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EXPLAINING SECTARIAN VIOLENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF BAHRAIN AND YEMEN

by

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June 2016

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13. ABSTRACT

  Sectarian violence in the Middle East has continued to rise amid regional turmoil and transition. Though violence perpetuated along sectarian identities has occurred at times during the Middle East's long history, it is not a constant or normal state of events. This thesis explains the rise in contemporary sectarian violence through comparative analysis and literature on Middle Eastern sectarianism and ethnic violence theory. This thesis has identified four primary independent variables as contributing factors to the dependent variable of sectarian violence. Three primary independent variables heightened the saliency of sectarian identity and regional sectarian tensions: identity group grievances, elite instrumentalization, and the regional context of the proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. State collapse, the fourth and most critical variable, then transforms sectarian tensions into sectarian violence due to the political, economic, and security vacuums created. This conclusion is demonstrated by comparing sectarian violence in Bahrain and Yemen. Though Bahrain and Yemen share the first three variables (grievances, instrumentalization, and regional context), they diverge on the forth variable, state collapse. As a result, Yemen, which has experienced state collapse, has escalating sectarian violence, while Bahrain has failed to experience sectarian violence due to a robust and capable state apparatus.

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A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF BAHRAIN AND YEMEN**

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AQAP	Al Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula
BICI	Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry
BTV	Bahrain TV
CSO	Central Security Organization
DV	dependent variable
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GDC	gross domestic product
GoB	Government of Bahrain
GoY	Government of Yemen
GPC	General People's Congress
GWoT	Global War on Terrorism
IAA	Information Affairs Authority
ICG	International Crisis Group
IED	improvised explosive device
IFLB	Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain
IRGC	Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
IV	independent variable
KSA	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
MAA	Media Affairs Agency
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MOI	Ministry of Interior
NAG	non-state armed group
NCO	non-commissioned officer
NDC	National Dialogue Committee
NSA	National Security Agency
NSA	non-state actor
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
POMEPS	Project on Middle East Political Science
PSO	Political Security Organization

SSFC	Special Security Force Command
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UNDP	United Nations Development Program

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I would like to dedicate this thesis and my degree's work to my late brother, Justin, and grandfather, Pops. The space you have left in my heart will never be filled, but I am so grateful for the years we had together. Lastly, to Squirt, the future of our family, here's to all the hope and possibilities you bring.

I.   INTRODUCTION

1.   Major Research Question

This thesis seeks to examine what has caused the recent rise in Islamic sectarian violence in the Middle East. Since the early 2000s, violence perpetrated along sectarian lines has been sharply rising.[1] According to Pew Research, "Globally, sectarian violence took place in nearly one-in-five of the world's countries in 2012 (18%), up from 8% in 2007," and "the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) was the most common region for sectarian violence; half of all countries in the region in 2012 experienced this type of violence."[2] Thus, the focus of this research is to understand why sectarian identity, specifically Shi'a/Sunni Muslims, has become a source of violence, and why this has become a recent phenomenon. An important caveat to highlight in this research is that motivations for committing acts of violence are often not singularly focused. However, there is still ample evidence, based on the nature of targeting, violence, and rhetoric espoused, to conclude that sectarian identities have greatly impacted violence in the Middle East for the past decade and a half.

2.   Significance of the Research Question

This thesis is significant because it strives to understand identity politics in the Middle East and specifically what drives these identities into violent interactions. Understanding the cause of sectarian violence can shape policies of international actors, better facilitate conflict resolution, and can shed light on the underlying issues that are fueling identity politics in the Middle East. Specifically, this research may assist the United States, which is an influential yet external actor, in forming better policy decisions and alliance relationships in order to promote lasting solutions and regional stability.

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[1] Angelina E. Theodorou, "Key Findings About Growing Religious Hostilities around the World," *Pew Research*, January 17, 2014, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/01/17/key-findings-about-growing-religious-hostilities-around-the-world/.

[2] Ibid.

This paper is also significant because it attempts to contribute to the greater body of literature on identity conflict. Much of the contemporary literature produced on sectarian violence in the MENA fails to utilize the theoretical frameworks developed through research on ethnic violence and test these frameworks with sectarian violence. Hopefully, this thesis can add to the literature on identity conflict by applying ethnic conflict theory and contemporary sectarian scholarship to explanations for sectarian violence in the Middle East. This may then provide a comparative basis for evaluating future identity conflicts outside the traditional bounds of ethnicity.

Lastly, this research is significant and necessary because the recent rigidity of divisions along sectarian lines is a dangerous source of conflict that may have long-standing implications. As Marc Lynch, the director of the Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) suggested, "Political responses to identity conflict become far more difficult after they have been successfully mobilized—especially under conditions of state failure, uncertainty, violence, and fear."[3] Thus, understanding how to evaluate and perhaps even resolve these conflicts is time-critical. Evidence also suggests that these sectarian tensions may have already escaped the control of local governments, potentially creating a larger regional or global challenge.[4] As author Gregory Gause points out, there is also real risk in "fanning anti-Shi'a sentiment in the Arab world," because "this directly supports the world view of extremist Sunni Salafi jihadists" groups. The Salafist or Islamist narrative can then turn otherwise mild regional or local political conflicts into extreme and violent expressions of religious sectarianism.[5] Additionally, as conflicts turn more violent or extremist, the damage created and blood shed can have lasting impacts on communities, creating deep-felt sentiments and degrading hopes of unity or reconciliation.

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[3] Marc Lynch, "The Entrepreneurs of Cynical Sectarianism," in *The Politics of Sectarianism* (Washington, DC: Elliott School of International Affairs, 2013), 5.

[4] Irm Haleem, "Creating Frankensteins: The Taliban Movement of Pakistan," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 2, no. 5 (2008): 15.

[5] Gregory Gause, "Saudi Arabia: Iraq, Iran, the Regional Power Balance, and the Sectarian Question," *Strategic Insights* 6, no. 2 (2007): 5.

3.   Methodology

To answer the major research question, why contemporary sectarian violence exists in the Middle East, four hypotheses have been considered as possible explanations and these hypotheses then evaluated through two comparative case studies. The four hypotheses tested for explanatory capacity are the ancient hatreds theory, the elite instrumentalism theory, the proxy war theory, and the state collapse theory. The two comparative case studies are Bahrain and Yemen, chosen because one location, Yemen, has exhibited sectarian violence despite both nations having ongoing sectarian tensions. Ultimately, the conclusions drawn from the comparative case studies suggest that not one of the four hypotheses best explain sectarian violence. Instead, sectarian violence is best explained as the product of a process where sectarian tensions are transformed into violence. The creation of sectarian tensions occurs through a combination of local grievances, the agency of actors, and the impact of the current rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. These sectarian tensions can then lead to sectarian violence during the turmoil, competition, and security dilemmas caused by the collapse of state capacity. In other words, this thesis will explain the dependent variable (DV) of sectarian violence by presenting four independent variables (IVs): grievances (the issues identity groups mobilize behind), local agency (instrumentalization of sectarian identity by elites), regional context (the impact of the proxy wars and rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran) and state collapse. This thesis proposes that the IVs of grievances, agency, and regional context are present in the creation of sectarian tensions, while state capacity is the critical variable that facilitates sectarian violence.

Comparative analysis serves as the primary method to demonstrate the conclusions of this thesis. Bahrain and Yemen make for good comparative case studies because both locations have similarities that lend them susceptible to sectarian tensions and conflict. Bahrain and Yemen both have sizable Shi'a populations, 55–75% in the case of Bahrain, and 35–40% in the case of Yemen.[6] The Shi'a populations in both

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[6] Justin Gengler, "Ethnic Conflict and Political Mobilization in Bahrain and the Arab Gulf" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2011), 53, http://hdl.handle.net/2027.42/89701.; "Mapping the Global Muslim Population," Pew Research Center, May 15, 2015, http://www.pewforum.org/2009/10/07/mapping-the-global-muslim-population/.

nations have very strong historical claims and identities, which contribute to their perceptions of legitimacy. In Bahrain, the Shi'a claim to be the original indigenous inhabitants of the island, referring to themselves as Baharna,[7] and suggesting that Sunnis on the island are "foreign usurpers."[8] This historical identity has contributed largely to Bahraini Shi'as' historical myth-making and sense of identity. Similarly, in Yemen, and to an even deeper extent, the historical significance of the Zaydi Shi'as can be traced to their Imamate in Northern Yemen, which existed for more than a thousand years.[9] The Zaydi Imamate was only conquered in the 1960s; a recent enough memory that still contributes to Zaydi identity and myth-making. Thus, in both Bahrain and Yemen, a strong sense of religious and territorial identity bolsters feelings of legitimacy and grievances.

Yemen and Bahrain do differ on some key aspects that at first may appear to present some challenges to comparison. The most obvious differences are geographical and material discrepancies. Yemen is home to about 27.5 million people,[10] and is one of the most gun-prolific nations in the world.[11] Yemen is a relatively large territory— roughly the size of California turned on its side—and comprises geography varying from rugged mountains in the north to harsh deserts in the south. Yemen is also "one of the driest, poorest and least developed countries in the world."[12] It ranked 154th on the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Multidimensional Poverty Index and

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[7] Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (New York Columbia University Press, 2008), 23.

[8] Kristin Smith Diwan, "Royal Factions, Ruling Strategies, and Sectarianism in Bahrain " in *Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf*, ed. Lawrence G. Potter (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 144.

[9] Khaled Fattah, "Yemen: Sectarianism and the Politics of Regime Survival," in *Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf*, ed. Lawrence G. Potter (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 209.

[10] "Countries in the World by Population (2016)," *World Population Prospects*, May 15, 2016, http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/population-by-country/.

[11] Philip Alpers and Marcus Wilson, "Guns in Bahrain: Gun Ownership and Possession," The University of Sydney, May 16, 2016, http://www.gunpolicy.org/firearms/compare/14/gun_owner_licensing/204.

[12] Investing in Rural People (IFAD), "Rural Poverty in Yemen," May 15, 2016, http://www.ruralpovertyportal.org/country/home/tags/yemen.

160th out of 173 on the 2015 UNDP Human Resource Development Report.[13] In contrast, Bahrain is a hot, flat, island in the North Arabian Gulf, about 3.5 times the size of Washington, DC, or roughly the same size as the San Francisco Bay. Bahrain has very strict gun laws[14] and has a population of only about 1.4 million people.[15] Bahrain is ranked 45th on the Human Development Index and their Gross National Index is almost 11 times more than Yemen's.[16]

These differences certainly reduce similarities between the two nations, but considering the variables that are being held in juxtaposition, these differences do not reduce their comparative capacity. Neither nation has a long history of sectarian conflict, but both still have Shi'a communities that hold deep-seated grievances. In fact, sectarian conflict in Yemen's history has been described as "very unusual," despite Yemen now dealing with sectarian violence.[17] Both Bahrain and Yemen have had strong leadership figures capable of instrumentalization (President Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen and King Hamad al-Khalifa in Bahrain). Both nations have had, and continue to experience, tremendous pressure and involvement from Saudi Arabia, and both are immersed in the regional contestation between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Thus, the differing factors between these nations are most acutely manifested in these nations' state capacity, which only serves to highlight the impact of state collapse in Yemen and state forte in Bahrain, and further emphasizes the casual value of state capacity. Thus, while Bahrain and Yemen are unique, for the purpose of this research, they offer valuable comparative capacity.

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[13] "Human Development Reports," UNDP, May 15, 2016, http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/2015_human_development_report.pdf. The Multidimensional Poverty Index is "calculated based on data on deprivations in education, health and living standards from ICF Macro Demographic and Health Surveys, United Nations Children's Fund Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys and some national household surveys."

[14] Alpers and Wilson, "Guns in Bahrain: Gun Ownership and Possession."

[15] *World Population Prospects*, "Countries in the World by Population (2016)."

[16] UNDP, "Human Development Reports."

[17] Fattah, "Yemen: Sectarianism," 207.

B.   LITERATURE REVIEW

This thesis attempts to uniquely examine the complexities of sectarianism in the Middle East by uniting scholarship on both ethnic and sectarian conflicts; individually, each section of scholarship is informative, but combined, it can be explanatory. Literature on contemporary sectarianism fails to adequately explain the difference between incidents of sectarian tension and that of sectarian violence, a discrepancy this thesis finds necessary to differentiate. The literature on ethnic violence purports the identity of ethnicity itself to be a critical component to causing violence, thus degrading the facilitative capacity of other identities like sectarian, tribal, or ideological. The following literature review provides an understanding of how sectarianism was created and became an important source of tension and violent action in the modern Middle East. Primarily, the contemporary literature on sectarianism is very good at explaining *why* sectarian tension, but not violence, exists in the Middle East, while literature on ethnic violence adds a more theoretical framework to understanding *how* identity tensions are transformed into violence. The following literature review will evaluate four hypothesis of sectarian violence by combining concepts from literature on ethnic conflict and contemporary literature on sectarianism. Though some of authors that will be presented have explained ethnic or sectarian conflict by combining certain elements of these hypotheses, each hypothesis will be considered independently for simplification and organization. As each hypothesis is presented, it will be made clear why, independently, each has value, but alone is not explanatory. The rest of the thesis will be dedicated to presenting the thesis's main argument, which will serve to provide a more encompassing and explanatory account of sectarian violence in the Middle East.

1.   Hypothesis 1: Primordialism

Primordialists prescribe to the concept that "conflict between two ethnic groups is inevitable because of unchanging, essential characteristics of the members of these categories."[18] This belief suggests that conflict between ethnic groups, or for the purpose

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[18] James D Fearon and David D Laitin, "Violence and the Social Construction of Ethnic Identity," *International Organization* 54, no. 04 (2000): 847.

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of this research, religious groups, is a defining part of that group's identity, and that the antagonism toward another group has existed since the identity was first created. Thus, the concept of ancient hatreds is not just a connection to the cultural history of a group, but it implies continuity to cultural hatreds, passed down among generations, and activated as a part of current conflicts.[19] Furthermore, sectarianism has often been described as a defining characteristic of less developed, "unmodern" nations, as it stands in direct contrast to the concepts of nationalism and pluralism.[20] The scholar, Ussama Makdisi, suggested that "the [Western] secularist paradigm insists that religious feelings, beliefs, culture, and passions are insidiously persistent and immutable; sectarianism, therefore, is almost always identified as a problem affecting less developed countries."[21] The labeling of sectarianism as an ancient hatred and a characteristic of less developed nations truly misrepresents the complex, nuanced, and contextual components of societal divisions and violence. In fact, religious groups are often described as "irreconcilably different, as inherently violent, and as incorrigibly hostile to [another] group's collective identity."[22] This primordial definition simply generalizes religious antagonism as an irreconcilable problem instead of historically contextualizing and explaining each episode of violence.

In the context of the Middle East, the ancient hatreds hypothesis suggests that the current conflict between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims is simply an extension of their ancient antagonism. The theory purports that the historical root of this division, which can been traced back to a major argument over the decision of who should lead the Muslim *umma* (community) after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, has created a long standing and consistent animosity between the groups. Shi'ites believed the leader of the *umma*, the caliph, should have been a descendent from Muhammad's bloodline, specifically his son-

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[19] Robert D Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey through History* (New York: Random House, 1993), xxi.

[20] Ussama Makdisi, "Reconstructing the Nation-State: The Modernity of Sectarianism in Lebanon," *Middle East Report* 200, no. 200 (1996): 24.

[21] "Understanding Sectarianism," *ISIM Newsletter* 8 (2001): 19.

[22] Ibid.

in-law, Ali.[23] Sunnis, alternatively, believe the caliph should have been a leader chosen by the *umma*, not predetermined through heritage.[24] This split of rightful community leadership has indeed resulted in differences of practice and systems of belief between Sunnis and Shi'a for centuries, and undeniably, times of conflict. Primordialists therefore have concluded that the initial fissure between Sunnis and Shi'ites has caused a long standing conflict, of which current sectarianism is just a contemporary manifestation. This understanding of ancient hatreds has influenced the analysis of sectarianism and ethnic conflict among policy makers, journalists, and even academics, leading some to believe that heterogeneous societies are particularly conflict-prone because of their ethnic or religious tensions, antagonism, and diverse makeup.[25]

The concept of primordialism has largely been disputed and proven as an incomplete explanation by the majority of modern presiding literature on ethnic and religious violence. Primordialism cannot explain why sectarian tensions erupt into violence when they do, or what accounts for times of relative stability between Sunni and Shi'a communities. Furthermore, the theory is unable to explain why Shi'a and Sunnis have allied together against other common enemies, as this cooperation would contradict the edicts of their own ancient hatred. For example, during the Iran-Iraq war from 1980–89, Iraqi Shi'a "largely upheld nationalism rather than their sectarian loyalty" and fought in opposition to the Shi'a regime of Iran.[26] Furthermore, Laitin and Fearon, authors on ethnic violence, discovered that it does not appear "to be true that a greater degree of ethnic or religious diversity—or indeed any particular cultural demography—by itself makes a country more prone to civil war."[27] In fact, Laitin discovered that heterogeneous societies can and do coexist more often than they are in conflict.[28] Even when conflict

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[23] Mike Shuster, "The Origins of the Shiite-Sunni Split," *National Public Radio (NPR)*, February 12 2007, http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2007/02/12/7332087/the-origins-of-the-shiite-sunni-split.

[24] Ibid.

[25] James D Fearon and David D Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War," *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 01 (2003): 75.

[26] Dilip Hiro, *The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 108.

[27] Fearon and Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War," 75.

[28] David D Laitin, *Nations, States, and Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 13–15, 136.

does exist in heterogeneous nations, explanatory factors beyond primordial hatreds prove more illuminating.

Nonetheless, the importance of cultural myths, symbols, and emotions between societal groups does exist, and these aspects of identity are relevant for group unity. Understanding these "ancient hatreds" reveals the historical and mythical elements of identity that can be activated by instrumentalists and leaders to promote group antagonism and mobilization. Thus, ancient hatreds can provide a perception of depth to an identity, facilitating not only its mobilization but also its fortitude. Despite this, primordialism still does not explain why groups pursue violent expression of identity, or why it occurs at a particular time period.

2.   Hypothesis 2: Instrumentalism by Elite Manipulation

Unlike the ancient hatreds theory, the instrumentalist theory supports the notion that identities are not innate and consistent, but rather constructed, and that particular "identity entrepreneurs can manufacture ethnic, racial, or religious identity for their own purposes."[29] This constructivist perspective on identity suggests two important ideas for this hypothesis: the notion that identity and culture are created, not innate, and that individuals can create these identities for their own gains. The concept of an individual actor purposefully using identity as a tool for gain is best described by the term "instrumentalization." Furthermore, in the context of this paper, the elites and groups who instrumentalize sectarianism will be referred to as having "agency" in constructing the sectarian narrative and ultimately sectarian tensions.

The theorist, Paul Brass, also supports constructivism and instrumentalization by suggesting that identity is not primordial or predetermined, but that it is socially and/or politically constructed, and therefore changeable.[30] Additionally, he argues that the primary manipulators of identity are elites and that identity is derived from the

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[29] Hannibal Travis, "On the Existence of National Identity before 'Imagined Communities': The Example of the Assyrians of Mesopotamia, Anatolia, and Persia," (New York: SSRN, April 13, 2011), http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1721218.

[30] Paul R Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison* (New Delhi, India: Sage Publications, 1991).

interactions or competition between ruling elites and elites of non-dominant ethnic groups.[31] Essentially, Brass suggests that this competition and desire to appeal to an identity allows elites to "select, distort, and transform" the identity of a community.[32] To expand, constructivists have suggested that elite instrumentalization can explain ethnic and religious *violence,* not just identity manipulation;[33] that religious or ethnic violence is the result of political elite's attempts to hold or acquire power;[34] and that these elites purposefully manipulate along identity divisions when they feel their power is threatened.[35] Laitin and Fearon also suggested that "ethnic violence occurs when political elites construct antagonistic ethnic identities in order to strengthen their hold on power."[36] VP Gagnon, another prominent constructivist also asserted that

> violent conflict along ethnic cleavages is provoked by elites in order to create a domestic political context in which ethnicity is the only politically relevant identity…[and that] endangered elites can fend off domestic challengers who seek to mobilize the population against the status quo, and can better position themselves to deal with future challenges.[37]

Gagnon, and others like him, thus assert that sectarian *violence* is caused though the agency of individual actors in society who manipulate or instrumentalize identity for their own gain.

Unlike ethnic constructivists who have drawn causal lines between identity entrepreneurs and ethnic violence, most contemporary literature on sectarianism does not quite make this leap. Instead, contemporary authors focus on instrumentalization to explain sectarian tensions or conflict, but not necessarily sectarian violence. Lawrence

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[31] Ibid.; Stuart J Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).

[32] Ilana Kaufman, "Ethnic Affirmation or Ethnic Manipulation: The Case of the Druze in Israel," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 9, no. 4 (2004): 57.

[33] Omar Shahabudin McDoom, "The Psychology of Threat in Intergroup Conflict: Emotions, Rationality, and Opportunity in the Rwandan Genocide," *International Security* 37, no. 2 (2012): 124.; Fearon and Laitin, "Violence and the Social Construction of Ethnic Identity," 853.

[34] Fearon and Laitin, "Violence and the Social Construction of Ethnic Identity," 853.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Valere Philip Gagnon, "Ethnic Nationalism and International Conflict: The Case of Serbia," *International Security* (1994).

Potter whose edited volume details multiple case studies of Middle Eastern sectarianism concludes that sectarian conflict is promoted as a tactic of governments to "divide in order to rule."[38] Potter and other contemporary authors therefore see the rational agency of governments as one of the forces behind sectarianism, but do not expressly suggest that instrumentalization causes sectarian violence. Another contemporary author on sectarianism in the Middle East who strongly supports the notion of elite agency is Toby Matthiesen. Matthiesen focuses on domestic politics and believes sectarianism is caused by identity entrepreneurs who instrumentalize sectarianism to maintain their authority.[39] Matthiesen's asserts that ruling Arabian Gulf elites manipulated the democratic grievances of the 2011 Arab Spring protestors into issues of sectarianism in order to repress the uprisings.[40] Thus, Matthiesen is suggesting that elite instrumentalization of sectarianism was a willful tactic employed to repress Arab Spring contestations of authority. However, Matthiesen also fails to explain how or why these manipulated sectarian tensions do or do not amount to actual sectarian violence. Additionally, his thesis does well to explain sectarian conflict in the Gulf region, but fails to explain sectarianism in nations that may lack robust systems of patronage and religious authority.

The idea of elites repressing challenges to their authority by instrumentalizing an identity is also shared by another contemporary author, Kristin Diwan, who suggested that "Sectarian strife is not simply the product of entrenched communal divisions; rather it is contingent upon choices made by the ruling elite."[41] Thus, not only does Diwan deny the theory of ancient hatreds, but she is also prescribing agency to sectarian tensions. Like Matthiesen, Diwan's description of instrumentalization in Bahrain does well to describe *why* sectarian tensions exist, but fails to explain *how* these tensions can led to sectarian *violence*.

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[38] Lawrence G. Potter, "Introduction," in *Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf*, ed. Lawrence G. Potter (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 25–26.

[39] Toby Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab Spring That Wasn't* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).

[40] Ibid., viii-ix.

[41] Diwan, "Sectarian Politics," 143.

Many contemporary Middle Eastern authors also advocate that instrumentalization can be accomplished not just by the ruling elite, but also by important non-state actors. Matthiesen states that "Sectarianism was not just a government invention, but the result of an amalgam of political, religious, social, and economic elites who all used sectarianism to further their personal aims."[42] Fearon and Laitin, authors on ethnic conflict, also emphasize that "non-elites" can provoke violence and construct ethnic antagonisms, simply as a "result of individual strategic action."[43] This paper supports the notion that both ruling and non-ruling elites can effectively instrumentalize sectarianism and contribute to the creation of salient sectarian identities. Additionally, this thesis will interchange the terms "elites" with Hannibal Travis's term "identity entrepreneurs,"[44] because though the latter is a more encompassing term, the former is less cumbersome to the reader.

Both ethnic and sectarian constructivist theories on identity conflict have limitations as explanations for contemporary sectarian violence in the Middle East. According to the scholarship on ethnic violence, if elite instrumentalization is responsible for identity based violence, then sectarian violence would be rampant throughout the Middle East, rather than limited to a few particular locations.[45] Additionally, while contemporary sectarian scholarship does well to explain *why* elites instrumentalize sectarian identity, it does not adequately explain *how* this manipulation can lead to violence. It seems insufficient to suggest that widespread violent hatred can be created by elite instrumentalization without also explaining what factors allow a particular identity to be so salient or what structural aspects of the society exist that may precipitate violence. As expert Stuart Kaufman suggested, only focusing on the leaders and their ability to manipulate groups disregards the impact of grievances that make an identity

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[42] Emile Nakhleh, "Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab Spring that Wasn't," *Journal of Arabian Studies* 4, no. 1 (2014), 155–56.

[43] Fearon and Laitin, "Violence and the Social Construction of Ethnic Identity," 874.

[44] Travis, "On the Existence of National Identity before 'Imagined Communities': The Example of the Assyrians of Mesopotamia, Anatolia, and Persia."

[45] These locations being Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen, primarily.

salient.[46] Thus, elite instrumentalization must also take into account other variables, like grievances and state capacity, to adequately explain *how* sectarian violence is created.

To be fair, many authors have attempted to combine elite instrumentalization with other factors to develop more sufficient explanations. For example, Stuart Kaufman states that while elites manipulate group identity, ethnic violence results only when elite instrumentalization is combined with a perceived threat environment and a historical context of symbolic myths.[47] Oman Shahabudin McDoom also suggested that alone, elite manipulation was not an explanation for the Rwandan ethnic violence; when emotions of fear were combined with instrumentalization and structural opportunities, ethnic violence resulted.[48] This thesis takes a similar approach to the contribution of instrumentalization. It is a very important variable in explaining *why* sectarianism has recently increased, but it is not the only variable that has contributed to the increase in sectarian violence in the Middle East.

3.   Hypothesis 3: The Proxy War

The proxy war hypothesis is a contemporary explanation that purports that sectarianism in the Middle East is the result of the competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia for regional hegemony.[49] A critical notion of the proxy war hypothesis is that both Saudi Arabia and Iran use proxy agents in neighboring countries to carry out their bidding and quest for regional control. Because this hypothesis is adhered to by many realists in both government and academia, this theory will be explored in detail. First, a more detailed explanation of the proxy war hypothesis will be provided, followed by the history of Iran and Saudi's competition which gives background to the hypothesis. Then, the theoretical literature on proxy wars will be compared to the contemporary competition between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and Iran and how the proxy

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[46] Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War*.

[47] Ibid., 5–6.

[48] McDoom, "The Psychology of Threat in Intergroup Conflict: Emotions, Rationality, and Opportunity in the Rwandan Genocide," 124.

[49] Gregory Gause, "Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War," *The Brookings Doha Center*, no. 11 (2014): 1–2.

war hypothesis has explained sectarian violence in the Middle East will be detailed. Finally, both the shortcomings and applicability of this hypothesis will be discussed. Overall, the proxy war hypothesis contributes to this thesis because the competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia has provided the context in which sectarian identity has been be so salient.

The proxy war hypothesis is a rational interpretation of the events of the Middle East, purporting that the "best framework for understanding the regional politics of the Middle East is as a cold war in which Iran and Saudi Arabia play the leading roles."[50] This phrase, the "new Cold War" is useful both because it suggests the contest for regional hegemony between two balanced powers, Saudi and Iran, as a "realist geopolitical battle,"[51] and as a reference to Malcolm Kerr's, "the Arab Cold War," of the 1950s and 1960s, in which important regional players competed for power in the Middle East.[52] Malcolm Kerr suggests that through proxy wars, the power projection of principle actors was "measured in their ability to affect domestic political struggles in neighboring states" and in which "non-state actors played major roles."[53] These two key components, power projection into other states' domestic affairs and the participation of non-state actors (NSAs), make this "cold war" reference applicable to the current Middle Eastern conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

The proxy war hypothesis attributes agency to the state, not just to an individual or local group, in the increase of sectarian violence. The proxy war hypothesis suggests that rival states place "identity within the context of strategic interactions" and that "regimes invoke collective identities and norms in a competitive fashion to increase their power in the regional order and to protect themselves against similar bids by their

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[50] Ibid., 1.

[51] Bassel F Salloukh, "The Arab Uprisings and the Geopolitics of the Middle East," *The International Spectator* 48, no. 2 (2013): 33.

[52] Malcolm Kerr, *The Arab Cold War, Gamal Abd Ul-Nasir and His Rivals 1958–1970*, 3rd ed. (London: Oxford University Press 1971).

[53] Gause, "Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War," 1.

rivals."[54] In this definition, the collective identities and norms being invoked are sectarian, and the regimes competing are Iran and Saudi Arabia. This competition has therefore given both Saudi and Iran agency in the promulgation of sectarian violence. Their actions have been legitimized by their identity as a Sunni (Saudi Arabia) and a Shi'a (Iran) Islamic state, and carried out through their influence and involvement in the domestic affairs of neighboring states. Both nations have promoted both state and NSAs to compete in proxy battles in areas of conflict and/or instability.

Before exploring the literature that supports the proxy war hypothesis, the historical context of this competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia will be described. The rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran has its roots in the foundation of Iran in 1979. The creation of the Islamic Republic of Iran stood as a direct challenge to the conservative Islamic monarchy, Saudi Arabia's, claim of Islamic legitimacy.[55] Each nation's claim for legitimacy has been particularly caustic for the region because both nations Islamic claims fall along the Sunnis-Shi'ite divide.[56] Thus, according to the proxy war hypothesis, while the three and a half decades since 1979 have been interspersed with varying degrees of rivalry, from hesitant coordination to open conflict, it has only been in the past decade or so that this competition has shaped the identity of the greater Middle East.

The relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran can be described as generally tense and hostile with brief periods of calm. The 1980s were continuously wrought with tension as the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) attempted to export the Iranian Islamic revolution into the Gulf region and as Saudi Arabia openly supported Saddam Hussain's war effort against Iran in the Iran-Iraq War (1980–89).[57] Furthermore, Islamic Republic openly encouraged disenfranchised Shi'a from Saudi Arabia's Eastern Providence to riot against the Saudi monarchy, causing immediate concerns and hostility

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54 Shibley Telhami and Michael N Barnett, *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 27.

55 Gregory Gause, "Saudi-Iranian Rapprochement? The Incentives and the Obstacles," *Project on Middle East Political Science*, no. 7 (2014): 7.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid. Saudi jet fighters even shot down two Iranian jets in 1984.

between Iran and Saudi Arabia.[58] The 1990s did see a short period of rapprochement between Riyadh and Tehran as Saddam Hussain's invasion of Kuwait and his efforts to break into the world oil market damaged Saudi-Iraq relations and gave common cause to the Saudi-Iranian relationship.[59] Yet, this short-lived period of understanding came to an abrupt end when U.S. troops marched into Baghdad in 2003. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 disabled Iraq's capacity to serve as the third leg on the Middle Eastern balance-of-power stool between Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia—consequently heightening tensions and competition between Iran and KSA. Then, in 2005, the election of Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad ushered in nearly ten years of a hardline and openly hostile Iranian president, a far cry from the "reform era" of Ahmadinejad's predecessor, President Mohammad Khatami.[60] As the landscape of the Middle East began to change, so too did the relationship between the two dominate powers in the Middle East.

Throughout the start of the twenty-first century, the stability in the Middle East only became more precarious as the political vacuums left in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and finally Yemen, invited regional intervention and competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran.[61] Saudi Arabia and Iran were presented with new opportunities to extend their regional power and influence in the wake instability caused by the Iraqi civil war and Arab Spring uprisings. The fall of Saddam Hussein and the Afghani Taliban ousted two key rivals on Iran's boarders, providing favorable conditions for the expansion of Iran's influence into the Middle East.[62] Furthermore, the Arab Spring, in part, mobilized minority Shi'a populations in predominately Sunni nations, threatening Sunni regime's stability and heightening Iran's potential influence. Thus, the recent instability caused by revolution and war in the Middle East has ushered in a new and more pronounced chapter of competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

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[58] W Andrew Terrill, "The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry and the Future of Middle East Security," *Current Politics and Economics of the Middle East* 3, no. 4 (2012): 30.

[59] Gause, "Saudi-Iranian Rapprochement?," 7–8.

[60] Shirin Ebadi and Azadeh Moaveni, *Iran Awakening: One Woman's Journey to Reclaim Her Life and Country* (New York: Random House, 2007), 180.

[61] Gause, "Saudi-Iranian Rapprochement?," 9.

[62] Michael Wahid Hanna and Dalia Dassa Kaye, "The Limits of Iranian Power," *Survival* 57, no. 5 (2015): 174.

The history of the conflict between Saudi and Iran makes relevant the literature on proxy wars because the literature can explain how and why identity is embedded in strategic interactions between competing nations. Andrew Mumford, in his book, *Proxy Warfare,* defines proxy wars as "the indirect engagement in a conflict by third parties wishing to influence its strategic outcome. They are constitutive of a relationship between a benefactor, and their chosen proxies, who are the conduit for weapons, training, and funding from the benefactor."[63] In Mumford's context, Saudi Arabia and Iran would be the benefactors of the proxy agents. Furthermore, the proxy war hypothesis suggests that these "interventions are undertaken ostensibly for reasons of maximizing interest, while at the same time minimizing risk."[64] Thus, when Saudi Arabia and Iran fund religiously motivated proxy groups, they employ a cost-efficient way to spread power and influence in the region. Mumford also suggests that proxy wars are typically conducted by states hoping to exploit localized events to create a "shift in the wider geopolitical environment,"[65] a goal the proxy war hypothesis suggests Iran and KSA have. Similarly, authors Maoz and San-Akca have suggested in their study, "Rivalry and State Support of Non-State Armed Groups (NAGs)," that in conflict-torn environments, the state/NAG cooperation is an effective state tool to target a rival power directly or indirectly, and is particularly effective when the NAG and the state share a mutual rival target.[66] Both Mumford and Maoz/Akca's descriptions of proxy wars and state/non-state alliances provide a definitional foundation for the proxy war hypothesis.

A state's motivation to utilize proxy agents, a key component of the hypothesis, is explained by author Frederic Pearson. Pearson identifies six primary reasons a state would intervene in another country, three of which are relevant to the proxy war hypothesis: "protection of social groups, ideology, and regional power balances."[67]

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[63] Andrew Mumford, *Proxy Warfare* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 11.

[64] Ibid.

[65] Ibid.

[66] Zeev Maoz and Belgin San-Akca, "Rivalry and State Support of Non-State Armed Groups (NAGS), 1946–2011," *International Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (2012): 720–21.

[67] Frederic S Pearson, "Foreign Military Interventions and Domestic Disputes," *International Studies Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (1974): 262.

Mumford believes Pearson's inclusion of ideology along with regional power balance is an incredibly important explanation for engaging in proxy wars, and that ideologies can shape and/or be intertwined with state interests.[68] This conceptualization of proxy war engagement is important because it recognizes both the constructivist's focus on the role of ideology as well as the realist's belief in the importance of national interests (or power). Even Hans Morgenthau, an avowed classical realist, supports this entwinement of ideology and interest when he says that there has always been an important "interplay between ideology and power politics."[69] Morgenthau further suggests that "Ideologies have been an independent motivating force" and that, "[Ideology] does not respect national boundaries…It finds enemies and allies in all countries…regardless of the niceties of international law."[70] This acceptance of ideology's role in proxy war conflict is directly applicable to this thesis because the proxy war hypothesis believes that Iran and Saudi Arabia's national security interests have been informed by their ideological association to Shi'a and Sunni Islam. Helle Malmvig argues that both Saudi Arabia and Bahrain have accused local dissident groups of being under the control or influence of Iran (e.g., being a proxy for Iran), thus transforming a potentially local or political issue into a sectarian one.[71] Malmvig concludes that, "The Sunni-Shi'a…rivalry…obviously serves to exacerbate sectarianism [and] makes ample room for the political instrumentalization of sectarian divides."[72] Additionally, Vali Nasr notes that "Saudi leaders say that the two things they won't compromise on are their faith and their security. The first they aver is threated by Shiism, the second by Iran."[73] These authors make clear that in the proxy war hypothesis, religious ideology and national security interests have become intertwined, resulting in sectarianism as a key motivator of regional competition and in determining friend or foe. This correlation between sectarian

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[68] Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, 36.

[69] Hans J Morgenthau, "To Intervene or Not to Intervene," *Foreign affairs* 45, no. 3 (1967): 428.

[70] Ibid.

[71] Helle Malmvig, "Ambiguous Endings: Middle East Regional Security in the Wake of the Arab Uprisings and the Syrian Civil War," *Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS)* 23 (2013): 23.

[72] Ibid.

[73] Vali Nasr, "The War for Islam," *Foreign Policy,* January 22, 2016,, http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/01/22/the-war-for-islam-sunni-shiite-iraq-syria/.

identity and national interests has led to the assumption that the ideology determines the alliance, rather than the alliance determining the ideology; for example, if a proxy group is Shi'a, they are assumed to be allied with Iran because of their common ideological adherence to Shiism. As will be expanded upon further when addressing the inadequacies of this hypothesis, this thesis suggests that there are fundamental flaws in the sweeping assumption of ideological alliances.

The proxy war hypothesis has applied the existing literature on proxy wars to the historical competition between Saudi and Iran to deduce that current sectarian violence in the Middle East is a result of the proxy wars between Saudi and Iran. Gregory Gause repeatedly asserts that Saudi Arabia and Iran indirectly fight one another by sponsoring sectarian state and non-state actors to engage in proxy wars on the battlefields of weakened Arab states.[74] Additionally, while Gause believes that "Saudi Arabia and Iran did not create the state weakness and sectarian identities in these countries, they are certainly taking advantage, [and] advancing their own interests in a classic balance of power game."[75] Gause sees an important "bottom-up" driving force behind sectarian violence, suggesting that sectarianism's saliency is a result of proxy groups engaging in sectarian outbidding as they compete among each other for Saudi or Iran's backing to gain legitimacy, recognition, and resources.[76] This outbidding has consequently led to more extremist sectarian discourse and sectarian violence.[77] Bassel Salloukh takes a more top-down approach to explaining the violence by suggesting that sectarian violence is simply a "spillover" or the result of the "realist geopolitical battle" between Saudi Arabia and Iran.[78] Salloukh sees the contestation of power between KSA and Iran as facilitating elites' instrumental use of sectarianism in domestic politics and allows local actors to disrupt popular, democratic uprisings into "veritable civil wars."[79] Similarly, Helle

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[74] Gause, "Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War," 1.

[75] Ibid., 11.

[76] Ibid., 9–11.

[77] Maoz and San-Akca, "Rivalry and State Support," 722.; Gause, *Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War,* 10.

[78] Salloukh, "The Arab Uprisings and the Geopolitics of the Middle East," 33.

[79] Ibid.

Malmvig argues that the regional turmoil and violence caused by the Arab Spring and the Syrian Civil War has created a shift in regional foreign policies along sectarian lines as Iran and Saudi Arabia compete for power.[80] Thus, though in different ways, these authors all argue that the contestation for power between Iran and Saudi explains sectarianism and sectarian violence in the Middle East.

In summary, this section has detailed the history of tensions between KSA and Iran, the scholarly basis of the proxy war hypothesis, and how contemporary authors have used this hypothesis to explain sectarian violence in the Middle East. The following section will expand this discussion to address the limitations of the proxy war hypothesis in explaining sectarian violence, but will also suggest that the regional competition between Saudi and Iran has facilitated the saliency of sectarian identity.

a. Limits of Explanatory Capacity of the Proxy War Hypothesis

Discerning the validity of the proxy war hypothesis requires differentiating reality from perception when evaluating the power projection capacity of Iran and Saudi Arabia. The proxy war hypothesis has its limitations in explanatory value because of the actual limitations of Iranian and Saudi Arabian proxy sponsorship, and because contributing such agency to Iran and Saudi Arabia diminishes critical domestic politics that have greatly affected sectarianism within individual nations.

An overreach of the proxy war hypothesis is its use as a general explanation for sectarian tensions, conflict, or violence, even in areas with limited Iranian or Saudi Arabian influence. Most authors agree that proxy agents have been impactful in contributing to sectarian violence in Iraq and Syria due to the conflict, instability, and state collapse there;[81] however, it is highly debated as to how impactful the regional rivalry between KSA and Iran has been in causing sectarian conflict in other areas. Lebanon, Palestine, Yemen, Bahrain, and the Eastern provinces of Saudi Arabia, and to a lesser extent, even Kuwait, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, have also all been categorized as battle-grounds for Iran and Saudi's regional competition. Unfortunately, this sweeping

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[80] Malmvig, "Ambiguous Endings," 23.

[81] Such as Syria and Iraq; Gause, "Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War," 1.

generalization of what categorizes a "proxy war battle-ground" muddies connections of causality and does not allow for a clear distinction of direct or indirect involvement by KSA and Iran.[82] If this important distinction is glossed over, the difference between state-sponsored encouragement and state-sponsored armament, and between sectarian tensions and sectarian violence, is lost; the rivalry of Saudi Arabia and Iran is given far greater agency than this thesis will support.

Figure 2 is a chart that depicts this more sweeping assumption of agency and shows alliances between Iran and Saudi Arabia and their supposed proxy groups. Figure 3 simply maps the concentrations of Shi'a within the Middle East.
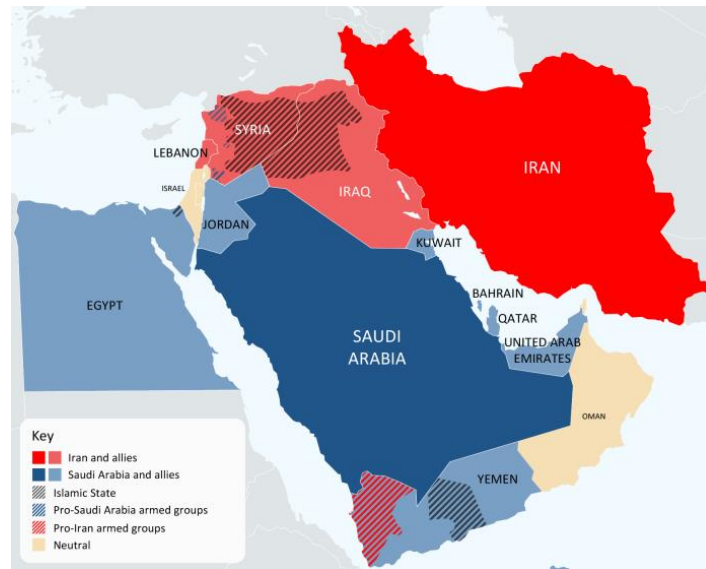
Figure 1. Sectarian Competition[83]

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[82] Geneive Abdo, "Talking About Reform in Bahrain," *Project on Middle East Political Science*, no. 4 (2013): 16.

[83] Andre Colling to Red24, Sectarian Competition – Saudi Arabia and Iran Jostle for Regional Hegemony, January 7, 2016, https://opinion.red24.com/2016/01/07/sectarian-compional-hegemony/.

Lines in the Sand: Shiites as % of Muslim Population
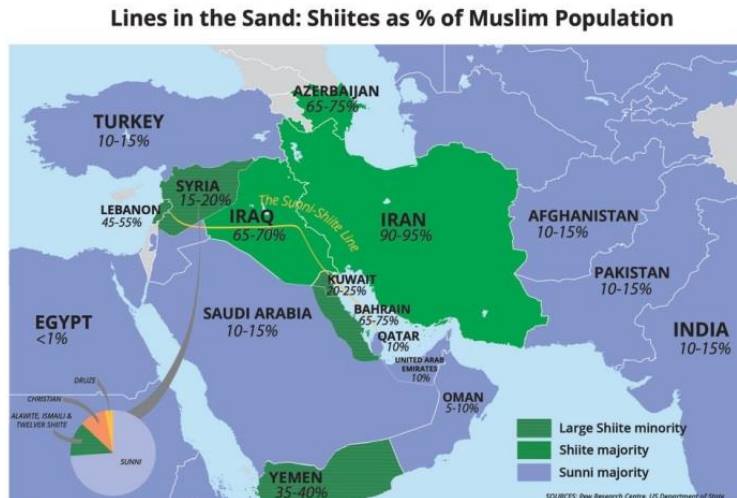
Figure 2. Lines in the Sand: Shi'ites as a Percentage of the Muslim Population[84]

The important takeaway from the two charts is in their juxtaposition. The implication made by Figure 2 and the proxy war hypothesis writ large, is that locations that have a large Shi'a population are also allied to Iran, and those that are predominantly Sunni are allied to Saudi Arabia. Thus, images such as Figure 2 emphasize the perception that the Middle East is either pro-Saudi or pro-Iranian, simply because of sectarian beliefs. This thesis finds the sectarian connection demonstrated by these figures to be an oversimplification that degrades the attributes of the proxy war hypothesis.

Another key assumption made by the proxy war hypothesis is that Iran is a powerful regional hegemon that is capable of projecting its power throughout the Middle East. This assumption deserves scrutiny because arguably, contemporary sectarian conflicts have actually hampered Iran's ability to project power and influence in the region. The sectarianization of the Middle East has caused Iran to fight to "maintain a diminishing sphere of influence rather than posing a rising challenge to the region."[85] With Shi'a holding a minority status in the Middle East, the increase of sectarian based divisions is a losing proposition for Iran, a nation that espouses to be the defenders of

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[84] TemplateFans to Datemplate, 14 Photos of Middle East Sunni-Shia Map, June 7, 2014, http://www.datemplate.com/post_middle-east-sunni-shia-map_424199/.

[85] Hanna and Kaye, "The Limits of Iranian Power," 183.

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Shi'a throughout the world.[86] Furthermore, as Iran's capacity has diminished so too has their control over co-religionist groups. As Laurence Louër asserts, "the time is over when the Islamic Republic could claim unconditional allegiance from all the Shi'a Islamic movements. Hence the time is over when one could analyze them as mere proxies of Iranian foreign policy."[87] Similarly, Yemeni expert Peter Salisbury argues that characterizing the Yemeni Houthis as a "true proxy of Iran" that "shares Tehran's wider goals, is to oversimplify the relationship involved and overstate the degree to which such claims can be substantiated."[88] Instead, Iran appears to have less capacity than the proxy war hypothesis would suggest. Lastly, Iran is competing in a region largely comprised of Sunnis and Sunni-run governments, and following a series of set-backs in Iraq, Syria, and Palestine, Iran's actions may be more geared toward preserving their survival than offensively asserting power.[89]

Iran and Saudi Arabia's balance of power capacity is greatly reduced when the political landscape is painted as simply Shi'a versus Sunni. Consider that in the past, Iran has relied on non-Shi'a actors to exert its influence, like its sponsorship of Hamas in Palestine, its close ties to the Sunni government of Sudan, and even its support for the Egyptian Sunni Muslim Brotherhood's candidate, Muhammad Morsi. Since the heightening of sectarian tensions, Iran has seen these alliances recede.[90] Likewise for Saudi Arabia, "the extent that political tensions in the region become increasingly and rigidly sectarian, the Saudi government loses the flexibility necessary to both block and engage Teheran simultaneously."[91] Saudi Arabia also has a sizable minority Shi'a population within their own borders, a group whose stability is degraded as sectarianism

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[86] Ibid.

[87] Laurence Louër, "The State and Sectarian Identities in the Persian Gulf Monarchies: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait in Comparative Perspective," in *Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf* ed. Lawrence G. Potter (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 17.

[88] Peter Salisbury, *Yemen and the Saudi–Iranian "Cold War"* (London: Chatham House, 2015), 3.

[89] Hanna and Kaye, "The Limits of Iranian Power," 183.

[90] Ibid., 185.

[91] Gause, "Saudi Arabia: Iraq, Iran, the Regional Power Balance, and the Sectarian Question," 1.

is heightened. Thus, to some extent, Saudi and Iran's interests cannot be driven by religious ideology alone if they are to preserve their own survival and interests.[92]

Though the Iranian and Saudi regional rivalry and sponsorship of proxy groups has existed for decades, the drastic increase in sectarianism and regional instability that followed the 2003 Iraq invasion and 2011 Arab Spring suggests that other factors have impacted sectarian violence in the region. Consider that as recent as 2006, Nasrallah, the head of Hezbollah, was found to be the "most admired world leader" and the Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, to be the "third most admired," in an Arab Annual Public Opinion Survey conducted in the Sunni nations of Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).[93] This fact suggests that even as late as 2006, fears of Iran, and the Shi'a threat more broadly, were not as pronounced as they would become in the years beyond 2011.

Despite indications that other regional factors may have contributed to sectarianism, there still appears to be a "near-hysterical focus on the existential threat of a meddling Iran."[94] This threat has "served to alarm ordinary Sunnis throughout the Gulf, spreading anti-Shi'i sentiment even to places with little history of sectarian politics (Yemen and Kuwait) and countries home to marginal Shi'i populations (UAE and Qatar)."[95] This fear has galvanized the proxy war hypothesis and has contributed to the belief Iran and Saudi Arabia have a plethora of proxy agents serving their interests and contributing to regional sectarian tensions and even violence. The proxy war hypothesis has also galvanized the assumption that there is "coherence of the 'Sunni' side of the conflict" in a "long-standing power struggle with Iran."[96] This over emphasis on the proxy war hypothesis to explain sectarianism in the Middle East has diminished the impacts of state collapse and elite instrumentalization on sectarian violence. Frederic

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[92] Thomas Pierret, "External Support and the Syrian Insurgency," *Foreign Policy* 9 (2013): 25.

[93] Hanna and Kaye, "The Limits of Iranian Power," 183–84.

[94] Justin Gengler, "Understanding Sectarianism in the Persian Gulf," in *Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf*, ed. Lawrence G. Potter (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 58.

[95] Ibid.

[96] Marc Lynch, "The War for the Arab World " *Project on Middle East Political Science*, no. 4 (2013): 9.

Wehrey eloquently summarizes, while "the Saudi-Iran rivalry and the Syria war have certainly heighted sectarian tensions in the Gulf… these factors are ultimately enablers, rather than root causes."[97] Thus, while the proxy war hypothesis can contribute to an understanding of sectarian conflict in the Middle East, overemphasizing the proxy war hypothesis diminishes recognition of other key variables that contribute to sectarian violence.

The merits of the proxy war hypothesis follow Wehrey's line of thinking—the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia has contributed to the saliency of sectarian identity and provided critical contextualization for sectarian narrative building. The competition between the two nations has become a way in which conflict in the Middle East is perceived—it has created a sectarian lens in which tensions and violence are viewed. Furthermore, the influence and interference that does come from Saudi and Iran has contributed to conflict escalation. Steven Lobell and Philip Mauceri suggest that "transnational penetration and foreign meddling in domestic politics will be more effective against divided societies, becoming a battle-ground for outside powers, and thereby contributing to the escalation of ethnic conflict."[98] This phenomenon has clearly been seen in places of severe conflict such as Iraq and Syria. Thus, the division of societies along sectarian lines is further heightened with the external meddling of both Saudi Arabia and Iran, thereby escalating sectarianism and sectarian divisions within individual nations. Lastly, because of the potency of the proxy war hypothesis, instrumentalist have perpetuated the perception of Iran or Saudi's influence to delegitimize local actors and emphasis their sectarian cleavages. In both case studies that will be presented, key leaders in Bahrain and Yemen have accused Shi'a dissidents of being proxy actors for Iran, a claim that in the current environment created by Iran and Saudi's rivalry was very effective in delegitimizing opposition voices. While the proxy war hypothesis has provided key literature and analysis on the impacts of Saudi and

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[97] Frederic Wehrey, "The Roots and Future of Sectarianism in the Gulf," *Project on Middle East Political Science* no. 7 (2014): 27.

[98] Steven E Lobell and Philip Mauceri, *Ethnic Conflict and International Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 5.

Iran's rivalry on sectarian saliency and local politics, other structural factors, like state capacity, are also critical in determining how sectarian violence is actually mobilized.

Figure 3.   Saudi Arabia Takes over the Middle East[99]
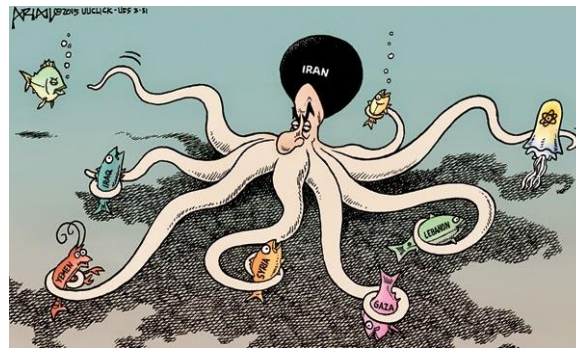
Figure 4.   Iran Takes over the Middle East[100]

These two images juxtapose the similar feelings of Saudi and Iranian influence in the Middle East, simply depending on the perspective.

4.   Hypothesis 4: The Collapsed State Theory

The state collapse theory posits that the recent rise of sectarian violence in the Middle East has been the result of collapsed states. Characteristics of a collapsed state, such as the lack of economic stability, protection, law and order, and even basic

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[99] Sajjad Jafari, "Cartoon of Saudi Arabia as an Octopus in the Middle East," in *Professor A.L.I Word Press (Blog)*, posted January 2, 2016, https://professorali.com/.

[100] Robert Ariail, "Iran's Tentacles," *Blog Spot,* 2015, tonyphyrillas.blogspot.com

resources, can perpetuate competition for power and the necessity for security and stability. Furthermore, the collapse of the state institutions degrades the importance of a national identity, providing space for new identity groups to become significant. This section defines the term "state collapse" and presents the state collapse hypothesis' assumptions; the necessity of the state apparatus, the impact of the process of state collapse on society, and how identity groups become more salient during times of collapse. Finally, this section concludes by suggesting a limitation of the state collapse hypothesis on fully explaining the rise in sectarian violence in the Middle East.

State collapse, failure, or weakness are all terms that vary in meaning based on the context and agenda in which they are being used for.[101] This thesis will use the term "collapsed" or "collapsing" state to describe a state that lacks capacity or legitimacy. Thus, collapsed states are "no longer just those that face constraints in terms of resources and economic viability,"[102] but states that no longer have political legitimacy, institutional capacity, or the ability to maintain protection of their borders and citizens.[103]

Literature on state collapse assumes the necessity of the state apparatus. As author Sarah Phillips described, the concept of failed states has "trouble imagining the possibility that security can exist beyond—or despite—the formal state."[104] This perspective suggests a Hobbesian view of mankind—submission to a central authority is better than civil war because the nature of man is to be at war with one another.[105] The collapsed state hypothesis therefore prescribes to the belief that a capable state, even an authoritarian state, can prevent man's natural propensity toward competition and conflict. This line of logic therefore concludes that if a state ceases to function and degrades into a condition of collapse, conflict is possible, if not probable. This point is reflected by

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[101] Mehran Kamrava et al., "Fragile Politics: Weak States in the Greater Middle East," ed. Mehran Kamrava (London: Hurst Publishers, 2014).

[102] Ibid., 0.

[103] Ibid.

[104] Sarah Phillips, "Questioning Failure, Stability, and Risk in Yemen," in *Fragile Politics: Weak States in the Greater Middle East,* ed. Mehran Kamrava (London: Hurst Publishers, 2014).

[105] "Hobbes's Moral and Political Philosophy," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Stanford University, 2002; reprint, February 25, 2014).

writers on ethnic conflict like Lake and Rothchild, Stuart Kaufman, and Marc Ross, who all believe that the effects of a collapsing state, particularly one riddled with tensions and grievances, can be enough to produce violence.[106] While this thesis certainly will not advocate authoritarian governance, it does agree with the conclusions that state capacity serves an important role in preventing anarchy and violence.

This thesis utilizes the term "state collapse" instead of "state failure" in an effort to emphasize the importance of the *process* of collapse rather than the static condition of failure. In other words, it is the destabilizing impact of the transition, from a weak state to a collapsed state, which has the greatest impact in the creation of violent hostilities and conflict. As the state begins to collapse, government support becomes increasingly partisan, security vanishes, government spending on essential resources is reduced, and the state's legitimacy crumbles.[107] Additionally, Beverly Crawford argues that in states where old social contracts "guided the allocation of political and economic resources" along ethnic or religious lines, state collapse can increase the "odds of cultural conflict and even violence."[108] Barry Posen's security dilemma also focuses on the impact of state collapse by suggesting that when a state is "confronted with structural collapse, one ethnic group cannot distinguish defensive from offensive security measures taken by the other group to protect itself in the 'emerging anarchy.'"[109] Posen argues that state collapse precipitates a condition of chaos and anarchy that causes groups to resort to violence by attacking other groups preemptively,[110] claiming that "the drive for security in one group is so great that it produces near-genocidal behavior toward neighboring groups."[111] The idea of the security dilemma is also referred to by Stuart Kaufman as the

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[106] McDoom, "The Psychology of Threat in Intergroup Conflict: Emotions, Rationality, and Opportunity in the Rwandan Genocide."

[107] Robert I Rotberg, "Failed States in a World of Terror," *Foreign Affairs* 81, no. 4 (2002): 128–30.

[108] Beverly Crawford, ed., *The Causes of Cultural Conflict: An Institutional Approach*, vol. 98, of *International and Area Studies Berkeley, California Research Series: The Myth of "Ethnic" Conflict: Politics, Economics, and "Cultural" Violence* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, Berkeley International and Area Research Series, 1998), 5.

[109] Barry R Posen, "The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict," *Survival* 35, no. 1 (1993): 27.

[110] Ibid.

[111] Ibid., 30.

"spiral of insecurity"—groups compete for their own self-defense when the state is unable to defend them.[112] Thus, what contributes most greatly to sectarian or ethnic violence is not how strong a state was prior to collapse or even how weak it becomes after collapse. Instead, it is the breaking down of the state's contracts, legitimacy, capacity, and protection, which occur during the process of state collapse that facilitates violence.

The state collapse hypothesis also argues that identity divisions become more salient in times of crises because people look toward known identity groups for protection and to gain authority or control. When the state collapses, security, capacity, and legitimacy are diminished, creating space for competition and disorder that necessitates group cohesion. People mobilize "looking for redress along ethnic, religious, or linguistic lines,"[113] allowing historical grievances and in-group and out-group dynamics to redefine society.[114] These identity divides are further fueled as power vacuums, created by the absence of state authority, present competitive opportunities for secession, autonomy, or control.[115] Omar McDoom's research on Rwandan genocide asserts that identities become more salient in threat environments and lead to in-group bias and out-group negativity.[116] For McDoom, it is the psychology of threat that creates emotions that drive societal polarizations.[117] A collapsing state produces an environment of threat, competition, and therefore, identity group saliency.

A weakness of the state collapse theory is that it fails to elucidate which identity societies will divide along during times of state collapse. In other words, though the state collapse theory can predict a commensurate collapse of national identity, it cannot predict a commensurate rise of another identity. As described in a 2013 Middle Eastern Security Report, "state weakness tends to encourage saliency with identities that do not align with

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[112] Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War*, 9.

[113] Rotberg, "Failed States in a World of Terror," 130.

[114] Ibid.

[115] Ibid.

[116] McDoom, "The Psychology of Threat in Intergroup Conflict: Emotions, Rationality, and Opportunity in the Rwandan Genocide," 131.

[117] Ibid.

the nation-state, such as sect, ethnicity, or tribe."[118] As the state becomes weak, the identity that ties people to the state does, as well. Thus, explaining what has caused the rise in *sectarian* violence in the Middle East can only be partially answered by the state collapse theory. The state collapse hypothesis can facilitate an explanation for the rise in violence, but other variables, such as those presented in the previous hypotheses, are necessary to explain the rise of sectarianism. This limitation of state collapse therefore suggests that this thesis argument, which combines the four hypotheses explored, is better poised to explain the recent rise in sectarian violence than any single hypothesis in isolation.

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[118] Aaron Reese, "Sectarian and Regional Conflict in the Middle East," *Middle East Security Report* (2013): 7.

II.   BAHRAIN CASE STUDY

The Bahrain case study will focus on exploring the first three IVs, grievances, instrumentalism, and the proxy war, and how these have specifically affected sectarian sentiment and tensions in the country of Bahrain. Though Bahrain has had a long history of sectarian divisions, the small island nation has coexisted peacefully with only a few intermittent exceptions. However, in 2011, the Arab Spring brought forth a wave of public grievances, transforming an otherwise stable country into one of widespread protests and disruption. The government of Bahrain (GoB) responded to these protests by emphasizing sectarian identities as a method of dividing and delegitimizing protestors and reducing the popular, cross-sectarian support of the movement. The context of the Iran/Saudi Arabian rivalry was also a very salient and important part of Bahrain's sectarian discourse as the proximity and history of Bahrain to both countries has made influences by both more impactful. This chapter will focus on the three IVs—grievances, instrumentalization, and regional contextualization—to explain Bahrain's sectarian tensions, but will do so largely within the context of the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011. By exploring the IVs of grievances, instrumentalization, and the contextualization of the regional proxy war, it will become clear how sectarian identity became mobilized and activated in Bahrain. However, unlike Yemen, because Bahrain's state remained strong and capable, these sectarian tensions did not escalate into sectarian violence.

A.   HISTORY OF GRIEVANCES

Bahrain has a long history of a Sunni minority ruling over a Shi'a majority, a narrative that has, in part, defined the nation. The small island of Bahrain is only about 3.5 times larger than the city of Washington, DC and is home to some 1.3 million inhabitants.[119] Of these 1.3 million inhabitants, over half are foreign nationals who live in Bahrain on work visas and without full citizenship rights.[120] It is currently estimated that

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[119] UNICEF, "UNICEF Statistics- Bahrain," September 5, 2015, http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/bahrain_statistics.html.

[120] "Bahrain Population 2016," World Population Review, May 5, 2016, http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/bahrain-population/.

between 60–75% of Bahraini's are Shi'a—a wide estimation because no official census has been permitted to ask this question since 1941.[121]

Originally, Bahrain was inhabited by Shi'a Arabs and governed as a dependency of the Persian Empire (Iran) until a Bani Utub Sunni tribe from the Arabian Peninsula, headed by the Al-Khalifa family, conquered the island in 1784.[122] From that point on, a system of tribal patronage has resulted in the "haves and have not's," and has been the primary source of grievances in Bahrain. While the Al-Khalifa family is Sunni, throughout its ruling history, "its allies [have included] prominent tribal and merchant families from Sunni and Shi'a, Arab and Persian communities."[123] Thus, Shi'a and Sunni divides have not always been as impactful as they are today.

Over the last two centuries, and every decade since 1920,[124] opposition movements have not simply been Shi'a uprisings, but rather have been generated from transnational ideologies. Popular ideologies like communism, Arab Nationalism, secular nationalism, and democratic revolution have all instigated cross-sectarian and cross-class political mobilization against the Al-Khalifa regime.[125] For example, in both the 1950s and the 1970s, nationalist movements united leftists and nationalists in both the Shi'a and Sunni communities against the regime.[126] The 1950s saw the creation of a cross-sectarian social movement and the formation of the Higher Executive Committee that openly challenged the ruler, Sheikh Salman bin Hamad Al-Khalifa, and his longstanding British advisor, Sir Charles Belgrave.[127] Then, two decades later, a voting coalition was formed

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[121] Gengler, "Ethnic Conflict," 123. "The mere number of Sunnis and Shi'is in the populace is a veritable state secret, having been last measured officially (i.e., revealed publically) in the nation's very first census of 1941."

[122] Diwan, "Sectarian Politics," 148.

[123] Jane Kinninmont, "Bahrain: Beyond the Impasse," (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2012), v.

[124] Sustained and organized campaigns for more rights occurred at regular intervals in 1921–23, 1934–35, 1938, 1947–48, 1953–56, 1965, 1975, 1981–82, 1994–96, 2002, 2011; Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Bahrain's Uprising: Regional Dimensions and International Consequences," *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 2, no. 1 (2013): 2.

[125] Diwan, "Sectarian Politics," 147.

[126] Ulrichsen, "Bahrain's Uprising," 2.

[127] Ibid.; Diwan, "Sectarian Politics," 151.

by the liberal People's Block and the more conservative Sunni Religious Block during the 1973 parliamentary elections.[128]

This cross-sectarian cooperation, particularly in 1973, challenged the historical systems of patronage and division the Al-Khalifa family had been using to maintain their power base. In fact, the 1973 parliamentary Sunni—Shi'a voting coalition was so powerful, the ruling family dissolved the parliament and another one would not be created until 2002.[129] After the parliament was reinstated in 2002, the King took unilateral action to cripple its capacity to govern, once more erupting protests that involved a broad range of political societies and "collectively spanned the ideological and religious spectrum."[130] The examples provided demonstrate that the constituency of Bahrain has repeatedly felt aggrieved by the ruling elite, but that the identity lines upon which these grievances fell has changed with contemporary factors that have rendered some identities more salient than others, at different times. Thus, these details put to rest any theories that ancient hatreds between Shi'a and Sunni have impacted the current sectarian discourse in Bahrain.

1.   Grievances, Historical and Contemporary

The grievances that comprised the basis of the Arab Spring protests in Bahrain indeed had some distinct cross-sectarian commonalities, but there have also been clearly held grievances in the Shi'a community because of the systematic exclusion and marginalization Bahraini Shi'a have experienced politically, socially, and economically since the 1980s. Shi'a, in particular, make up a larger portion of lower class in Bahrain as compared to Sunnis, and have felt aggrieved because of sectarian discrimination in the job market, shortages of affordable housing, and general unemployment. Additionally, Shi'a have been excluded from public sector jobs, particularly in areas of national defense, and have had their limited voting rights diminished though gerrymandering and Sunni naturalization techniques.

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[128] Ulrichsen, "Bahrain's Uprising," 2.

[129] Ibid.

[130] Ibid.

The exclusion of Shi'a in Bahrain politically and economically became more firmly entrenched following the regional politicization of Shi'a as a result of the 1979 Iranian revolution. Then in 1981, an Iranian-supported coup plot by Bahraini Shi'a, who were associated with the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB), was uncovered and drastically altered the perception of Shi'a and their relationship with the ruling family.[131] This event, along with the general fear of Shi'a mobilization as a result of Iran attempting to export their revolution, encouraged the GoB to excluded Shi'a from key public sector jobs and politics. An important nuance to understand in Bahrain, and elsewhere in the Arab Gulf, is that "public-sector employment does not lead to political allegiance," instead, "political allegiance leads to public-sector employment."[132] This key fact is largely why Bahrain's Shi'a have been discriminated more so politically and economically than their Sunni counterparts, but also why there has been cross-sectarian disgruntlement over patronage, corruption, and employment opportunities. A Sunni who disagrees with the administration is just as unlikely as a Shi'a who disagrees to get a job in the public-sector. However, statistically, Bahraini Sunnis are more inclined to support the regime, thus supporting the perception of discrimination along sectarian lines.[133] Either way, the result is that Sunnis are nearly 40% more likely to be employed in Bahrain's public sector, even after considering other relevant individual factors.[134] Additionally, not only are Shi'a excluded from public-sector jobs more readily, but it also is more common for them to hold lower-level jobs when they are employed, both in the public and private sectors.[135] This makes Bahraini Shi'a more likely to be competing with the foreign labor force than their Sunni counterparts, adding to Shi'a's anger at the government's failure to reform job growth opportunities for Bahraini citizens and hold businesses accountable for employing cheap foreign labor.[136]

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[131] Kinninmont, "Bahrain: Beyond the Impasse," 14.

[132] Gengler, "Ethnic Conflict," 288.

[133] Ibid., 175.

[134] Ibid., 287–88.

[135] Ibid., 288.

[136] Kinninmont, "Bahrain: Beyond the Impasse," 19.

The exclusion of Shi'a from the public sector, particular the security forces, grew steadily throughout the 1990s. From 1994–1999 the regime faced its longest uprising to date when citizens, the majority of whom were Shi'a, demanded "the return of the parliament, the end of the state of emergency, and measures to create jobs."[137] The result of the uprising was further entrenched distrust of the Shi'a population and a reinforcement of the regime's sectarian preferences in public employment. Up until that time, young Shi'a men heavily relied on the armed services for employment, despite being relegated to positions of non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and foot soldiers.[138] The inclusion of Shi'a in the public sector, and of Shi'a and Sunnis working closely together, was viewed as threatening to the GoB. Thus, the regime's sectarian profiling has left the four major security bodies of Bahrain—the Bahrain Defense Force, the National Guard, the police forces in the Ministry of Interior, and the National Security Agency—almost entirely comprised of Bahraini Sunni and foreign mercenaries, and headed almost exclusively by Al-Khalifa family members.[139] Within the NSA alone, which in 2009 employed 1000 people, 64% were non-Bahrainis, and of the 36% that were Bahraini, only 4% were Shi'a.[140] Generally speaking, Shi'a are excluded from the security services and from positions of leadership when they are employed in these organizations, and foreigners from southeast and south Asia account for large numbers, and even in some organizations like the Special Security Force Command (SSFC), the majority of the servicemen.[141]

In addition to the exclusion of Shi'a from the security apparatus in Bahrain, the already limited opportunities for Shi'a and Sunnis to vote have been skewed to reduce the voting capacity of Shi'a populations. The Lower House of Parliament, the elected body

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[137] Ibid., 16.

[138] Laurence Louër, "Sectarianism and Coup-Proofing Strategies in Bahrain," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36, no. 2 (2013): 247.

[139] Ibid., 246.

[140] "Bahrain: Dangerous Statistics and Facts about the National Security Apparatus," BCHR, March 5, 2009, www.bahrainrights.org/node/2784.

[141] "Mercenaries in Bahrain: The Cruel Crackdown of the Uprising," *Islamic Human Rights Commission*, April 29, 2014, http://www.ihrc.org.uk/publications/briefings/11005-mercenaries-in-bahrain-the-cruel-crackdown-of-the-uprising.

of representatives (as opposed to the Upper House which is appointed by the King), had as of 2010, 45% Shi'a and 55% Sunni representatives.[142] Considering the fact that Shi'a make up a clear majority of Bahrain's citizens (at least 55–75%), that they are represented with a percentage less than 50% suggests efforts have been made to tip the balance in favor of Sunnis. One explanation for the Sunni majority in Parliament is due to the efforts of hardliners in the Khalifa regime who began a policy of Sunni gerrymandering and Sunni citizen naturalization to try and increase Sunni political constituents and the Sunni population in general. The details of these efforts were released in the infamous al-Bandar Report, a detailed 216-page document written by Saleh al-Bandar, a British citizen of Sudanese descent who worked in the Royal Court Affairs Ministry.[143] The report was sent to the Bahrain Center for Human Rights and subsequently publically released in 2006, creating political upheaval.[144] This single document "revealed an elaborate [and secret] plan to rig elections through gerrymandering techniques and by supporting Salafist and Muslim Brotherhood candidates."[145] Furthermore, it detailed a coordinated plan of rapid naturalization of Sunnis from Jordan, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Yemen[146] and a Shi'i-to-Sunni religious conversion program[147] that was intended to bolster the percentage of Bahraini's that were Sunni and loyal to the regime. The release of the al-Bandar Report, dubbed the Bandargate Scandal, was further evidence of a methodological process of excluding Shi'a from the political apparatus and strengthening the patronage of Sunni elites, and has contributed largely to Shi'a held grievances in Bahrain.

The 2011 Arab Spring protests largely expressed grievances that had historically impacted Shi'ites in Bahrain, like the ones mentioned above, but also they articulated

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[142] Seth Kaplan, "Bahrain: Analyzing Inequities between Sunnis and Shiites," *Fragile States,* May 16, 2012, http://www.fragilestates.org/2012/05/16/bahrain-analyzing-inequities-between-sunnis-and-shiites/.

[143] Ibid.

[144] Louër, "Sectarianism and Coup-Proofing Strategies in Bahrain,"256; the report can be found at http://www.bahrainrights.org/node/528.

[145] Frederic Wehrey, "Bahrain's Decade of Discontent," *Journal of Democracy* 24, no. 3 (2013): 120.

[146] Ibid.

[147] Gengler, "Ethnic Conflict," 63–64.

cross-sectarian desires for constitutional and governmental reform. The protests were orchestrated on February 14 because that day was the tenth anniversary of a referendum calling for a Democratic Constitutional Monarchy that, though it had received 98.4 percent approval by Bahraini voters, was never fully implemented.[148] Ten years later, in 2011, anger at the lack of change led to cross-sectarian calls for: "a parliament with full authority; a government that represents the will of the people; fair voting districts; discussion of naturalization policy (as a result of the Bandargate Scandal); combating corruption; public lands; and addressing sectarian tensions."[149]

While agreements about grievances were initially widespread among the Bahraini population, differences in the goals and strategies of protest groups began to divide popular and cross-sectarian support for the movement. For example, some of the more formal organizations, like Wa'ad, a long-established secular, liberal opposition party with both Sunni and Shi'a membership, and Al-Wefaq National Islamic Society, a well-organized Shi'a political party that held all of the Shi'a won seats in the Lower Parliament, called for negotiations and limited reforms.[150] Other groups, like the "Coalition of February 14th Youth," and Haaq, a more radical Shi'a group that had boycotted the 2010 elections, were more intent on revolution and the dissolution of the regime.[151] This division among protestors eventually led to many citizens, particularly Sunnis who were secular and involved in business, to feel underrepresented and even excluded from the protests.[152] As the GoB responded with increasing levels of force and repression, the protests seemed to take on a more radical and dangerous momentum that further excluded moderate Bahrainis. Thus, the grievances that formed the basis of the protests in February of 2011 increasingly became more radicalized and prone to sectarian instrumentalization and divisions. The next section will describe the ways in which the

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148 Kinninmont, "Bahrain: Beyond the Impasse," 5.

149 Ibid.

150 Ibid., 8.

151 Ibid.

152 Ibid., 9.

originally cross-sectarian Arab Spring in Bahrain was transformed into sectarian tensions and conflict among the people of Bahrain.

B.   REGIME INSTRUMENTALIZATION THROUGH MEDIA MANIPULATION

As the 2011 uprisings began to unfold, the GoB was faced with a conundrum; they could either capitulate to the Arab Spring calls for democratization and reform, therefore potentially precipitating the demise of the regime, or they could undermine protest grievances by instrumentalizing sectarianism and dividing the cross-sectarian support base of the protestors. The GoB realized they did not have to silence all of the voices of discontent so long as they could simultaneously isolate the discontented and satisfy a core constituency whose continued allegiance would preserve the government.[153] Because the state understood that Shi'ites were already largely dissatisfied with Al-Khalifa rule, "the protestors' complaints would be in vain so long as most Sunnis remain loyal to the regime."[154] This section will detail the ways in which the government of Bahrain instrumentalized Sunni and Shi'a cleavages in the 2011 uprisings and transformed a largely united Bahraini society into a one fraught with sectarian tensions. First, an explanation about Bahrain's media consumption and the GoB's capacity for media control will be detailed, followed by multiple examples of how this control was key in grievance discrediting and sectarian instrumentalization.

1.   The Capacity for Media Influence

The government of Bahrain has enjoyed a tremendous capacity to instrumentalize sectarian divisions during the 2011 uprisings because of Bahrain's consumption of media and the state's near total control over media. Bahrain enjoys one of the world's highest literacy rates at 99.76% in 2015.[155] Furthermore, 99% of all Bahrainis have access to the radio, more than 95% access to television, and as of 2010, over 85% had access to

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[153] Justin Gengler, "Bahrain's Sunni Awakening," Middle East Research and Information Project, January 17, 2012, http://www.merip.org/mero/mero011712.

[154] Ibid.

[155] UNICEF, "UNICEF Statistics- Bahrain."

broadband Internet.[156] Additionally, there is nearly a 2:1 ratio of cellphones to people in Bahrain, making it one of the most connected, literate, and capable nations for media absorption nearly anywhere in the world.[157] A recent study from 2010 asked some 1,187 students, between the ages of 15–17 (74%) and 18–22 (26%)[158] about their media consumption. The students reported their daily viewing rates of local news on television was either on *Bahrain TV* (22%), or one of seven other channels controlled by the state's Middle East Broadcasting Center in Bahrain (45%).[159] Additionally, a quarter of the respondents reported that the Internet was used daily to view news websites—local, general, or international, and 37% accessed online political forums every day.[160] This is consistent with Justin Gengler's research, which found "that there is something about Arab Gulf residents, something independent of their education levels, their economic satisfaction, their happiness with their governments' performance, and so on, that renders them more likely to incline toward politics, makes them more likely to undertake political actions, and leads to lower levels of political deference."[161] The above data thus indicates that news media was actively absorbed by and relevant to a large portion of the Bahraini population, something that helped facilitate mobilization during the Arab Spring protests but also facilitated the government's instrumentalization of sectarianism.

While state owned media is actively consumed by the Bahraini population, the Freedom of Press index placed Bahrain at 182rd out of 197 nations in 2012.[162] The Freedom House statistics are this low because the GoB indirectly or directly controls nearly all media sources on their island nation. The GoB indirectly controls all seven of the print media sources in Bahrain, only one of which is referred to as an "opposition"

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156 Ibid.

157 Ebrahim Abudlrahman Al-Shaikh and Vincent Campbell, "News Media and Political Socialization of Young People: The Case of Bahrain," in *News Media in the Arab World,* ed. by Barrie Gunter and Roger Dickinson, (London: Bloomsbury, 2013),157.

158 Ibid., 160.

159 Ibid., Fig 8.3, 164.

160 Ibid.

161 Gengler, "Ethnic Conflict," 33.

162 Karin Deutsch Karlekar and Jennifer Dunham, *Press Freedom in 2011: Breakthroughs and Pushback in the Middle East* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2012), https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/Booklet%20for%20Website_0.pdf.

newspaper, called al-Wasat.[163] While the patronage of the newspaper owners is not necessarily proof of GoB manipulation or media propaganda, the al-Bandar Report, conveniently is. One clause in the al-Bandar Report explicitly stated that the GoB was to "prepare propaganda materials in the form of opinion pieces to be published in the newspaper *al-Watan*, a pro-government publication. *Al-Watan* [will] ostensibly serve as the key vehicle for the anti-Shi'a propaganda created by this secret network."[164] This segment from the al-Bandar report does well to address the GoB's sectarian instrumentalization through the media.

Sectarian instrumentalization through the media is also achievable because radio and television broadcasts are still all officially controlled by the state through the Bahrain Radio and Television Corporation and collectively managed by the Bahrain News Agency.[165] While there are some political spaces on the Internet that are not necessarily run by the state explicitly, the Media Affairs Agency (MAA) and Information Affairs Authority (IAA) can still monitor, manipulate, and ban sites at a moment's notice and can create firewalls to restrict social media access.[166] Additionally, there are no domestic private TV broadcasting channels, and any privatized channels that are allowed to be shown in the country, including BBC, Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabia, MBC and CNN are all prescreened and edited.[167] Additionally, it has been reported that even where there is space for dissenting opinions, self-censorship is widely practiced because of laws that restrict freedom of speech, like the one that makes it illegal to criticize the King or the royal family.[168]

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[163] Mahmoud Cherif Bassiouni, Nigel Rodley, Badria Al-Awadhi, Philippe Kirsch, Mahnoush H. Arsanjani, "Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry," *Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry,* November 23, 2011. Manama, Bahrain: 2011. The other six are owned by individuals who are "pro-government" and very closely associated with the GoB.

[164] Geneive Abdo, "The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a—Sunni Divide," *The Saban Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings—Analysis Paper*, no. 29 (2013): 28.

[165] Ibid.

[166] Al-Shaikh and Campbell, "News Media and Political Socialization,"157.

[167] Ibid.

[168] Suzanne Plunkett, "Bahrain Toughens Penalties for Insulting King," *Reuters*, Februrary 5, 2014, http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/05/us-bahrain-law-idUSBREA140KX20140205. Up to seven years in jail and a fine of $26,500 for anyone who publically insults the King.

The key dissenting argument against the GoB's ability to control public opinion during the Arab Spring is that the GoB's control of state-run media was not impactful enough to counter the pervasive amounts of social media that exposed the true nature of the uprisings. While most scholars agree that during the early days and even weeks of the Arab Spring in Bahrain, social media was empowering and facilitating, some disagree. Studies such as Marc Owen Jones' "Social Media, Surveillance and Social Control in the Bahrain Uprising" and the Institute of Peace's "New Media and Conflict After the Arab Spring," give concrete examples of the state's ability to manipulate social media and how the nature of new media makes it vulnerable to discreditation. Jones describes how "hegemonic forces use social media for the purposes of surveillance, censorship, and propaganda" by using or benefiting from "trolling, naming and shaming, offline factors, intelligence gathering, and passive observation."[169] Additionally, the Institute of Peace's article, "New Media and Conflict," adds that it became increasingly hard to separate new from old media in the Arab Spring as they facilitated one another, and that overall, new media seemed to have more of an amplifying effect, propelling the message abroad, rather than having a unifying effect within Bahrain.[170] In general, most scholars have come to the conclusion that one, "tyrants [also] tweet,"[171] and two, while the anonymity of the web makes credibility and authenticity very challenging to discern, it also results in self-censorship and fear of retribution if surveillance is suspected.[172] In fact, many of the protest leaders were targeted and accused of crimes based on their posts on social media. For example, Nabil Rajab, who had co-founded the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, was arrested at Manama airport on May 5, 2012 and sentenced to jail simply over a tweet that criticized the Bahraini prime minister.[173]

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[169] Marc Owen Jones, "Social Media, Surveillance, and Control," in "The Role of Social Media in the Arab Uprisings—Past and Present," ed. Maha Taki and Lorenzo Coretti, *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 9, no. 2 (2013): 72.

[170] Sean Aday et al., "Blogs and Bullets II: New Media and Conflict after the Arab Spring," *United States Institute of Peace*, no. 80 (2012): 3.

[171] Ibid., 16.

[172] Jones, "Social Media, Surveillance, and Control," 80.

[173] Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf*, 60.

The GoB also wielded tremendous control over social media not just through passive monitoring, but also by deciding which sites to allow and which ones to shut down. The Twitter feed Harghum "posted the names and photographs of alleged protesters, and sometimes even posted protesters' addresses, telephone numbers and current locations."[174] The GoB opted to allow this Twitter feed to continue, even though it resulted in the vandalizing of anti-government protestor's private residences and forced people to abandon their homes in fear. Some have argued that Harghum served a useful pro-government function so the GoB focused more of its attention on targeting and shutting down anti-government sites.[175] As the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) report discovered, "The GoB used firewalls to block certain social media and other websites. However, the GoB has not permanently shut down Twitter feeds such as Harghum, even though they produced material that international law requires to be prohibited [like names and addresses] and which is in fact prohibited under Bahrain law."[176] In general, Bahrain was a caustic social media environment that was not conducive to political opposition support. As one Al-Jazeera reporter, Gregg Carlstrom, tweeted; "Bahrain has by far the hardest-working Twitter trolls of any country I've reported on."[177]

The information on news access, consumption, and biases presented thus far paints a detailed picture of the GoB's ability to influence media messaging, the tremendously high percentage of media absorption in Bahrain, and lastly, how influential this information was on the perspectives of a very politically active population. In combination, the GoB had both the means and capacity to influence protester's sentiments and discredit legitimate cross-sectarian grievances during the Arab Spring.

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[174] Mahmoud Cherif Bassiouni et al., "Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry," (Manama, Bahrain: Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, 2011), 401.

[175] Ibid., 401–02.

[176] Ibid., 402.

[177] Jones, "Social Media, Surveillance, and Control," 78.

2. Evidence of Sectarian Instrumentalization by the GoB

Instrumentalizing sectarian tensions by suggesting that Iran influenced the protests, the protests were a Shi'a only uprising, and that the protestors were dangerous, allowed the GoB to delegitimize the Arab Spring grievances and foment sectarian tensions in Bahrain. The regime's emphasis on Iranian participation in the Arab Spring was one of the mostly widely used tactics by the GoB to delegitimize the homegrown nature and cross-sectarian support of the protests. One of the primary sources that documented the GoB's incitement of sectarianism has been the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry. The BICI was a report royally commissioned in the aftermath of the protests to address some of the human rights abuses and issues that arose during the protests. While the commissioning of the report was a good step forward, implementing the recommendations has largely failed to occur. Nonetheless, the report offered insights on methods by the GoB to stir up sectarianism by falsifying Iranian involvement in the protests.

a. Iranian Involvement

The BICI suggested that some media sources were instrumental in perpetuating rhetoric of Iranian involvement. For example, the report highlighted a television program titled, "Al Rased" which aired on *Bahrain TV,* which emphasized sectarianism and Iranian involvement. The program showed clips of Bahraini citizens protesting and described them as "traitors linked to Iran and a liability to Bahraini society."[178] The program then depicted three images of the Middle East as Iran spreads across it until, by 2017, the black flag of Iran has covered the whole of the Arab Peninsula (see image below).[179]

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[178] Bassiouni et al., "BICI," 393.

[179] Ibid.

Figure 5.   Iran Taking over the Arabian Peninsula on "Al-Rased"[180]

The BICI concluded that "al-Rased," and other programs like it, influenced Bahraini's opinions that the uprisings in Bahrain were part of a larger Iranian plot. Ali Al-Saffar, a Middle East economist in London, presented a similar conclusion as the BICI when he asserted that the GoB attempted to portray the uprisings as Iranian backed and thus illegitimate; as sectarian and thus undemocratic, and "the vehicle it chose to do that with was *Bahrain TV* (BTV)."[181] He continued by saying that "[BTV] got across the story the government wanted it to get across, which is to frame the protest movement as being solely Shi'a—which we knew it wasn't—as violent, and to make the Sunna minority feel like if the protesters got what they wanted, the Sunni community would be threatened."[182] As news sources continued to repeat this same rhetoric, it became harder to consider dissenting opinions against the sectarianization of the protest movement.

Key government officials in the GoB also perpetuated the sectarian discourse of an Iranian uprising in their public statements. Saqer al Khalifa, a former media advisor

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180 Bassiouni et al., "Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry," 393.; "Al-Rased," *Bahrain TV,* accessed September 1, 2015, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x3sdFp7Hh4M&feature=related.

181 Karen Leigh, "The Anti-Al Jazeera: Bahrain's Notorious State-run TV Channel," *The Atlantic,* April 19, 2011, http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/04/the-anti-al-jazeera-bahrains-notorious-state-run-tv-channel/237462/.

182 Ibid.

for the Bahraini embassy in Washington, said that the February 2011 uprising in Bahrain was the long awaited, Iranian backed, Shi'a revolt.[183] Saqer al Khalifa also stated that since 1979, when the Islamic revolution occurred in Iran, the Bahraini government had been training and preparing for the revolt in Bahrain for years by developing a very capable security apparatus.[184] The accusations of Iranian involvement also came straight from the King himself. King Hamad al Khalifa said quite explicitly when justifying Saudi military force in Bahrain that, "the legitimate demands of the opposition were hijacked by extremists with ties to foreign governments in the region;" which served as a clear reference to Iran and a clear undermining of legitimate grievances.[185] Statements by government officials were crucial in perpetuating the sectarian tensions in Bahrain.

Continuously suggesting Iranian involvement served to both systematically discredit any opposition group's grievances and further emphasized the sectarian divisions of the country. Despite ample data that indicates that Iranian was *not* the source of the Bahraini Arab Spring protests, the GoB has maintained this firm belief and unrelenting insistence. As one author noted in 2012, "It is striking that, more than a year after the start of the protests, officials have not provided evidence (such as communications, financial links or other intelligence findings) to indicate that Iran was the source of anything other than moral support for the Bahraini opposition."[186] Other sources, such as a 2013 Brookings Analysis Paper, also reiterated that "to date, there is no hard evidence to indicate that Iran has given material support to factions within the Bahraini opposition."[187] Even the BICI concluded that "The evidence presented to the Commission by the GoB on the involvement by the Islamic Republic of Iran in the internal affairs of Bahrain does not establish a discernible link between specific incidents that occurred in Bahrain during February and March 2011 and the Islamic Republic of

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[183] Geneive Abdo, *The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide* (Washington, DC: Saban Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings, 2013), 14.

[184] Ibid.

[185] Ibid., 13.

[186] Kinninmont, "Bahrain: Beyond the Impasse," 20.

[187] Abdo, "The New Sectarianism," 15. Note: recent explosives found in Bahrain in 2015 do have chemicals traceable to Iran. See info on 2015 IED attacks on MOI by Shi'a militants.

Iran."[188] However, the power of the Bahraini media has left a majority of the Sunni's in Bahrain convinced of Iranian subversion and with a deep mistrust of Shi'a citizens, regardless what factual data is presented.[189]

Furthermore, there are just issues in asserting that all Bahraini Shi'a hold loyalty to Iran because they are co-religionists. In fact, a majority of Bahraini Shi'ites adhere to guidance from clerics in Iraq, particularly Ayatollah Sistani, and do not believe in the Iranian model of wilayet-e-faqih (rule of the jurists).[190] Not to mention, most Bahraini Shi'a are Arab, not Persian, and have a very strong ethnic connection to Bahrain, claiming to be the indigenous "Bahrana" people who inhabited the island long before the Al Khalifa family's arrival in the eighteenth century.[191] Justin Gengler also conducted polling research and concluded that just over 63% of the Shi'a he interviewed believed that *sharia* law was "not at all suitable" as a form of governance.[192] This statistic helps support the idea that an Islamic State (like Iran's model) was not the goal of most Shi'a protestors, but in fact democracy and rights.

b. Protestors as Violent

The GoB also attempted to portray the protesters as violent to justify government crackdowns and delegitimize the protesters' demands. In an article titled, "Anti-Al-Jazeera: Bahrain's Notorious State-run TV Channel," the reporter said that the "protesters repeatedly told me they watched crews—usually wearing balaclava masks, to avoid identification—plant knives and guns at protest sites, then turn on the cameras to film the weapons and protesters suggestively side-by-side."[193] While a single example sounds too nefarious to substantiate, accounts of this happening have been repeated by multiple other

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[188] Bassiouni, et al., "Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry," 387.

[189] From authors perspectives and discussions with Bahrainis on September 15, 2015.

[190] Kinninmont, "Bahrain: Beyond the Impasse," 16.

[191] Ibid.; Diwan, "Sectarian Politics," 148.

[192] Gengler, "Ethnic Conflict"; Justin Gengler, "How Radical Are Bahrain's Shia?," *Foreign Affairs*, May 15, 2011.

[193] Bassiouni et al., "Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry," 109.

sources.[194] Toby Matthiesen, a Middle East scholar who was there during the protests, gave a firsthand account of a spokesman for the Ministry of Interior on *Bahrain Television*, "deliver a chilling statement in which he defended the attack on the roundabout and showed knives, swords, and other weapons allegedly found there, as well as wounded police officers."[195] According to Matthiesen, "The story [told on BTV] seemed to totally contradict what [he] had witnessed, and what [he] could gather from people [he] spoke to and from videos and pictures uploaded on social media."[196] In Matthiesen's assessment, what he was witnessing "was the beginning of a media war and disinformation campaign spearheaded by the regime to promote its version of events."[197]

The BICI's review of the accusations that the protestors had weapons similarly concluded that "The Commission has not seen any evidence to suggest that the demonstrators were armed with weapons."[198] Footage showing abandoned weapons at the site of the protests was coupled with the sectarianization of the protestors in media coverage. These reports may have contributed to repeated incidents of Sunnis attacking Shi'ite protestors.[199] Additionally, these enhanced sectarian tensions and fears contributed to Sunni neighborhoods forming what they dubbed "popular committees," made up of Sunni men who stood 24-hour watches, "to ensure the safety and security of their respective neighborhoods [and] to defend their homes against attacks."[200]

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[194] Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf*, 33.

[195] Ibid.

[196] Ibid.

[197] Ibid.

[198] Bassiouni et al., "Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry," 231.

[199] Justin Gengler, "Bahrain's Sunni Awakening," *Middle East Research and Information Project,* 17 (2012). Gengler's notes from conversations with U.S. Embassy officials and incidents from December 2011 that "a Shi'i religious procession was attacked by members of a "Military Society" newly founded by 'Adil Filayfil…[because] procession-goers had supposedly refused to alter their route around Sunni neighborhoods and were shouting anti-government slogans. [According to 'Adil Filayfil,] his group had merely stepped in where the state had failed to act."

[200] Bassiouni et al., "Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry," 375.

c.   Tactics of Physical Repression

The GoB was also able to instrumentalize sectarianism during the protests by using police and security forces to implement repressive tactics and to specifically target Sunni oppositional protestors that gave legitimacy to grievances and promoted cross-sectarian cooperation. While the protests were at first peaceful and "felt like the most natural thing to bring your family to,"[201] things quickly changed with the regime's harsh response. On the third night of protests, some 10,000 Bahrainis gathered in the Pearl Roundabout shouting slogans like "Down, Down Khalifa," and "No Shi'ites, no Sunnis, only Bahrainis."[202] Terrified of the potential cross-sectarian strength of the protest, the regime sent riot police to disrupt the protests. Security forces fired tear gas and rubber bullets at short range, burned down the makeshift structures that had been constructed in the Pearl Roundabout, and caused the death of three and the injury of dozens.[203] This began a trend of harsh police tactics that would leave some 30–80 Bahrainis killed during protests or in custody.[204]

The government's repression of protestors forced the more moderate voices to become terrified and stop participating, and it turned Sunni sympathizers and supporters away, making the protests represented by Shi'ites in far greater numbers. Additionally, the GoB's aggressive response to the protests served another parallel function for the regime—it rid the Shi'a and Sunni communities of prominent opposition leadership and human's rights activists by silencing them. The opposition newspaper, Al-Wasat, was ruthlessly targeted after it tried to report on the regime repression. Its printing house was vandalized, its presses largely destroyed, its website blocked, and its co-founder and board member, Kareem Fakhrawi, thrown into prison where he would die only a few

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[201] Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf*, 9.

[202] Ulrichsen, "Bahrain's Uprising," 2.

[203] Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf*, 16.

[204] "Individuals Killed by Government's Excessive Use of Force since 14 February 2011," Bahrain Center for Human Rights, accessed September 23, 2015, http://www.bahrainrights.org/en/node/3864. Various accounts have listed different numbers, but around 100 deaths is a consistent number.

days later.[205] The government also began to target key leadership who were capable of facilitating the protests. The government sentenced nineteen Bahraini opposition leaders to jail, including the leadership of Haqq, al-Wafa, and the *shirazis.*[206] Additionally, Ali al-Salman, the general secretary of the prominent Shi'a political party, al-Wefaq's, was shot in the head and wounded by a tear gas canister from close range, and two former al-Wefaq MPs were stripped of their citizenship.[207]

Police brutality and government repression was not only targeted at Shi'a protestors, in fact, Sunni anti-government protestors were targeted for reasons some suspect to prevent cross-sectarian support of the movement. For example, activists from the leftist group Wa'ad, an Arab Nationalist group made up of both Sunni and Shi'a, were targeted in particular.[208] A famous Sunni, Ibrahim Sharif, who was the secretary general of Wa'ad, had been delivering fiery speeches in support of the protest movement urging Sunni-Shi'a unity. In response, Sharif was arrested by a group of masked special forces and a pro-regime mob was allowed to ransack the Wa'ad headquarters.[209] In defiance, Ibrahim Sharif detailed the torture he experienced while in custody through letters smuggled out of prison and had them posted online, but paid the price with a five year jail sentencing conducted by a special security court.[210] Sharif, being a prominent Sunni anti-government protestor, was a serious challenge for the GoB's message of a Shi'a/Iranian dominated uprising, thus Wa'ad and its leaders suffered the consequences of harsh repression.

The GoB went to great lengths to discredit and instrumentalize the 2011 protests because doing so silenced the challenges to the regime's power and authority. Even the

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[205] Ibid.: "Kareem Fakhrawi, 49 years, Date of death: 12-Apr-2011. On April 12, the opposition group Wefaq National Islamic Society announced that one of its members, a businessman and a founder of the *Alwasat* newspaper, named Kareem Fakhrawi, had died in custody. He reportedly was last seen at the Exhibition Centre Police Station on April 3, as he went to the police station to file a report and complaint about a raid on one of his relative's houses. Marks of torture were visible on his body."

[206] Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf*, 60.

[207] Ibid., 57.

[208] Ibid.

[209] Ibid., 57–59

[210] Ibid., 59.

man who was commissioned by King Hamad to produce the BICI, legal scholar Professor Cherif Bassiouni told the king after he concluded his findings from the BICI, "You have a choice between the unity of the country and the unity of the family."[211] The Al-Khalifa family was "determined not to go the way of Egypt and Tunisia," and allow the passage of reforms to destroy the government and stability of Bahrain.[212] The survival of the regime and the long term stability of Bahrain were therefore more critical in the eyes of the GoB than preventing social turmoil and sectarian tensions.

C.   REGIONAL CONTEXTUALIZATION

The proxy war hypothesis, which argues that Bahrain's Shi'ites are a proxy for Iran and was the raison d'etre for the Arab Spring uprising, has largely been discredited and considered inaccurate. While influence and moral support did indeed exist from Iran, the Bahraini people were acting on their own accord in a local context, not as proxy agents of the bigger regional challenges. Therefore, the focus of this section is on how the regional contextualization of the rivalry between Saudi and Iran and the circumstances of instability throughout the Middle East, particularly Iraq and Syria, has impacted the reactions to and perceptions of the Arab Spring in Bahrain. Furthermore, and most importantly, the context of the regional environment has set the stage for the saliency of sectarian identity and allowed this to be a key mobilizing and instrumentalizing factor during Bahrain's Arab Spring. Thus, this section will attempt to shed some light on how this greater rivalry and regional turmoil heightened sectarianism within Bahrain and facilitated the sectarian narrative built by the GoB. A general overview of the regional context and how this impacted the GoB will be explored, followed by brief discussions of both Iran and Saudi Arabia's involvement in Bahrain and how this impacted sectarian identities.

The case of Bahrain and the instrumentalization of sectarianism by the GoB is an incomplete assessment without considering the impact of regional events and the Saudi/Iranian rivalry. As one scholar noted, "Bahrain's political fault lines have never

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[211] Abdo, "The New Sectarianism," 18.

[212] Ibid., 13.

simply matched sectarian lines, but in a context of heightened regional sectarian tensions, Sunni and Shi'a communities have become increasingly polarized."[213] Thus, the context of regional events impacted the GoB's fears of their Shi'ite population, shaped many of their discriminatory measures, and heightened the saliency of Bahraini sectarian identities.

What has made the 2011 Arab Spring time period unique from previous periods of mobilization and identity politics in Bahrain is largely due to Bahrain's unique geostrategic position and the contemporary regional turmoil. Bahrain is a very small island located just off the east coast of Saudi Arabia and across the North Arabian Gulf from Iran. Religious, ethnic, and tribal ties connect segments of Bahrain's population to Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, and have exposed the island nation to politicization of identity from all three of these powerful nations.[214] Additionally, though being the first nation to discover oil, Bahrain was promptly the first to also run out, leaving it dependent on assistance from other nations and not organically a stable oil economy.[215] These factors have made Bahrain susceptible to the winds of politicization that have shifted throughout the Middle East, and its geographically strategic position and diminutive size have also made it highly desirable as a sphere of influence. With these vulnerabilities in mind, Bahrain has been acutely aware of its need for allies. Bahrain's leadership, largely due to the ethnic, tribal, and religious connections of the Al-Khalifa family to the Arab Peninsula, has forged a marriage with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations instead of a relationship with Iran. In the 1970s, the UN conducted surveys and interviews among Bahraini people, which found that a majority of Bahrainis desired independence.[216] As a result of this polling, the Shah of Iran formally relinquished Iran's territorial claims to Bahrain in 1971.[217] Additionally, the assistance

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[213] Kinninmont, "Bahrain: Beyond the Impasse," 2.

[214] Diwan, "Sectarian Politics," 151.

[215] Ibid.

[216] Kinninmont, "Bahrain: Beyond the Impasse," 14.

[217] Ibid.

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by the United States in protecting the Gulf countries during the Iraq/Iran war during the 1980s also increased the bonds of the GCC nations and the U.S. with Bahrain.[218]

The impact of current events, particularly the 2003 War in Iraq, has drastically shaped the perspectives and fears of Sunni-led nations in the Middle East. The power vacuum that resulted from state collapse in Iraq facilitated the rise of the Shi'ite majority into positions of authority, and resulted in the repression of the Sunni minority and an increased influence from Iran. The events in Iraq have increased fears of Shi'ite uprisings, Iranian influence and expansion,[219] and has made Sunni governments with Shi'ite populations particularly leery about jeopardizing the stability of their regime. One of the most telling examples of how fears of Iran and Shi'ites have been enhanced by the collapse of Iraq is from an al-Bandar report study titled, "A Proposal to Promote the General Situation of the Sunni Sect in Bahrain," written in 2005 by an Iraqi academic under commission from the Bahraini government. The author of the report cited the reason for heightened sectarian tensions in Bahrain were due to "the historic changes that threaten the Arab Gulf region [as a consequence of] the fall of the former Iraqi regime."[220] The study elaborated that

> the marginalization of Sunnis and the lessening of their role in Bahrain is part of a larger regional problem...there is a dangerous challenge facing Bahraini society in the increased role of the Shi'a [and] the retreat of the role of the Sunna in the Bahraini political system; namely, the problem concerns the country's [Bahrain's] national security, and the likelihood of political regime change in the long term by means of the present relationships between Bahrain's Shi'a and all the Shi'a in Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia's eastern region, and Kuwait.[221]

This report and similar sentiments in the GoB further entrenched fears of Shi'ite citizenry that had first been cultivated in the wake of the Iranian revolution and the 1981 Shi'a coup. Thus, for the GoB, the exclusion of Shi'ites from the security services, the

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[218] Nader Habibi, "The Impact of Sanctions on Iran-GCC Economic Relation," *Middle East Brief,* no. 45, (2010): 2, http://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/meb/MEB45.pdf.

[219] Kinninmont, "Bahrain: Beyond the Impasse," 2.

[220] Gengler, "Ethnic Conflict," 63.

[221] Ibid.

use of foreign Sunni mercenaries, the purposeful gerrymandering to increase Sunni voting capacity, and even the Sunni naturalization process, were all in response to this fear of Shi'ites and Iran due to the regional events that heightened sectarian tensions.

Iran and Saudi Arabia have also been very impactful in heighten sectarian tensions directly in Bahrain as a part of their own competition and tension with one another. While it is true that Iran is not "the driving force behind the unrest in Bahrain," Iran is certainly a complicating factor.[222] Iranian officials, clerics, and media outlets were very vocal in their support of the Shi'a population in Bahrain during the protests.[223] For Iran, supporting Shi'a causes across the Middle East is popular with the Iranian people and has been seen as an effective way to compete with Saudi Arabia for regional influence. As one analyst described, "Iran can benefit simply by emphasizing—in a partisan and often exaggerated way—abuses in Bahrain as an indication of the failings of the Gulf monarchies that it is so keen to discredit."[224] For example, in January, 2012, Ayatollah Khamenei expressed his support of the protests during an "Islamic Awakening and Youth Conference," when he said to the audience, "What you did in Egypt, what you did in Tunisia, what you did in Libya, what you are doing in Yemen, what you are doing in Bahrain … is part of a battle against this dangerous and harmful dictatorship that has been pressuring humanity for two centuries."[225] This statement suggests that Iran supported the protests in Bahrain possibly even more so because of their opposition to Western-backed Sunni regimes than because of any co-religionists sentiments.[226] Comparatively, Iran has been much quieter about brutalities committed against Shi'a in

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[222] Kinninmont, "Bahrain: Beyond the Impasse," vi.

[223] Ibid., 20.

[224] Ibid., 21.

[225] Supreme Leader's Speech to Participants of "Islamic Awakening and Youth" Conference, Ahlulbayt Islamic Mission, last modified February 2, 2012, full text of speech delivered on January 30, 2012, by Ayatollah Khamenei, http://www.aimislam.com/leaders-address-to-the-islamic-awakening-and-youth-conference/.

[226] Kinninmont, "Bahrain: Beyond the Impasse," 20.

Pakistan than they were in Bahrain.[227] While the rich history of Bahrain and Iran adds deeper dimensions to their support of the protests, the important take away is that Iran has benefited from supporting the protests in Bahrain because it serves to undermine Saudi Arabia and other gulf monarchies, with whom Iran considers itself in competition with. This instrumentalization of Shi'a identity by Iran has contributed greatly to the saliency of sectarian identity and suspicions on the part of the GoB simply because of sectarian identity.

Saudi Arabia has also been paramount in heightening sectarian identity through their involvement in the Bahraini Arab Spring and their support of the GoB. Saudi officials see Bahrain as a bulwark against the threat of Iranian expansion into the Arabian Gulf and as a necessary ally in dealing with their own minority Shi'a population.[228] In fact, part of Saudi's decision to bolster hardliners within the al-Khalifa regime of Bahrain is because they mirror Saudi's own response to their Shi'a population in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia.[229] The Saudis viewed the Bahraini Shi'a-dominated uprising as "a direct threat to their own domestic security; a victory for the Shi'a of Bahrain would certainly inspire Saudi Arabia's own disaffected Shi'a population in the eastern provinces."[230] In fact, this is exactly what happened as Bahrain's Arab Spring sparked a sort of Arab Spring within Saudi Arabia's Shi'a population, just across the Causeway Bridge that unites the two countries. Thus, the protests in Bahrain created a personal interest for Saudi Arabia in cementing the status quo in Bahrain and stabilizing the country. The direct involvement by Saudi Arabia and the co-religionist Shi'a protests between the two countries is part of the regional context that has further entrenched the saliency of sectarian identity. Though both Bahrain's and Saudi Arabia's protests did

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227 Alex Vatanka, "The Guardian of Pakistan's Shia," *The Hudson Institute,* June 1, 2012, http://www.hudson.org/research/9863-the-guardian-of-pakistan-s-shia. "The silence of Iran's officialdom with respect to the plight of Pakistan's Shia is conspicuous and openly criticized by the wider Iranian public. A review of two key government websites—the official site of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader, and the Islamic Republic News Agency, the outlet of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's government—reveals almost no statements by Iranian political leaders about the situation of the Shia in Pakistan and the siege of Parachinar."

228 Kinninmont, "Bahrain: Beyond the Impasse," 20.

229 Toby Matthiesen, "A" Saudi Spring?": The Shi'a Protest Movement in the Eastern Province 2011–2012," *The Middle East Journal* 66, no. 4 (2012): 629.

230 Abdo, *The New Sectarianism*, 15.

have true grievances and desires for reform, the identity which was most accentuated by these mutual protests, and by the GoB and Saudi regimes, was sectarian.

Bahrain also greatly depends on Saudi Arabia for its own livelihood, a decisive factor that has enhanced Saudi Arabia's influence in Bahrain and impacted Bahrain's sectarian instrumentalization.[231] Bahrain's decision to allow Saudi troops to march across the Causeway into Bahrain and participate in riot control measures was a clear signal both from Bahrain's government and from Saudi Arabia that they stood together in the regional contestation against Iran. Bahrain's Arab Spring, therefore, in a way became a proxy for Saudi Arabia's own contestation against Iran and Iranian influence, and it was this direct influence from Saudi Arabia that further activated sectarian identity as a part of the protest movement. This point comes out clearly when considering King Hamad's statements about why he requested Saudi and UAE troops to come to his aid. King Hamad stated that his government was forced to use foreign military intervention to impose order because "the legitimate demands of the opposition were hijacked by extremists with ties to foreign governments in the region," a clear and direct reference to Iran.[232] Thus, the regional rivalry and competition between Iran and Saudi provided the contextualization that heightened sectarian identity and was crucial in shaping Bahrain's response to the protests. Thus, the GoB's decision to use the fear of Iranian infiltration as a primary reason for delegitimizing the protestors enhanced the saliency of sectarian identity and contributed to sectarian conflict in Bahrain.

D.   CONCLUSION

The Arab Spring in Bahrain led the GoB to recognize the potential implications to regime survival if a united Shi'a and Sunni uprising was allowed to persist. Thus, the GoB employed various tactics to amplify sectarian divides within the country and reduce

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[231] Kinninmont, "Bahrain: Beyond the Impasse," 20. 77% of all Bahrain's oil is provided by Saudi Arabia, the bulk of which comes from an offshore field, Abu Safa, which is shared with Saudi Arabia but administered by Saudi Aramco. This accounts for 70–80% of the revenue the government receives. Additionally, 80% of the visitors that come into Bahrain and support the tourist industry come across the King Faisal Causeway, which starts in Saudi Arabia.

[232] King Hamad bin Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa, "Al Khalifa: Stability Is Prerequisite for Progress," Analysis/Opinion, *The Washington Times*, April 19, 2011, http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/apr/19/stability-is-prerequisite-for-progress/.

the cross-sectarian nature of the protests. Sectarian identity was a salient identity for Bahrainis because of the history of grievances that fell along sectarian lines due to the GoB's "divide and rule" tactics (like the exclusion of Shi'a from the public sector, gerrymandering, etc.), and because of the regional Sunni/Shi'a rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran that further activated sectarian identities. These factors of grievances and regional contextualization contributed to the GoB's decision to instrumentalize sectarian identities during the Arab Spring in order to delegitimize the protestors and divide the cross-sectarian calls for regime reform. The GoB successfully instrumentalized sectarianism by allowing or facilitating biased reporting on the protests; allowing harsh repression and policing tactics, including ones that silenced Sunni opposition figures; and by continually pushing a narrative of the protests as being orchestrated and supported by Iran. However, unlike other areas of the Middle East, like Yemen, even at the height of unrest and chaos during Bahrain's uprisings, these sectarian tensions never resulted in sectarian violence.[233] This case study has therefore demonstrated that the IVs of grievances, instrumentalization, and regional context are directly and crucially linked to the rise and fomentation of sectarian identity and tension within Bahrain. However, short of the final IV of state collapse, these tensions have failed to be activated into identity-based violence.

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[233] Kinninmont, "Bahrain: Beyond the Impasse," 20.

III.   YEMEN CASE STUDY

This chapter on Yemen will focus on exploring the first three IVs, grievances, instrumentalism, and the proxy war, and how these have specifically affected sectarian sentiment and tensions in the country of Yemen. Yemen, in many ways, exemplifies how identities are heightened, encouraged, mobilized, and disseminated over time. Though this thesis is constructivist in thinking about identity mobilization and identity groups, it does not suggest that this can occur rapidly. A big part of Yemen's current sectarianism is a direct result of the grievances of certain identity groups, the individual actors emphasizing sectarian identities, and the regional context, all which have been building for decades and have contributed to making sectarian identity salient in Yemen. Thus, this thesis chapter will focus on how the sectarian narrative was built in Yemen and became an activated identity. To show this, the three IVs will be explored in Yemen. First, the chapter will detail a brief explanation of Yemen's sectarian history and the legitimate grievances of key minorities in order to shed light on how identity entrepreneurs have been able to give context to the sectarian narrative. Second, the saliency of the sectarian narrative will be explained through the influence of the regional contest for power between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shi'ite Iran. Third, how the government of Yemen (GoY) has deliberately crafted a sectarian narrative will be revealed. The following analytical chapter will then demonstrate how this identity resulted in increased levels of violence as the state began to weaken and eventually collapse.

A.   ZAYDI GRIEVANCES

Yemen's history of the Zaydi Shi'a imamate, Zaydi grievances against the GoY, and the Zaydi's competition for religious and political legitimization are important elements in understanding sectarianism in Yemen. However, while "Grievances alone cannot explain the outbreak of violence," they do "play an important role in the

mobilization process."[234] The grievances felt by the Zaydis, from the cultural attacks on their community to their lack of political and economic inclusion, have contributed to their reasons for mobilization and have been actively challenged by the GoY. The government perceived Zaydi activism as a potential threat and this was impactful in the GoY's opposition to the Zaydi movement. Understanding the Zaydi grievances and the government's response to them can shed light on how the Houthis and the GoY have been able to instrumentalize sectarianism and effectively build the sectarian narrative in Yemen.

The history of sectarianism in Yemen has its own unique and localized flavor and understanding its nuances thus becomes important to prevent the sweeping sectarian generalizations often levied at the Middle East. Until 1962, the Zaydis had a centuries-old imamate[235] and have dominated the northwest highlands of the South Arabian Peninsula since the ninth century.[236] Since the twelfth century, Muslims in Yemen have followed the Shafa'i school of Islamic law, shaping the Sunni and Zaydi-Shi'a in the region much differently from their Sunni and Shi'a counterparts in other regions of the Middle East.[237] Thus, the Zaydi-Shi'ite's religious practices and adherences are closer to their fellow Yemeni Sunnis of the Shafa'i order than those of the dominant Twelver Shi'a sect found in Iran, Iraq, and other Middle Eastern nations.[238] Also in contrast to other Shi'ites in the region is the claim that the Zaydi imamates and many other Zaydi families are Hashemites (*sayyid*), that is, direct descendants from the Prophet Muhammad.[239] Thus, this widely respected religious and tribal authority has a deep history and still remains

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[234] Tanja Granzow, "Violent Vs. Non-Violent Struggle: Investigating the Impact of Frames on Movement Strategies in Yemen," *Civil Wars* 17, no. 2 (2015): 168.

[235] Sophia Dingli, "Is the Failed State Thesis Analytically Useful? The Case of Yemen," *Politics* 33, no. 2 (2013): 94.

[236] Noel Brehony, "Yemen and the Huthis: Genesis of the 2015 Crisis," *Asian Affairs* 46, no. 2 (2015): 237.

[237] Ibid.

[238] Ibid.; Zaydis are referred to as Fivers, meaning they follow a different blood line from the Prophet Muhammed than Twelver Shia, and recognize only five Imams as legitimate rulers of the Muslim *umma*. This differs from those who Twelver Shiites recognize, as they follow the linage of a different split in the blood line out to twelve Imams. In fact, the name Zaydi comes from Zayd ibn ʿAlī, the grandson of Husayn, the son of Ali and Fatima, the Prophet's daughter.

[239] Shelagh Weir, "A Clash of Fundamentalisms," *Middle East Report* Jul-Sep, no. 204 (1997).

critical to the Zaydi and northern Yemeni identity. As this paper will show, this history of a revered social status and a nearly thousand-year-old Shi'a imamate has been used by both the Zaydis themselves and Sunni oppositionists to encourage identity narratives. The Zaydis, particularly the Houthi movement, has fomented these historical narratives to rejuvenate culture, prestige, and the saliency of the Zaydi identity. Both Sunni elites and the GoY have also used the Zaydi's history and identity to build a sectarian narrative and activate sectarian fears against the Zaydis.

The grievance variable is critical in the manifestation of sectarianism in Yemen. Grievances stem largely from social and economic reasons, the first relating to the activation of sectarian identity due to the Shi'a-Zaydi revivalism, which began in the mid-1980s to counter the rise of Sunni-Salafism,[240] and second due to the impact of relative economic isolation and depravation experienced in the North. The Sunni Salafists, which encouraged Zaydi sectarian oppositional mobilization, entered Yemen in three main ways: by returning Sunni *mujahidin* who fought in Afghanistan during the 1980s; by deliberately funded efforts by the Saudi government throughout the 1980s until today; and by men returning from work in Saudi Arabia with Wahhabist ideologies.[241]

To expand on these three influences on Zaydis' social grievances further; firstly, returning *jihadists* from Afghanistan in the 1980s brought Osama Bin Laden's Sunni extremism to Yemen and Saudi Arabia, which would eventually form the basis for Al Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula (AQAP).[242] Initially, while these *jihadists* largely focused on fighting communists in Southern Yemen, some of them would later become influential in fighting the Zaydis during the Sa'ada Wars and AQAP would contribute greatly to promoting sectarian violence.[243]

Secondly, in the late 1980s into the early 2000s, Wahhabi sheikhs were sent from Saudi Arabia to establish mosques, *madrassas*, and youth centers in northern cities, the

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[240] Ibid., 22.

[241] Ibid.

[242] Victoria Clark, *Yemen: Dancing on the Heads of Snakes* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 160.

[243] Ibid.

center of Zaydi culture.[244] One such imam, Moqbil Hadi al-Wadei, was a "strong critic of all shades of Shi'i doctrine…in his sermons, books, and cassettes, he often accused the Shi'is of being heretics who propagated non-Islamic superstitious beliefs and practices."[245] Al-Wadei popularized the Salafist beliefs that became associated with Islah Party, the Yemeni political version of the Muslim Brotherhood and a very powerful political party. Islah's "wide tent" of Sunni supporters has allowed it to support "a more-extreme Salafi contingent that is open to the politicization and deployment by the GoY as the [GoY sought] to counter the [Houthi] rebellion."[246] Because Islah has been described as a "patronage machine and shelter to Salafis,"[247] this has only reinforced Zaydi sectarian rhetoric and suspicion against the GoY and Sunnis at large. Furthermore, Islah was originally headed by Shaikh Abdullah al-Ahmar of the powerful Ahmar family in the northern Hashid tribal confederation,[248] adding elements of tribal competition and patronage into an already tense battle for religious legitimacy.

Thirdly, returning remittance workers from Saudi Arabia brought a large increase in Salafi and Wahhabi ideologies, which threatened Zaydi Shi'a identity, religion, and culture.[249] The often low-class, working men who returned to Yemen from Saudi Arabia were drawn to Yemen's burgeoning Salafi mosques and the Islah party because the egalitarian nature of Salafism challenged the Zaydi *sayyid* religious and tribal elite status.[250] These men became the basis of Sunni support for the Wahabbi clerics like al-Wadei. Furthermore, the GoY and Saudi Arabia would later take advantage of the large numbers of Salafists in Zaydi territory to exasperate religious tensions and justify military action against the Zaydis.

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[244] Ibid., 248–49.

[245] Fattah, "Yemen: Sectarianism," 222.

[246] Barak A Salmoni, Bryce Loidolt, and Madeleine Wells, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Huthi Phenomenon*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND National Defense Research Institute, 2010), 74.

[247] Ibid.

[248] Weir, "A Clash of Fundamentalisms," 22.

[249] Clark, *Yemen: Dancing*, 137.

[250] Weir, "A Clash of Fundamentalisms," 22.

Economic grievances in the North have come from the north's perception of relative economic deprivation and isolation. Yemen's economy, particularly in the north, heavily relied on Yemeni men preforming temporary migrant work in Saudi Arabia and sending their remittances back to their families.[251] However, in 1991, just as Islah and al-Wadei were gaining prominence, Saudi Arabia, angry over President Ali Abdullah Saleh's refusal to condemn Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, refused to allow Yemeni workers to stay.[252] With a one-month notice, over 800,000 Yemenis were sent back across the border to Yemen, resulting in roughly 1.5 billion dollars in lost remittance salaries and increasing unemployment to over 25%.[253] The flow of low-status, unemployed, *shabab* (young men) back across the border impacted the Northern Yemeni economy most severely. Furthermore, while the remittance money had helped enhance the northern economy, it was still almost entirely self-sufficient from the central government and the nature of the landscape and harshness of the farming conditions had prevented agricultural specialization and limited trade options.[254] This promoted very tight and distinctly independent bonds between the communities in Northern Yemen, where goods were traded on a critical system of roads and paths that united towns and villages to provide sustainment.[255] However, the "vulnerability of this economic system is tremendous and impacted greatly by warfare,"[256] exasperating the Zaydi's economic grievances against the GoY.

The grievances against increasing spread of Salafist beliefs and economic isolation led the Zaydi's to organize the *Shabab al-Moumineen* or the "Believing

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251 Clark, *Yemen: Dancing*, 137.

252 "Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb," *International Crisis Group*, no. 86 (2009), http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/iraq-iran-gulf/yemen/086-yemen-defusing-the-saada-time-bomb.aspx.

253 Clark, *Yemen: Dancing*, 137.

254 Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Huthi Phenomenon*. 32–35.

255 Ibid., 35.

256 Ibid., 37.

Youth,"[257] which was founded in the early 1990s by both prominent Zaydi Shi'a clerics and ambitious, young, non-*sayyid* Zaydi youth.[258] The *Shabab al-Moumineen* (Believing Youth) founded over twenty-four summer schools, sports camps, and youth groups with as many as 15,000 to 18,000 students by the end of 2000.[259] The group also held public sermons, promoted the educational centers, and distributed literature—all in an attempt to reacquaint Zaydi youth to their religious and cultural origins.[260]

The buildup of both Zaydi and Salafi movements in North Yemen activated sectarian identities and first brought sectarian tension to a dramatic head during the 1991 and 1992 Zaydi celebrations of 'Id al-Ghadir, which is a Shi'a celebration of the Prophet's designation of his son-in-law, Ali, as his successor.[261] In 1991, Salafists attempted to take over the primary mosque of the Believing Youth in the city of Razih by importing preachers from Saudi Arabia and installing their own religious officials at the mosque.[262] Whole Shi'a and Sunni communities were rallied as competition for the ability to deliver Friday sermons eventually escalated into armed standoffs at the mosque and ended in the murder of the leading Wahhabi cleric's son.[263] These sectarian grievances would serve as the basis for the expanding Zaydi sectarian identity and resistance to the government's tacit approval of Salafist infiltration, helping ignite the larger conflict of the Sa'ada Wars.

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[257] Clark, *Yemen: Dancing*, 248. There is still a lot of dispute about who exactly the founders of this movement are. Some sources claim that two Zaydi's with close ties to Shi'a leaders in Iran and Lebanon, Mohammed Salem Azzan and Abdul-Karim Jadban. Others claim that the Believing Youth was a spin off or evolution of a group called the Youth Union founded by a religious sheikh Salah Almed Feletah in 1986. Even still, some sources give credit directly to Baer al-Houthi (Hussein al-Houthi's father) and Hussein al-Houthi. However, the important part is the group was formed by conservative religious Zaydi Shi'a clerics to promote Zaydi teachings to youth in North Yemen.

[258] Weir, "A Clash of Fundamentalisms," 23.

[259] Clark, *Yemen: Dancing*, 249.; Jack Freeman, "The Al Houthi Insurgency in the North of Yemen: An Analysis of the Shabab Al Moumineen," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 32, no. 11 (2009): 1008.

[260] Ali Abulohoom, "Who Was Hussein Al-Houthi," *Yemen Times,* June 17, 2013, http://www.yementimes.com/en/1686/report/2495/Who-was-Hussein-Al-Houthi.htm

[261] Weir, "A Clash of Fundamentalisms," 23. The very nature of this holiday is inflammatory for Sunnis because it essentially delegitimizes Abu Bakr, whom Sunnis view as the Prophet's rightful successor.

[262] Ibid.

[263] Ibid.

B.   NARRATIVE BUILDING: INSTRUMENTALIZING SECTARIANISM

This section will demonstrate the impacts of instrumentalization by elites in perpetuating sectarian tensions in Yemen from the Sa'ada Wars through the current civil war. While these actions certainly contributed to deaths in the Sa'ada Wars, the greater impact of this instrumentalization was to create a sectarian narrative and language, which became pervasive and ingrained in Yemeni society. To demonstrate this, three main areas will be explored: media messaging and its impact, instrumentalization by the GoY, primarily during the Sa'ada Wars, and instrumentalization by the Houthis, from the conception of the group through their current civil war.

1.   Sectarianism through Media Messaging

In order to make the argument that the GoY, the Houthis, and other identity entrepreneurs instrumentalized sectarianism, it is necessary to show the level of public reachability and societal acceptance of the sectarian narrative. Unlike Bahrain, where literacy rates exceed 99% and access to television and radio media access exceeds 95%,[264] roughly only 50–65% of Yemen's adult population is literate.[265] Because of this lack of literacy, and with over two thirds of the population living in rural conditions, "The print media does not seem to have a strong impact across much of Yemeni society."[266] Most of society depends on radio or Internet media to conceptualize current events. The ability of both the GoY and the Houthis to exploit media messaging would be crucial in the propagation of sectarian narratives and building group solidarity. Arguably, however, the GoY long held a clear advantage over the Houthis in media messaging, and even when the Houthis took over Saana in 2014, they still only controlled a portion of the

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[264] UNICEF, "UNICEF Statistics- Bahrain."

[265] UNICEF, "UNICEF Statistics- Yemen," December 20, 2015, http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/yemen_statistics.html.; Kevin Watkins, "Human Development Report (HDR) 2005," ed. Charlotte Denny (New York: United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2005), 250. https://freedomhouse.org/report/countries-crossroads/2006/yemen - _edn19. In 2005, the number was 51%, in 2012 the figures are closer to 65%. This variation will again shift with the current conflict and lack of schools available and youth bulges.

[266] Brian Katulis, "Freedom House- Yemen," Freedom House, December 20, 2015, https://freedomhouse.org/report/countries-crossroads/2006/yemen.

nation's media. Thus, in general, the GoY was more successful at instrumentalizing sectarianism through the media than the Houthis were.

The GoY has focused their anti-Houthi media campaign in all major forms of media; print, radio, TV, and Internet. One of the GoY's message control strengths was in their ability to impact the literate segments of society, like the Army, by routinely repeating the same themes and messages in print and broadcast publications.[267] The GoY has published targeted messaging in the "the Army's newspaper (*26 September*), the General People's Congress' political party (GPC's), newspaper (*al-Mu'tammar*), and English news sources affiliated with the GoY (like *Saba' News*)."[268]

In addition to targeting literate members of society through print media, the government extensively reached out into other forms of media such as television (primarily local stations but some satellite), radio (the most prolific), and the Internet (however, only 22.6% of the population uses the Internet, the lowest in the Middle East).[269] The GoY was able to greatly influence the media that was the most widely consumed—television and radio—because of the monopoly they maintain over most of the broadcasting stations.[270] There were still a few private and satellite distributors, like *Al-Masirah,* which was pro-Houthi and operated from Beirut, and *Suhayl* TV, which was religious-based and operated via satellite from the UK; however, their audience was limited.[271] Additionally, these limited opposition channels could not compete with the fact that "the GoY leadership, including President Saleh himself, [gave] televised interviews on the [Sa'ada] conflict and [took] advantage of 'impromptu' appearances before journalists' cameras to talk about the GoY's progress in the conflict."[272]

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[267] Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Huthi Phenomenon*. 168–69.

[268] Ibid., 169.

[269] Enrique de Argaez, "Internet World Stats: Usage and Population Statistics," Miniwatts Marketing Group, 30 December 2015, http://www.internetworldstats.com/me/ye.htm.

[270] Katulis, "Freedom House- Yemen."

[271] Ibid.; BBC News, "Yemen Profile- Media," BBC World News, December 30, 2015, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14704901.

[272] Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Huthi Phenomenon*. 169.

Furthermore, because television was limited in Yemen, the interviews were also transcribed and printed into GoY-affiliated papers and English-language outlets, which served to reinforce regime messaging and increased the distribution of that messaging.[273]

The GoY also attempted to control journalism and messaging in the northern parts of Yemen and internationally as well. The GoY frequently used the government radio stations in Sa'ada to broadcast anti-Houthi messages; for example, propaganda interviews with individuals associated by blood or tribe to the Houthi family who condemned the actions of the Houthis.[274] The other advantage the government maintained during this time was the state imposed "media blackout" that made further detailed analysis of media messaging or even factual accounts of what happened during the Sa'ada Wars very difficult to obtain. During this time, both domestic and international media reporting on the conflict was restricted to prevent Houthi ideals from gaining notoriety or government military action from gaining attention.[275] The Freedom House stated that "Yemen's government severely restricted press freedom; security forces intimidated, beat, and arrested dozens of journalists who had expressed criticism of the government."[276] Additionally, the government continuously enacted Article 103 of the Press and Publications Law which outlaws "direct personal criticism of the head of state" and publication of material that "might spread a spirit of dissent and division among the people" or "lead to the spread of ideas contrary to the principles of the Yemeni Revolution."[277] This law was used as justification to ban, destroy, and outlaw Zaydi or opposition media. According to human rights groups, "the Ministry of Culture and the Political Security Organizations (PSOs) monitored and sometimes removed from stores printed materials that espoused Zaydi-Shi'a doctrine."[278] Additionally, human rights

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[273] Ibid.

[274] Ibid.

[275] Dhayf Allah Al Shami, interview by Safa Al Ahmad, 2015.

[276] Katulis, "Freedom House- Yemen."

[277] Joel Campagna, "Attacks, Censorship, and Dirty Tricks: In Yemen, the Press Climate Is Deteriorating," *Freedom House,* March 9, 2006, http://www.cpj.org/Briefings/2006/yemen_3-06/yemen_3-06_printer.html.

[278] US State Department, "State Department Report on Yemen," *International Religious Freedom Report for 2011* (2011), http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/171749.pdf

groups have reported that the government banned the publishing of Zaydi-Shi'a Islamic materials and even "distributed grade-school textbooks that described the Zaydi manner of prayer as incorrect."[279] Additionally, the regime has targeted youth messaging in schools by mandating curriculum consistent with regime messaging, and by closing down summer camps associated with the Believing Youth and the Houthis while opening its own GoY sponsored summer camps in and around Zaydi areas.[280] These actions increased Yemenis' repeated exposure to the regime's sectarian messaging with limited access to a counter-narrative.

The importance of media in Yemen was so critical that controlling this messaging was one of the first goals of the Houthis upon their takeover of Sana'a in late 2014. Though the collapse of the Saleh regime in 2011 temporarily increased media capacity and freedoms in Yemen as hundreds of new private websites, sixteen new broadcasting channels, and thirteen new radio stations were created,[281] the takeover of Yemen's temporary government by the Houthis in late 2014/early 2015 has seen a drastic decrease in press freedom and an increase in media messaging favoring the Houthis.[282] According to assessments of press capacity and freedoms, the Houthis succeeded "in controlling most of the media outlets in Sana'a and a number of other invaded Yemeni cities by attacking their headquarters and their regional branches."[283] Additionally, the Houthis were successful in taking control of the main telecommunications provider for Yemen and through this, blocking pro-regime, anti-Houthi messaging on multiple websites.[284] The Houthis also made serious efforts to distribute their messaging. They have set up large television screens and speakers in stadiums to showcase their leadership,

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[279] Ibid., 5–6.

[280] Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Huthi Phenomenon*. 9, 169.

[281] "The Effect of Houthi Control over Media Outlets in Yemen," *The Regional Center for Strategic Studies*, August 8, 2015, http://www.rcssmideast.org/en/Article/345/The-Effect-of-Houthi-Control-over-Media-Outlets-in-Yemen#.V09eUvkrKM-.

[282] "Yemen's Houthi Rebels Thought to Be Holding 11 Journalists Hostage," *Reporters Without Borders,* August 28, 2015, https://rsf.org/en/news/yemens-houthi-rebels-thought-be-holding-11-journalists-hostage.

[283] Ibid.

[284] Ibid.

particularly Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, speaking about the Houthis and trying to gain support and sympathizers (see image below).[285]

Figure 6.   Abdul-Malik al-Houthi Speech Project at a Houthi Rally

Much of the Houthi propaganda has a "religious character and focuses on issues including the overarching US-Israeli conspiracy and Arab 'collusion.'"[286] Their broadcasts also play traditional songs from the Northern mountainous regions of Yemen, encouraging courage and faith for their fighters and promoting Zaydi culture.[287] Furthermore, with the near monopoly of print, TV, and radio broadcast in areas controlled by the Houthis, they have been able to distribute sermons and religious messaging promoting Zaydi Shiism with ease.[288] Thus, control of the media has been as critical for the Houthi movement promoting itself as it was for the GoY in discrediting the Houthis. Instrumentalists require a platform, and for both parties, the media has played a major role in the distribution and propagation of sectarian narratives.

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[285] Mohammed Hatem and Glen Carey, "Saudis Fret over Iranian Front Emerging from Yemen Chaos," *Bloomberg,* February 11, 2015, http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-02-11/saudis-fret-over-iranian-front-emerging-from-yemen-chaos.

[286] Abdulelah Taqi, "Houthi Propaganda: Following in Hizballah's Footsteps," *The New Arab*, April 12, 2015, https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/2015/4/12/houthi-propaganda-following-in-hizballahs-footsteps.

[287] Ibid.

[288] Ibid.

Unfortunately, as conflict has intensified since 2015, media has become more restricted and less supporting of unbiased opinions. A Center for Media and Economic Studies published in August of 2015 indicated that over 350 press workers in Yemen were jobless due to closures, seizing of newspapers, and the termination of certain visual and audio broadcasts.[289] Additionally, the impact of civil war and Operation Decisive Storm has put many journalists at risk of being kidnapped, abused, and indiscriminately killed.[290] This has caused journalists to move south to areas uncontrolled by the Houthis, like Aden, and also resulted in Arab channels taking over the broadcasting of key stations like Al Arabiya and Aden Live from abroad.[291] Overall, media messaging has been critical for both pro and anti-Houthi forces as they compete for messaging and has impacted sectarian propaganda throughout the country.

2. Instrumentalization of Sectarianism by Other Means

a. The GoY's Instrumentalization

The Saleh regime did its best to instrumentalize sectarianism in their fight against the Houthi movement by implementing a deliberate policy of delegitimizing the Houthis' grievances, particularly during the Sa'ada Wars. The GoY attempted to portray the Houthis as being an Iranian proxy, "closeted imamis," cowardly, oppressive, and against Republican ideals through targeted propaganda, religious accusations, and military intervention.[292] This section will detail the saliency and methods of GoY sectarian instrumentalization.

The government of Yemen's actions to instrumentalize sectarianism in opposition to the Houthis was not limited to media messaging. The GoY also constructed the sectarian narrative by purposely instigating religious tensions by targeting Zaydi religious institutions and by transforming the focus of the Sa'ada Wars into a religious battle.

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[289] Taqi, "Houthi Propaganda."

[290] "Yemen," *Reporters Without Borders,* accessed January 15, 2016, https://rsf.org/en/taxonomy/term/172.

[291] Ibid.

[292] Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, *Regime and Periphery*, 168–78.

These actions, as the government hoped, further fueled the radicalization of the Houthis and increasingly isolated their group from the tribal and familial ties they had previously maintained peacefully with Sunnis in the region. Through the actions of the Government, the sectarian narrative of the Zaydis was truly cemented in Yemeni society.

The government incited Zaydi communal anger by restricting their freedom to practice their religion. The GoY shifted approved prayer times in some of the country's main mosques from times traditionally observed by the Zaydis to times observed by Salafist.[293] Additionally, the government closed Zaydi mosques in the North and in Sana'a, claiming them to be "extremists Shi'a religious institutes;" banned or reassigned Imams found to be sympathetic to "radical" Zaydi doctrine and replaced them with Sunni or Salafist imams; and monitored Zaydi mosque services.[294] The GoY then summoned "GoY-affiliated Shafi'i and Salafi *'ulama'* to publish *fatwas* (legal rulings) condemning the Houthis in terms aligned with GoY rhetoric."[295] For the Zaydis, the situation was further escalated into sectarianism when, according to Human Rights groups, hundreds of Zaydis were jailed simply because of their religious association, despite a lack of evidence that they had supported Houthi military actions.[296] These governmental actions drove Zaydi leaders to believe that there was a concerted effort on the part of Saleh's regime to abolish Zaydi culture and to "insert Salafi traditions, mosques, and imams into traditionally Zaydi regions."[297] The government targeted these Zaydi religious institutions because the narrative they had constructed to combat the Houthis was one that encompassed all Shi'a-Zaydis, even if in reality not all Shi'a-Zaydis supported or agreed with the Houthi movement. Therefore, the government's continued actions to target Zaydis as a whole group demonstrated their commitment to building the sectarian

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[293] US State Department, "State Department Report on Yemen." 4.; Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Huthi Phenomenon*. 168–69.

[294] US State Department, "State Department Report on Yemen," 4–5.

[295] Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Huthi Phenomenon*. 169.

[296] US State Department, "State Department Report on Yemen," 4.

[297] Ibid.

narrative in order to diminish the real grievances of their citizens and garner support from Sunnis both inside and out of Yemen.

The Saleh regime also recognized that by instrumentalizing sectarianism during the Sa'ada Wars, they could recruit Sunnis and Salafists to fight with government forces or tribal militias against the Houthis, as well as appease the powerful Salafist elements within the GoY itself.[298] This deliberate conscription of Salafists only served to further propel the sectarian narrative as it confirmed Houthi and Zaydi fears of a government partnership with Salafists to target Zaydis. Additionally, the sectarian rhetoric Saleh's regime used to entice Sunni fighters into conscription added a religious element to the wars that had previously not existed. Below is a piece of GoY propaganda posted for army troops during the Sa'ada campaigns:

[Translation]

The Illustrious Religious Scholars of Yemen:

Shaykh al-Raymi: All together must stand against those who are working very hard to establish an apostate [Shi'ite; *rafidi*] order.

Shaykh Mahfuz: We must continue the efforts and close ranks to confront this discord and bury it.

Shaykh al-Mu'allim: There is no use to endeavoring with the rebels except for decisively finishing [them] and using force.

Shaykh al-Mahdi: These [Huthis] directed their weapon toward the *umma*; fighting them is legitimate and this is a religious ruling [*hukm shar'i.*]

Shaykh Hasan: Those who revolt against the consensus of the *umma* and the [existing political] order require the leaders to take responsibility and preserve security.

Figure 7. GoY Tactical Information Operations Leaflet Condemning Houthis in

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298 Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, *Regime and Periphery,* 93.

Islamic Terms[299]

In March of 2007, the Yemeni Ministry of Defense officially published a *fatwa* (religious edict) authorizing and obligating "the use of deadly force against the [Believing] Youth."[300] Military chaplains then further "echoed GoY pronouncements to Sunni troops," providing them with "Islamic justification for prosecuting a war against fellow Yemenis."[301] The government's release of a religious directive is an incredibly important example of the GoY's incitement of sectarianism. The GoY, though running an Islamic nation, technically still affords religious protection in its own Constitution to non-Muslims or minority Muslim groups like the Zaydis.[302] By using the pulpit of the Ministry of Defense and its own military chaplains, the GoY was able to instrumentalize religion into the Sa'ada conflict by encouraging Sunnis to fight against the Zaydis on religious grounds. Additionally, Saleh's main general in charge of the First Armored Division, who conducted the GoY's campaign against the Houthis, Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, was a "Zaydi turned Salafist."[303] Additionally, Ali Mohsen was not just a prominent figure and member of Islah (the Sunni/Salafist political party),[304] but he was also known to be "openly pro-Salafi with links to *jihadists*"[305] and "recruited extreme Salafist directly into the fight, regardless of geographic or tribal background."[306] General Mohsen was a significant part of the regime's sectarian narrative because his use as the leading general demonstrated the GoY's catering to internal Salafist sentiments and encouragement of a religious facet of the Sa'ada Wars.

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[299] Ibid., 175. Source was a Yemeni national from the conflict area.

[300] UNHCR,"Child Soldiers Global Report 2008 - Yemen," May 20, 2008, http://www.refworld.org/docid/486cb13f0.html.; Jane Novak, "Yemen's Internal Shia Jihad," *Global Politician,* March 21, 2007, www.genocidewatch.org/images/Yemen_07_03_21_Yemen_s_Internal_Shia_Jihad.doc.

[301] Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, *Regime and Periphery,* 169.

[302] US State Department, "State Department Report on Yemen," 1.

[303] Clark, *Yemen: Dancing*, 249.

[304] Brehony, "Yemen and the Huthis: Genesis of the 2015 Crisis," 234.

[305] Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Huthi Phenomenon*. 186.

[306] Ibid., 162.

The GoY additionally mobilized irregular militias led by Sunni tribal sheikhs who also held leadership rank in the Yemeni military and who had "either passively supported or actively promoted the spread of radical Sunni Islam in Sa'ada since the 1990s."[307] However, instead of employing these "Colonel Sheiks" as a part of the normal GoY army infantry to fight the Houthis, Saleh sent these men to lead their own, independent, irregular militias against the Houthis.[308] These sheikh-led militias were made up not just of loyal tribesmen, but also of Salafists eager to fight the Houthis. Among the ranks of the irregular militias there have been reports of "members of the Abyan Aden Islamic Army (a known terrorist organization with connections to Al-Qaeda in Southern Yemen) and its leader Khalidabdul Nabi…numerous Iraq generals [who] were recruited into the Yemeni military in 2003…including high level Baathists… [and] veterans of prior conflicts in Afghanistan, Chechnya, Bosnia, and other *jihadist* campaigns."[309] While it can be difficult to determine the extent of Salafist influence and participation in the military and militias, several very influential regime elites, in addition to Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, were publically known to be anti-Zaydi and Salafist sympathizers and contributed to instrumentalizing sectarianism. Another prominent anti-Zaydi actor was the *jihadist* and Sunni extremist, Abd al-Majid al-Zindani, who founded and ran the Salafist development center, al-Iman University, and was an active Muslim Brotherhood member and founder of the Islah Party. Additionally, Muhsin al-Ahmar, who had fought with the *mujahidin* in Afghanistan, was among many PSO and Interior Central Security Organization (CSO) leadership officials who were known for their support of Salafism.[310] Clearly the entrenchment of elites who were dedicated Salafists in the military, judiciary, and the intelligence services has had a distressing impact on what previously was a unique society of religious pluralism in the Arab Peninsula. Furthermore, their presence in the GoY and participation in Sa'ada Wars helped further

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307 Marieke Brandt, "The Irregulars of the Sa 'Ada War: 'Colonel Sheikhs'and 'Tribal Militias' in Yemen's Huthi Conflict (2004–2010)," in *Why Yemen Matters: A Society in Transition,* ed. Helen Lackner (London: Saqi Books, 2014), 20.

308 Ibid.

309 Novak, "Yemen's Internal Shia Jihad."

310 Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, *Regime and Periphery.*

cement the sectarian narrative against the Houthis through their own actions and the actions of the GoY.

b.   Sectarian Instrumentalization by the Houthis

The Houthi movement has been able to mobilize sectarian group identity by propagating clear messages of grievances and community solidarity and by providing leadership to mobilize followers. While instrumentalization by elites often implies nefariously using identity as a tool to promote and maintain power by elites, in the case of the Houthis, this appears to be less of the motivation. Instead, instrumentalizing sectarianism has served to preserve Zaydi relevance and those who relied on their Zaydi identity for community worth. Thus, by proclaiming to be defenders of Yemeni and Zaydi ideals, key individuals and the Houthi group as a whole have maintained significance in the community that may have otherwise been lost. This is a subtle, yet important, distinction between an instrumentalist who manipulates identity for their own power propagation and those, like the Houthis, who use identity mobilization to solidify their role and worth in the community. Either way, the Houthis still instrumentalized sectarian identity to their advantage and to promote their group identity.

The instrumentalization of Zaydi grievances into sectarian tensions, and even war, was most successfully accomplished by Hussain al-Houthi, the son of a prominent Zaydi cleric. Hussain was a key member of both the Believing Youth and the Zaydis political party, al-Haqq, but in the early 2000s, became the popular leader of a more outspoken group of Zaydis.[311] Hussain promoted not just a Zaydi revival against Salafism, but also a nationalist movement in opposition to a corrupt Yemeni government, economic and political isolation, and Saleh's support of the United States' "War on Terror."[312] Al-Houthi found an audience for his messaging because worsening economic conditions coincided with the other pressing issues of Salafist encroachment and the US's invasion of Iraq, all key Zaydi grievances. As oil revenues declined in 2003, the government began to further politically and economically isolate previous beneficiaries like the

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[311] Clark, *Yemen: Dancing*, 249.

[312] Ibid; Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, *Regime and Periphery,* 94.

Zaydis in the Northern region.[313] Additionally, ongoing efforts by Saudi Arabia to shore up the porous Saudi-Yemeni border exasperated economic conditions in the North which relied on seasonal cross-border trade routes and smuggling.[314] In an effort to ensure support (read, finances) from Saudi Arabia, Ali Abdullah Saleh signed the Treaty of Jeddah in 2000, permanently giving up its claim of the Jizan, Asir, and Najran provinces that shared close familial, tribal, and religious ties with Yemen's Zaydis.[315] Furthermore, the north's comparative economic deprivation became heightened as young Zaydi males became more exposed to other areas of Yemen and the greater Middle East.[316] Thus, though tribal identities were still critical, northern Yemenis began to see common predicaments that affected Zaydis as a whole. This created an "imagined community" of Zaydi discontent and unity in which al-Houthi was able to instrumentalize.[317] Al-Houthi combined these pressing northern issues with anger over Saleh's support of the United States' invasion of Iraq when he publically condemned Saleh's regime in 2003 at the main mosque in the capital of Yemen (Sana'a).[318] Hussain delivered a fiery sermon decrying the regime and at the end declared what is now the infamous Houthi chant, "God is great, death to America, death to Israel, God damn the Jews, victory to Islam!"[319]

This slogan would come to represent Hussein al-Houthi's ideologies, grievances, and objectives, and its popularity reflected Houthi's resonance with many Zaydis and Yemenis alike. Al-Houthi's new slogan also framed his supporters as an action-oriented, zealous religious movement that could stand up against the government and could motivate a collective action based on a collective identity. The religious element to al-Houthis messaging was critical in his ability to instrumentalize sectarianism and turn

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[313] Brehony, "Yemen and the Huthis: Genesis of the 2015 Crisis," 235.

[314] Dingli, "Is the Failed State Thesis Analytically Useful? The Case of Yemen," 95.

[315] Marieke Brandt, "The Hidden Realities Behind Saudi Arabia's Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen," May 15, 2015, http://www.focaalblog.com/2015/05/15/marieke-brandt-the-hidden-realities-behind-saudi-arabias-operation-decisive-storm-in-yemen/.

[316] Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, *Regime and Periphery*, 5.

[317] Ibid.

[318] Freeman, "The Al Houthi Insurgency in the North of Yemen: An Analysis of the Shabab Al Moumineen," 1009.

[319] Ibid.

otherwise secular grievances and issues into ones that appeared to threaten the very culture and religion of northern Yemenis. The collective Zaydi identity that al-Houthi facilitated both greatly enhanced Hussain's popularity and power, but also promoted suspicion by the GoY to al-Houthi's intensions. Shortly after Hussain al-Houthi's sermon where he first coined the notorious slogan, supporters throughout Sana'a and Sa'ada began to graffiti the slogan, anti-regime, and anti-U.S. sentiments on government buildings and distribute literature condemning Saleh's support of the United States.[320] Regime security forces arrested hundreds of Houthi followers[321] because they felt the slogan was a threat and said that, "If today the Houthis chanted 'Death to America,' tomorrow they could be chanting 'Death to the President.'"[322] It was both the government's fear of the movement and the Houthi supporters' opposition to the government that lead to armed skirmishes, escalating when al-Houthi and a group of his followers were killed in the hills of Sa'ada by the Yemeni Army, sparking the first Sa'ada War.[323] The Sa'ada Wars, which would last from 2004 to 2010, and Hussain al-Houthi's martyrdom, further activated sectarian identity and heightened the overall sectarian tensions in the region.

The martyrdom of Hussain al-Houthi did not end the instrumentalization of sectarianism by Houthi movement elite. Instead, Hussain's bother, Abdul Malik al-Houthi, took over as leader of the movement and carried the sectarian messaging onward, using Hussain's martyrdom as a platform of legitimacy. Hussain's sermons and lectures had been recorded and after his death were widely distributed and even converted to MP3s.[324] This allowed the Houthis to speak with a consistent voice and allowed Hussain to further instrumentalize the growing conflict, even from the grave. However, what most greatly contributed to the Houthis' messaging and propaganda were the Sa'ada Wars.

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[320] Ibid.; Clark, *Yemen: Dancing*, 249.

[321] Clark, *Yemen: Dancing*, 249.

[322] Freeman, "The Al Houthi Insurgency in the North of Yemen: An Analysis of the Shabab Al Moumineen," 1009.

[323] Clark, *Yemen: Dancing*, 249–50.

[324] Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, *Regime and Periphery*, 114.

The armed conflict with the GoY made it easy for Malik and other Houthi elites to assert that "their religion and culture [were] under ideological and *physical* siege…by the GoY itself."[325] The physical ramifications of the GoY's war against the Houthis bonded Northern Yemenis, even those who many not have been Houthi supporters, in part because the northern agricultural economic system was tremendously vulnerable to war.[326] Thus, for Houthi instrumentalization, economic grievances would only become even more pronounced after the start of the Sa'ada Wars and contribute to inciting sectarian sentiment. The Houthis were able to claim that "the government has destroyed the north without rebuilding it," thereby allowing the Houthis to emphasize the "longstanding geographic imbalances in development [and] the GoY's violation of wholesome northern tribal norms, such as respect for protected places and mediation."[327] Additionally, GoY violence only "activated wider circles of opposition to the regime— over time, more Zaydis in the north, representing several tribes, began to call themselves Houthis."[328] As the war bonded northern Yemenis, Malik and other Houthi elites had a wider and more sympathetic audience to propagate their narrative.

Houthi messaging has always been carefully constructed to fit within the greater Yemeni society but still appeal to their Zaydi base of support. In general, the Houthis rely on promoting their legitimacy as defenders of both the Yemeni people and Zaydis by discrediting the GoY and promoting their own credentials. Much of the Houthis instrumentalization of sectarianism in the country has come from their self-declared status as *mujahidin* and defenders of Islamic faith and culture. The Houthis have achieved the promotion of their messaging by using both religious symbolism and charismatic leadership to enhance group identity.

The Houthis have promoted a salient group identity through their use of Houthi propaganda and rituals. In disseminating their messaging, the Houthis have relied heavily on methods that carry strong connotations of Zaydi culture and religion like poems,

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[325] Ibid., 93.

[326] Ibid., 37.

[327] Ibid., 24.

[328] Ibid., 8.

lectures, and anthems.[329] They have then expanded this messaging to younger audiences by using web pages, YouTube and Internet videos, web forums, and digital sound files.[330] The material produced by the Houthis appears to highlight a mix of both peaceful and aggressive messaging, done so to target various audiences that reflect the Houthis own internal constituencies. For example, in a January 2008 interview, Abdul al-Malik says the Houthis first demand was "freedom of thought, expression, and religious occasions," going on to argue that the group aims to "educate our Islamic community [about] the culture of the Qur'an."[331] Messaging like this attempted to paint the group as a religiously motivated, peacefully insurgency which acts as defenders of Yemeni culture and religion. In contrast, and in an appeal to the younger generations of Zaydis, the Houthis have also declared themselves as *mujahidin*, or religious warriors, "capable of launching spectacularly devastating, preplanned attacks on GoY forces."[332] In both instances, however, the religious credentials of the organization are stressed and contribute to the condemnation of the GoY as un-Islamic. This rhetoric solidifies Houthi group identity as the religiously righteous one, and the GoY as corrupt and controlled by foreigners and non-legitimate forces.

In addition to message propagation, the Houthis have instrumentalized sectarianism by utilizing Shi'a holidays to create a salient group identity. In particular, four key holidays served as platforms to gather supporters and engender group solidarity: al-Ghadir Day (which, as previously mentioned, is when Shi'a believe Prophet Muhamad declared Ali as his rightful successor), the Prophet's Birthday (which is considered a blasphemous celebration by most Sunnis and particularly Salafists), International Jerusalem Day (to show solidarity with Palestine), and the Commemoration of Martyrs Day (a Houthi invented holiday to honor their fallen warriors).[333] This allows the Houthis to unite many disparate elements of Zaydis and Yemenis and promote Shi'a religious

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[329] Ibid., 216.

[330] Ibid.

[331] Ibid., 233.

[332] Ibid., 225.

[333] Ibid., 236.

values as a necessary part of group identity, hence enhancing and instrumentalizing sectarian identity as a salient part of anti-regime and pro-Houthi identity.

The Houthis also rely on key elites, like Abdul al-Malik al-Houthi, to propagate Houthi ideology and group solidarity. Though instrumentalism by elites often suggests that power and control are independent motivators for elite instrumentalization, declaring this as a guiding principle for Abdul's actions is extremely difficult. While he, and his family, have without a doubt benefited from the ascent in power and prestige, this role may have been thrust upon Abdul more so than actively sought out. Unlike his older brother Hussain, Abdul was very young and rather unprepared to take on the mantel of Houthi leadership upon Hussain's death, and has taken many years to comfortably fill this role.[334] Additionally, continued military success has forced Malik to be a wanted man, having to move often to different fortified safe houses.[335] Even still, the Houthi group has used Malik to promote the Houthi message. Abdul al-Malik has his own press office, sends out email news-letters, interviews with media sources, speaks at key holidays and gatherings, and visits war-torn areas to meet followers and offer condolences.[336] All of these actions are on top of his military leadership responsibilities and conducted to enhance his image outside of just his local constituents. Thus, as an individual, Malik has helped provide leadership to the Houthi movement, but does not appear to be pushing for individual power in the recently established Houthi interim government.[337] Thus, Abdul al-Malik's instrumentalization of group identity appears to be beneficial for the group as a whole, even if personally the benefits are mixed.

3.   Instrumentalization Conclusion

Instrumentalization of sectarian identity in Yemen has resulted from actions taken by both the GoY and the Houthis. Yet, the actions by the GoY appear to have been more

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[334] Ibid., 237.

[335] Ibid., 191.

[336] Ibid., 237.

[337] Ibid. Houthi supporters have said that they want Abdul Malik to remain a spiritual leader and not be mudded in politics. Furthermore, since the Houthi takeover in 2014, the Houthis have continually stressed they want to broker a new government when fighting is over and have led the country as a council, not with a single individual.

impactful in heightening sectarian tensions than the Houthis because the GoY focused on disaggregating identity as a tact for divide and rule while the Houthis have attempted to aggregate identity in order to increase their constituency. This is largely due to the fact that the Houthis, while benefiting from creating a strong group identity based on religious and cultural norms, must also weigh this against ostracizing Sunni Yemenis and limiting their support networks. Much of the more recent Houthi rhetoric, particularly from the Arab Spring in 2011 through present day, has attempted to broaden its group identity to include non-Zaydi Yemenis.[338] The GoY, on the other hand, recognized the minority status of Zaydi-Shi'a in Yemen, and attempted to exploit sectarian identity as a tool to degrade and delegitimize the Houthi movement and prevent the Houthis from gaining a wider base of appeal. Both actors, however, have instrumentalized sectarian identity and have contributed to sowing the seeds of sectarian discontent and making sectarian identity a salient one.

C.   NARRATIVE BUILDING: THE REGIONAL CONTEXT

While instrumentalism has shown sectarian narrative building in Yemen, understanding the greater context of how and why sectarianism became a relevant identity in both Yemen and the greater Middle East is best explained by the regional tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran. This regional rivalry has emphasized the Sunni and Shi'a identities of both the sponsor states of Saudi and Iran respectively and the sectarian identity of their proxy agents. This sectarian identity labeling has been used as a tool for identity groups to expand their constitute base and appeal to either Saudi or Iran for support, or conversely, by oppositional forces (like state governments) to discredit and delegitimize an identity group by claiming it to be no more than a proxy for Saudi or Iran. In the case of Yemen, a fundamental part of the sectarian narrative built up against the Houthis has been contextualizing their existence in light of the Iranian / Saudi rivalry by insisting on the Houthis' Iranian connections and their anti-Yemeni nature. In doing this, by "distancing the Houthis from Yemen," the GoY has attempted to

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338 International Crisis Group, "The Huthis: From Saada to Sanaa," in *International Crisis Group* (Brussels, Belgium: International Crisis Group, 2014), 2.

"internationalize the issue."[339] This framing of the Houthis as a foreign Shi'a proxy of Iran has led the GoY to suggest that not only do the Houthis threaten national stability, but they also "threaten the regional balance of power" and that "they should be seen as part of the Global War on Terrorism (GWoT)."[340] This assertion has allowed the GoY to gain support from Saudi Arabia and other external actors who oppose Iran in combating the Houthis. This section will demonstrate the insubstantiality in the accusation of the Houthis as an Iranian proxy, but also show how this greater sectarian rivalry provided the context that was critical in shaping the sectarian tensions within Yemen. Thus, the conclusion to draw in this section is that sectarian *tensions* were made relevant and heightened by the regional rivalry between Saudi and Iran, but because the Houthis were not a true Iranian proxy, the proxy war theory is not sufficient for explaining sectarian *violence* in Yemen.

One oversight in the accusation that the Houthis are but a Shi'a proxy of Iran is that Zaydi Shiism is clearly distinct from the Twelver Shiism found in Iran. One particularly important distinction between Zaydi Shi'a and Iranian Shi'a is the Zaydis' disinterest in proselytizing their beliefs. Furthermore, both Zaydi doctrine and most Zaydis do not support the idea of *wilayat al-faqih* or "rule of state by a religious jurist."[341] Iranians believe that the Ayatollah is the human embodiment of the hidden twelfth imam, something that Zaydis do not believe.[342] In fact, Zaydism has moved even further away from the idea of a political imam ruling Yemen and instead believe the imam should only be seen as a fallible human that can help guide the community on religious beliefs alone.[343] Furthermore, simply categorizing the Houthis as an Iranian proxy because they share, broadly, similar religious beliefs, is a vast oversimplification of reality. Peter Salisbury, a Yemeni expert, suggests that it is "tempting to fall into the misleading trap of seeing [Yemen's] various factions as out-and-out proxies for regional

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339 Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, *Regime and Periphery*, 171.

340 Ibid.

341 Ibid., 67.

342 Ibid.

343 Ibid.

superpowers, malleable to the will of Riyadh or Tehran."[344] The religious differences between the Houthis and most Iranians are just one in many differences that separate the beliefs, ideologies, goals, and actions of the two.

Most bothered by these accusations of being an Iranian proxy was in fact Hussain al-Houthi and his followers. While it is clear that al-Houthi himself took some inspiration,[345] even possibly some training, from his time in Iran (though its nature, religious or military, is in question), many accounts suggest Hussain al-Houthi was never hoping to establish an Imamate or serve as a proxy for Iran.[346] Hussain al-Houthi has always claimed that the way to bring about the Zaydi revival was to "struggle against American hegemony over the Arab and Muslim world and to be satisfied with the Quran as the supreme religious authority."[347] His statements against the president, Ali Abdullah Saleh were made with the intention of inciting anger against the GoY among all Yemeni Muslims, regardless of their sect.[348] Shortly before his death in July of 2004, Hussain al-Houthi wrote an open letter that furiously attempted to rebut the GoY's accusations of foreign connections where he claimed, "His differences stemmed solely from the government's pro-U.S. stance and Saudi policy in Yemen."[349] Even Hussein's father claimed after Hussein was killed that, "Hussein's objective merely had been to defend Islam."[350] More recently, in an April 2015 interview with *Frontline*, reporter Safa Al Ahmad discussed Iranian aid with a senior Houthi leader, Dhayf Allah Al Shami:[351]

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[344] Peter Salisbury, "Is Yemen Becoming the Next Syria?," *Foreign Policy*, March 6, 2015, http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/03/06/is-yemen-becoming-the-next-syria/.

[345] Adam Taylor, "The History of "Death to America," *Washington Post,* February 18, 2015, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2015/02/18/the-history-of-death-to-america/. Connecting this slogan to Iran isn't hard to do, considering during the Iranian revolution of 1979, the phrase "Death to America" and "Death to Israel" were heard often.

[346] "Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb," 12–13.

[347] Samy Dorlian, "The Ṣa'da War in Yemen: Between Politics and Sectarianism," *The Muslim World* 101, no. 2 (2011): 193.

[348] Ibid.

[349] "Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb," 3.

[350] Ibid.

[351] Shami, "The Fight for Yemen."

Safa Al Ahmad: It has been widely reported that Iran gives the [Houthis] weapons, money and training.

Dhayf Allah Al Shami: It's not true.

Safa Al Ahmad: No financial, military, or moral support?

Dhayf Allah Al Shami: No financial or military. If there is moral support, well, we support Chavez in Venezuela. Why this insistence that we receive support from Iran, other than wanting to turn the struggle in this country and the region into a sectarian one, based on the American and Zionist agenda?[352]

This insistence on a lack of Iranian support, while disputable as a fact, does convey the Houthis insistence on being credible among their Zaydi followers and not to be seen as a proxy for Iran.

Ali Abdullah Saleh understood that linking the Houthis to Iran during the Sa'ada Wars allowed him to delegitimize the Houthis' grievances and obtain more funding and support from foreign powers by antagonizing the regional sectarian competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Through state-controlled media and assertions made by Saleh and other GoY elites, the GoY was able to amplify sectarian tensions by creating a fear of an Iranian proxy.[353] For example, in 2010 after the final Sa'ada War, in which Saudi Arabia had militarily supported the GoY with air strikes against the Houthis, Saleh explained on a primetime interview on a Saudi Arabian news channel, al-'Arabiyyah:

> [A]l-Houthi now has a foreign ideology: let's say, [one] based on Twelverism, [while] he is Zaydi. We in Yemen are Zaydis and Shafi'is. We have no problem [between us]. The entry of the Twelver sect, introduced to the Houthis [from outside], is something new. We reject its being imposed on our country, or [that] we [should] adopt it. Because for thousands of years in Yemen…there is no dispute between Shafi'is and Zaydis. And this new, errant sect will pay … the price [for promoting sectarian strife].[354]

Accusing the Houthis of promoting foreign ideologies and sectarian strife allowed Saleh to justify his own government's and the Saudis' military actions during the Sa'ada

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352 Ibid.

353 Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, *Regime and Periphery,* 174.

354 Gengler, "Ethnic Conflict," 74.

Wars.[355] In the same interview, Saleh was also asked about the alleged foreign support of the Houthi rebels.[356] He stated, "More than 80 to 90 percent of [Houthi action] is foreign encouragement in order for countries of the region to settle their scores with Saudi Arabia, to preoccupy Saudi Arabia, and to send a message to Saudi Arabia via these Houthi elements."[357] Saleh's clear allusion to Iranian meddling provides both the GoY and the Saudis justification to engage the Houthis militarily and has helped Saleh secure several billion dollars of financing from Riyadh.[358] Furthermore, suggesting Iranian collusion with the Houthis ties the Houthis into the larger sectarian conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran. However, a "WikiLeaks cable in 2009 confirmed that both the United States and Saudi Arabia well understood Saleh's material calculations and strongly doubted Iranian influence in Yemen."[359] Despite this understanding, both the GoY and Saudi Arabia recognized the benefit to delegitimizing the Houthis and building up the sectarian narrative through the concept of proxy Iranian actors. Furthermore, speeches by the GoY, like the one presented, shows that the regional competition enhanced sectarianism as an identity worth instrumentalizing and activating. Activating these sectarian sentiments contributed to both Zaydi support of the Houthi movement and the GoY's support in their opposition to the movement.

To explain in further depth why the proxy war hypothesis has limited applicability in Yemen for explaining sectarian violence, it is important to consider the evidence behind the GoY's Iranian proxy claims. Unlike the GoY officials, others in Yemen at the time of the Sa'ada Wars had different perspectives of Iranian involvement. A western diplomat, in an interview with the ICG (International Crisis Group) said, "There is no clear evidence of Iranian involvement but small signs of a role by Iranian charitable organizations. Overall, however, the conflict (Sa'ada Wars) appears chiefly fueled by

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[355] Novak, "Yemen's Internal Shia Jihad."; Stacey Philbrick Yadav, "The Limits of the Sectarian Framing in Yemen," *Washington Post,* September 25, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/09/25/the-limits-of-the-sectarian-framing-in-yemen/.

[356] Gengler, "Ethnic Conflict," 74.

[357] Ibid.

[358] Salisbury, "Is Yemen Becoming the Next Syria?"

[359] Brandt, "The Hidden Realities Behind Saudi Arabia's Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen."

internal grievances."[360] Furthermore, when the ICG pressed the GoY for evidence of Houthi collusion with the Iranians, the GoY provided documentation of alleged Iranian financial, logistical, and ideological support, "raised more questions than they answered."[361] The ICG went on to concluded that GoY "Accusations were not adequately sourced and often came from unidentified institutions. Overall, the evidence appeared incomplete and biased."[362] While some (disputed) assessments on Iranian involvement during the Sa'ada Wars still circulate, outside observers seem to have conclusively agreed that direct Iranian funding for weapons and support in military training was not evident. This lack of Iranian involvement is also critical because it demonstrates why the proxy war hypothesis only provides an overly generalized assessment of the causes of sectarian violence in the Middle East. On the surface, Yemen appears to be an Iranian proxy, but when reconsidered with evidence and a detailed evaluation, the nature of sectarian tensions and violence is not so simple and can only be explained through the process of narrative building and grievances that this paper stresses.

Despite the lack of direct involvement in sectarian violence, the regional rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia has clearly contributed to the saliency of sectarianism in Yemen. Iran has also taken advantage of this sectarian sentiment and egged on the perception of support for the Houthis without actually having to provide serious material contributions or engage militarily in the region. Iranian and Lebanese media outlets made it a point to "frequently, and not impartially, [cover] the war of Sa'ada."[363] During the fifth and sixth rounds of the Sa'ada Wars, support demonstrations were orchestrated in Shi'a areas of Iraq and in Iran to support the Houthi rebels.[364] Furthermore, Twelver Shi'ites issued religious statements of support from the famous *hawzat* (Shi'a religious seminaries) of Najaf in Iraq and Qom in Iran "[condemning] the oppression of Zaydis by

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360 International Crisis Group, "Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb," 12.

361 Ibid., 11.

362 Ibid.

363 Dorlian, "The Ṣa'da War in Yemen: Between Politics and Sectarianism," 192.

364 Ibid.

the Yemeni government."[365] These statements of spiritual and moral support for the Zaydis have benefited Iran by continuing the perception of wide-scale sectarian conflict in the region. This has allowed Iran to appear stronger and more capable of spreading Shi'a revolutions in its competition with Saudi Arabia for hegemony in the Middle East.

The influence of the Saudi/Iranian rivalry in the sectarian narrative has truly come to a crescendo during the current 2015 Yemeni Civil War, with Saudi Arabian and Sunni coalition partners engaging in a full scale military conflict against the Houthis. By this point, however, the narrative of sectarianism and a Saudi Arabian versus Iran proxy war has long been built; now the narrative is being enacted. It is clear that Saudi Arabia relies on the "Iranian bogeyman to forge a coalition of the willing against the conflict-ridden and impoverished Yemen."[366] Without the assertion of Iranian intrusion, Saudi's military campaign in the sovereign country of Yemen would be considered an unjustified aggression. Additionally, the Saudis now rely on the very sectarian narrative that they helped conceive to continue motivating the anti-Houthi coalition and justifying the violence perpetrated against Yemeni citizens.[367] Ironically, the direct military action of Saudis and the GCC has prompted Iran to actually increase their own involvement in the conflict and actually support the Houthis. In March of 2015, Iran received Houthi leaders in Tehran and openly supported the Houthi delegation when the Deputy Foreign Minister promised economic aid to build power plants, provide fuel, and expand ports for the Houthis.[368] Additionally, the Houthis also generated an aviation contract with an Iranian airline to allow flights from Iran into Yemen, something that hadn't happened in years.[369] Thus, in a way, the GoY and Saudi Arabia were able to actually materialize the very

[365] Ibid.

[366] Brandt, "The Hidden Realities Behind Saudi Arabia's Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen."

[367] Abdullah al-Saud, "One Year Later: Why We Saudis Went to War in Yemen," *The Wall Street Journal,* March 25, 2016, http://www.wsj.com/articles/one-year-later-why-we-saudis-went-to-war-in-yemen-1458943065.

[368] International Crisis Group, "Yemen at War," *International Crisis Group Middle East Briefing*, no. 45 (2015), http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/iraq-iran-gulf/yemen/b045-yemen-at-war.aspx.

[369] Agence France Presse (AFP), "First Iran Flight Lands in Shiite-Held Yemen Capital," *Al Arabiya English*, March 1, 2015, http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/03/01/First-Iran-flight-lands-in-Shiite-held-Yemen-capital-.html.

sectarian conflict they had spent so many years purporting already existed. The conclusion to take away is that the regional competition between Saudi and Iran has distinctly and significantly influenced sectarian sentiments in Yemen, even if the Houthis are not a true Iranian proxy. Thus, the merits of the proxy war hypothesis are clearly demonstrated in contextualizing the increase of sectarian *tensions* in Yemen, even if the proxy war narrative cannot directly explain sectarian violence.

D.   CONCLUSION

Yemen's historical context of sectarian tensions, Zaydi grievances, the larger regional sectarian competition, and the instrumentalization of sectarianism by the GoY and the Houthis throughout the last decade, have all combined to create a powerful and salient sectarian tensions in Yemen. However, as this paper has also demonstrated, these contributing factors fail to adequately explain the current sectarian violence in Yemen, of which the explanation will be provided in the subsequent chapter. In summary, this paper has detailed Houthi grievances, both social and economic, which helped foster an imagined community and build a sectarian solidarity. Secondly, when the Houthi movement gained momentum through the efforts of key leadership like Hussain al Houthi, it presented a credible threat to the GoY's maintenance of power and patronage. Thus, the instrumentalization of sectarianism was one of the methods the GoY used to discredit the Houthis because it allowed Ali Abdullah Saleh to deflect Sunni criticism and dissent within his own government."[370] Furthermore, the GoY's instrumentalization was disaggregating in nature—it served to isolate the Houthis from the support of other elements of Yemeni society by highlighting their religious sect above all other possibly shared identities. Thus, the GoY acted to sectarianize the conflict because of political and internal dynamics[371] more than any particular sentiment they felt against Shi'a in Yemen. Nonetheless, the instrumentalization of salient identities, like religion, can have serious and complex repercussion on a society particularly when a narrative like the one built in Yemen is allowed so much time to fester and is marked with the blood of so many

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[370] Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, *Regime and Periphery*, 126.

[371] Clark, *Yemen: Dancing*.

combatants. Further heightening sectarianism has been the regional rivalry between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shi'a Iran, which has served as a backdrop to the local issues in Yemen by given saliency to sectarianism as an identity. In many ways, the Saudi/Iranian proxy conflict is the structural constructivism while the instrumentalism by the GoY and the Houthis is the intentional constructivism.

The sectarian narrative built up over the Sa'ada Wars from 2004–10 unfortunately has not dissipated, but been enhanced as the Houthis have gained strength and dominance. Since the Houthis have been so deeply identified within the context of sectarianism, the same sectarian based biases have delegitimized their participation in important Yemeni events since the Sa'ada Wars such as: their involvement in the Arab Spring in 2011; their complaints with the GCC established interim government in 2012; and their anger over the unfair power distribution decided in the 2013–14 National Dialogue Council. Thus, instead of allowing the Houthis to be a part of the solution to Yemen's ever weakening state institutions, their sectarian labeling has only further enhanced their isolation and increased independent actions instead of the group working within the greater state collective. Ultimately, this sectarian narrative has cumulated in the current conflict between the Houthis and the Saudi Arabian-led coalition as the Houthi's 2014 coup was perceived by Sunnis as nothing more than the reestablishment of the Shi'a Imamate and exertion of Iranian power in the Gulf, just as the sectarian narrative had been constructed. The Yemeni government collapse in the 2014–15 Houthi coup has created new alliances and factions along sectarian lines. Media reports on the conflict have suggested motivations for violence along sectarian lines in ways that are reminiscent of the Sa'ada Wars, only now; the fight isn't between the government and a rebellious faction, but among Sunnis and Shi'a in the whole country. Ultimately, as the state of Yemen becomes weaker, "the absence of a dominant political authority [has] created the conditions in which extremism and appeals to religious identity flourish."[372] Farea al-Muslimi, a visiting scholar from Yemen at the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut, exemplified how the collapse of the Yemen state has impacted sectarianism in his

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[372] Kareem Fahim, "As Conflicts Flare up, Leaders Fan Sectarian Flames in Middle East," *The New York Times*, October 17, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/18/world/middleeast/as-conflicts-flare-up-leaders-fan-sectarian-flames-in-middle-east.html?_r=0.

country when he said, "We have crossed a line. Welcome to Iraq. Welcome to Syria."[373] The next section of this paper will prove, through the comparison between Yemen and Bahrain, how a lack of state capacity allows the entrenched sectarian narratives, created by identity entrepreneurs and regional contexts, to be activated into violent sectarianism.

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[373] Ibid.

IV.   STATE COLLAPSE

Previously, the two case studies of Bahrain and Yemen show how sectarian tensions are built, heightened, and promoted, particularly through instrumentalization and the regional context of the Saudi/Iranian rivalry. At this point, understanding how these tensions can manifest into physical violence, perpetuated along sectarian identity lines, requires evaluating state capacity. State capacity is critical in determining whether sectarian violence will result. This chapter will argue that while Yemen and Bahrain both have elevated levels of sectarian tensions, only Yemen has experienced sectarian violence because of its state collapse. To demonstrate this point, the first section will detail Bahrain's state capacity and its ability to quell the Arab Spring uprisings and prevent sectarian based violence. Then, Bahrain's state capacity will be juxtaposed with Yemen's state collapse, explaining the resulting sectarian violence.

To note, this thesis does recognize the disparity between one of the Middle East's poorest nations, Yemen, and one of its richest, Bahrain. National wealth is certainly a contributing factor to state capacity, as is a nation's geography and demography. Yemen has rough, isolating terrain and large unpopulated areas, surrounded by the ocean and Saudi Arabia and home to more than thirty million people who are mostly uneducated and young. Bahrain only has 1.3 million people living on an island not more than three times the size of Washington, DC; all of whom are educated and literate. Despite these differences, the preceding chapters of this thesis attempted to demonstrate that Yemen and Bahrain share many of the same contributing factors and resulting sectarian tensions within their countries. Therefore, a comparison of the effects of state capacity can still be made because the analysis is internal to each nation. Meaning, sectarian tensions in Yemen have led to sectarian violence because of Yemen's lack of state capacity, circumstances that are independent from Bahrain's. Thus, though each nation's contexts must be considered internally, conclusions about the importance of state capacity can be compared externally.

A.   BAHRAIN STATE CAPACITY

Following the Arab Spring uprisings, sectarian violence in Bahrain has failed to materialize despite deeply aggravated sectarian tensions within the country and population. Though Bahrain's sectarianism has been fueled by grievances, instrumentalization, and the regional environment, the government of Bahrain has prevented these tensions from transitioning into violence. The following section will describe the aftermath of the Arab Spring on the stability of Bahrain, the population's mobilization toward violence and the acts of violence that did take place, and ultimately, the state's actions that have prevented substantial sectarian violence.

1.   The Aftermath of the Arab Spring

The GoB's strategy in dealing with the Arab Spring uprising in Bahrain, detailed in chapter two, can be summarized as promoting internal sectarian differences to denigrate unifying, anti-government, cross-cutting cleavages among the Bahraini population. The Sunni and Shi'a citizens of Bahrain, who initially participated in the uprisings of the Arab Spring, did so because of shared political, social and economic disenfranchisement. Yet, despite these common grievances between Shi'ites and Sunnis, within weeks of the start of the Arab Spring, the protests became overwhelmingly Shi'a-led. The government's anti-protest strategies derailed cross-sectarian ties; even "those Sunni who were critical of the government's policies, when forced to choose, sided with the state over the Shi'a."[374] This division along sectarian lines stoked intercommunal discord and sectarian conflict unknown to Bahrain for many years.[375] Jane Kinninmont interviewed Bahrainis in the year following the Arab Spring and said that "many Bahrainis with different religious and political viewpoints have stated that the social fabric has been torn, that sectarianism exists to a degree unprecedented in their lifetime, that they have broken with friends from other sects, and that they have heard about

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[374] Abdo, *The New Sectarianism*, 14.

[375] Some have commented that sectarianism was bad after the attempted 1981 coup and during the late 1990s uprisings; though others have commented that 2011 was the worst they had seen.

'mixed' Sunni–Shi'a marriages ending."[376] This torn social fabric led not just to friendships ending, but to extremist rhetoric and violent agitation.

In the weeks and months following the Arab Spring, citizen's actions and protests became increasingly hostile and extremist, suggesting that Bahrain was possibly on the brink of sectarian violence. Hostile and enraged Shi'a groups and Sunni counter-mobilizations were cultivated. Perceptions that the GoB unfairly targeted Shi'a in their attempts to quell unrest contributed to the development of Shi'a-extremist groups and further heightened sectarianism. A Shi'a-led group, the "14 February Youth Coalition," began using urban violence—burning tires, throwing Molotov cocktails, erecting roadblocks, and attacking security forces[377]—and even established a military wing called the "Holy Defense" group.[378] Sunni counter-mobilization also became increasingly violent and radical as well. Sunni gatherings led to radical splinter groups that adopted an anti-Shi'a, rather than pro-government, message.[379] Justin Gengler stressed that these counter-mobilizations were "inspired by a clear and powerful message emanating from all corners of the government-controlled media: resist this attempted coup by deviant Shi'a and their master in Iran, or risk the same foreign takeover that befell Iraq in the wake of the U.S. invasion."[380] Both Shi'ites and Sunnis acted upon sectarian sentiments fueled by the rhetoric and actions of the GoB, and led Bahrain perilously close to sectarian violence.

Though the government initially saw the fomentation of sectarianism as a method to suppress a large, unified, anti-government movement, it quickly became clear that the sectarian rhetoric was also generating dangerous intercommunal violence and threatening Bahrain's stability. Throughout 2011 and into 2012, radical Sunni and Shi'a groups engaged in violent confrontations. In December of 2011, a Shi'a religious precession

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[376] Kinninmont, "Bahrain: Beyond the Impasse," 9.

[377] Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf*, 62.

[378] Ibid., 63.

[379] Justin Gengler, "Sectarian Backfire? Assessing Gulf Political Strategy Five Years after the Arab Uprisings," *Middle East Institute*, November 17, 2015, http://www.mei.edu/content/map/sectarian-backfire-assessing-gulf-political-strategy-five-years-after-arab-uprisings.

[380] Ibid.

during Ashura was attacked by a Sunni group founded by Adil Filayfil, a former Bahraini intelligence officer.[381] Filayfil defended his group's attacks by stating "his group had merely stepped in where the state had failed to act."[382] In April of 2012, after a Shi'a group took credit for a pipe bomb that injured seven policemen, a large group of plain-clothed Sunni men answered an Internet call to "avenge the attack" and descended on Shi'a-populated neighborhoods near Manama.[383] They came with "knives, sticks, and other sharp objects" according to eye witness reports, beating up the residents of the Shi'a neighborhoods they came in contact with.[384] Furthermore, radical Shi'a groups have repeatedly used violent tactics as a part of their strategy to fight an armed resistance against the state. These groups have used improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and pipe bombs to attack Bahraini security personnel, resulting in the deaths of approximately fourteen, according to the Bahraini Ministry of Interior (MOI).[385] Extreme tactics used by both Shi'a and Sunni groups clearly demonstrates how fraught Bahrain has been with sectarian tensions, and how perilously close this island nation has been to full-scale sectarian violence. Since 2011, authors writing on Bahrain have been predicting sectarian violence, and even war, not dissimilar to that of Syria or Iraq. One author stated "Decades of divide and rule in Bahrain is transforming the spectra of sectarian conflict into a dangerous self-fulfilling prophecy."[386] Another, even more ominously suggested that "If we are not careful," the situation in Bahrain could "morph into a sectarian bloodbath in a

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[381] "Bahrain's Sunni Awakening."

[382] Ibid.

[383] "Sunni Mobs 'Attack Shia Villages in Bahrain,'" *Al Jazeera*, April 11, 2012, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/04/2012411134042367377.html.

[384] Ibid.

[385] Brian Dooley, "Four Years on, U.S. Should Push Bahrain to Reform Security Forces," *Huffington Post*, April 15, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/brian-dooley/four-years-on-us-should-p_b_6680326.html.

[386] Kylie Moore-Gilbert, "Sectarian Divide and Rule in Bahrain: A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy?," Opinion Article, *Middle East Institute,* January 19, 2016, http://www.mei.edu/content/map/sectarian-divide-and-rule-bahrain-self-fulfilling-prophecy.

similar vein to Syria."[387] Why then, has the sectarian conflict in Bahrain not developed into all out sectarian violence?

2.   The Bulwark of GoB State Capacity

Ultimately, the inability of sectarian violence to exist outside a few isolated incidents is due to the GoB's state capacity and their ability to repress and thwart. Since 2011, Bahrain has employed tactics of physical security and institutional control to prevent violent rebellion. Bahrain's security apparatuses used brute force, foreign military intervention, and harsh integration tactics. They have also erected checkpoints, conducted sweeping arrests and raids, and even destroyed buildings and Shi'ite religious sites. Bahrain's various governmental institutions used the judiciary system, intelligence services, and even monitoring equipment to assist in targeting perpetuators and eliminating threats to security.

In the immediate aftermath of the February 2011 riots and since, the GoB implemented harsh security measures that limited the capacity of sectarian tensions from spiraling into sectarian violence. The Bharani security forces abruptly and aggressively attempted to end protest by firing tear gas, rubber bullets, and birdshot into crowds, even killing a few civilians.[388] On March 14, 2011, King Hamad al Khalifa declared a three-month state of martial law and enlisted the support of Sunni Saudi troops, augmented by UAE ground forces and Kuwaiti naval vessels, to help impose a state of emergency, curfew restrictions, and protest control.[389] The foreign military support helped facilitate "mass arrests, a curfew, a ban on rallies, and a general crackdown on those seen as sympathetic to the protests."[390] Saudi and Bahraini tanks were placed in the center of

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[387] Ralph Leonard, "Bahrain's Sectarian Tensions and America's Mysterious Silence on the Oppressive Regime," Opinion, *None of the Above (NOTA)*, February 24, 2016, https://notanetwork.org/2016/02/24/bahrains-sectarian-tensions-and-americas-mysterious-silence-on-the-oppressive-regime/.

[388] Frederic M Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf: From the Iraq War to the Arab Uprisings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 77.

[389] Ibid., 81.

[390] Ibid.

Manama and the GCC forces stood guard over vital installations in Bahrain.[391] The government also bulldozed the Pearl Roundabout and its iconic monument—the gathering place and symbol of the Arab Spring—to make a very clear point about the GoB's capacity to end the uprising.[392]

The GoB has used its considerable security forces to physically suppress the population. The police and military have set up an extensive network of police and military checkpoints across the city to prevent freedom of movement or congregation, the majority of which are staged at the entrance to Shi'a villages and still exist today.[393] These checkpoints have facilitated the arrest of nearly 3,000 people for crimes ranging from "insulting the king"[394] and attempted murder for throwing Molotov cocktails at police,[395] to charges of "conspiring to overthrow the Bahraini government"[396] and "carrying out terrorist crimes."[397] Since 2011, the GoB has destroyed a total of 53 Shi'ite religious sites,[398] an act that received international condemnation, even from President Barak Obama.[399] The Government has also greatly stepped up its utilization of swift and forceful policing tactics, employing riot control for funeral precessions and holidays, especially the anniversary of February 14, the date of the original Arab Spring protest.

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[391] "Bahrain's Security Clampdown Divides Kingdom," *BBC*, April 14, 2011, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-13088600.

[392] Martin Chulov, "Bahrain Destroys Pearl Roundabout," *The Guardian*, March 18, 2011, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/mar/18/bahrain-destroys-pearl-roundabout.

[393] Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf*, 55–56.

[394] Kenneth Katzman, *Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy*, CRS Report No. 95-1013 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2016).

[395] Ibid.; Noor Zahra, "150 Firebombs Seized in Riots," *Gulf Daily News*, July 27, 2012, http://www.gulf-daily-news.com/source/xxxv/129/pdf/page05.pdf.

[396] DPA News, "Three Accused of Attempting to Overthrow Bahraini Government," *Bahrain Center for Human Rights*, January 27, 2009, http://www.bahrainrights.org/en/node/2705.

[397] Noah Browning, Hadeel Al Sayegh, and Catherine Evans, "Bahrain Jails Four Men on Terrorism Charges: Prosecutor," *Reuters*, February 25, 2016, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-bahrain-security-court-idUSKCN0VY1S9.

[398] Katzman, *Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy*, 9.

[399] "Shia must never have their mosques destroyed in Bahrain" said Barak Obama during a speech; "Obama Middle East Speech in Full with Analysis," *BBC*, May 19, 2011, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-13461682.

These very strict measures have reasserted the GoB's control of Bahrain physically; making clear that controls the streets.

The GoB has also demonstrated its capacity to prevent sectarian violence through its sophisticated institutional enforcement and reach. After the initial days of protests, the government fired public employees suspected of participating or sympathizing in the protests. This equated to roughly 3.6% of the Bahraini workforce, or nearly 4,600 people, the majority of whom were Shi'a.[400] Another 250 people have had their Bahraini citizenship permanently revoked, again, the majority of who are Shi'a of Persian descent.[401] The GoB also utilized the judiciary system to target dissidents; in 2012, the government officially made it illegal to hold public protests,[402] increased the jail penalty for "insulting the king" from two up to five years,[403] and began prosecuting people over anonymous twitter comments tracked by utilizing IP spy links.[404] Additionally, the MOI and the National Security Agency's (NSA's) intelligence services purchased cellphone-spying capacities from Western companies like Nokia-Siemens Networks.[405] This has allowed the NSA to acquire short message service (SMS or text) transcripts of suspected protestors that have been used during interrogations and judicial trials.[406] Intelligence services have also been successful in uncovering weapons and bomb caches, like the 1.4 tons of high-grade explosives, rifles, and hand grenades found in an underground vault just south of Manama in September of 2015.[407] Reporters and scholars in Bahrain

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[400] Paul Liben, "United States Commission on International Religious Freedom: Annual Report," (www.uscirf.gov: U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2015), 191.

[401] Katzman, *Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy*, 13.

[402] Kate Kizer, "Misplaced Concern: The Sectarian Scapegoat in Bahrain," *Open Democracy,* December 9, 2015, https://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/kate-kizer/misplaced-concern-sectarian-scapegoat-in-bahrain.

[403] Katzman, *Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy*, 17.

[404] The IP Spy File: How Bahrain's Government Silences Anonymous Online Dissent, Bahrain Watch, accessed September 15, 2015, https://bahrainwatch.org/ipspy/viewreport.php

[405] Vernon Silver and Ben Elgin, "Torture in Bahrain Becomes Routine with Help from Nokia Siemens," *Bloomberg*, August 22, 2011, http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2011-08-22/torture-in-bahrain-becomes-routine-with-help-from-nokia-siemens-networking.

[406] Ibid.

[407] "Bahrain Unearths Huge Weapons and Explosives Haul," *BBC*, September 30, 2015, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34405303.

have also noted that a "ubiquitous network of CCTV cameras" now adorns buildings and street corners in large numbers, making the MOI's constant monitoring quite apparent.[408] The GoB has demonstrated a pervasive and profound capacity to monitor, regulate, and restrict citizen activity and prevent violence.

Overall, Bahrain's security forces and state institutions make up a highly capable state apparatus that has been able to control violence and protests effectively in Bahrain. The effect of this state capacity gives Bahrain the general appearance as a peaceful and stable country.[409] As one reporter noted, "Bahrain has fallen into a political lull since the latest crackdown on activists…one suspects that there is simply no one left to protest who hasn't already been arrested, been driven into hiding, or fled Bahrain entirely."[410] The physical policing and harsh judicial responses imposed by the GoB has effectively halted the development of sectarian violence in Bahrain.

3.   Conclusion

In conclusion, the lack of sectarian violence in Bahrain is not due to a lack of sectarian tensions or conflict—Bahrain has even been considered a primary spark of sectarianism in the Middle East.[411] Instead, Bahrain has escaped the fate of sectarian violence that has befallen Iraq, Syria, and now Yemen, due to its immense state capacity to stop and prevent violence through physical security forces and state institutions. As Toby Matthiesen, a Middle East scholar who was in Bahrain during 2011, remarked, "Guns and tanks are very effective tools to stop revolutions, particularly if…the soldiers are loyal to the regime and international pressure on the regime is limited."[412] Thus, as

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[408] Justin Gengler, "Bahrain Settling in to a New Normal," *Religion and Politics in Bahrain, Blog Spot,* posted May 14, 2015, http://bahrainipolitics.blogspot.com.

[409] From author's perspectives visiting in Fall of 2015: only subtle signs of unrest remain like armored police vehicles near Shi'a neighborhoods and graffiti. Otherwise, particularly in the main urban areas of Manama, indications of unrest are not present.

[410] Gengler, "Bahrain Settling in to a New Normal."

[411] Gengler, "Sectarian Backfire? Assessing Gulf Political Strategy Five Years after the Arab Uprisings."

[412] Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf*, 53.

Matthiesen points out, regime capacity proved instrumental in determining the outcome of the Arab Spring in Bahrain.

While Bahrain demonstrates the effectiveness of state capacity in preventing sectarian tensions from becoming sectarian violence, this conclusion should not be extrapolated to generally assume that state repression, regardless of its abuses, is condoned or even inherently effective. Bahrain is a small island nation with a particular geography, demography, and institutional capacity that is favorable for state control. Because Bahrain has a small population, statically, this reduces the physical number of people that the government would have to contend with in an opposition movement, and this number is reduced even further when considering what percentage of opposition voices would even be willing to engage in illegal or violent activity. Adding in the nation's particularly tough gun laws and the difficulty citizens have in obtaining weapons, the state's ability to quell rebellion, unrest, and violence may be comparatively easier than in other nations.[413] Nonetheless, considering Bahrain as a microcosm can still be very useful in demonstrating the true stopping power of state capacity in preventing sectarian violence.

It is equally important to conclude that the prevention of violence and the resolution of sectarian conflict are two distinct things. If anything, the actions taken by the GoB has further fomented sectarian strife and conflict within Bahrain, it has just failed to manifest beyond clandestine and isolated incidents of hostility due to the state's repressive capacity. Additional efforts by the GoB will be necessary if Bahrain is to truly end its sectarian conflict.

B.   YEMEN STATE COLLAPSE

Sectarian violence in Yemen has become a growing reality in the wake of state collapse. Yemen's particular state demise was a process that started dramatically in the wake of the 2011 Arab Spring and then slowly continued to decay as a result of the 2014 Houthi invasion and subsequent 2015 anti-Houthi military campaign led by Saudi Arabia.

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[413] Reese Erlich, "Bahrain's Changing Opposition," *Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting,* December 13, 2012, http://pulitzercenter.org/reporting/bahrain-young-militant-uprising-islamic-reform-movement.

Though Yemen's state was never strong to begin with—central authority lacked real control in some of the provinces and separatist and terrorist groups existed within this frame for decades—there still remained a level of functionality that prevented large scale identity violence, provided institutional services, and facilitated systems of patronage.[414] In other words, though dysfunctional, the Yemeni state prior to 2011 had both legitimacy and capacity. The Arab Spring's uprisings led to the ousting of President Ali Abdullah Selah, and subsequently terminated 33 years of social, political, and economic contracts.

This section on Yemen will detail the impact of state collapse and demonstrate that as the state's institutions and social contracts were broken, identity conflict was heightened. The first section will detail how the state's collapse reordered alliance structures along sectarian lines. The second section will demonstrate how the lack of state capacity facilitated the strength of non-state actors like the Houthis and AQAP, further heightening sectarianism. The third section will detail the incidents of sectarian violence that resulted from state collapse, and lastly, the impact of external actors will be detailed, particularly how the Saudi Arabian-led coalition against the Houthis has bolstered sectarian violence and terrorist groups' capacity.

1.   New Sectarian Alliances

The Arab Spring, and the process of state collapse, caused a reordering of alliances along sectarian identity. Prior to the 2011 Arab Spring, President Ali Abdullah Saleh had a skilled system of divide and rule in which his regime "functioned as long as there was enough money to maintain the patronage networks and provide ordinary Yemenis with the hope, if not reality, of a better life."[415] Yet, the 2011 termination of President Ali Abdullah Selah ended the dominant social contracts, alliances, and state institutions he had maintained. As Beverly Crawford has stressed, when old social contracts are broken during times of state collapse, the odds of identity conflict and violence are increased.[416] Thus, Yemen was particularly susceptible to identity conflict

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[414] Khaled Fattah, "Yemen: A Social Intifada in a Republic of Sheikhs," *Middle East Policy* 18, no. 3 (2011): 84.

[415] Brehony, "Yemen and the Huthis: Genesis of the 2015 Crisis," 234.

[416] Crawford, *The Causes of Cultural Conflict: An Institutional Approach*, 5.

because of its deeply entrenched tribal, familial, and regionally based systems of patronage that were critical to how the state functioned and how power and wealth were transmitted.[417]

The impacts of state collapse on society, and prior instrumentalization and grievances that had heightened sectarianism, caused new alliances to form along sectarian identities. First, state collapse generated a societal reordering of salient identity groups as national identities became insignificant and resulting security and power vacuums encouraged new identity group cohesion. Second, new alliances were formed along sectarian identities because of the variables that had fostered sectarian tensions, as detailed in chapter three. To recap, sectarian tensions were fomented by activated sectarian based grievances in the Houthi community, identity entrepreneurs instrumentalizing sectarianism, and the regional rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia that further emphasized sectarian identities.

The Ali Mohsen/al-Ahmar/Islah alliance and AQAP alliances with Sunni tribes, which were both formed in the wake of state collapse, demonstrate both the saliency of sectarianism and the impact of state collapse on group identities. To be certain, sectarian identity is not the only identity these new alliances shared in common—tribal, familial, regional, and anti-regime identities were also important. However, Yemen had not been known as a nation where sectarian identity held enough importance to trump or facilitate new alliance groups; yet suddenly it did. In part, these new alliances turned the "peaceful social intifada" of the Arab Spring into a "widespread, violent confrontation among military units, tribal forces, and militants" and heightened sectarian divisions.[418]

a.   Mohsen/ Ahmar/ Islah Alliance

The Arab Spring activated internal divisions which had been brewing, the most notable of which was the split between President Saleh and three powerful actors; General Ali Mohsen, the al-Ahmar family, and the Islah political party.[419] All three

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[417] Dingli, "Is the Failed State Thesis Analytically Useful? The Case of Yemen," 98.

[418] Fattah, "Yemen: A Social Intifada," 79.

[419] Brehony, "Yemen and the Huthis: Genesis of the 2015 Crisis," 238.

groups, though they had previously held overlapping interests, were not directly linked outside of their shared patronage with or support of Ali Abdullah Selah. Yet, after the Arab Spring, all three groups became linked by two critical factors; one, their competition for power with Ali Abdullah Selah, and two, their adherence to Sunni Islam. As background, the various connections these groups have with one another, Saleh, and the Houthis will be described.

General Ali-Mohsen is the half-brother of Ali Abdullah Saleh and commanded the Army's First Armored Division that fought the Houthis during the Sa'ada wars.[420] In fact, the Sa'ada Wars have even been called "Ali Mohsen's War,"[421] because of his advocacy within the GoY to keep fighting the Houthis. Mohsen was also known for his connections with Salafist Sunni groups[422] and his recruitment of Salafist extremists to help fight against the Houthis.[423]

The al-Ahmar family is the head of the largest and most powerful tribal confederation, the Hashid, and is the same tribe that Ali Abdullah Saleh hailed from.[424] The Ahmars are ideologically closely linked with both moderate Sunnis and Salafists, but prior to 2011, avoided any kind of direct confrontation with the Houthis outside of tribal disputes.[425] Both the Hashid tribe and the Bakil tribe—the tribe most Houthis come from—are regionally located in Northern Yemen. Sheikh Abdullah Bin Hussein al-Ahmar, the leader of the Hashid tribal confederation until his death in 2007, also worked very closely with Saudi Arabia and was a founding member of the Islah party.[426]

The Islah political party is considered Yemen's version of the Muslim Brotherhood. At times it has represented a counterweight to Saleh's political party, the General People's Congress (GPC), while other times, it has sided with the GoY and has

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[420] Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, *Regime and Periphery*, 126.

[421] Ibid., 160.

[422] Ibid., 93.

[423] Ibid., 162.

[424] Ibid., 47–48.

[425] International Crisis Group, "The Huthis," 8.Confrontations between the Hashid and Bakil tribes did occur, the Bakil tribal confederation being the one most Houthis are a part of; Group, "The Huthis," 8.

[426] Ibid.

been the direct recipient of patronage and funding.[427] Islah has always been known to shelter more extreme Sunni Salafists among its ranks, though broadly speaking; it was better described as a "tribal-Islamist force" than a Salafist political party.[428] Additionally, at times, even Zaydis have worked with Islah, "either hoping to benefit from kin network affiliations or out of grievance with the GPC."[429]

Prior to 2011, the relationships and connections between these groups and among other actors like the Houthis or Ali Abdullah Selah were fluid and facilitative toward various identity needs. Meaning, tribal, familial, and regional identities facilitated connections among and between actors. After 2011, however, sectarian identity became a more impactful link, cementing alliances and isolating others. Since 2011, an alliance between "Islah, Ali Mohsen, and the Ahmar family leadership," was formed, predicated on the fact that they "are all Sunni Muslims and are ideological and political opponents of the Houthis."[430] Thus, the sectarian unity of their relationship became relevant as a result of state collapse and the end of Saleh's patronage. As will be discussed, this directly resulted in sectarian violence.

b.   AQAP Alliances

State collapse, coupled with the real and perceived threat of Houthi expansion south and east, has shifted alliances in the south toward sectarian identities to the benefit of AQAP. Prior to the start of state collapse in 2011, Yemen had informal "popular committees" that were largely comprised of tribal militias and that worked closely with the GoY to combat AQAP expansion and presence in Yemen.[431] However, the issues that have coincided with state collapse, like the fracturing and ineffectiveness of the Yemeni Armed Forces, increased poverty, unemployment, and economic turmoil, and especially

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[427] Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, *Regime and Periphery*, 5.

[428] Ibid., 74.

[429] Ibid.

[430] International Crisis Group, "The Huthis," 3.

[431] Farea al-Muslimi, "The Popular Committee Phenomenon in Yemen: Fueling War and Conflict," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, April 1, 2015, http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=59560.

the lack of government authority, have reduced the capacity of the popular committees and fostered new Sunni based alliances.[432]

AQAP has taken advantage of state turmoil to reassert itself and swell its ranks by focusing on sectarian identities.[433] On January 28, 2011, AQAP's deputy leader, Abu Sufyan al-Azdi, proclaimed it was every Yemeni Sunni's duty to take up arms in defense of the apostate Shi'ite Houthis.[434] Focusing on sectarian identity has allowed AQAP to "exploit the sectarian side of the Yemeni conflict."[435] AQAP has worked to facilitate these new sectarian alliances by changing some of its extremist tactics and offering advanced and highly capable fighters' services in order to be more palatable to local Sunni tribes.[436] Acting as the military arm of these local Sunni tribes and unrelentingly attacking Houthi targets has enhanced AQAP's image as "the 'real' protector of the Sunni tribes against the 'Shi'a aggression'" and has both bolstered recruits and enabled new alliance formation.[437] These sectarian alliances have allowed AQAP to gain sympathy and infiltrate a strange conglomeration of Sunni tribal militias, anti-Houthi fighters, and southern separatists. For example, Ziyad al Majdali, the head of the al-Bayda Tribal Alliance,[438] said he believed he had a religious duty to fight the Houthis.[439] Though Majdali is firm that he is not al-Qaeda, he pointedly said, "As a Sunni southerner, I can never accept the Houthis. Let me be honest. Even if al-Qaeda and I have

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[432] Michael Horton, "Capitalizing on Chaos: AQAP Advances in Yemen," *The Jamestown Foundation* 14, no. 4 (2016), http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=45113&no_cache=1#.VzO47fkrKM9.

[433] CFR.org Staff, "Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)," *CFR Backgrounders,* June 19, 2015, http://www.cfr.org/yemen/al-qaeda-arabian-peninsula-aqap/p9369.

[434] "AQAP Deputy Leader Urges Sunnis Take up Arms against Houthis," Site Intelligence Group Enterprise, https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/site-intel-group-1-28-11-aqap-shahri-audio-houthis.html.

[435] Ludovico Carlino, "AQAP's Infiltration of Yemen's Sunni Tribes Reduces Effectiveness of Precision Airstrikes, Sustains Jihadists' Expansion," *IHS Jane's 360,* May 17, 2015, http://www.janes.com/article/51474/aqap-s-infiltration-of-yemen-s-sunni-tribes-reduces-effectiveness-of-precision-airstrikes-sustains-jihadists-expansion.

[436] Ibid. AQAP is known for having highly skilled bomb makers and well-trained militant jihadists, services which are being offered to Sunni tribal sheiks in their anti-Houthi campaigns.

[437] Ibid.

[438] In the Bayda governorate, roughly halfway between Sanaa and Aden

[439] Ziyad al-Majdali, interview by Safa Al Ahmad, 2015.

disagreements, if we're fighting in the same trenches against the Houthis, he becomes my brother, my bother in arms."[440] This is the sectarian sentiment that has grown into forming sides in violent confrontations, and has been facilitated by sectarian discourse and fueled by state collapse and insecurity.

2.   Increased Strength of Non-State Actors: the Houthis and AQAP

The Houthis have capitalized on the collapse of the Yemeni state to further their organizational strength, political clout, and territorial occupation. As an ICG report stated, the "most obvious factor in Houthi territorial gains [was] the significant weakening of state authority following the 2011 uprisings."[441] The Houthis used the chaos of the Arab Spring as an opportunity to reorganize and bolster their military and political strongholds in the Sa'ada governorate, positioning them for expansion beyond.[442] The Houthis also capitalized on the political power vacuums created by the divisions within the GoY elite to expand their base of popular appeal outside of Sa'ada.[443] The Houthis calculatedly backed the Arab Spring youth movement in Sana'a and vocally condemned the GCC's November, 2011 brokered peace deal and newly formed "consensus government."[444] The Houthis' outspoken opposition to the GCC deal resonated with many Yemenis who were aggravated that the Arab Spring had only served to re-entrench corrupt elites, strengthen external actors, and cripple internal security.[445] In the months following the Arab Spring, the Houthis made efforts to stress their Yemeni identity, as opposed to their Shi'a or Zaydi identity, to encourage support. However, their actions in the subsequent years following the Arab Spring became increasingly sectarian and facilitated widespread sectarian violence. The political and security power vacuums

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[440] Ibid.

[441] Group, "The Huthis," 5.

[442] Alexandra Lewis, "Unpacking Terrorism, Revolution and Insurgency in Yemen: Real and Imagined Threats to Regional Security," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 7, no. 5 (2013): 88.

[443] International Crisis Group, "The Huthis," 2.

[444] Ibid.

[445] Ibid.

caused by the Arab Spring allowed the Houthis to bolster their military and political strength, popularity, and capacity.

Al-Qaeda also was able to consolidate strength and capacity as a result of the 2011 Arab Spring. Specifically in the early months of the Arab Spring turmoil, the "diversion of security forces toward containing public demonstrations led to the escalation of Al-Qaeda's activities in the country, with AQAP joining forces with Ansar al-Sharia and seizing control of important cities and strongholds in the South."[446] The state's lack of stability greatly enhanced AQAP's strength as their militants, who had been busy fighting off GoY troops, were now free to re-equip and grow. To demonstrate their enhanced capacity, AQAP staged two attacks in Sana'a in the year following the Arab Spring; a dramatic attack against the presidential palace the day President Hadi was sworn into office, killing 26 republican guards, and another, only a few months later, which killed another 96 Yemeni soldiers.[447] Like the Houthis, AQAP was able to take advantage of the frustration and disenfranchisement of many Yemenis in the South and Eastern parts of the country, where AQAP has since operated quite freely.

3.   Sectarian Violence in Yemen

The failure of the National Dialogue Committee (NDC) and initial reform attempts in Yemen after the Arab Spring led to sectarian violence as it became clear to aggrieved groups, like the Houthis, that they would see no meaningful changes. After the initial chaos and government collapse caused by the Arab Spring, outside powers, particularly the GCC, and Yemen's old elites, attempted reform efforts in the hopes of quelling further unrest. As a part of the reform process, the NDC was established and was comprised of representatives from multiple parties who were to negotiate conflict settlement and draft a new constitution.[448] Among the many issues with the NDC and interim government, the primary problem was that "At every stage in the NDC planning

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[446] Lewis, "Unpacking Terrorism, Revolution and Insurgency in Yemen: Real and Imagined Threats to Regional Security," 88.

[447] Ibid., 87.

[448] Stacey Philbrick Yadav, "'The "Yemen Model' as a Failure of Political Imagination," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 47, no. 01 (2015): 145.

process, inclusivity was scuttled in favor of the embedded interests of established partisan, military, and tribal figures."[449] Thus, for those Yemenis who had supported the Arab Spring in the hopes of reform, the NDC's members suggested that stability and change were unlikely—of the 565 NDC delegates, "the Houthis were given only 35 seats and only 20% were granted to youth activists that had been instrumental in the 2011 Arab Spring."[450] Additionally, the process was slow moving despite the critical deterioration the country was experiencing in levels of unemployment; water, food, and petrol shortages; and violence and instability. Furthermore, "when it came time to draw the boarders of the new federated Yemen, the GCC selected interim president, Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, appointed a special, unelected committee and did not include any representation from youth activists, al-Hirak, or the Houthis."[451] The proposed borders of the new federated Yemen split the south in two, angering al-Hirak, the Southern separatists, and carved up Houthi territories, preventing them any access to the sea or any share in Yemen's oil and gas resources.[452] As the NDC came to its scheduled end in September of 2013, violence and clashes were re-sparked in frustration and anger over the seemingly wasted time spent and the perception of unfair results. As it became clear the NDC was failing and that further state collapse seemed inevitable, violence and sectarianism rose.

In the summer and fall of 2013, sectarian violence between Houthi and Salafist fighters drastically increased as competition for power and territory continued in the wake of NDC failures and the state's continued collapse.[453] Capable and determined, the Houthis had used the time since 2011 to regroup and were now focused on establishing the changes the NDC had failed to deliver, increasing their own strength, and gaining territory. In the north, sectarian identity steered the conflicts. In 2013, the Houthis sieged a Salafist religious institute, Dar al-Hadith, in Dammaj, Sa'ada. This action quickly

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[449] Ibid.

[450] Brehony, "Yemen and the Huthis: Genesis of the 2015 Crisis," 239.

[451] Ibid.

[452] Ibid., 243.

[453] International Crisis Group, "The Huthis," 3.

escalated the fighting into two distinct sides—the Houthis and their Shi'a Zaydi followers, and a conglomerate of Sunni Salafist fighters, and members of the al-Ahmar/ Islah/ Ali Mohsen alliance.[454] Dar al Hadith had long been a symbol of Saudi/Salafist intrusion into the Houthis religious homeland. Thus, the battles at Dammaj represented a larger underlying Shi'a versus Sunni sentiment and served as the spark for the sectarian conflict that would engulf the north of Yemen.[455]

Throughout the fall of 2013 and well into 2014, from the border of Saudi Arabia in the town of Kitaf, Sa'ada; all through the governorates of Jawf, Hajja, and Amran; and even down to the very edges of Sana'a, sectarian battles occurred (see map below).[456] The combatants on both sides of these battles had clear sectarian delineations; even local AQAP members joined Salafist militias in fights against the Houthis and their supporters.[457] Hussein al-Ahmar, the new head of the al-Ahmar family and Hashid tribal committee, actively urged the elimination of the Houthis and pledged his tribesmen would shed the blood of anyone trying to associate with them.[458] In Hajja, Jawf, and Arhab, the Houthis fought against Islah-affiliated tribesmen while in the Amran governorate, al-Ahmar fighters were assisted by old members of Ali Mohsen's 310th Army brigade.[459] Throughout this time, the Islah/ Ahmar/ Mohsen Sunni alliance clearly presented itself in action, displaying sectarian rhetoric and targeting Houthi fighters. In both Kitaf and Dammaj, Sunni Salafist religious institutes were used to stockpile weapons, money, and fighters, demonstrating the use of Sunni Salafist ideologies to promote violent confrontation against the Houthis.[460] Though exact accounts of armament and capacity of these religious institutions is under scrutiny, reporters who visited these sites after hostilities pointed out that "the students in this area were not just

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[454] Ibid.

[455] Maria-Louise Clausen, "Understanding the Crisis in Yemen: Evaluating Competing Narratives," *The International Spectator* 50, no. 3 (2015): 23.

[456] International Crisis Group, "The Huthis," 2.

[457] Ibid., 2–3.

[458] Ibid.

[459] Ibid., 3–4.

[460] Ibid., 4.

studying the Quran."[461] The sectarian battles in the North of Yemen took place specifically because the GoY was unable to stop them.[462]

Figure 8. Governorates of Yemen[463]

Despite the state's feeble attempts at ceasefires in early 2014, the lack of real state capacity only led to further intensifications of sectarian violence. For the Houthis, the second assassination of a Houthi NDC representative further concreted their perception of an existing security dilemma and power vacuum, and enhanced their sectarian group cohesion and resolve. Furthermore, during this time, the state's economy continued to collapse as violent clashes disrupted oil production. In 2014, revenues from oil exports fell by 37 percent as foreign oil companies abandoned operations in Yemen.[464] Considering that between 2000 and 2009, "the hydrocarbons sector, including refining,

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[461] Ibid.

[462] Ibid.

[463] "Vascular Plant Flora and Phytogeography of the Southern Governorates of Yemen," https://www.bgbm.org/en/research-flora-and-vegetation-arabian-peninsula-and-socotra/vascular-plant-flora-and-phytogeography.

[464] Brehony, "Yemen and the Huthis: Genesis of the 2015 Crisis," 247.

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accounted directly for 20–30 percent of Yemen's overall gross domestic product (GDP), 80–90 percent of its exports and 70–80 percent of government revenues," a loss of nearly 40% of its productivity in 2014 was devastating for Yemen.[465] It became increasingly clear for the citizens of Yemen that the state was no longer capable and the need for identity group protection and cohesion was paramount.

Throughout 2014 and into 2015, sectarian violence throughout the whole country was amplified as the state continued to deteriorate and Houthi aggression and momentum increased. In the fall of 2014, the Houthis momentum led to their take-over of the capital, Sana'a, the forced house arrest of President Hadi, and the continued expansion of Houthi militants into the governorates south of Sana'a. These critical actions only further heighted sectarian violence in the country, particularly in battles against AQAP and the Sunni tribal militias who stood in opposition to what they saw as a northern invasion by Houthi Shi'a apostates.[466] For example, Jamal al-Awlaqi, a tribal fighter in the southern Shabwa governorate, stated that he was fighting the Houthis because "they are a sectarian, northern group, aided by Iran that wants to occupy our lands."[467] Thus, as the GoY's military presence continued to dwindle in the south and eastern provinces, the rise of armed Sunni tribal alliances became more apparent in the security vacuum left. Where the GoY was absent or incapable of providing stability and defense, sectarian groups were forged in opposition to the perceived Shi'ite Houthi takeover of Yemen.

While sectarian violence had initially been limited to northern areas of the country, the continued expansion of Houthi militias southward has bolstered sectarian extremists groups, specifically AQAP, AQAP's affiliate, Ansar al-Sharia, and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).[468] IEDs, suicide bombers, assassinations, ambushes, and violent engagements by these extremist groups have grown in frequency and intensity

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[465] Peter Salisbury, *Yemen's Economy: Oil, Imports and Elites* (London, England: Chatham House, 2011).

[466] Mohamed Mukashaf and Noah Browning, "Combat in Yemen Risks Stirring Sectarian Hatred," *Reuters*, April 12, 2015, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-sectarianism-idUSKBN0N40Z520150413.

[467] Ibid.

[468] Horton, "Capitalizing on Chaos: AQAP Advances in Yemen."

since 2011. In April of 2014, ISIS claimed one of the most violent suicide attacks in the Middle East. It took place at two Shi'a Zaydi mosques in Sana'a and resulted in over 140 people killed.[469] Since 2011, Houthi group consolidation and sectarian identity has been enhanced as nearly monthly ambushes, attacks, and targeted explosions have occurred in Houthi strongholds all over Yemen.

The Houthis have responded to these attacks on their sectarian identity by expanding their territory and preemptively engaging opposition groups, framing their actions as necessary to protect minority Shi'ites against Salafist aggressors, foreign jihadists, and terrorists.[470] While the Houthis have often attempted to depict themselves as an inclusive group, fighting for the defense of Yemenis against corruption and foreign transgressors, their rhetoric still stimulates sectarian identity divisions as a part of who they define as "us" and "them." For example, in February, 2015, the leader of the Houthis, Abdel Malik al-Houthi, made a speech to his followers justifying Houthis expansion into the southern governorates because "The Islah Party is cooperating and allying with al-Qaeda in Marib, Shabwa and other areas. Islah seeks to spark sectarian disputes. This clearly happens in Taiz and other places. This is an illegitimate and filthy tactic which harms the Yemeni people."[471] Speeches like these by the Houthis demonstrate that sectarian discourse was used to heighten group cohesion and justify violent actions against Sunnis. The Houthis have decisively activated sectarian identities in order to distinguish friend from foe and legitimize Houthi expansion. As one Houthi member, Abdel Malik al-Ijri, claimed in an interview with Reuters, "The largest element in the pro-Hadi militias was al-Qaeda."[472] These claims made by Houthis precipitate a notion that the Houthis must expand in order to defend themselves. While the perceived threats the Houthis speak to may be exaggerated, in the midst of state collapse and the

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[469] Ibid.

[470] Saeed Al-Batati, "Analysis: What Is Yemen's Al-Houthi Really Saying?," *Middle East Eye*, September 19, 2014, http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/analysis-what-yemens-al-houthi-really-saying-773962158.

[471] Khalid Al-Karimi, "Former Houthi Spokesperson: Houthis to Dissolve Islah Party," *Yemen Times,* March 2, 2015, http://www.yementimes.com/en/1864/news/4936/Former-Houthi-spokesperson-Houthis-to-dissolve-Islah-Party.htm.

[472] Mukashaf and Browning, "Combat in Yemen Risks Stirring Sectarian Hatred."

resulting security dilemmas, this rhetoric and aggressive mobilization is expected. State collapse has triggered the sectarian mobilization and violent interactions of both Sunni and Shi'ites alike.

4.   External Sectarian Actors

Starting in March of 2015, the Saudi Arabian-led military campaign against the Houthis has sealed the fate of the Yemeni state and further entrenched sectarian identities. Since aerial bombardments, naval blockades, and military operations were commenced by the Saudi-led coalition, the Yemen state has faced perilous conditions. Oxfam International estimates that some six million Yemenis are on the brink of starvation,[473] and as of January 28, 2016, 5,500 deaths and nearly 27,000 injuries have resulted.[474] Furthermore, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimates that nearly 80% of all Yemenis (about 21.1 million people) are in need of humanitarian aid or protection,[475] and in 2015, Yemen ranked seventh out of 178 countries on the Fragile State Index, below even Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan.[476] Thus, Operation Decisive Storm has only deepened the chaos of state collapse and heightened sectarian rhetoric.

While many have argued that the incidents of sectarian violence prior to 2015 were local contestations for power, the new external involvement by actors in the Middle East along clear sectarian lines has drawn sectarian identity even deeper into the conflict in Yemen. It is hard to ignore that all of the GCC coalition governments that are participating in Operation Decisive Strom are Sunni and all of them are supporting

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[473] Daniel Martin Varisco, Sato-Kan Hiroshi, and Junji Kawashima, "The Sectarian Crisis in Yemen: Damage from a Divisive Storm," *Middle East Institute,* September 29, 2015, http://www.mei.edu/content/map/sectarian-crisis-yemen-damage-divisive-storm.

[474] Jake Longworth, "Yemen: Intractable Conflict and the Growth of Extremism," *Intersec: The Journal of International Security*, February 26, 2016, http://www.intersecmag.co.uk/yemen-intractable-conflict-and-the-growth-of-extremism/.

[475] Varisco, Hiroshi, and Kawashima, "The Sectarian Crisis in Yemen: Damage from a Divisive Storm."

[476] J. J. Messner et al., "Fragil State Index 2015," in *Fragil State Index* (The Fund for Peace: Fund for Peace, 2015).

President Hadi, a Sunni himself.[477] One author suggested that Saudi Arabia has stimulated the "Shi'a versus Sunni dichotomy as a critical factor in rallying support against the Houthis."[478] In a comprehensive study of sectarianism on social media by the Carnegie Institute, the start of Saudi-led hostilities in Yemen correlated to drastic spikes in sectarian language in the online sphere.[479] The report found that the "most dramatic spike in tweets containing anti-Shi'a terms in the period under study occurred following the first airstrikes in Yemen in late March, 2015, as the Saudis launched Operation Decisive Storm."[480] The report stated that "as fighter jets from Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Qatar, Sudan, and the UAE joined the Saudi-led operation in Yemen, a kind of pan-Sunni zeal swept through the region."[481] Moreover, the governments of Iran, Hezbollah, and Iraq came out in opposition to the GCC actions and in support of the Houthis, decisively solidifying sectarian identities and validating Saudi aggressions.[482] In the wake of state collapse in Yemen, a new battlefield has been created in which regional sectarian actors have come to exacerbate local sectarian discourses and state weaknesses. Thus, regional sectarian actors have served to further heighten sectarian violence in Yemen.

Sectarian violence in Yemen has also increased as a result of the Saudi-led military efforts against the Houthis because it has indirectly aided and emboldened Sunni extremists. Many scholars have claimed that Al Qaeda and ISIS have been the real winners in Yemen's war as the Saudi-led coalition's primary targeting of the Houthis, and not AQAP or ISIS, has provide space for these extremist organizations to grow in

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[477] Jeff Colgan, "How Sectarianism Shapes Yemen's War," *Project on Middle East Political Science* 28, no. The Gulf's Escalating Sectarianism (2016).

[478] Clausen, "Understanding the Crisis in Yemen: Evaluating Competing Narratives," 22.

[479] Alexandra Siegel, Sectarian Twitter Wars: Sunni-Shia Conflict and Cooperation in the Digital Age, (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2015), http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP_262_Siegel_Sectarian_Twitter_Wars_.pdf. 2.

[480] Ibid., 6.

[481] Ibid.

[482] Ibid.

popularity and territory.[483] As one author noted, since 2015, "this multi-front war in Yemen is a gift to groups like AQAP and the Islamic State. Both organizations thrive in areas where poverty and sectarian tensions are pronounced."[484] As of March 2016, AQAP holds more territory than that it did in 2011 (see image below) when the group's regional control had reached its peak among the turmoil of the Arab Spring uprisings.[485] Furthermore, al Qaeda has since become an incredibly deadly force in Yemen—the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) Critical Threats Project tracked over 110 attacks in just a fifteen-month period that AQAP was responsible for.[486] Most estimates suggest the number of attacks have only increased in the past few years as AQAP has gained further strength and territory from which to conduct operations.[487]

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[483] al-Muslimi, "The Popular Committee Phenomenon in Yemen: Fueling War and Conflict."; Longworth, "Yemen: Intractable Conflict and the Growth of Extremism."; Peter Salisbury and Ahlam Mohsen, "The Rise of the Islamic State in Yemen," *Vice News*, July 20, 2015, https://news.vice.com/article/the-rise-of-the-islamic-state-in-yemen.; Yaroslav Trofimov, "Is Al Qaeda Winning in Saudi-Iran Proxy War in Yemen? Concerns Arise after Islamist Extremists Fought Alongside Saudi-Led Coalition and Its Allies," *The Wall Street Journal,* September 10, 2015, http://www.wsj.com/articles/is-al-qaeda-winning-in-saudi-iran-proxy-war-in-yemen-1441877581.

[484] Horton, "Capitalizing on Chaos: AQAP Advances in Yemen."

[485] Ludovico Carlino, "Anarchy across Southern Yemen Likely to Facilitate AQAP's Unopposed Expansion into New Areas, Including the Coast," *IHS Jane's 360,* February 16, 2016, http://www.janes.com/article/58047/anarchy-across-southern-yemen-likely-to-facilitate-aqap-s-unopposed-expansion-into-new-areas-including-the-coast.

[486] Cody Curran et al., "AQAP and Suspected AQAP Attacks in Yemen Tracker 2010, 2011, and 2012," AEI Critical Threats April 10, 2016, http://www.criticalthreats.org/yemen/aqap-and-suspected-aqap-attacks-yemen-tracker-2010.

[487] Oren Adaki, "AQAP Claims 149 Attacks in Yemen since Late September,"*The Long War Journal*, December 19, 2014, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/12/aqap_attack_map.php.
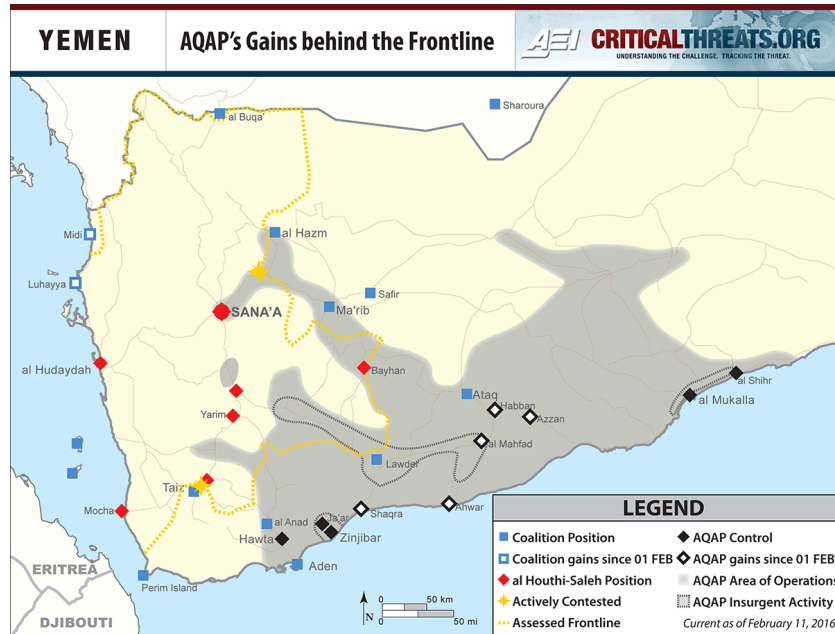
Figure 9. AQAP's Gains in Yemen as of 2016[488]

Pro-Islamic State militants have also been organizing themselves in *wilayats* since 2014, reportedly reaching seven as of early 2016.[489] Additionally, since March of 2015, the Islamic State has carried out at least 29 attacks, killing at least 389 people.[490] The governorates in which IS occupies a presence coincide with territories AQAP has a strong presence in as well. For the same reasons AQAP gained popularity, IS too is "enjoying some popular support in the predominantly Sunni areas, and especially in areas that have suffered the atrocities of the Houthis and their allies. The IS-affiliated factions thus are welcomed as protectors from such transgressions."[491] Thus, for both IS and AQAP, the Saudi-led strikes, the collapse of the state, and the increased sectarian framing

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[488] Katherine Zimmerman, "AQAP Expanding Behind Yemen's Frontlines," *AEI Critical Threats*, February 17, 2016, http://www.criticalthreats.org/yemen/zimmerman-aqap-expanding-behind-yemens-frontlines-february-17-2016.

[489] Longworth, "Yemen: Intractable Conflict and the Growth of Extremism."

[490] Helene Lavoix, "Understanding the Islamic State's System – Wilayat and Wali in Yemen," *The Red Team Analysis Society*, February 22, 2016, https://www.redanalysis.org/2016/02/22/yemen-islamic-state/.

[491] Ashraf al-Falahi, "Islamic State Extends Its Tentacles into Yemen," *Al Monitor,* November 30, 2015, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/11/islamic-state-expands-yemen-qaeda-aqap.html.

of the conflict has bolstered their image as Sunni defenders, enhanced their capacity to inflict sectarian violence, and united Sunni groups in opposition to the Houthis.
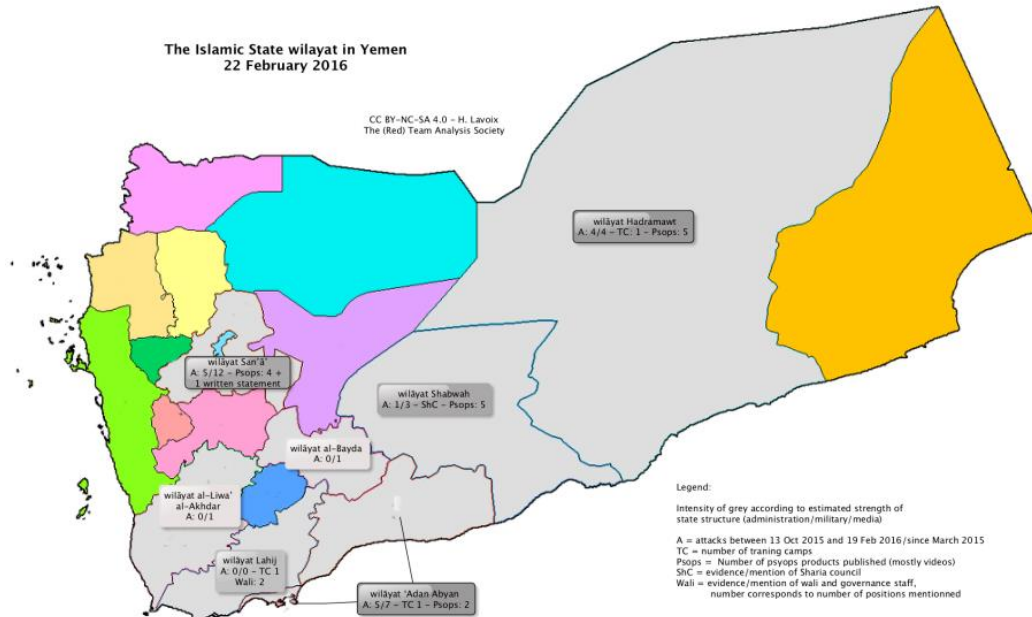

Figure 10. Islamic State's *Wilayats*[492]

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, state collapse in Yemen has facilitated the rise of sectarian violence. State collapse has precipitated security dilemmas and power vacuums that have pushed Yemenis into decisively sectarian divisions in search of protection and group cohesion. This has led to new alliances forming on the basis of sectarian identity, has enhanced the support and capacity of groups along sectarian lines, and has facilitated external actors pushing sectarian agendas and rhetoric. Therefore, the success of groups like the Houthis and Al-Qaeda has largely been as a result of their sectarian appeal and the increased support this identity has provided them among co-religionists. Sadly, Yemen has been transformed from a place that traditionally had seen very limited importance placed on sectarian identity to one fully immersed in the complexities and consequences of sectarian violence.

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[492] Lavoix, "Understanding the Islamic State's System – Wilayat and Wali in Yemen."

V.   CONCLUSION

This thesis has attempted to explain the rise of sectarian violence in the Middle East by evaluating four independent variables in a comparison of Yemen and Bahrain. The four IVs that have been explored, and their contributions duly explained, have been grievances, elite instrumentalization, the regional proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and state collapse. By examining the impact of these variables in both Yemen and Bahrain, it has become clear that the two nations share three of the four IVs, and only one of them, Yemen, has experienced sectarian violence. Thus, the conclusion that can be drawn from these observations is that sectarian tensions have been created in both nations due to grievances felt by the Shi'a populations in each country; the sectarian instrumentalization of these grievances by elites, primarily the government regimes in each country; and that the sectarian nature of this "divide and rule" strategy imposed by the governments has been shaped by the regional context of the competition between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shi'ite Iran. Furthermore, the key variable absent in Bahrain but present in Yemen has been state collapse, thus suggesting that Yemen's sectarian violence has been created by sectarian tensions that have transformed into sectarian violence due to the consequences of state collapse and the ensuing political and security vacuums.

This research has attempted to articulate that sectarian violence in the contemporary Middle East is not mono-casual, and that suggesting so is in fact a weakness of current theories used to explain sectarian violence. Instead, the combination of aggrieved populations, state agency, regional competition, and state collapse has supplied the context for why sectarianism, as opposed to other identities, has become so salient and conflicting. Furthermore, understanding how the independent variables explored are more formidable in combination than as standalone variables can prevent an incorrect application of this work in other areas. Meaning, though this thesis has stressed each IV as a critical component in the creation of sectarian violence, this does not imply that any nation that experiences one of these variables, like state collapse, will simply

disintegrate into sectarian or identity based violence. Therefore, it is the combination of variables that appears to be necessary in the creation of sectarian violence.

While this research has also highlighted the importance of state capacity in preventing sectarian tensions from becoming violent, the conclusion to be drawn is not that the harsh hand of the state, as in the case of Bahrain, is a consistent policy direction worth pursuing to prevent violence in other areas. Bahrain's distinctive circumstances; their small population, isolated geography, and incredible state wealth, has allowed them control over their population that may not be feasible in other circumstances. Considering that Bashar al Assad's regime in Syria attempted a similar harsh government crackdown to quell Arab Spring unrest has only further exacerbated violence and instability, this research is not suggesting state capacity is the only thing between stability and violence. To reiterate, each nation's circumstances with conflict, sectarianism, and violence must have corresponding individualized considerations and policy solutions, even if the process of how sectarian violence is created can be generalized.

Additionally, this thesis has specifically focused on the Middle East, instead of sectarianism in general, because there are specific factors in the region of the Middle East that have influenced how and why sectarian violence has been created that may differ from sectarian conflict in other regions of the world. The deep religious and cultural history of Islam in the Middle East has contributed to identity mythmaking and saliency in a particular way. The primacy of authoritarian regimes has given greater agency and capacity to elite instrumentalists than may exist in other regions or contexts. The (largely) ethnic homogeneity of the region has limited the mobilizing power of ethnicity in the propagation of violence, directing the conflict in the Middle East toward sectarianism in ways that might not occur in other regions that have ethnic divisions to contend with as well. Lastly, the competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran, though the effects of which have reverberated in other nations outside of the Middle East, has more greatly affected the Middle Eastern region. The contestation for regional hegemony is felt specifically by the nations upon which this competition is taking place in, and that has been largely limited to the Middle East. Therefore, the current issues surrounding sectarian violence that have been explored are particularly applicable in the Middle East.

When scholars write on sectarianism, they typically consider it as a "subset of ethnicity."[493] However, this dynamic is not as applicable in the Middle East; sectarian identity is important and standalone, not as a subset of culture or ethnicity. This distinction of sectarian conflict from ethnic conflict is important because it can help spawn tailored solutions for sectarian conflict resolution. In other words, applying conventional ethnic territorial accommodation solutions, like partition or secession, to the sectarian issues of the Middle East, may be unwise or simply not applicable. Therefore, for conflict and policy solutions in the Middle East, this thesis has attempted to provide narrow and content specific details, yet for the greater understanding of sectarian violence, this thesis has hopefully contributed a theoretical process that can be adapted to other cases of identity conflict.

A.   POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

Solutions that address sectarian conflicts in the Middle East must be nuanced and specific to the nation and area under duress. If anything, this thesis has tried to stress the contextual importance in understanding sectarian violence, and this same lesson of contextualization should be applied to policy applications as well. Solutions possible in Yemen will be different than those proposed in Bahrain, or even Syria or Iraq. Additionally, while this thesis considers identity as a constructed phenomenon, it also acknowledges the primordialists' argument that identity, once made salient, is very resilient to change, especially after identity conflicts.[494] In short, blood matters, and this region has seen a lot of bloodshed over sectarian identity. Recognizing the resiliency of identity hopefully discredits policy solutions that attempt to simply ignore or abolish sectarian identity. However, on the other hand, sectarianism's current saliency should also not result in policy solutions that attempt to fortify sectarianism as a paramount identity beyond the memory of conflict nor diminish the space for other identities to exist. A balance between recognizing the importance of sectarian identity without

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[493] Frances Stewart, "Religion Versus Ethnicity as a Source of Mobilisation: Are There Differences?," in *CRISE Working Paper* (Oxford, England: University of Oxford, 2009), 1.

[494] Stephen Van Evera, "Primordialism Lives!," *APSA-CP: Newsletter of the organized section in comparative politics of the American Political Science Association* 12, no. 1 (2001): 20.

entrenching its societal divisions is a critical one to strike. Therefore, this thesis does not advocate partition or consociationalism as potential solutions to sectarian violence in the Middle East because both solutions would result in a permanence of sectarianism that would most likely not be beneficial to the long term stability of the region.

B. POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND SOLUTIONS IN YEMEN

The peace talks currently underway for conflict resolution in Yemen are a necessary and important step in ending the violence and destruction of the Middle East's poorest country. While both the conflict and its resolution are still very much an ongoing process, exploring possible policy implications in Yemen for the US, and establishing lessons learned, can be very useful. The most critical conclusion to draw from Yemen's sectarian conflict is it has been preventable. Yemen was largely a nation void of sectarianism prior to government instrumentalization, external imposition, and state collapse. While the Zaydis have certainly exhibited considerable fortitude as a group over time, for nearly a thousand years in fact, their identity has not been in conflict with other Yemenis or the existence of Yemen until recently. The Zaydis as a group, though largely independent and regionally defined, have not suggested territorial partition as a part of their goals or ideology. Their Yemeni-ness has been paramount in their image building as a group, despite current events overshadowing this aspect of their identity in favor of their sectarian nature. Thus, this thesis suggests that the recognition of multiple identities, like that of the Zaydis, is critical, but should not be done so at the expense of a shared nationalism or patriotism.

Reintegration of the opposing groups in Yemen through a unifying leader or parliamentary system would be a more lasting solution to rebuilding a post conflict Yemen. Cementing sectarian identities, which have been inconsequential in the past, reduces the ability for them to become inconsequential in the future. Therefore, instead of considering partition or consociationalism as ways to solve the sectarian violence in Yemen, solutions of reintegration, limited regional autonomy, like federalism, or simply better guarantees of minority rights and participation in the central government, could adequately address grievances and facilitate conflict resolution. Many of the Houthis'

issues have stemmed from general grievances of government corruption, lack of representation, and inadequate state capacity to provide for its people; these same issues have also been articulated by many other Yemenis including those in the South. Finding a moderate voice in government that can be acceptable for both the Zaydis and the rest of Yemen would be a necessary first step to ending conflict and reintegrating Yemenis into a united nation.

1. Policy Implications for the United States

The United States should emphasize conflict resolution, not continuation, in Yemen. Reconsidering the support the U.S. has provided to its ally, Saudi Arabia, in Saudi's prosecution of war in Yemen, would be a wise decision and may help end the sectarian violence and turmoil in Yemen. Not only would this be beneficial for the lives of the Yemenis affected, but it would allow the U.S. to refocus on arguably one of the most fretful impacts of Saudi Arabia's campaign on Yemen, the rise of AQAP and ISIS. Both extremist groups have greatly benefited from the lack of government prosecution, the general chaotic, lawless atmosphere, and the flowing sectarian rhetoric. Both groups have increased their recruitment base, their territorial control, and their capacity to conduct terrorist operations. The war has also, though not completely, limited the US's ability to prosecute these terrorist groups in Yemen. In combination, a stable, non-sectarian Yemen is a better proposition for the United States. The perception of threat the Saudi's have repeatedly insisted upon from Iran, though Yemen, has failed to materialize. Instead, what has materialized is a humanitarian and terrorist crisis, the effects of which will impact the nation of Yemen, the Middle East as a region, and even the United States for some time.

C. POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND SOLUTIONS IN BAHRAIN

While state capacity has prevented all out sectarian violence in Bahrain, the sectarianism that has been activated in the country requires discussion for solutions and alleviation. Lessons from other developed and capable states in dealing with identity crisis, like that of the United Kingdom and the IRA, can demonstrate that ongoing identity based insurgencies that target both the state and other identity groups can be very

detrimental and impactful for society. While a civil war and the calls for partition were prevented by England's own capable state, much like Bahrain, eventually bringing an end to the continual violence required negotiations and inclusions of the very groups the government was at first unwilling to work with. The situation in Bahrain might call for similar diplomatic negotiations to end the low-level Shi'a violent resistance. While the GoB is justified in believing that violent resistance must be met with harsh repression, it would behoove them to consider that there still are real grievances felt by a large portion of their population and that negotiating with opposition groups may be the only realistic solution to ending the violence and discontent of their citizenry. Additionally, the GoB must recognize that having a large part of the capable and even moderate voices of the opposition movement imprisoned and unable to participate in reasonable negotiations has driven opposition groups to more radical and violent forms of rebellion. Reconciliation and negotiation should therefore be restarted with the moderate and capable groups, like al Wefaq, and earnestly attempt to solve the issues the past attempts at negotiations faced.

One possible solution to facilitate negotiations is soliciting the support of outside mediators, like the United Nations. Having impartial parties present can help address some of the politically and culturally sensitive grievances that have led to past talks failing. Furthermore, this would give the GoB further legitimacy in the eyes of the international community that they are taking serious steps toward conflict resolution. As a part of these international dialogues, also fully implementing the changes the BICI recommended, even if promised in an incremental fashion, would also be a critical show of commitment by the al Khalifa regime toward reconciliation.

The partition or secession of parts of Bahrain are simply not feasible solutions to the sectarianism in Bahrain. The economy and land mass could not reasonably facilitate any type of division. The reality for Bahrain is that the rulers and their constituents all live on a very geographically small and isolated island nation; assimilation or non-territorially based autonomy solutions are more plausible solutions.

Power sharing is also not a reasonable solution for Bahrain. Consociationalism only really works when the ruling power is in a state of weakness and agrees to share

power with other elites to facilitate an end to conflict.[495] This is certainly not the case in Bahrain, and the GoB has clearly demonstrated its hesitation to relinquish any of its power. If anything, the conflict in Bahrain has refortified the GoB's state capacity and determination to not allow Shi'a groups a larger say in the government. The solutions to conflict in Bahrain must start small and eventually require the GoB to give certain concessions. This relinquishment of control may only happen either after a long duration of violent resistance, like in England with the Irish Republican Army, or with the encouragement from outside powers, like the international community or the United States.

Thus, while the GoB has the nation largely under control, not taking more meaningful steps to address the slow, simmering, resistance within their own small nation could impact their economy and livelihood. Because Bahrain is competing with Dubai to be a financial capital of the Middle East and heavily relies on foreign participation, from Saudi's weekend visits to Manama, the Formula One races, or even the United States' stationing of the 5th Fleet, ending the Shi'a violent resistance becomes critically important. One IED targeting tourists, U.S. sailors, or business centers might irreparably damage the Bahraini economy. For these reasons, Bahrain has a vested interest in preventing a terrorist attack in Manama or a resurgence of protests and conflict in their streets.

1. Policy Implications for the United States

The United States must balance short term with long-term stability in Bahrain in their policy decisions. Understandably, the U.S. has primarily been concerned with unrest in Bahrain because of Bahrain's relationship as a close ally, their purchasing of U.S. weapons systems, and most especially, their housing of the U.S. Navy's fifth fleet. Nonetheless, the U.S. actions toward Bahrain have largely favored short term stability over long term solution building because of the United States' immediate concerns with base security and because of the U.S. desire, at the time, to move forward with the Iran

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[495] Donald L Horowitz, "Ethnic Power Sharing: Three Big Problems," *Journal of Democracy* 25, no. 2 (2014): 8.

nuclear deal. The U.S. decision to remain largely silent on Bahrain's response to the Arab Spring, however, maybe have been at the expense of long term stability that will be harder to remedy as opposition groups become further entrenched and Bahrain's resistance remains ongoing. Public backlash against the U.S. position in Bahrain has already generated much condemnation by Bahrainis; this could potentially lead to violence targeting U.S. base instillations or U.S. military personnel. Due to these risks and the potential long term instability of Bahrain, the U.S. should use its leverage to push for reconciliation talks in Bahrain. Now that the Iran nuclear deal has been mostly finalized, the U.S. should refocus on encouraging its ally to address the underlying problems in Bahrain and to address their severe humanitarian missteps. The longer the situation in Bahrain continues unresolved, the harder reconciliation will be as opposition demands become more entrenched and unreasonable.

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