite regimes in both countries have variably sympathized with
ISIS.
The group’s ability to capture and hold territory, finance itself and engage in activities that make international news, has made it a strong non state actor, who have contributed immensely to the destabilization of Syria and Iraq, and the macabre nature of the sectarian divide in both countries. The next chapter further explains ISIS role in the in the conflict as it continue its brutality and continue to capture territory across Iraq and Syria.

Events of the First World War led to the partitioning of the heart of the Middle East that placed different religious groups and sects under common administration. This has led much friction between and among these groups, the most volatile of which is the Sunni-Shiite conflicts. In these conflicts are different state, non-state, regional and international actors and dynamics, which contribute in various ways to fuel them. State actors in the conflicts are Iran, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Syria and other states in the region. Other state actors include the United States and Russia whose interests in the region and how the pursue them; draw them into the Sunni-Shiite identity clashes. Non-state actors like Hezbollah and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria have become so potent in the sectarian strife that their actions are more far-reaching than the state actors are.
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CHAPTER THREE

THE IRAQ AND SYRIA CRISES

3.0 Introduction

This chapter seeks to look at the Sunni-Shiite rivalry with emphasis on the crises in Iraq and Syria. Iraq would be examined from the 2003 US invasion through the transitional period to the current sectarian friction that is impeding its fight against ISIS. The actors and factors would be discussed together with their roles in the conflict. The Shiite militias, Sunni extremists, former Baath Party functionaries are examples of Iraqi groups discussed in this chapter. The Roles of Ayatollah Ali Sistani, Moqtada Sadr, Nouri al-Maliki in the conflict are also discussed and show the link between their actions and the instability in Iraq. Similarly, the Syrian conflict and the roles of actors including Bashar al-Assad, and leadership of the various groups since the 2011 protests are discussed. Also in the chapter is how the sectarian roles of Saudi Arabia and Iran in both conflicts affect the stability of the countries in question. The role of the United States and Russia, and their direct ramifications on the two conflicts is explained further in this chapter. At the end of the chapter, the internal dynamics together with the role of the external nuance of both conflicts should be understood in elucidating their sectarian nature.

3.1 The US Invasion of Iraq

When George Bush Jnr. mounted an aircraft carrier in San Diego, California, and gave a speech under the banner with the inscription, ‘Mission Accomplished’, just three months after the invasion of Iraq, he was to reaffirm his belief before the invasion that, Iraq was going to be a ‘sprint’. However, that showmanship turned out to be a comic relief in preparation for a more serious sectarian insurgency that was to kill more American soldiers and Iraqi civilians than the actual invasion in the next eight years.\(^1\) The invasion turned out to be a ‘marathon’ that would heighten sectarian divisions in the country. Which was also to spark off Islamic
militancy across the world, give birth to ISIS and all that manifested in upsurge in Sunni-Shiite rivalry. That is, the job to depose Saddam Hussein, a long time dictator was done; but the idea to keep Iraq in one piece with a functional democracy was nowhere near realization.²

The Americans did not take much time to reach Bagdad. US decided to invade, and within three months, had control of almost all of Iraq; its airspace, territorial waters and the landmass, except for some insignificant pockets of Baathist resistance. The United States, in its bid to ensure orderly transfer of power, at least in its own terms, created a transitional authority headed by Paul Bremer III. With vast oil resource and power-conscious neighbours, the United States needed to secure Iraq. In the meantime, the Weapons of Mass destruction, which became the sine qua non for the invasion were not found, nor had any reasonable link been drawn between Saddam and al-Qaeda.³

The Coalition Provisional Administration (CPA), among its policies, decided to disband the whole of the Iraqi army and purge the bureaucracy of Saddam loyalists.⁴ The latter, popularly labelled as debaathification policy, was to clear the Iraqi system of possible saboteurs who, stemming from their loyalty to Saddam, could disrupt the effectiveness of Bremer’s administration. This decision turned out to be self-defeating, as the sacked and persecuted bureaucrat would later ally with anti-American extremist and sabotage the transition anyway. The dissolution of the army was also very troubling since it created a dangerous vacuum. The dissolution therefore left security in the hands of the American forces who did not know the Iraqi terrain well enough to secure it from what was to come—a deadly insurgency. More so, the numbers of the US forces were not enough to exercise effective control on the ground. Important to this study is how the disbanding of soldiers and the concurrent purge of the bureaucracy aggravated the sectarian divide in the country and the sub-region. The nature of
the Iraqi society, even in the days of the British colonialist, was such that the minority Sunnis was deliberately made to dominate the security forces as a measure to subjugate or more liberally, balance the influence of the Shiite majority. Saddam could not change that, as he benefitted from it himself-being a Sunni. The disbanding of the armed forces meant, putting many Sunnis out of work. The response was to be very devastating.

Not long after the invasion, the Iraqis expressed dissatisfaction with the CPA, and as a corollary wanted them out of their country. A quantitative research carried at the time discovered that many Iraqis felt the administration was not responsive to their needs, they wanted the US-led coalition out of the country as, they viewed them as occupiers and not liberators; and they generally felt cheated by the process. By August 2003, there was an unexpected intensification of insurgency against the coalition forces, who hitherto thought they would have had a warm reception from the Iraqis. Worst, was the murder in Najaf, of an influential Shiite ayatollah with 125 others in a car bomb. While the capture of Saddam in December that year was a sign of a symbolic end of his regime, and was a feather in the cap of the coalition force, sectarian violence continued unabated with another multiple murder of about 140 Shiite pilgrims in the holy city of Karbala. These set the tone of the Sunni-Shiite divide violence that was to come. The suicide bombings by Sunni extremists and collaborators from the fallen regime brought about a fierce response from the Mahdi Army. The Mahdi Army is a paramilitary force led by Moqtada Sadr, a junior Shiite cleric who had inherited the respect and significant following of his ayatollah father who was executed by Saddam in the 80s. The Mahdi Army engaged in many retaliatory atrocities that would subsequently lead to a civil war in 2006. AQI under Abu Musab al-Zarqawi kept using suicide bombers to target Shiite areas and elsewhere.
The interim administration, realizing the growing sectarian gulf between the two major groups in Iraq, opted to create a form of governance that would avoid the marginalization of minority groups. The CPA proposed a system of regional caucus governance to the displeasure of Ayatollah Sistani who wanted direct elections. The Shiite populations led by Sistani wanted a democracy based ‘one man one vote’. Increasing unemployment and widespread terrorist attacks and crime have forced many Iraqis to depend on sectarian based organizations for protection. This therefore enhanced the role of religious leaders especially among the Shiites. Ayatollah Ali Sistani is the senior most of Iraq’s Shiite clerics who commands massive following and respect within the sect. Originally born in Iran, he moved to the spiritual city of Najaf, Iraq, to study as a cleric. The Ayatollah increasingly played important political roles after the invasion of Iraq. Despite being a conservative religion, he had largely become a moderating factor in the sectarian strife of the country. His call for a representative democracy for Iraqis to choose their own leader was widely accepted especially, among the Shiite majority population that was naturally going to benefit from the process.

Amid the escalating violence in 2005, there were elections to form the Transitional National Assembly that was later led by a Shiite Prime Minister and a Kurdish ceremonial president. Later, representatives of the Shiite and Kurdish communities approved a draft constitution that met opposition from the Sunnis. The country endorsed the constitution through a referendum and amidst Sunni protest.

The US invasion of Iraq and the actions of the Coalition Provisional Authority sparked a Sunni-Shiite friction that has haunted the stability of the country since 2003. The invasion led to Shiite assertiveness and Sunni paranoia that assumed a macabre nature not seen for decades in the country and the sub-region. While Saddam variably played the sectarian card to keep himself
in power and sometimes did so brutally, Iraq was generally stable with adequate internal security. His removal however unleashed a Sunni-Shiite drift that led to a bloody civil war and, accounted for the continuous instability.

3.2 The Civil War

In 2006, the violence in Iraq got out of hand and resulted in the loss of several lives, especially in Baghdad, Falluja and Shiite pilgrim centres of Karbala and Najaf. The non-conventional attacks, which were often suicide-bombing in nature, became more difficult to handle.

The Iraq civil war began with the bombing of the important Shiite Al-Askariya mosque in February 2006. The bombing meant an attack on Shiism. The retaliation was massive and devastating with the Mahdi Army leading the way. There were allegations of the group carried out a calculated murder of Sunnis on large scale in religiously mixed neighbourhoods.\(^\text{13}\) There were instances when unidentified gunmen stopped traffic and separated Sunnis from Shiite and shot them. The Sunni extremists responded with more car bombs in Shiite communities, and abducted Shiites who they murdered eventually.\(^\text{14}\)

Attempts by the United States to quell the violence resulted in civilian casualties, and did not thaw the violence that aggravated by the day. This increased the already bad anti-US sentiments among the Iraqis. Sunni politicians blamed their Shiite counterparts for supporting militias carrying out ethnic cleansing, and further blamed the security forces for serving as tools for the purpose.

The civil war, resulted in more civilian casualties and infrastructural devastation, and worsened Iraq’s sectarian divide and reduced the prospect for a political solution. In 2007, putting
President Bush increased in the numbers of US forces and brought in a new commander, General David Petraeus.\textsuperscript{15} Petraeus’ strategy involved cooperation with Sunni tribal leaders. This granted them some level of control in their communities. The General was able to change the tide of the conflicts against Sunni insurgents and AQI; and by late 2007 put them on the defensive.\textsuperscript{16} The debaathification policy implemented was reversed and former Sunni public servants were brought into the system. These changes proved effective, as the widespread sabotage and killings were drastically reduced.

Ayatollah Ali Sistani, also influenced Shiite brigades that were aggravating the situation. His brand of religious tolerance was, however, opposed by Moqtada Sadr. The Mahdi Army continued to attack Sunni fighters and coalition forces unabated. The action of the Sadrist was very difficult to deal with, as they portrayed themselves as protectors of the Shiite majority in Iraq. Ayatollah Sistani did not preach hatred against the Sunnis and sounded more nationalist in his approach to issues. Sadr was more open about the differences of the two sectarian identities. He sometimes blamed Sistani for doing nothing significant to oppose Saddam’s brutal oppression of the Shiites during the late ruler’s days.\textsuperscript{17} That is, while Sistani was no puppet of the coalition forces, the Sadrist did not consider him assertive enough against the occupation and Sunni aggression. Later in 2008, Nouri al-Maliki, in a bold step that won praises from the West, ordered a crackdown on the Mahdi Army in the south. Being a Shiite Prime Minister and leading a Shiite government, Maliki’s resolve against Sadr was very significant towards the peace process. Subsequently, the coalition forces begun handing over the control of some provinces that are Sunni dominated to the central government-this was unthinkable few years before then.
### 3.3 Iran’s Influence on Iraq

Upon the fall of the Saddam regime in 2003, Iran’s worst enemy in the region was no more. The additional gift of that invasion was the supplanting of the fallen Baathist regime by its Shiite majority population and politicians. Iran simply had a huge influence on many of the Shiite elites who became heir apparent to the Iraqi ‘thrown’. Many of them had sought refuge in its territory during Saddam’s oppressive rule that did not tolerate dissent. The only problem Iran faced was the Sistani factor. Ayatollah Ali Sistani, unlike his peers in Iran, did not believe in the idea of clerics playing overt political roles in the state. He belonged to the ‘quietist’ school of thought that advocated apolitical clerical life.

Iran on the other hand has had two senior clerics, Ayatollahs Khomeini and Khamenei that had assumed the role of supreme leaders of the state since the 1979 revolution that established an Islamic state in the country. This difference between Sistani and the Iraqi regime is what may have accounted for Sadr’s closer ties with Iran.\(^{18}\) It also did not significantly reduce Iran’s role in Iraq. In early 2008, the Iranian hardliner president, Mahmoud Amadinejad visited Iraq and met Maliki. The visit was not only symbolic because Iran exercised significant influence on many Shiite groups operating in the country.

Sunni-led states in the region looked on with much concern as they became increasingly alarmed with Iraq falling under the influence of Iran. The Saudis became very sensitive to the change in the power balance in the region after the deposition of Saddam. This influence coupled with Iran’s aggressive nuclear programme, was not only a concern for Saudi Arabia and the Sunni-led Gulf States, but their powerful Western ally, the United States of America as well. However, the influence Iran had on the Shiite politicians and militias, as well as its
controversial nuclear programme made these states sit on tenterhooks. Iran’s influence on Sadr, was substantiated when Sadr went on a self-imposed exile in Iran.

Iran’s actions and influence within the borders of its western neighbour is far reaching, and are largely a result of shared sectarian identity. This has however become detrimental to the stability of Iraq for many reasons. Iran’s support for Shiite militias over the years in its neighbour’s territory, has adversely affected its stability. These militias came up in the early days after Saddam’s overthrow with the aim of pushing a sectarian agenda of asserting Shiite revival in the country. While some claim to have the objective of protecting Shiite communities against Sunni extremist-itself sectarian-they have exacerbated the volatile situation of the country over time. Groups such as the Mahdi Army have engaged in sectarian killings in the days of the civil war, which continue to haunt the stability of Iraq today. Iran continues to prop up these groups to maintain its influence in Iraq—a cause for instability. Sunni states as a corollary had sometimes referred to Nouri al-Maliki as a puppet.

3.4 Resurgence of Sectarianism and the fall of Maliki

After the 2010 elections in Iraq, it took nine months to form a government. This was due to disagreements on which ethnic group should occupy key ministerial positions, especially those of defence and interior. The following year, the United States began withdrawing its armed forces from Iraq. This development increased once again, the suicide bombings across the country. Shiite pilgrims and mosques became common targets for ISI and other jihadi groups. A day in August, that year, Sunni extremists apparently coordinated 40 attacks. Sadr returned to Iraq that same year.
Of much concern, was the confusion and blame game that plagued the political leadership in Baghdad. Prime Maliki minister Nouri Maliki blamed the surge in sectarian attacks on Shiite targets on some senior Sunni politicians in Bagdad. He accused the Sunni Vice-president Tariq al-Hashemi of running death squad to disrupt Iraq’s stability. AL-Hashemi fled and took refuge in the northern autonomous region of Kurdistan. In 2012, al-Hashemi was sentenced to death by an Iraqi court in absentia, a trial many Sunni had viewed as a resuscitation of a Shiite antagonism against them. Three months later Sunnis staged massive rallies across Iraq to protest what they saw as persecution and marginalisation by the Shiite majority.

By 2013, there was a clear indication sectarian violence in Iraq was descending to the high levels of 2008 with rampant attacks from both sects. The government was not doing much anything to improve the situation. In April that year, government forces had entered a Sunni anti-government protest camp and, in the process, killed about 50 protesters. A jailbreak in the middle of the year by insurgents brought into the Iraqi society tough bred extremists who fuelled the already increasing gulf between the two sects. Other minorities including Christians could not evade the violence as churches came under extremists’ attacks. The UN, by the close of the year had put the civilian death toll of 2013 at 7,157. By early 2014, Sunni extremists had taken control of Sunni bastions of Ramadi and Falluja. The situation in Iraq was chaotic. While some blamed the development on what they saw as a premature withdrawal of Iraqi forces, others believed the situation in Iraq was expected because of its sectarian make-up. Some in the latter group further suggested a breakup of the State into independent sectarian states as a future solution to the crisis.

After the 2014 general elections, Maliki did not obtain a majority with his coalition to form a government. With increasing violence and ISIS surprise capture of Mosul, Maliki came under
increasing pressure to step down for a more moderate candidate to take over. While he remained obstinate and hung on to power, the momentum of the pressure on him to step down increased from the West, Sistani and more interestingly, Iran. There was a consensus that every section of the Iraqi society must be on board in order to fight ISIS decisively. The West had hinged its arms supply on the Iraqi government forces to a change in leadership that should be all inclusive. By September 2014, Haider al-Abad, a Shiite had replaced Maliki and formed a broad-based government that included Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds.

This unity government has not stopped the frequent attacks on Shiite mosques. Nor stopped the ISIS onslaught as the group keep expanding its territories despite the US and coalition airstrikes, and Iraqi government forces, Kurdish forces, Shiite militia and Iranian forces facing it on the ground. The unity government has not also been able to stop the excesses of pro-government fighters especially the Shiite brigades in Sunni territories. The presence of Iran on the ground in Iraq has hindered the full cooperation from Sunni-led states in the coalition airstrikes in the country. To them, their efforts would only inure to the benefit of their arch-rival in the region, Iran, just as the 2003 invasion had accomplished.

3.5 Flashback on Syria

Syria has had multi-religious and multi-sectarian population since its formation as state. The Sykes Picot agreement, as has been discussed in the previous chapter paid little or no attention to these diversities when the British and the French were dividing the region. The French made the minority groups of the state-the Druze, Alawite and Christian-powerful to counter the majority and elite Sunni population. They were autonomy over their territories and they had different laws. For instance, the Druze and Alawite states had greater autonomy within Syria at the time, with laws that fitted their peculiar cultures. Subsequently, this autonomy was
limited as the French united the state, but with a motive to weaken Sunni domination. This was achieved by a careful designation that ensured the domination of the security forces by the Shiite Alawite people in the state. The deliberate recruiting of the minority Alawite population in the military—an important tool of control by the colonial forces—that helped the French keep Sunni dissidents at bay. The majority Sunni dominated the bureaucracy and the middle class.

At independence in 1946, the Sunni still dominated the political elites while the minority held strategic institutions. The multiplicity of religion, sectarianism and ethnicity of the Syrian society brought about series of coups and counter coups, and a period of turmoil that ended with the Baath Party capturing power in 1963.

In 1970 the Alawite members of the Baath Party led by Hafez al-Assad, a defence minister in charge of an Alawite dominated national army, seized power to begin a long rule that would bring Bashar al-Assad to power after his death. Under the elder Assad the Alawite who had faced oppression for centuries before the beginning of colonial control of the region, had not only dominated the military through the machinations of the Europeans but also, become the political masters as well. This was not easy as Hafez al-Assad had to court the support of the Sunni elite through convenient arrangements that gave them some level of authority over their enterprises. He was able to get the attention of other minority groups, as they considered a rule by an individual from the Alawite minority much safer than that from the majority Sunni. He could however not avoid opposition from the Muslim Brotherhood and other groups who resented his rule on both sectarian and ideological basis. For instance, the Muslim Brotherhood did not want to have anything to do with the idea of secularism as espoused by the Baath Party. This opposition became macabre, as assassination attempts at Hafez Assad became a concern.
for the regime. After one serious attempt on his life failed, Assad ordered a brutal response, which is described in chapter two of this study.

Hafez, well aware of the irritation that the Israeli occupation of Arab lands brings to the Arabs in Syria and elsewhere, he engaged in frequent anti-Israeli rhetoric that had audience transcending sectarian and ethnic lines in Syria. He even engaged in open conflict with the Jewish State. The Arab Israeli conflict therefore became a means with which Assad maintained his power albeit not the only leader to do so in the region.

The military supply from the Soviet Union and later Iran, after the revolution, also became one of the pillars the regime. This was very important since the anti-Western posture of the regime under Baath ideologies did not allow it obtain weapons from West. The Soviet Union, later, Russia and Iran under the mullahs, themselves anti-westerners, saw the need to equip Assad to keep his power. He in turn, gave them a footing in the Middle East. Iran needed him to access Hezbollah in Lebanon and sideline Saddam, while the Soviets and later, Russia did so to maintain its presence in the Mediterranean and the region as a whole. It kept its naval base in the Syrian port city of Tartus—the only, in the Mediterranean. The security of Syria was therefore an issue of strategic importance to the two international and regional powers.

3.6 Bashar al- Assad and the Arab Spring

Bashar al-Assad took over power in 2000; many saw him as a reformist, considering his education in the West as a medical doctor. More so, he took a wife who was a British citizen. Not long after, the hardliners in government had their way as the young, composed leader yielded to their quest to maintain the status quo. Bashar therefore engaged in minimal reforms that left much of the characteristics of the regime intact.22 The military was still dominated by
the Alawite minority; the state remained a police state; relations with the West were still the same-bad; and Assad kept a close relationship with Iran.

In 2011, in the wake of the Arab Spring, Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak of Tunisia and Egypt respectively, stepped down. Abdullah Saleh, the Yemeni leader, hanged on, and would require enormous pressure from regional and international actors, before stepping down. The Arab monarchs largely used overwhelming force and propaganda to quench the Arab Spring fervor within their territories. The fact that most of the protesters were Shiites made them easy targets for the sheikhs. Gadafi, kept calling the opposition ‘rats’ till he was finally murdered in October, 2011. Iraq with its Shiite dominated democracy was not in anticipation of the spring affecting it.

The Arab Spring in Syria, contrary its sectarian origins, according to Jackson Diehl, the Arab Spring caught up with Syria when fifteen school boys from an influential Sunni family in Syria scribbled anti-regime slogans on walls in Daara.23 The torture of the boys by Atef Najib, an Alawite cousin of Assad and head of local security, after pleas for their release by powerful Sunni tribesmen and a sheikh fell on deaf ears, was the root of the unrest that has consumed tens of thousands of Syrian citizens.24 On the 18th of March when the family of the boys and local clerics marched to the local governor for their release, the security forces opened fire and killed at least four.25 As a reaction protesters burned the office of the local governor marked the beginning of the uprising. Assad tried to water down the tensions by giving a speech on some conciliatory measures, freeing dozens of prisoners, lifting the notorious state of emergency that had been in place for over 40 years and dissolving government. These were significant, considering the fact that they all happened within a single month. The next two months in May, Assad declared a general amnesty for all political prisoners.26
All the carrots Assad gave could not tame the protesters’ resolve to rise against the regime like their Arab brothers had done in the region.\textsuperscript{27} The regime was obstinate as it used significant force to clamp down on protesters. It treated the protest as mere pockets of demonstrations in some cities that were not uncommon in Western capitals. Sooner, the regime came to realize how the protests were becoming widespread and frequent in many Sunni dominated areas. It had also turned more violent and, in June, the regime was reporting the death of over a hundred of its army officers. While it is a fact that the Sunni groups in Syria, especially, the Muslim brotherhood, had always opposed the rule of the Assads and, sometimes been at the receiving end of brutal crackdowns, the regime in this case had been very cynical towards the protest and had employed force enormously, in quelling it. The crackdown in Hama by the security forces that led to the death of many was particularly a message to the protesters that Assad was ready to do anything to stay in power.

By October 2011, Syrian exiles and some internal elements had formed the Syrian National Council, (SNC) to make available an official body that would give a face to the Syrian opposition elements-it was led by Muslim Brotherhood members.\textsuperscript{28} This was also to court the attention of the west, which wanted a more organized opposition as a catalyst to strengthen their opposition to Assad, as they sanctioned his government and exerted diplomatic pressure on his state sponsors.\textsuperscript{29} The presence of a recognized opposition also provided an alternative government and a possibility of stability, should Assad exit or booted out. On the ground however, was the Free Syrian Army (FSA) engaging the Assad forces in the real fighting. The latter body consisted of several community brigades that were organized upon the militarization of the struggle and brutalities by government forces, to protect their communities. Many of the groups under the FSA do not take the SNC serious in
the struggle, as they considered them exiles with insatiable want of power, and who did not know the domestic problems of the country. That was true.

By December of the first year of the conflict, extreme elements of the Syrian Arab Spring had announced their significance in the conflict through a twin suicide bombing that killed 44 in Damascus. That was a blow to the regime that had, until then, protected the capital with an eagle eye. The event further sent a message to western interests in the region about how jihadists are assuming the role of a supposed moderate opposition. By February the second year, Assad intensified his crackdown by more aerial bombardment of rebel strongholds, particularly in the city of Homs.

Later, when Assad he saw the intensity of the problem and increasing pressure from regional and international actors, especially the West and its allies in the region, Assad decided to sit with the opposition and was open to political reforms. Assad’s seemingly positive overtures could not calm protests as they kept swelling every Friday, after prayer from the mosques in Sunni dominated towns and cities of the country. The negotiations in Europe did not yield any good result.

The reaction of Assad and the Syrian regime has led to the current instability in the country. By adopting sectarian tactics to discredit the opposition and win over other minorities to his side, Assad had used the Sunni-Shiite divide in the region to justify his use of overwhelming force against them. While Assad was successful with the exploitation of the sectarian differences in the country to stay in power-something Gadafi, Mubarak, Ben Ali and Saleh could not do-that has come at the cost of any near-future stability in the country. It would be
complicated to find Syria in its pre-Arab Spring revolution state any time soon. Some envisage the country subsequently becoming a failed state.

3.7 Russia’s Role in Syria

Bashar al-Assad has benefitted immensely from the strategic partners his father had kept, since the beginning of the unrest in the country, especially when it got militarised and increasingly sectarian. Russia has been the main international supporter of the Bashar al-Assad regime aside Iran (a regional player) with China playing a far lesser role in the diplomatic level. Russia has kept its naval base there and continued to supply arms to the regime. It has vetoed all United Nations Security Resolutions targeted at the Syrian government with China. Russia maintained that the conflict must be resolved politically and diplomatically, and vehemently opposed regime change. China shares a similar view. Both countries have used the chaos in Libya after they have cooperated with the west to allow a UNSC sanctioned airstrikes by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Putin has also argued that, the radical and savage nature of some opposition members would make any power transfer sanctioned with force, a dangerous move. He cited a video showing one rebel biting into the lungs of a captured loyalist of the government as a case in point. The presence of terrorists organizations affiliated with al-Qaeda and the rise of ISIS have further enhanced the argument advanced by pro-Assad states who have opposed UNSC sanctions later in the conflict. Assad’s portrayal as the defender of the minority groups of in Syria, have also made the position of his supporters somewhat credible to some politicians and actors, even in the West. In 2014 a US senior politician wrote a letter to Assad, commending him for his protection of Christians in Syria.

One of the significant actions of Russia that also saved a face and protected Assad from possible attack from the United States, was the deal it brokered to have the Syrian government surrender
it stockpile of chemical weapons, after it had apparently breached a red line that was given by President Obama not to use them in the conflict. The deal helped Assad and the regime to hang on to power against all odds. Putin has also reluctantly cooperated with the West and other interests in the region, as he withheld the supply of the SAM 300 air defence system from Syria. The state of the art surface-to-air missile, which has the capability to protect Syria against the most sophisticated air attacks, was ordered by the regime before the conflict. However, Russia had to hold on to its delivery as other powers expressed their concerns. At some stage in the conflict, there were reports that Russia had its technical advisors on the ground delivering their services to the regime in the conflict. This has however not gained much traction compared to the role of Hezbollah and Iran’s Revolutionary Guard.

While Russia has not overtly taken a sectarian side to the conflict, its continuous support of the regime diplomatically and militarily, as well as its close ties with Iran largely make it an ally of the Shiite side of Syrians sectarian civil war, which is a cause for instability in the region. While Russia’s support of Alwite-Shiite led government in Syria, has not been informed by conscious sectarian considerations, it has aided the Assad regime to cling on to power in the face of open resistance from the majority Sunnis. Its aid to Syria has immensely contributed to Assad’s sectarian agenda that has destabilized that state and pushed it to the edge of a failed state status. Much of the weaponry used by Assad to pound the Sunni based rebels, have come from Russia. While Russia may be pursuing its national interest, in Syria, it has been a culprit of Syria’s instability since 2011.

3.8 The United States and the Syrian Crisis

The United States’ position on the Syrian conflict over the time has been one of interest to experts and commentators of the event. With its lukewarm attitude with the situation in Egypt
that ousted Hosni Mubarak and a concomitant backlash from the Egyptians, the United State was quick to ask Assad to leave the country and predicted his imminent fall should he refuse to leave. If Gadafi, Ben Ali, and Mubarak have fallen, why not Assad? The call for Assad to step down was hence a very convenient political action for the United States. After sometime, it was clear, the maxim that every situation is different, had to be used in explaining the reasons Assad would not go anytime soon.

All efforts by the US to sanction Assad in the UNSC failed. Thanks to Russian and Chinese veto power in the council. Many have also expressed that with the insignificance of Syria’s oil resources to the international system, the United States was relatively unwilling to get directly involved in any uprooting of the Syrian regime. Again, examples of interventions in Iraq and a more measured one in Libya had not yielded the desired results yet. When in 2013, Syria was reported to have used chemical weapons in an attack on rebel held areas against a red line given by President Obama, a swift military response by the administration as was expected and urged by Sunni-led states in the region did not happen. Russia as has been narrated above moved in to broker a deal that had Assad compromise his chemical arsenal.

The United States with its western allies has instead used its regional allies as convenient proxies to influence the conflict in Syria. It has done so with incremental supply of arms to some ‘vetted’ groups among the rebels. With bases in Turkey and Jordan, the rebels have received and still receiving training from western experts to transform them from the ragtag state to more disciplined fighting groups that can make impact on the ground in Syria. These efforts by the United States and its allies, are not only targeted at the Syrian government, but the extremists, particularly, ISIS that are causing more havoc than the government. Knowing
that the effort by the recognized rebels would not be able to accomplish this, it led the way with its allies in the region to start air strikes targeting ISIS positions.

The discussion of airstrikes by the United States became necessary when in June 2014; ISIS surprisingly swept across eastern Iraq from their bases in Syria and took Mosul, the second largest city of that country. The worrying aspect of the ISIS invasion of territories was the brutalities they meted out to their captives who were mainly Iraqi security forces, adherents of other sects and religions, and the enslavement of women for sexual gratification. While many of these atrocious activities were already being committed in Syria, the US considered their practice in Iraq unacceptable, as it had an obligation to protect a state it had helped plunge into chaos. It was a moral obligation. The decision was therefore a departure from the original position by US on the group. Obama openly downplayed the real threat of ISIS while it was in Syria. He however considered the group very dangerous on another platform not long after they had entered Iraq, committing mass murder and chasing minority groups up mountains.

### 3.9 The Sectarian Nature of Syria Conflict

Not long after the situation was getting out of hand, had Assad begun a sectarian strategy of targeting Sunni civilians and labelling the opposition as ‘al Qaeda’, ‘while portraying himself as the protector of Syria’s religious minorities’. The latter was to garner some credibility for his government over its actions, while the former, sought to discredit the opposition and make himself the victim of the situation. At least the west would not like to help anything al Qaeda. Assad employed the relatively superior army and his militia, the shabiha, to sanction his agenda, which increased in intensity and number of casualties caused, over time. The rebels also took advantage of Sunni dominated areas where they had natural supporters to stage their attacks on government forces and institutions. The sectarian nature of the conflict, hence,
became more pronounce, as it turned more violent, with extremists on both sides fanning it to their advantage.\textsuperscript{36}

Forces loyal to Assad, the shabiha and other government functionaries have targeted Sunni areas in government held cities and villages in several reported murders. Men thought to be supporters of Assad murdered 80 Sunni Muslims in a village of al-Qubair.\textsuperscript{37} There were also reports of government forces horridly executing 108 civilians with guns and knives.\textsuperscript{38} Sunni farmers populated that village. Government aerial bombardment targeted Sunni populated areas in big cities and indiscriminately fired missiles, which produced child and women casualties. The strategy was double-faced, as the regime simultaneously stoked fear among the Alawite populations and other religious minorities. The government tied the survival these minority groups to that of the regime by using sectarian retaliation from Sunnis against the Alawites as an example. Assad and his Sunni dominated generals armed Alawite villages long before they were faced with any real threat that would later come from terrorists.

Increasing defections of mostly Sunni members of the armed forces and the murder of Alawites in some parts of the country played into the plans of the regime as sectarian identity had become the divisive factor in the conflict. Rebels often separated captured soldiers on sectarian basis and had the Alawites among them killed while the Sunnis were imprisoned. A clear distinction had been drawn first, by the government who considered that a strategy for its survival, and second, rebels whose retaliation concretized the Sunni-Alawite divide.

The Sunni-Shiite rivalry in Syria became aggravated with the emergence of jihadist in the conflict. These jihadist groups being chased elsewhere in the region found Syria a safe haven to establish their bases and exhibit their formidability. They had also benefited from a situation
where the international community had its attention on the atrocities committed by the Syrian regime against its people. This, together with their initial acceptance by the defenceless Sunni population, largely in the north, gave them space and time, to build a momentum that would soon prove elusive to halt. Territory conscious, these groups from the onset have jealously guarded their areas of operation and instilled their own form of justice, with some running bakeries that distribute bread to residence who are in dire need of food, because of the conflict. Some of the jihadist, notwithstanding their strict interpretation of Islamic law and corresponding sacrosanct implementation, have won the hearts of the people because of their cherished abhorrence for corruption—a canker government officials under Assad were involved. One of the profound groups in the conflict that has contributed to the instability in the region has been Jabat al-Nusra or the Nusra Front. An affiliate of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, (AQI) the group came to Syria in the late 2011, and within some few months established itself as the most formidable of the Sunni extremist groups. It exercised strong control over territories and implemented strict Islamic laws, which did not tolerate the Alawites, and attracted objections from some moderate rebels. Consequently, al-Nusra has had to clash with some sections of the Free Syrian Army and taken territory from them. It however ‘increasingly emphasized the Syrian, rather than global, character of [its] jihad’. That is, the group was much interested in its operations in Syria than elsewhere because, perhaps it considered itself as a Syrian version of Al Qaeda’s global agenda. This made it reject, later, attempts by ISIS to imbibe it into its agenda of creating an Islamic caliphate. It was comfortable with the gains it had made in Syria. It had adopted a sophisticated communication strategy that made extensive use of social media to propagate its agenda and achievements on the ground. This made it very attractive to foreign jihadists who wanted to fight the Assad regime in Syria. Part of its battle plan was the use of car bombs, which it did so effectively to put the regime on its toes and establish its
formidability in the conflict. This attracted some western attention and was subsequently put in the US blacklist of terrorists.

Being extremist Sunni as it is, al-Nusra attacked the beliefs of other sects, particularly the Alawite and named them apostates. As has been expressed by Caryl, and would like to paraphrase, no one hates the Shiites, in this case, the Alawites more than al-Qaeda, in this case al-Nusra.\(^{41}\) The group has not hidden its anti-American character in the various audios it has released over time. The group’s affiliation with al-Qaeda has led to the Free Syrian Army distancing itself from them—a step important to securing arms from the west and other supporters in the region. Al-Nusra’s taking of territories and its discrimination against the Alawite and other minorities makes it a dangerous sectarian factor that has contributed to the instability in Syria. Their actions would make any future negotiations to have Syria in one piece, a very difficult one.

Apart from the al-Nusra, other jihadi groups have shown strong presence in the Syrian conflict and set out to prove their agility on the ground. These include the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF), a group with ‘strong roots among Syrian veterans of the Iraq war’ (TPcels; Ghuraba al-Sham, Fatah al-Islam among others. These groups like al-Nusra, reject the Syrian independence flag and rather mounts the black jihadi flag in areas under their control.

There is also the Khorasan group that has uniquely used Syria, only as a safe haven to plan attacks on western interests beyond the borders of the country. The group reportedly has a core circle of senior al-Qaeda members and enjoys cooperation from al-Nusra. This has been necessary, perhaps to allow it concentrate on its core duty of planning against the west. Considering the extensive use of target killings of senior operatives of al-Qaeda and the Taliban
by the United States in the tribal areas of Pakistan, Syria I would suggest, became a more strategic and safe location for the mostly-wanted al-Qaeda tacticians to relocate and plan, away from US drones. The group was able to stay out of the limelight until 2014, when US airstrikes targeted and hit their bases.

These groups form the extremist section of the Sunni side of the conflict in Syria. Their strict and literal interpretation of the Koran and Islamic law make them very uncompromising to any future recognition of Assad and his Alawite sect. To them Alawites are heretics who have no place in Islam, let alone to govern true adherents of the religion. Their methods of fighting which involves summary execution and the use of suicide bombers have become unattractive to western government observers, who hold the stick to check Assad. They have further caused much disruption by turning against the moderate FSA and other times, against themselves. The actions of ISIS, as would be discussed later, have even made these groups less and less popular outside Syria.

There are on the other side of the coin in the Syrian opposition and rebels, moderate groups and fighters whose actions are in sharp contrast with the extremists. They are the majority Syrian revolutionaries still fighting to overthrow the regime and be part of the political future of the state. These are mostly under the umbrella of the FSA and do not use Islamic law or fundamentalist principles to justify and push their cause. They are often secular in ideology and use the Syrian independence flag in their areas of control.

There are also moderate Islamists who also want to be part of the political future of the state, but with Islamic principles. This is not uncommon in the region since stable states, such as Egypt and Tunisia have Islamists participating in their democratic experimentation. Without
jihadist agenda and salafists convictions, these groups have particularly attracted support from the Gulf States. As moderate or secular as these rebels may be, the fact that they were mostly adherents of the Sunni sect in Islam is very significant to this study. Overlooking the sectarian identity these rebels share would amount to ignoring one of the central factors that have kept this conflict raging until today.

3.10 The Regional Sunni-Shiite Dimension in Syria

In the midst of unrest and protest in Syria, the government signed a 10 billion dollar gas deal with Baghdad and Tehran. While the acts of states signing deals during unrests are not rare situations, the states involved in this particular deal should be of interest to us. They are all Shiite led and share a contiguous territory. Tehran, in addition to the deal was building a military base in Syria that would facilitate the shipment of military equipment from Iran, and had as early as July 2011 injected about 2 billion dollars to bolster Assad’s economy, which suffering was from the uprising. Throughout the conflict, Iran has protected its strategic ally and made Assad’s survival a state policy by ‘investing’ billions in Syria despite the fact that itself is under western and international sanctions. The Ayatollah, in order to keep proxy groups especially, Hezbollah, at arm’s length has found it strategic to support Assad politically, diplomatically and militarily.

Fortunately for the mullahs, there was and still exist a Shiite led Iraq with a friendly Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki that has allowed the use of its airspace to send arms to Assad. While Western states particularly, the United States have expressed their concerns to the Maliki government-a coalition it has supported over the years-much was not done to stop the cooperation between the states, that has inured to Assad’s benefit. The so-called Shiite crescent was at work.
Iran further sent functionaries of its elite Qud force to Syria to help train and advise the Syrian army that was facing frequent defection of its Sunni members.⁴⁵ In fact, many of the leaders of the FSA are former Syrian army officers who had defected. The Saudis would later declare Iran sending its soldiers to Syria as an invasion, in a press conference.⁴⁶

Later came Hezbollah, the most effective and discipline Shiite non-state force in the region, into the Syrian theatre. With its disciplined forces and fighting side by side the Syrian armed forces, the group was able to retake several towns and villages some of which were strategic, back to the government. While its actions led to the plummeting of its popularity among the Arab populations in the region-after it had soared in a 2006 war against Israel-it saw the survival of the Assad regime very critical to its own formidability and invincibility. The eradication of the Alawite regime would definitely disrupt its lifeline of weapon supply from Iran. Hasan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, probably preferred a state of contiguous friendly states from its doorstep to Iran, to one that would face obstruction from an unfriendly state. Simply, it wanted to keep the Shiite crescent.

All along, the Sunni-led states had naturally thrown their support behind the rebels politically, diplomatically and, more controversially, militarily. The support from Sunni-led states to the rebels is as varied as the composition of the rebels. Diplomatically, Turkey and the monarchies, as well as the one-year Islamist government of Egypt, exerted pressure on the Assad regime and asked him to leave the country. Turkey became more vociferous when a fighter jet of its own was shot down by Syria after it had reportedly, entered the air space of its southern neighbour.⁴⁷ Turkey turned to its allies in NATO and pushed for the creation a ‘no fly zone’ in northern Syria to protect civilians who were mostly Sunnis. The west did not give in to this
pressure as it expressed concern over the presence of jihadist in that part of the country. That is, it would create a safe haven for jihadist to thrive and ultimately threaten the west. Again, Syria had superior air defence system to that of Libya, which would put western pilots at risk—a feat it has proven by shooting down the Turkish fighter jet. Turkey and Jordan became louder in their call for western intervention and that was understandable, considering the flock of refugees into their territories. As neighbours they were bearing the brunt of the conflict.

The Gulf States monarchies and Jordan being Sunnis have given support to the rebels in different ways to sustain their struggle against the regime. The extremists among the rebels have largely received support from private individuals and charities from the Gulf States that sympathize with their cause. While some Gulf States have not been comfortable with the flow of this support from their territories, they claim not to have enough legal framework and institutional ability to curb it. The concern of states largely emanates from the threat the jihadists who receive such support poses to their own security. With some of their citizens fighting with these groups, there is the constant fear of the possibility of bringing home the extremist ideas they have acquired in Syria.

The governments of the Sunni-led Arab states have instead given enormous support to the moderates in the conflict. These moderate groups, some of which are Islamist have received weapons, cash and training from Gulf Arab states. Saudi Arabia has particularly provided arms to some groups through Jordan. Qatar has provided cash and arms as well as venue for the organization of the opposition activities outside Syria. Jordan and Turkey, the southern and northern neighbours of Syria respectively, have mostly provided bases for the training of opposition fighters, while they uncomfortably open their doors for refugees from their warring
neighbour. Much of the private funds from Gulf States to extremist, are believed to have come from Kuwait, a state with powerful salafist politicians and groups.

The support given to the opposition to the Gulf States has not been without intra-Sunni State disagreement. Disagreement over the support for rebels has characterized the relations between Saudi Arabia and Qatar. This, what I would like to call, ‘support clashes’, has had many facets or dimensions, which include the Muslim Brotherhood and the general rivalry between the two Sunni-led States in the Gulf. The Saudi monarchy detests the ideologies of them Muslim Brotherhood as they seek to encourage Islamist engaging in politics and ultimately being in control of the state. 49 This tenet of the group, in the eyes of the Saudis, would be threatening to the monarchy’s survival should it be tolerated. The hatred for the Muslim Brotherhood by the Saudis vividly displayed when Saudi Arabia supported the deposition of Mohammed Morsi of Egypt in 2013. 50 Qatari support for the Brotherhood in Syria who dominated the Syrian National Coalition therefore did not sink well with the Saudis, and they did not hide their upset from the Emir. Again, Qatar compared with Saudi Arabia is minute both, in land size and population, and the latter was not comfortable with the competition the former seem to be engaging with it. Qatar with its huge oil and gas deposits relative to its population is challenging the many spheres. Al Jazeera is rivalling Al Arabiya as an International news outlet, and the Qatari airline being one of the best in the world. This rivalry has not gotten out of hand though, as the Sunni-Shiite rift in the region dwarfs it. The two Sunni-led states have since made effort to settle it, as they need more cooperation to push their common agenda in Syria. 51

Iran, Iraq and Hezbollah have immensely supported their Shiite ally Bashar al-Assad, to stay in power with significant support from Russia and China at the international and diplomatic level. This has been in the form of arms and cash aid, backed by fighters, trainers and advisers.
The situation has been correspondingly true of the other side, as rebels, both moderates and extremists have been at the receiving end of cash, arms and logistics from Sunni-led states in the region with some vetted support from the west, particularly, the US. The support to both side of the conflict from sectarian allies in the region has had inimical effect on any hope for a future stability of the country. For instance, some groups propped up by Gulf States and their private charities are members who are not Syrian citizens. The lack of affinity to the state by the rebels is very detrimental for the stability of Syria, as they have little or nothing to lose should it collapse. Some have a mission which is often too simple and rigid-to overthrow Assad. Others want to establish Sharia states in a country they are not citizens of, based on Sunni principles. Considering their determination to achieve their sectarian goals, Gulf sponsorship of their activities only spells doom for Syria.

Iran’s actions, with its Hezbollah proxy are similarly an external sectarian interference in the domestic politics of Syria that has exacerbated the chaos in the state, and pushed the opposition to take entrenched position. With Iran and Hezbollah in Syria because of sectarian affiliations they share with Assad, many on the other side of the divide are able to justify their solidarity against the regime-a remedy for unending instability in the state.

3.11 The ISIS Factor

The evolution of ISIS had started in Iraq after the deposition of Saddam in 2003, and the resultant chaos that plagued the state. Then, the group was Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and the main method of attack was the use of car and suicide bombers targeting coalition forces and Shiite holy shrines and communities. Under its first leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the group gained so much notoriety with its savage decapitation of captured victims and videoing such acts for public viewing.\(^5^2\)
The group was ideologically salafist, and advocated the puritanical interpretation of the Koran and its literal application to social life. As a Sunni extremist group, it created terror cells in predominantly Sunni regions and communities from where the planning and execution of attacks were comfortably coordinated. With many Sunnis left out after the disbanding of the army and the debaathification policy of the CPA, combined with the excesses of the Mahdi Army after early attacks of AQI, the toleration of al-Zarqawi by Sunni tribesmen and groups became natural. At least AQI was a Sunni group albeit savage and salafist in action and ideology.

In fact, many experts have argued that the actions of al-Zarqawi and his AQI immensely led to the outbreak of hostilities culminating in a bloody civil war beginning in 2006 with the bombing of the Al-Askiriya mosque. He wanted a chaotic situation that would give him space to operate.

US forces subsequently killed Al Zarqawi in an air raid in 2006. The successors of al- Zarqawi did not change the modus operandi of the group but its name. The group became the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). While al-Zarqawi was well known to have harboured such ambition of creating an Islamic state of puritanical Islam, his immediate successors first projected the idea with a change in the name of the organization. With U.S change in the strategy of fighting insurgency in Iraq, the immediate successors of al-Zarqawi also got killed.

The US forces under the command of David Petraeus, a four star general, had changed the strategy in Iraq, and adopted a new one that courted the cooperation of Sunni tribesmen against insurgence and terrorist groups in Iraq. This strategy together with the increase in the numbers US forces on the ground, in 2007, helped put ISI and other insurgents on the defensive.
ISI in the meantime elected Abubakr al-Bagdadi the current leader of ISIS, to succeed the successors of al-Zarqawi. Al-Baghdadi, like his predecessors ordered and coordinated car bombs against American troops, the Mahdi Army and Iraqi government troops albeit with some limitation as the heavy presence of US and Iraqi troops on the ground created significant impediment. This hindrance to its operations and effectiveness was however, eased when the United States started a scheduled withdrawal of its troops from Iraq and supplanted the security gap with the tactically inferior Iraqi government troops in 2011.

In 2011, when the United States was withdrawing its troops from Iraq, the Syrian crisis was at its infancy. Assad was busily cracking down on protesters and calling them al-Qaeda affiliates. Somewhere in Iraq, al-Bagdadi was sanctioning a new branch of al-Qaeda, Jabat al-Nusra to fight in Syria. This agenda, as was later revealed, received the blessing of Zayman al-Zawahiri, the successor of Osama bin Laden. By the late 2012, al-Nusra had established itself as very formidable, result oriented and effective force in the struggle against Assad. It had carried suicide attacks on regime forces and taken territories in northern Syria. What made the group more efficient and paradoxically also fearsome, was its administration of territories it had captured. It implemented Sharia law in the strictest form and made economic use of resources in its areas of control to fund its activities. These achievements attracted more jihadis both local and foreign to its ranks to bolster its strength.

Interestingly, al-Bagdadi in 2013 dispatched part of his forces in Iraq to Syria to fight an Islamic Jihad against Assad. Not long after, he renamed ISI, ISIS. The renaming of the group was not as problematic as its use of force against other jihadist groups on the turf. Worst of all, ISIS attacked al-Nusra after it had refused to merge with it. The leadership of al-Nusra were so upset
that the situation was taken to al Zawahiri for settlement. When the al-Qaeda global leader in his suspected hideout in Pakistan finally gave his verdict that al-Baghdadi had no business in Iraq, ISIS refused to recognize his authority and practically broke away from the group, while it continued its aggressive and brutal methods of fighting.\textsuperscript{57} It took territories and resources from al-Nusra and other groups and implemented Sharia in its areas of control. The nature of the implementation of Sharia by ISIS however, made al-Nusra look more liberal. Non-Muslims in captured territories were forced to convert or in default, face death; women of ‘infidels’ were ushered into sex slavery; and looting of properties of non-Muslims was allowed. Within a short time of ISIS emergence in Syria, it had become the most formidable and feared group in the country. Jihadist feared ISIS as much as the government forces did. Many jihadist had joined the group from the west, as it made use of internet propaganda as a tool for recruiting Muslims who were dissatisfied with western interference in the region, or those who fancied fighting jihad. Western states were increasingly becoming sensitive towards the possible return of their citizens who were fighting for the jihadist in Syria by the day.

What actually turned the stomach of the international community was the speed with which ISIS swept western Iraq in mid-2014. While the international community watched helplessly as ISIS committed unimaginable atrocities in Syria-taking control of Raqqa, and taking border posts in the east, no one had predicted that that was in preparation for an offensive in Iraq. In late June, ISIS entered Iraq and took its second largest city of Mosul. What struck the international community was the little or no resistance from the Iraqi Army units stationed in the city. The taking of Mosul, its corresponding executions and subsequent invasion of surrounding areas made many western governments including the Obama administration have a change of mind about the group.
3.12 ISIS and Sectarianism

On the sectarian front, ISIS executed Shiites and Alawites in Iraq and Syria. This summary killings and gruesome murders of Shiite adherents revamped the idea of the group’s hatred for the sect that constituted a majority in Iraq and minority Syria. To them Shiites are apostates and killing them was an appropriate retribution. The sectarian antagonism by ISIS was so much of concern that Iran, the Shiite powerhouse of the region sent functionaries and units of its elite Revolutionary Guard to fight the group and protect Baghdad against possible invasion and savagery—an agenda the group had vowed to execute. Some international news outlets later videoed the Commander of Iran’s Revolutionary Guard in Iraq, and its forces fighting against ISIS in the north of the country. The Shiite government in Iraq have reiterated the indispensability of Iran in the fight against ISIS. At least as a Shiite state, Iran’s resolve against the terror group is much reliable than many other players in the region.

The ISIS threat in Iraq had also strengthened the international strength of the Alawite led regime in Syria, as Western states became overly wary of arming the Sunni rebels for fear of arms falling into the hand of extremists. Granted, this concern had occupied the minds of the west way before the rise of ISIS, however, their insatiable quest to murder innocent civilian and attack Iraqi forces and minority groups, as well as their interest in creating an Islamic Caliphate—something Baghdadi had already stood in Mosul and declared—increased the that fear. Assad all of a sudden had become a saint in the scheme of things with ISIS in the picture.

In 2014, when the Obama administration resolved to conduct airstrikes against ISIS target in Iraq and Syria, many Sunni-led States especially Turkey made striking Assad’s forces a sine qua non for any support they would offer. The United States however declined and went ahead to hit ISIS targets in Iraq and Syria while it turned a blind eye on the Assad forces. In Syria, the airstrikes hit the Khorasan group that was discovered to be planning attacks against western
interests and the US. This was to the advantage of the Assad regime. For the first time US was working inadvertantly, in the interest of the Assad regime and in some instances, as it would later come out, cooperating with it against Sunni extremists.

In Iraq, while the United States declined having any direct cooperation from Iran, it did not object to its presence there, and support for the Shiite led government. The airstrikes in Iraq had also protected the Yazidis against an onslaught from ISIS. It also aided Iraqi and Kurdish forces to take over the largest dam in Iraq from ISIS.

More worrying of the sectarian dynamics in Iraq was the resurgence of Shiite militia in the wake of ISIS aggression. The militias, funded by Iran have shown strong presence in some areas in Iraq than the Iraqi government forces.59 There have been reports of them looting abandoned homes of Sunni communities and torturing Sunnis who they blame with little or no evidence for supporting ISIS. Some of these groups have openly expressed their hatred of Sunnis in front of television cameras. Some Sunni states have raised concerns about this development. Some have expressed that there is no difference between ISIS and the Shiite militias. The Sunni-led state who supported and, or joined the coalition airstrike against ISIS, as a matter of principle had shied away from attacking Syria or have decided to be silent on it, as of early 2015.
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CHAPTER FOUR

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

4.1 Summary and Observation

This study set out to look at the Sunni-Shiite rivalry in the Middle East; and how it has manifested in Iraq and Syria, in their resent history and current happenings. The four main objectives were:

- To have an overview of the Arab Sunni-Shiite divide.
- To ascertain the factors that feed into the divide.
- Dangers posed by the divide to peaceful co-existence in the Middle East in general and Iraq and Syria in particular.
- Offer suggestions based upon the findings as to the way forward.

To these ends, the study have revealed that the Sunni-Shiite divide in the Middle East has a historical antecedents that goes back to the events that happened after the death of Prophet Mohammed in 632 AD. The controversy over who would be his successor sowed the seed for a sectarian divide that would plague the region for about a thousand and a half years. The situation was in the 16th and 17th aggravated when the Safavid Empire of Iran and the Ottoman Empire of Turkey adopted Shiism and Sunni respectively as the official religion of their empires and persecuted minority adherents of the other. While later conditions allowed adherents of the two sects to have settlements where they dominated and variably exercised some level of control, the Sykes Picot agreement changed that drastically. The agreement’s concomitant amalgamation of the different sects into single states as in Syria and Iraq brought about a situation where one sect, which did not have access to power faced oppression from the other, which had power. Much of the unequal distribution of power was the handiwork of
the colonialists who used it as a tool to keep their colonies in check. The arrangement has influenced the sectarian divide of the region to this day.

This study, again in seeking to ascertain the factors that feed into the divide and the conflict that characterized it, discovered that various interests; state and non-state, international and domestic, and regional and global played different and sometimes contradictory roles to fuel it. On the global level, are the United States and Russia who not being adherent of any sect themselves, have played significant role to fuel this divide through the pursuance of their interest in the region. The United States especially, after 1979 has largely supported Sunni-led states against the Shiites. During the Arab Spring, the US turned a blind eye when the Sunni-led states openly used excessive force to crackdown on protest. The United States have constantly supplied arms to these states that have helped them counter the threat Shiite Iran posed in the region.

Russia on the other hand has supported the Shiite side of the divide. While its support to Iran during the Iran-Iraq war was not significant in comparison to what it gave to Iraq, Russia’s relations with Iran improved in the 90s. Syria, another member of the Shiite crescent in the region has, however overwhelmingly received arms support from the Soviet Union and later, Russia. Russia as at 2015 still had its only Mediterranean naval bases in Syria. During the Syrian civil war it has use its veto power status to protect Assad overwhelmingly against UN sanctions. It announced an arms deal with Tehran that would involve the powerful defence system, the SAM 300. In the late 2014, it provided the Shiite-led government of Iraq with some planes for its air force. Together, the Russia and America have been divisive factors that have contributed to the Sunni-Shiite drift in the region.
The study also found the regional state-factors influencing the rivalry to be Shiite Iran on one side and Saudi Arabia and the other Sunni-led Gulf States on the other side. Iran, since the revolution in 1979 has had a policy of exporting Islamic revolutions elsewhere. To this end, it has created proxies and supported the Assad regime before and during the civil war, with its forces on the ground in Syria. Iran has also influenced greatly, the Shiite led government in Iraq, even when the United States was still there. It has further supported communities in the Gulf States who are heavily discriminated against.

Saudi Arabia, has assumed the role of the leader of the Sunni States in the region. With a conservative monarchy, the kingdom, from day one of the Islamic revolution in Iran, has opposed the mullahs for its own security. It would not tolerate any revolution on its soil. This idea is widely shared by other Gulf States and Jordan. During the Syrian civil war Saudi Arabia has supported groups it has labelled as moderates to oppose Assad. Other Gulf States including Jordan, Qatar, UAE and Kuwait have played various roles in supporting the Syrian opposition. In Iraq, the Sunni-led states have had their citizens and government supporting the Sunni side if the conflict while they rebuke Maliki of being an Iranian puppet.

Some of the non-state regional factors to the rivalry include the activities of Shiite Hezbollah and Sunni extremists groups like ISIS. Hezbollah has been used by Iran to largely, face off Israel in southern Lebanon and expand its influence in the region. However, Hezbollah has subsequently joined Assad with the provision of fighters to shore up his depleting army that was facing problems with its desertion of its Sunni members. ISIS, on the other hand, has carried out its extremist Sunni ideas through violence, and seeks to establish an Islamic state encompassing much of the region. Though a Sunni group and suspected to have received
support from Sunni private donors, it excesses and affiliation with al-Qaeda has attracted the condemnation of Sunni and Shiite government alike.

The domestic factors and actors in Iraq include the Shiite led government that have marginalised the Sunni minority under Nouri al-Maliki, with by Iranian influenced Shiite militia dominated by the Mahdi Army. On the Sunni side is the Sunni tribesman, supported by former Baath Party functionaries and insurgents who feel marginalised by the Shiite-led government, and sometimes see the use of violence to be the most effective way to make their voice heard. This is particularly the case with events during the civil war and 2012 to 2014. There are also the various terrorist groups whose only activity is violence, which they believe should be meted out against apostates-Shiites and the religious minorities.

In Syria is an Alawte-Shiite-led government that has over the years oppressed the majority Sunni population through the establishment of a police state. It has used its security forces to suppress protests that were inspired the Arab Spring in 2011. Bashahr al-Assad has resolved to stay in power in spite of international pressure on him to step down. The government has smartly played the sectarian card to remain in office to this day. On the Sunni side in Syria is the Free Syrian Army mostly led by defected Sunni soldiers who are more liberal with religion and fight under the banner of the Syrian Independence Flag. These groups mostly want to be part the political future of Syria. There are the extremist elements made up of mostly jihadist most of who are foreigners. These groups have varying aims, with some having the ultimate aim of overthrowing Assad, while others like ISIS wants to establish a state of their own. Other groups are in Syria to search of a safe haven from where they can plan attacks against western interests. The Khorosan group is an example of such group.
This study, as its third objective sought to examine the dangers posed by the divide to peaceful co-existence in the Middle East in general, and Iraq and Syria in particular. The dangers posed by this divide can be placed into different categories; international, regional and domestic.

From the study, it can be deduced that domestically, the Sunni-Shiite rivalry has devastated the Iraqi and Syrian societies and continues to do so with no workable long-term solution in sight. Millions of people have been internally and externally displaced, while the violence continues unabated. It has also created humanitarian problems with children becoming malnourished and being casualties of both regime and ant-regime attacks. The inter sectarian killings and counter killings spell doom for the future of both countries, since the situation creates a vicious cycle that is likely to continue for decades or centuries to come.

The presence of jihadist in the two states is very dangerous to their long-term stability. These groups are often not transient and would operate even in peacetime, as they would go underground and later emerge stronger. For example during the ‘surge’ in Iraq, many insurgents and terrorist lowered their activities, only to re-emerge after US troops started withdrawing in 2011. This situation poses danger to the very stability of the states in question. Again, the heavy handedness of sectarian governments and the perception of power as an end in itself or more liberally, an end to ensure sectarian dominance, also pose danger to the two states. In Iraq and Syria, sectarian distrust has made politics a zero-sum game where a government dominated by a particular sect promotes the interest of that sect and view the other sect with mistrust. This has led to miscalculation and the creation of surveillance systems by governments that monitor literally, every step of a perceived opposition. This has been the case in Syria since the 1970s. This phenomenon is very dangerous to the stability and the unanimity of the state. The situation has led to ruling governments seldom compromising on anything.
The Alawites in Syria do not know their fate, should Assad and his Alawite colleagues leave government in the hands of the Sunni majority. In Iraq, the Sunnis have not fared well after the deposition of Saddam.

At the regional level, the Sunni-Shiite rivalry has led to minority groups, be it Sunni, Shiite, Kurds, Christians, Druze or Yazidis feeling insecure in states of which they are citizens. The minority Shiite populations in the Gulf States have largely been marginalized and oppressed by the monarchs. In Bahrain where Shiites form a majority, the minority Sunni rulers have muzzled the opposition with macabre force. These actions by Gulf States, in recent times have been informed by suspicion that these sections of their states are likely to take inspiration from their sectarian protégés in Iran after 1979. Other minorities like Christians Yazidis and Druze have become mere victims of the clash. These groups have particularly attracted the wrath of Sunni extremists who regard them as infidels and kill them as result. The situation does not augur well for a region that is a cradle for several religions.

The inter-sectarian rivalry has led to a dangerous arms race that would in the long-term lead to more instability in region. The arms race has had Iran and Saudi Arabia leading the way. The latter has even resorted to what the west and Israel believe to be a nuclear programme that has an aim of acquiring nuclear weapon. Saudi Arabia has vehemently opposed this development, as it considers nuclear arms in the hands of the mullahs as win for Iran in the sectarian strife. The Saudi side of the race has been the massive purchase of modern US arms worth billions of dollars. As a state that is not at war except occasional terrorist attacks and Shiite protest, Saudi purchase of new fighter jet, warships and air defence systems among others, is a cause for concern in the region. The monarchy has further threatened that it would also pursue a nuclear
programme if Iran were not stopped from obtaining the bomb. The quest for the two leading countries of the divide to out-do each other with respect to weaponry spells doom for the region. Internationally, I would agree with Christian Caryl that ‘given that one billion believers are caught up within this theological and demographical battle, the rest of [the world] are bound to feel the shock waves’. This shock wave has been in the form of refugee problems. Increasing number of people from the region are risking their lives crossing the Mediterranean to seek asylum in Europe to the latter’s discomfort. Many western citizens are moving to Syria to join extremist forces; a development that shook governments to pass legislation against returnees. Peace in the region, which is well resourced with oil and gas and hence crucial to global economic stability, is positive for the international community. Conflicts in the region until recently major was a in the fluctuations in the price of oil industry. It was one of the reasons the US formed a coalition to stop Saddam from annexing Kuwait in the early 1990s. Saudi Arabia, the largest oil producer was close by and Saddam could have made it his next target-a situation that could have hit the international oil market. The sectarian rivalry therefore has the potential to disrupt global economic performance if not checked.

4.2 Conclusion

From the study, it has come to the fore that the Sunni-Shiite dichotomy emerged at the infancy of the religion and created a division that resulted in conflicts. Later in the 16th centuries, the Safavid and Ottoman empires were involved in the sectarian strife that led to persecution of minorities within their territories. While Sykes-Picot Agreement whimsically tried to put the two sects under common colonial administrations and create a semblance of state identity over sectarian ones, the actions of the colonialist actually sowed seeds of hatred that have haunted the region especially in Iraq and Syria. The divide and rule strategies adopted by the colonialist helped strengthen minority sect against the majority. In Syria the Alawite-Shiite were the
minority and made to dominate the majority Sunnis; that continued even after the colonialist
had left and especially when Hafez al-Assad took control of the state. In Iraq was the opposite
situation where for a long period the minority Sunnis would rule over and suppress the majority
Shiite. In 2003, after Saddam left power, the majority Shiite in Iraq, saw it as an opportunity to
get back at the Sunni minority. Knowing their demographic superiority, the Shiite advocated
for a majoritarian democracy that would go to disadvantage the minority. Subsequent event
that has involved Sunni extremists and insurgents on the one hand and Shiite militia and
hardliner politicians the other hand has brought about a sectarian that keeps worsening by the
day. In Syria a popular uprising that had started in Sunni neighbourhoods in 2011 had been met
with brute force from the Alawite-Shiite government, after it had exploited the long time
sectarian divide in and posed as a protector of the minorities. The involvement of Sunni
extremists and jihadist in the conflict as against Shiite Hezbollah fighters on the respective
sides of the conflict has further aggravated the situation and plunged the country in a never-
civil war that is poised to keep the country unstable for a long time into the future.

The support from the Shiite theocracy of Iran to the Shiite sides of both countries; and that
from the Sunni Gulf monarchies variably to the Sunni sides in Syria and Iraq takes the sectarian
conflict to a regional level. The support from the regional powers of both sects has added
another layer of the sectarianism to the conflict.

The support from two outside powers of the US and Russia have also gone to either side of the
conflict where they feel their interests are well served. This has made it difficult to reach a
peaceful solution.
Scary, however is the product both conflict has produced. The emergence of ISIS which seeks to establish an Islamic state that would cover both Syria and Iraq has created fear and panic throughout the region. The brutality of the terrorist organization and its method of savage murder of innocent civilians have made it enemy to both Sunni and Shiite led states. The fact however remains that ISIS is a group that has Sunni salafist adherents as members. From the above it would be prudent to posit that the Sunni-Shiite rivalry in the Middle East is the cause of instability in Iraq and Syria.

4.3 Suggestions

From the above observations from the history, a nature and the effects of the sectarian conflicts between the Sunni and the Shiite adherents of Islam in the Middle East, with particular emphasis on the Syria and Iraq conflicts, I would like to make some suggestions. These suggestions are meant to recommend alternative solutions to the crisis.

The United States has to change its approach to the region in an effort to realize a thaw in the sectarian divide on the continent. As a global power and with enormous resources both financial and military, the US has much influence and leverage in the region that has not had any equal rival. It has most of the Gulf Monarchs, if not all as allies with some providing military bases for its forces. Jordan is a close ally, and even Iraq in its tumultuous state, is significantly cooperative with Washington. With the provision of support and airstrikes in Syria, it has significant control over what becomes of the warring state. US pressure on Iran over its nuclear programme and the resultant moderation in the posture of the mullahs towards negotiations, a sign of its influence even on the most obstinate of states in the region. With such influence and power comes with a responsibility to promote stability in the region, which is vital to international peace.
The United States must be consistent, and indiscriminate in promoting its values in the region. The United States’ values of democracy, liberty, and promotion of human right around the world need unbiased application. Accusations by many of US double standards in the region are rife among some experts. It has been accused of supporting its Gulf States allies while they oppress and crackdown on dissent from their Shiite minorities without reservations. During the Arab Spring, the United States became openly and forcefully critical with states like Libya and Syria for abusing the rights and freedoms of their citizens, while it kept mute over the killing and abuses by the Gulf States especially Saudi Arabia Bahrain and Kuwait of their Shiite citizens. This has raised questions about the fairness of US policy in the region among the Arab populations and from Iran. Anti-US governments in the region often refer to such inconsistent and discriminate actions by the great power to attack it. Iran has often refer to US as an arrogant power. The attitude of the US towards its allies has also increased mainstream Shiite antagonism towards it. The United States must therefore rethink its relationship towards allies in the region in order to enhance its own credibility in resolving conflicts and shaping a region that is vital to international peace and economics.

It is further important for the members of the Security Council of the United Nations, especially the veto wielding states of China, Russia France, Britain and the United States, to put peace in the volatile region ahead of their individual support for some particular sates and leaders. With the paramount aim of the UNSC being ensuring global peace and security, member states must build consensus and achieve unanimity to prevent or control conflict; and move away from taking entrenched positions and using their veto to protect or support irresponsible actions of allies in the region. Russia and China from day one of the Syrian crisis have used their veto on the UNSC, to protect Assad while his forces kill tens of thousands of mostly, Sunni civilians and plunge the country into further sectarian deterioration by the time. France, Britain and the
United States on the other hand have always asked Assad to leave and kept tabling resolutions that have all faced Russian and Chinese veto. With these entrenched positions on conflicts, it becomes increasingly difficult to build consensus towards promoting peace in the region. It is therefore important for US, and its allies on the Security Council to rethink their stance on regime change in Syria, and, for Russia and China to soften their position on the future of Bashar al-Assad in any future government. Russia should hence, revise its policy of providing military support to Assad since the beginning of the sectarian violence. This should however not come without a corresponding revision of western support for some rebels in the conflict. The United States must also exert pressure on its Gulf States allies to check support for rebels from both private and government sources. These steps would immensely affect positively, the Sunni-Shiite rivalry in the region since Syria has become a boiling point in the divide.

US and western rapprochement towards Iran is again, very vital to ensuring regional security in the region. With its huge resources, population, and influence in the region, isolating the Shiite powerhouse of Iran has not yielded any good results with respect to the Sunni-Shiite rivalry. The influence Iran has on the Shiite populations and governments in the region makes it an indispensable potential partner towards peace building in the region and the bridging of the gulf between the Sunnis and the Shiite in the region. Engaging Iran would also bring upon it the responsibility to check its proxies like Hezbollah and to some extent Hamas in a bigger picture of peace building in the Middle East. Iran further has enormous influence on the Shiite led governments in Iraq and Syria-a condition known to western governments. So far, western isolation of the mullahs has done next to nothing to change Tehran’s role in the sectarian strife in the region, except to push it to negotiate on its nuclear programme. As the main factor on the Shiite side of the rivalry, any effort towards mitigation must necessarily involve Iran. The
post-1979 policies of the west towards Iran need serious revision and adjustment that should effectively involve it in the management of the ever-widening sectarian gulf.

The promotion and propping up of moderate politicians and groups by the world powers in their quest to quench the Sunni-Shiite rivalry in the Middle East should be part of a broader plan. Much of the factors that have adversely contributed to the sectarian gulf have been influenced by hardliners and extremists both in government and among the opposition who seem to benefit from the chaos or are just stuck with unbending sectarian doctrines and principles. These elements in the region are difficult to bring to the table to compromise on their positions, and go to complicate any attempt at resolving the sectarian drift. In Iran are hardliner politicians, who see continuous opposition to the United States, and the west as policy that cannot change. These fanatics of the revolution work to undermine all efforts made by moderates in the state to normalize improve relations with the West. In Iraq, there are moderates who are open to inter sectarian cohesion and inclusive governments and often had to clash with sectarian extremists whose actions are detrimental to the stability of the state. Within Syria, extremists on both side of the divide have refused to compromise their positions towards any peace deal that would stabilize the country. So far they seem to have triumphed over the moderates in the country as conflict is getting worse. Support by international powers, particularly Russia and the US to moderates, would therefore help to reach compromise and raise the prospects of stabilizing the state. Regional powers of Iran and Saudi Arabia must also concentrate their energies on propping up moderate elements in the states in question, as stability in Iraq and Syria would bode well for the entire region. Other Gulf States and Jordan in their contribution towards stability must do more to stop the flow of cash from their private citizens to extremists, as that has been one of the main lifelines for Sunni extremist in the
region. McCants is for instance of the view that the US State Department has a huge role to play in ensuring this policy.

The policy of the west particularly, the United States to promote and spread democracy to the region must be well defined and locally driven to give it credibility. While democracy may be good for all irrespective of religious beliefs or geographical position, it must be adopted to suite the culture of the people so as to avoid any clash between the two. Notwithstanding Tunisia’s relative success with adoption of a democratic system after the Arab Spring, many of the state in the region that had their long time dictators removed, have descended into chaos. This has largely stemmed from internal clashes such us the Sunni-Shiite rivalry in Iraq and Syria. I would agree with Lee Kuan Yew with his suggestion, of solving the socio-economic issues of states in the region as the preliminary step towards the implementation of a democratic system. The west must therefore solve the internal issues that are often economic and social, and explore with domestic politicians how the culture of a given state can be imbibed in new democratic institutions. For instance the official involvement of religious leaders within the structure of the state can help stabilize Iraq. Since the state has its religious leaders commanding much respect than the political class, placing them in a non-elective body within the state structure would be very essential to its stability.

With the above suggestions, together with numerous given by other scholars, I believe the sectarian rivalry between the Shiite and the Sunnis can be mitigated by interested parties in countries, the region and the world at large.
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