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Religion and Political Survival:

The Regional Strategies of Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar

A thesis

submitted in partial fulfilment

of the requirements for the degree

of

Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science

at

The University of Waikato

by

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THE UNIVERSITY OF
WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

2020

Abstract

Do Middle Eastern regimes use the contest between secularism and religion as a domestic authoritarian survival strategy, and if so, has this been projected into their regional policies in response to the 'Arab Spring'? Post-Secular Theory has focused on the role of religion in domestic politics, neglecting the international and regional sphere, whilst also disproportionately focusing on the West, neglecting, for instance, the Middle East. To address this gap in the literature, this research looks at the domestic motivations for foreign policy, specifically for the purposes of regime survival in four key states: Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar. The investigation uses existing theories that consider regime survival strategies, such as Selectorate Theory, and religion and domestic politics, including Jonathan Fox's Secular-Religious Competition Perspective. These have been adapted and applied to the Middle East, exploring their usefulness beyond providing explanations for domestic political behaviour.

To test this, the co-optation patterns of sect and degree of secularism/fundamentalism within Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar was compared to the militias sponsored by each respective regime in the civil wars in Syria and Yemen as a means of discovering the existence of authoritarian survival strategies that use religion in the regional sphere. The research found that the case study states sponsored militias that matched the regime's domestic *winning coalition* of support in terms of position on the secular-fundamentalist scale and sect. The secular-fundamentalist scale was created to rate the regimes and the militias in terms of religiosity. In doing so, it provides a tool for assessing the ongoing societal contest between secularism and religion, as outlined by Fox's Secular-Religious Competition Perspective.

The significance of this research is that it establishes the presence of the contest between secularism and religion, and also sectarianism, as regime survival strategies in the regional sphere, specifically in militia sponsorship in Yemen and Syria. Therefore, this research proposes the incorporation of an additional causal variable into explanations for international state behaviour in the Middle East: the desire of elites to stay in power and the subsequent regional externalisation of the domestic strategies they use to secure their rule.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Reuben Steff and Mark Rolls for their great supervision and the interesting conversations (PhD related and otherwise). I am very grateful.

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Chapter One: Introduction

The outbreak of mass protests against Tunisia's Ben Ali in January 2011 took the world by surprise. However, no one could have foreseen the dramatic events that happened next. The unrest quickly spread across the region, contesting or negating the power of ruling elites in Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain. Sustained protests took place in Morocco, Iraq, Algeria, Lebanon, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman and Sudan whilst minor protests occurred in Djibouti, Mauritania, the Palestinian National Authority, Saudi Arabia and Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara. In 2011 it looked as if the region's authoritarians were looking at a sweeping rejection of their governance and that a new breed of politician could be ushered in. The events were even more surprising because the cascade of protests occurred in a region where analysts had typically decided that 'Arab exceptionalism[1]' applied: that Middle Eastern citizens were so accepting of authoritarianism that street-led challenges were highly unlikely. Not only did the protests prove the analysts wrong about the 'Arab Street', but it also exposed the deep dissatisfaction in the region with illiberal rule. To politically survive, the states needed to either adjust to, or suppress, the events. They were now vulnerable to widespread and escalating civilian discontent that was shared across the region. What did the regimes do next? How have the regimes responded to this regionally generated challenge?

The 'Arab Spring' strengthened the Middle East's authoritarian ruling elites understanding that the domestic threat of over-throw and revolution could be inspired by regional events beyond their own borders. Regional norms regarding authoritarianism and cronyism were under threat. This meant that to ensure their survival in the new era following the disruptive 'Arab Spring' the states needed tactics that faced and dealt with this new reality. The *authoritarian survival tactics* that the regimes used domestically now needed to reach into the regional sphere, and suppress or manage uprisings in other states to prevent them

[1] Arab exceptionalism is a body of scholarship that attempts to explain authoritarian persistence in the Arab Middle East during the 1990s and 2000s. During this period, political stagnation in the region contrasted with the shifts towards constitutional change elsewhere around the globe (Porras-Gomez, 2020). The explanations for this phenomenon embraced the following: "the weakness of civil society, the deliberate manipulation and division of opposition forces, the co-optation of social forces through the distribution of rent, cronyism, and stunted economic liberalization, the region's cultural endowment, the prevalence and peculiar logic of monarchy, the embrace of liberalized autocracy, the effective manipulation of political institutions such as parties and electoral laws" and conditions that foster "robust authoritarianism, specifically, the presence of an exceptionally muscular coercive apparatus" (Bellin, 2012, p. 128). Arab exceptionalism was dramatically challenged by the eruption of the 'Arab Spring' across the region in 2011.

inspiring uprisings at home. In other words, the outcomes of uprisings and/or civil wars need to be managed to ensure the victors supported a continuation of regional norms regarding authoritarian rules, and did not disrupt the domestic survival strategies of intervening states. The regimes need regional counter revolution strategies to ensure the endurance of authoritarianism.

In 2019, eight years after the beginning of the first protests in Tunisia, Syria and Yemen are still in the throes of active and militarised conflict between elites, political movements, militias and communal groups. Who wins will not only have an impact on the regional aspirations of the region's states, but also on their ability to hold onto power and to enforce stability at home. Therefore, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar are all seeking to steer the outcome of these two conflicts. In doing so, the states are supporting, or targeting, select militias. The militias they respectively sponsor reflect the institutional structure of support within the sponsoring states and the authoritarian strategies these regimes use at home - strategies that deploy sectarianism, secularism and fundamentalism as key tools. This extension of authoritarian survival strategies into the regional sphere may be the new tool of ruling elites and reflects their growing understanding that, in a globalised world, civilian unrest and opposition movements readily cascade across borders and represent a severe threat to their continued rule. Therefore, if authoritarianism is to survive, it has to learn to manage not just domestic unrest, but regional unrest as well, including the suppression of groups within other state's conflicts. Given this, foreign policy reflects more than just geopolitical interests and hegemonic contests. As Hal Brands points out in relation to China and Russia, "increasingly assertive foreign policies […] are measures of domestic fortification as well" (Brands H. , 2018, p. 73), further observing that "dictators are seeking a world made safe for authoritarianism" (Brands H. , 2018, p. 72). This research explores the implications of these statements in relation to militia sponsorship choices in civil wars, specifically how these patterns relate to the domestic use of religion, secularism and fundamentalism within authoritarian survival strategies. The specific strategies that will be investigated are the patterns of militia sponsorship in the Yemeni and Syrian civil wars by Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar.

Sectarianism, Secularism and Fundamentalism as Regional Authoritarian Survival Strategies

The key argument of this research is that secularism, sectarianism and fundamentalism are used by authoritarian states in the Middle East as authoritarian survival strategies, and that these strategies are *frequently extended into the regional sphere*, particularly under conditions of regional instability. Rather than political survival considerations serving as a variable which limits regional aspirations, this research postulates that decisions made by states in the regional sphere are frequently made primarily in the interests of the ruling elite. This is reflected in the patterns of militia sponsorship in the Syrian and Yemeni civil wars by the states that serve as the case studies for this research: Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar. These states use regime survival strategies to reinforce their rule. Given religion remains a significant source of political legitimacy in the Middle East, these strategies frequently seek to appeal to the same-sect citizens in other countries as the ruling elites in the states deploying survival strategies, and those citizens who share the regime's ideology as it relates to religion and the role of religion in governance. Citizens that are from a different sect and/or significantly less or more religious than the ruling elites are more likely to face political repression. Therefore, authoritarian survival strategies in the Middle East tend to focus on securing domestic support from those with the same level of religiosity and the same sect as the regime elites, albeit there are some important distinctions, such as Iran's support of Sunni Hamas. Additionally, some sects, such as the Syrian Alawites and the Yemeni Houthis, do not fall readily into either the Sunni or Shia categories. However, in both cases, even if the faith is different to Iran's Twelver Islam, the group's identity has a greater religious affiliation with Shia regional networks. This indicates the political use of ongoing contest between sects, and between religious and secular actors in the domestic sphere.

This thesis investigates the domestic authoritarian survival strategies that use sect and religiosity as causal variables that predict the case study states' choices of militia sponsorship in the Syrian and Yemeni civil wars. It finds that the sponsored militias match with inclusion-exclusion patterns relating to sect and religiosity in the regimes' survival strategies that they use in the domestic sphere. The domestic contests between fundamentalism and secularism are reflected in militia sponsorship patterns in regional conflicts by Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE

and Qatar. This means that Jonathan Fox's Secular-Religious Competition Perspective Theory, which posits that religious and secular actors are engaged in ongoing competition over policy within states, has relevance when explaining regional politics. This research also looks at Selectorate Theory in relation to regional politics. Selectorate Theory's premise is that the key focus of ruling elites is their own political survival. This research asserts that when looking for explanations for international behaviour and foreign policy choices, ruling elites' strategies to secure their political survival need to be considered. Given the match between domestic authoritarian survival strategies and militia sponsorship patterns in Syria and Yemen by Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar, this research posits that Selectorate Theory also has explanatory power in the regional sphere as well as the domestic[2].

Given the general acceptance of Secularisation Theory within the West, which assumed that societies would become secular as they modernised, the International Relations field, has, until recently, tended to neglect religion. However, Post-Secular Theory's successful refutation of Secularisation Theory's key findings that as states modernise they also secularise, and the assertion that secularisation has been particular to the Western development, has fostered a greater focus on religion in International Relations and Political Science analysis.

As such, Post-Secular Theory has led to burgeoning research on the impact of religion within domestic politics as scholars like Jonathan Fox (who examines domestic competition between secular and religious actors), and Sarah Feuer (who considers political opposition and religious regulation), fill important gaps in the literature on this topic. However, the role of religion in foreign policy analysis is still relatively understudied. This research seeks to build upon the existing scholarship in this field, in that it considers the impact of religion on foreign policy choices, specifically regarding militia sponsorship by intervening states in the Syrian and Yemeni civil wars.

Religion is explored and understood in this research as a tool in political competition to support one's interests, where fights over political power and privilege occur over the degree of religiosity between religion and secularism. Religion is also understood as the boundary between political groups and their respective elites. Selectorate Theory outlines how political

[2] Selectorate Theory and Religious-Secular Competitive Perspective Theory both form part of the theoretical framework of this thesis and are discussed in detail in the following chapter.

elites seek to secure and hold the support of specific groups in society. Ethnic Conflict Theory has established that politicians frequently seek to secure support through the manipulation of ethnic and sectarian groups, establishing in- and out-groups on the basis of sect or ethnicity. By mapping the groups that regimes seek to retain as supporters according to Selectorate Theory, this thesis finds that the in-out group patterns of support for regimes significantly reflected religious identity groups. Previous research tells us that Middle Eastern states use religion for legitimacy and utilise politically significant levels of sectarian mobilisation. This thesis looks to make this dynamic explicit. The research therefore, is positioned in the literature between foreign policy and contests over secular-fundamentalist religiosity, sectarian mobilisation, authoritarian survival strategies and regional politics.

The focus of this investigation is on the use of religion as an instrument in the Middle Eastern regional system to pursue domestic political survival. Four states are of key interest to this research: Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar. It tests for the presence of religio-political tactics that serve authoritarian resilience in the regional sphere by analysing domestic regime survival tactics against patterns of militia sponsorship in the Syrian and Yemeni civil wars. The regimes are compared by looking at the sectarian makeup of the militias they sponsor, and by considering the position between secularism and fundamentalism of the militias and how this relates to the sponsoring states' domestic patterns of inclusion and exclusion based on religiosity. This provides an explanation for the four states' foreign policy decisions in the Syrian and Yemeni civil wars, which are linked to enhancing their regional power and maintaining autocratic leadership at home. The similarity between domestic authoritarian survival strategies and regional choices regarding militia sponsorship, as they relate to sect and religiosity, are analysed against the theoretical framework. The *theoretical framework* is crafted from an extension and adaptation of Mesquito and Smith's Selectorate Theory, Jonathan Fox's Secular-Religious Competition Perspective, Barry Buzan's work on the idea of the state, Sarah Feuer's observations on religious regulation and political opposition, and Lisel Hintz's Identity Hegemony Theory. As such, this research investigates the following questions:

Primary Research Question:

Do Middle Eastern regimes use authoritarian survival strategies that use sectarianism, secularism and fundamentalism, and, if so, are these strategies also used in the regional sphere?

Secondary Research Questions:

What is the impact of sectarianism, secularism and fundamentalism on patterns of militia sponsorship in the Syrian and Yemeni civil wars?

Is the ongoing domestic contest between religion and secularism, as described by Jonathan Fox, present in the MENA regional sphere as well?

Does Selectorate Theory, which describes domestic politics, have relevance in regional politics?

This research project searches for a link between domestic regime survival strategies and the use of religion, secularism and sectarianism in regional policies. In order to establish whether a link exists a specific and measureable aspect of their foreign policy was chosen: militia sponsorship in regional civil wars. By identifying if patterns of militia sponsorship exist which are linked to elites' sectarian identity and religiosity, this research expands the number of factors that motivate foreign policy decision-making, asserting that they include authoritarian regime survival as a potential objective, particularly when unstable regional conditions exist.

Structural Realism, Black Boxes and Authoritarian Survival Strategies

In order to identify patterns between domestic survival strategies and militia sponsorship, this research applies Selectorate Theory to the domestic politics of the four case study states and then links the findings to the militias sponsored or resisted in the Syrian and Yemeni civil wars. This also tests whether Selectorate Theory is applicable and relevant to decisions made in the regional sphere. In doing this, by extension, the thesis also tests the relevance of Structural Realism, which asserts that international politics is constrained by structural and material considerations, and that a state's responses are dictated by its place in the hierarchy of states. Structural Realism considers states to be 'black boxes' where the relative balance of power between states in the system, regional or international, is key to explaining

behaviour; as opposed to the states internal regime characteristics, politics and ideology/religion. This research accepts that structure imposes restraints on regional politics and on the ability of states to push their domestic survival agenda into the regional scene. However, this research argues that when considering how the case study states engage in the civil wars in Yemen and Syria, through patterns of sponsorship with specific militias, there is a need to look past structural factors as religion also plays a role. Thus, this research hopes to add to the emerging body of research that seeks to break the view that states are indeed 'black boxes' when it comes to foreign policy analysis in the Middle East. Neoclassical realists such as J.W. Taliaferro, S.E. Lobel and N.M. Ripsman also attempt to address this, seeking to explain the impact of the internal dynamics of states on foreign policy (Taliaferro, Lobell, & Ripsman, 2009, pp. 4-5).

Karen E. Young also seeks to investigate the impact of leadership on foreign policy, lamenting that "foreign policy analysis of the Gulf, however, is often hindered by the 'black box' of leadership within the Gulf Arab states" (Young, 2015, p. 4). Investigating the domestic strategies of the Gulf states has also been hindered by long held academic assumptions that centre on Rentier Theory explanations for authoritarian survival strategies in the Middle Eastern and North African security complex. Justin Gengler challenges the narrow focus on Rentier Theory in his research on the ethnic political mobilisation in Bahrain (Gengler, Ethnic Conflict and Political Mobilization in Bahrain and the Arab Gulf, 2011).

Neoclassical Realism considers how security and foreign policy relates to national interests. Taking a neoclassical realist approach to US military interventions, Colin Dueck describes how "conceptions of national interest are considered in the light of domestic political incentives and constraints. This establishes that domestic politics "matters" not as a primary cause of intervention but rather as a powerful influence on the exact form" (Dueck, 2009, p. 139). In contrast, this research counters that the domestic survival of elites can and often is a primary cause of intervention, at least by authoritarian states. Thus this research, looking at the impact of internal regime and ideology on foreign policy, alternatively asserts the relevance of the internal survival strategies of authoritarian ruling elites. This project focuses on the decision making process between foreign policy and authoritarian survival strategies, specifically strategies that are structured around religion.

There is a branch of theory on military interventions that supports the premise that interventions are driven by domestic political considerations. This includes Diversionary War Theory, described by authors such as Peter Trubowitz, Helen Milner, Jack Synder and Michael Hiscox (Jaroslav & Jasinki, 2008) (Trubowitz, 1998) (Milner, 1988) (Synder, 1993) (Hiscox, 2002), which posits that "problematic domestic circumstances motivate a country's leader to divert popular discontent by launching a militarized international crisis" (Jaroslav & Jasinki, 2008, p. 641). Jaroslav Tir and Michael Jasinski tied Diversionary War Theory to domestic politics and ethnic conflict, whereby they described how an "embattled leader can elicit public support by using armed force against ethnic minorities within his/her country" (Jaroslav & Jasinki, 2008, p. 641). If we consider Diversionary War Theory in relation to this research, this project essentially looks into situations whereby leaders facing region-wide discontent at authoritarian rule attempt to elicit public support and strengthen their domestic power by arming or resisting sectarian or religious/secular militias in other states' civil wars. Although the leaders of the case study states did not face the same domestic pressures from the 'Arab Spring' as more vulnerable regimes such as Syria, they were/are still sponsoring groups that match the intervening elite's support base in terms of sectarianism and/or degree of religiosity/secularism, and resisting those that do not represent the same religious positions. However, it is unlikely that these strategies are operationalised without consideration for the region's dynamics. The sponsorship of select militias is likely to also support the objective of trying to undermine or depose of regional adversaries for example, thus the regime's endgames in Syrian and Yemeni civil wars will reflect both domestic survival strategies and regional patterns of amity and enmity.

Religion and Authoritarian Survival Strategies

This research looks at external authoritarian legitimation practices that use religion, religious secularism and sectarianism in the Middle East. As a consequence of globalisation, it has become harder to shield populations from external influences due to greater mobility and connectivity; as such, autocracies are having to increasingly manage the external environment in order to preserve authoritarian stability at home. Thus, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar have adopted increasingly activist foreign policies following the 'Arab Spring'. This has been particularly relevant since the 'Arab Spring' revealed that the main threat to

the regimes was not domestically mobilised opposition, but the mobilisation of region-wide cross-sectarian discontent. The regimes used sectarian narratives to manipulate and control this discontent. Consequently, it coalesced into the sharing of sectarian community based frustrations within states and across borders. Under these conditions, organised opposition, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, began to coordinate with the grassroots uprisings making the Iranian, Saudi Arabia, the UAE autocracies more vulnerable. Qatar's ties to the Muslim Brotherhood network has meant it is less vulnerable to threats from this quarter.

In response, the regimes initiated regional authoritarian survival strategies. Religion and/or religious secularism form the basis of the many authoritarian legitimation frames in the region. Additionally, sectarianism and the intensity of religious convictions form the basis of inclusion and exclusion in terms of co-opting and repressing sections of the population as per Selectorate Theory. Regimes need to extend enough dividends and identity group benefits to same sect supporters to keep them invested in the political survival of the existing ruling elites, and to repress out-groups. As such, this research looks at the domestic projection of these policies in the aftermath of the 'Arab Spring' by analysing the sponsorship of militias in the Yemeni and Syrian civil wars by Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar. The extensions of regime survival strategies into the international arena remains understudied, and this research explores this as it relates to religion, sectarianism and religious secularism. A central premise of this research is that the authoritarian quest for stability and survival extends beyond the domestic sphere, into the international.

Expanding the Competition Perspective to International Relations and Foreign Policy Analysis

Fox explains that the contest between secular and religious actors in policy making is ongoing. Thus, in the Middle East, the contest between the degrees of secular or religious governance is a permanent feature and has been instrumentalised in the contest over power and privilege by both the regimes and their challengers. In order to place the Competitive Perspective into an international relations framework, this thesis places it under the umbrella of Competitive Shaping. Described by the Foreign Policy Research Institute as "the variety of discrete means of contesting the state and the system surrounding it, contesting hearts and minds" (Elkus & Noonan, 2018, p. 1). This theoretical approach stresses that "competition for power and

influence lies at the core of political and social life" (Elkus & Noonan, 2018, p. 1). Given fear of each other's militaries, and the destructive power of today's weapons, competitive shaping in the 'gray zone' has become a more prominent feature of states' security agendas than the use of outright military threats or force. Competitive Shaping as a concept tends to assume that attempts to alter the internal dynamics of other states is part of a strategy for regional power. This research explores the possibility that attempts to shape the internal dynamics of other states in the Middle East can be explained as extensions of the intervening regimes' domestic authoritarian survival strategies. Hals Brands describes gray zone conflict and competition further:

> Gray zone conflict is best understood as activity that is coercive and aggressive in nature, but that is deliberately designed to remain below the threshold of conventional military conflict and open interstate war. Gray zone approaches are mostly the province of revisionist powers – those actors that seek to modify some aspect of the existing international environment – and the goal is to reap gains, whether territorial or otherwise, that are normally associated with victory in war. Yet gray zone approaches are meant to achieve those gains without escalating to overt warfare, without crossing established red-lines, and thus without exposing the practitioner to the penalties and risks that such escalation might bring. Gray zone challenges are thus inherently ambiguous in nature. They feature unconventional tactics, from cyberattacks, to propaganda and political warfare, to economic coercion and sabotage, to sponsorship of armed proxy fighters, to creeping military expansionism (Brands, 2016).

Brands outlines that states use competitive shaping strategies to achieve gains that would previously have been associated with war, pointing to material and territorial gains. However, this research seeks to establish that the gains sought by the case study states in the post-'Arab Spring' environment are related to their own domestic stability. Whilst the FPRI's Competitive Shaping concept excludes direct military intervention, it includes the sponsorship of militia in proxy wars. In the Middle East, "state, non-state and quasi state actors […] compete with governments and other sub state entities" (Elkus & Noonan, 2018, p. 15). The FPRI identifies Saudi Arabia as one of the states who "aggressively attempt to shape international and intra national environments through a variety of official, semi-official and illicit means" (Elkus & Noonan, 2018, p. 15). Iran, and the small states of Qatar and the UAE are also actively attempting to shape the Middle East. Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar's interventions in the Syrian and Yemeni civil war feature state versus non-state actors in an

international setting; for instance, Iran versus the anti-Assad mosaic of weaker non-state actors. In both Yemen and Syria, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are also pitted against weaker non-state actors, albeit their efforts are not always in unison as they at times support opposing groups. None of the non-state actors are capable of launching a full-scale campaign both in their own state and against the intervening state on its home turf, except to a limited extent. This largely removes the risk of all out inter-state war for the intervening state. However, smaller scale inter-state conflicts are still an issue, for example the 2019-2020 Persian Gulf crisis whereby tensions between Iran and allies and the US and its state allies spilled over in a series of maritime clashes (Katzman, McInnis, & Thomas, U.S.-Iran Conflict and Implications for U.S. Policy, 2020, pp. 2-12).

International relations features many examples of states using internal divisions to stoke factionalism and weaken rival states. Religion is a significant internal division that is stoked and manipulated by actors, non-state and state, in the Middle East. Jonathan Fox's Competitive Perspective Theory identifies a key religious rift, outlining how society contains an ongoing and permanent tension between the forces of secularism and religion. This research looks into the political use of this tension between secularism and religion as a competitive shaping strategy to weaken both State adversaries and domestic opponents as well as strengthening regional allies and internal support.

It is assumed, and tested, that the domestic survival strategies that states use to ensure authoritarian resilience extend into the regional sphere and feature attempts to reshape other states. In order to test this, this thesis uses a theoretical framework (described in chapter 2) which outlines the use of religion as a political tool by political elites and/or outlines ways in which domestic elites preserve their own power in domestic politics. These predominantly domestic focused theories are adapted and extended to fit the purposes of this project ensuring the framework works in the regional sphere. This theoretical framework is then used in the chapters that follow to test if domestic regime survival tactics that involve religion can be found in the regional sphere. For example, Selectorate Theory is used to test for sectarian favouritism in the distribution of dividends by the state, and Feuer's religious regulation ideas are used to test for the presence of manipulation of religion in order to mitigate threats from transnational religious ideas and networks. Autocratic regimes such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar are ideal for testing Selectorate Theory and sect/religion,

given that authoritarian regimes rely on small *winning coalition*[3] systems and a large *selectorate*. This means they tend to produce high degrees of rent seeking and cronyism, making patterns of sectarian religious inclusion and exclusion from state benefits more pronounced than in a democracy with a larger *winning coalition* (Mesquito, 2014, p. 65). As the thesis focuses on domestic explanations for foreign policy, to help separate the regime survival strategies from regional geo-politics, Buzan's Regional Security Complex (Buzan, 2007) criteria are applied; specifically, the patterns of amity and enmity across the Middle Eastern and North African region.

This research investigates the question of whether or not the regional policies of states manipulate the competition between religious and secular actors, and, if so, are these policies used to support regime survival. This investigation therefore extends the Competition Perspective put forward by Jonathan Fox, in which he posits that religious and secular actors are involved in ongoing competition rather than an existential situation whereby one cancels the other out (Fox, 2019, p. 524). This research looks at how this competition is moved into the regional sphere to maintain authoritarian stability. Additionally, this research investigates the religious logic to the choices regarding the sponsorship of foreign militias by Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar given the emergence of religious extremists, sectarian overlaid civil wars and the risks of Islamist elites moving into political power within the uprisings in Yemen and Syria.

Thesis Structure

The theoretical framework of the thesis, which extends and expands the work of Fox, Feuer, Buzan, Smith & Mesquito and Hintz to fit the regional sphere and the project, is outlined in Chapter 2. Chapter 2 also features a research tool created to further describe the religious makeup of the regimes and militias; the religious-fundamentalist index which establishes criteria for rating the regimes and militias in terms of religiosity/secularism. Chapter 3 describes the domestic strategies that use religion as the frame for domestic authoritarian survival strategies in Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar. Having established this, Chapter

[3] Selectorate Theory outlines how regimes need the support of a group of essentials, the *winning coalition*, who are drawn from a bigger group of influential supporters, the *real selectorate*. This is described in greater detail in Chapter 2.

4 explains how the case study states use their religious capabilities to project influence into the regional sphere in order to achieve foreign policy goals. These chapters provide the explanatory backbone of the research project.

Chapter 5 analyses data collected on militia sponsorship in the Syrian civil war by Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar between 2011 and 2019. The sponsored militias are analysed in terms of sectarian makeup and compared against the authoritarian survival strategies of the regimes. The militias' religious-fundamentalist index ratings are then compared against the corresponding sponsoring regimes. Finally, militia sponsorship preferences are compared to the domestic survival strategies of the regimes using the theoretical pillars as a framework. The findings are then evaluated against the research questions. In chapter 6, the same test used in chapter 5 is applied to the Yemeni civil war. This chapter then applies these findings by looking for religious derived authoritarian stabilisation and survival tactics in the regional sphere. Chapter 7 presents the conclusions as a whole, finding that religion is present in international systems as an extension of the domestic survival strategies of ruling elites.

The overall focus of this thesis aims to contribute to filling the gap in the International Relations field with regards to religion. As Carolyn M. Warner and Stephen G. Walker point out "while religion has emerged as a significant factor in some analyses of international relations, controversial and unexplored questions remain concerning the role of religion in the foreign policies of states" (Warner & Walker, 2010, p. 2/43). This research postulates that religion's presence in foreign policies is to a significant extent due to the extension of religious strategies used by ruling elites to survive politically into the regional or international sphere. The source of such foreign policy (and much domestic policy as well) is political survival, and sectarianism, religious secularism and fundamentalism are some of the most prominent mechanisms for ensuring authoritarian stability and maintenance in the Middle East. Typically, the analytical framework for studying religion and foreign policy places it firmly in the domain of constructivism; an approach that focuses on how religion effects foreign policy decision making through the influence of religious heritage, identity, ideas and culture on state interests and state institutions. This thesis explores an alternative approach, demonstrated in the analytical map for religion and foreign policy presented below. Here the focus is on religion's role as a political tool, which is dependent on its societal importance. The religious mechanisms are indicated in brackets.

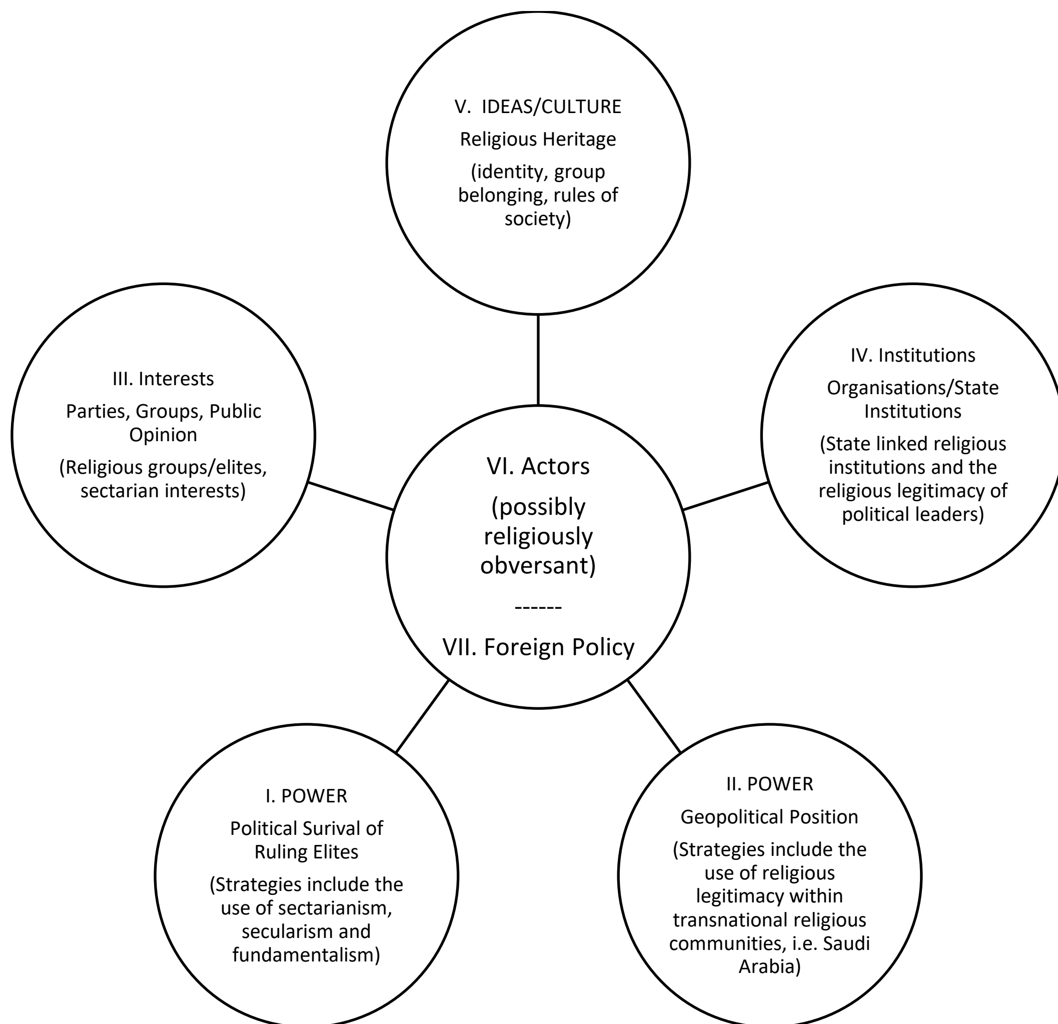

Figure 1.1. Map of Religion and Foreign Policy[4]

The following research aims to test and make explicit the above analytical map, figure 1.1, as it relates to religion as a political instrument, specifically focusing on the political survival of ruling elites. In standard analytical mapping of foreign policy, power is, as Warner and Walker state, drawn from the work of Kenneth Waltz and Robert Jervais, as the key variable that states are concerned with internationally. States "assess their relations with other states and take actions with or against them based on a clear calculation of power and survival" (Warner & Walker, 2010, p. 8/43) (Waltz, 1979) (Jervais, 1999). This source of power relates to state survival and sovereignty in the international system. This research focuses on the inclusion of box *I. Power* and the political survival of the ruling elite, positioning the elite's political survival as a key variable of foreign policy decision making in the international sphere. Typically, within

[4] The structure of this map is derived from Warner and Walker's Macroscopic Map of Religion and Foreign Policy (Warner & Walker, 2010, p. 6/43) but contains different content which has been created by the author.

literature on strategic culture it is in terms of religious belief systems and the impact of these cultures of belief on state strategy that the literature contemplates religion. When it comes to religion and conflict this has led to a focus on "the significance of institutional religion-state connections and ideological distance between disputants to account for the varied significance of religion in interstate conflicts" (Henne, 2012, p. 753). Alternatively, this research argues that these are the dynamics that elites are able to instrumentalise, rather than the key cause of disputes. This is in keeping with Kaufman's Symbolic Politics Theory which discusses the cynical and predatory use of ethnic group fears by ruling elites to mobilise same identity group supporters to oppose their political challengers (Kaufman, 2006, p. 48). Thus, this research considers religion in terms of its role as an instrument of political power, and as such this research aims to include religion in international relations as a strategic political survival mechanism in the domestic and international spheres.

Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework

The Intersection of Religion and Political Survival

Introduction

This research investigates the impact of secularism, sectarianism and fundamentalism on the sponsorship of militias in the Syrian and Yemeni civil wars. The investigation looks to establish whether certain relationships between religion and the state produce the expected patterns of foreign militia sponsorship. These patterns are further tested to see if they correlate with the projection of domestic authoritarian stabilization strategies into the international arena.

Religion has been overlooked in IR theory due to a widespread belief that religion has little impact on international relations and that the process of modernisation would lead to secularism: the study of religion's impact on politics, at least in the IR realm, was therefore going to become increasingly unnecessary. Additionally post-secular scholars have focused on the West neglecting regions such as the Middle East. As a result, there is a growing body of literature on religion within domestic politics in political science research, with the emergence of new theories that seek to explain religion and domestic politics. IR theory, however, needs a stronger body of theories to explain religion's impact on the global political scene, including in the Middle East. There are some emerging theories: Lisel Hintz has established that states project domestic identity issues into their foreign policies when moves to advance a specific national identity are blocked domestically. However, given that globalisation has amplified the reach of transnational religion, and that religion is showing signs of increasing or maintaining its influence, more work is needed. This research seeks to investigate the religious component of regional politics in the Middle East through expanding and adapting some of the emerging theories on domestic politics and religion to fit the regional realm.

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework used in this research which tests how states use religion in regional systems to achieve domestic political survival. The thesis contains case studies in chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6 on four prominent Middle Eastern states: Saudi Arabia, Iran, the UAE and Qatar. This framework positions religion in IR theory as an ideology that is engaged in an ongoing contest with secularism, and as an identity derived political instrument

used in regional systems to achieve political ends. The research focuses on a regional system (Middle East) given that the international system's norms, intergovernmental organisations, and international regimes are largely secular[5], operating through a system defined as the liberal or rules based order. Furthermore, this research is conducted at the regional rather than state level due to the already burgeoning research at the domestic level given the post-secular acceptance that religion has an impact on domestic politics. The impact of religion on the regional level is generally under researched in the literature. As such, this research focuses on the use of religion in regional strategy as a tool to ensure domestic political survival.

Many analysts, such as John Mearsheimer, have concluded that the international system is moving from a unipolar system towards a multipolar arrangement (Mearsheimer J. , 2018). As the system shifts towards multipolarity, regional dynamics and competition will increasingly affect the international system - they will not remain localised to regional geographic boundaries. As such, regional systems require greater analytical and scholarly scrutiny. This research seeks to expand the literature on the impact of religion on politics; and provide explanations for the political use of religion in regional systems as a tool to ensure domestic political survival. This is achieved through extending and synthesising theories that focus on the strategic use of religion in domestic strategies for regime survival. These theoretical extensions are then used to test if these religious strategies are used in the regional sphere as well.

This chapter proceeds in five stages. The first stage begins with a description of Secularisation Theory and then moves to position this research in reference to recent scholarship on Post-Secular Theory. The second outlines the key theoretical framework including Selectorate Theory, Buzan's idea of the state, Feuer's ideas relating to religious regulation and opposition movements, Fox's Secular-Religious Competition Perspective, Buzan's Regional Security Complex framework and Hintz's Theory of Identity Hegemony. The third adapts these theories to fit regional systems, thus forming the theoretical pillars of this research. The chapter concludes by outlining the methodological application of the theoretical pillars.

[5] It is difficult to find any research that has tested this, which may be because it is felt to be an intuitive understanding of how interstate relations are conducted at the system level.

A Brief History of Religion and Politics in Europe

Prior to the emergence of Post-Secular Theory, IR theorists had largely agreed that religion would become increasingly irrelevant to understanding international relations due to the secularising impact of modernity which has been most prominent in the Western world. Modernization refers to the profound shift from pre-modern and traditional lifestyles and societal systems to modern politics, economies, societies and cultures which possess a high degree of technological development, and a reliance on scientific explanations for real-world phenomena. This shift contributed to the development of secularism: the separation of religion from the political sphere and the relegation of religion to the private lives of individuals. However, the West's own history shows that modernity is only one contributing factor towards secularization. The history of much of the non-Western world supports this idea as modernisation outside of the West has not typically resulted in secularization. For instance, despite modernization's global advance, 80% of the global population still identifies with a religious group (Hackett & McClendon, 2017).

The Christianization of the Roman world during the late antiquity period, between the 3rd and 8th centuries, is as central to the culture and religion of modern Europe as is the growth of secularism (Thomas & O'Mahoney, 2014, p. 108), which is generally understood to have grown out of the Enlightment period's focus on reason, liberty and scientific method in the late 17th/early 18th Century. Europe's progression towards secular sovereign statehood was accelerated by the Protestant Reformation which started in 1517 and was initially focused on reforming the Roman Catholic Church, however the religious competition unintentionally resulted in a transfer of resources from religious to secular uses, enhancing the bargaining power of secular rulers (Cantoni, Dittmar, & Yuchtman, 2018, p. 2037). Wars were fought along confessional lines and were initially settled by the Peace of Augsburg in 1555 which was based on *cuis religio, euis religio*[6], allowing Protestant and Catholic princes to enforce their specific Christian theologies within their own territories, thereby strengthening their sovereignty. However, this arrangement proved unstable with events leading to Europe's deadliest religious conflict - the Thirty Years' War - which started in 1618 and ended in 1648 (Shah & Philpott, 2011, p. 31).

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[6] Means 'whose the realm, his the religion'

In the two centuries between the Reformation in 1517 and the early eighteenth century, Central and Western Europe were intermittently disrupted by clashes between different variants of Christianity (i.e. Catholic, Lutheran, Zwinglian and Calvinist). A crisis in the complex medieval political system had seen the emergence of a key struggle within the political regime that centred on competition between the Protestant and Catholic religious and political elites. The church, a 'transnational' organization, enjoyed enormous legitimacy and influence over medieval society, including the powerful nobility, owing to its consistency and ability to make good on its promises" (Owen, 2010, p. 88). John M. Owen explains further,

> When it appeared likely that a polity would change from one established religion to another – i.e. conversion of the rulers, lawful succession or revolution – strife in neighbouring polities would intensify and actors would identify their interests more and more closely with co-religionists regardless of polity and against inhabitants of their own polity who adhered to a rival religion. Transnational ideological polarization altered the incentives facing rulers. The promotion in other polities of their own branch of Christianity began to override other interests. Rulers would intervene and counter-intervene to overturn or support their rival religion in foreign polities" (Owen, 2010, p. 87)[7].

This political configuration, transnational political Catholic versus Protestant political competition, was at its most severe during the catastrophic Thirty Years War. The war ended in the Peace of Westphalia with a set of agreements which established the norm of non-interference in another polity's domestic affairs, thus reducing religio-political foreign policies. Transnational Catholic versus Protestant competition ceased when, in the late 17th Century, political elites saw a way out of the instability and destruction of religio-political contest through adoption of a regime that tolerated religious diversity, as was practised in the Netherlands and then England (Owen, 2010, p. 88).

Religion and politics were intertwined in early modern Europe. In medieval Europe "the 'religious' and 'political' realms…were seen by virtually everyone as intimately mingled" (Owen, 2010, pp. 90-91). Hence, political authority, with its responsibility to maintain social order, was obligated to monitor and enforce religious belief and practice to some extent; a ruler who failed to fulfil this obligation cast his own legitimacy into doubt (Owen, 2010, pp.

[7] This dynamic is a significant feature of Middle Eastern foreign policies in the current era and is explored within this research.

90-91). There is also significant entanglement between religion and politics in the modern Middle East.

Despite modern secular representations of religion as irrational faith, religion is innately connected to the feeling and reinforcement of community. Scott Thomas explains that, during the Middle Ages and throughout early modern Europe, religion was understood as a "community of believers rather than as a body of doctrines or beliefs" (Wilson, 2012, pp. 103-104). Given this, the European wars over religion were fought to preserve a particular way of communal life as opposed to being solely fought over "intractable beliefs regarding the nature of the world and God" (Wilson, 2012, pp. 103-104). Challenges from within Christianity from such groups as the Lutherans, who "held that the religion that bound society must be one without mediation between the believer and God; clergy must have no special spiritual or legal privileges, and that secular authorities must be supreme" (Owen, 2010, p. 98), gradually weakened the medieval norm of *religio vincula societatis* (religion is the bond of society) (Owen, 2010, p. 118). This strengthened the relative power of secular actors within the political sphere.

IR theory draws from an Anglo-American understanding of religion and politics, which posits that religion is not a significant factor in politics. Given Europe's history of religious and secular elites both participating in governance, this finding does not investigate whether Europe's past has implications for politics elsewhere around the globe. Elizabeth Shakman Hurd explains,

> Most realist, liberal, English school, feminist, and historical-materialist approaches to international relations treat religion as either private by prior assumption or a cultural relic to be handled by anthropologists. Even constructivists, known for their attention to historical contingency and social identity, have paid scant attention to the politics of secularism and religion, focusing instead on the interaction of pre-existing state units to explain how international norms influence state interests and identity or looking at the social construction of states and the state system with religion left out of the picture. […] The presumption that religion has been privatized and is no longer operative in modern politics or that its influence can be neatly encapsulated in anthropological studies of a particular religious tradition and its external influence on politics, has led scholars of international relations to miss or misconstrue some of the most significant political developments of our time. This narrow vision is in part attributable to a rigid and dehistoricized secular/religious binary that

prestructures the field of academic political science and international relations (Hurd E. , 2011, pp. 167-168).

The history of all civilisations is marked by the interchange between religion and politics. Both politics and religion are institutions that operate in the realm of rules and norms to govern life. The degree to which politics and religion are interwoven varies greatly, but perhaps no civilisation has ever separated the two as effectively - although unevenly - as Western civilisation, with US secularism a unique case.

The Peace of Westphalia and the Emergence of Secularism

The Peace of Westphalia, commonly regarded as the "origin of modern international relations", ended the religious wars in 1648, and represented the consolidation of Europe's transformation from medieval Europe to the modern state system (Shah & Philpott, The Fall and Rise of Religion in International Relations: History and Theory, 2011, p. 31). Part of this modern state system involved the growth of secularism, described by Jose Casanova as the "passage, transfer, or relocation of persons, things, function, meanings, and so forth, from their traditional location in the religious sphere to the secular spheres" (Casanova, 1994, p. 17).[8]

The Peace of Westphalia, and the subsequent adoption of political regimes that tolerated religious diversity, began the move towards European secularisation. Secularism grew out of the Enlightenment, which originated from philosophers such as Hobbes, Spinoza, and Hume among others. The Nineteenth Century saw ideas supporting political secularism strengthened by the work of Marx, Darwin, Nietzsche and Feuerback and in the Twentieth Century by Durkheim, Weber, Dewey, Freud and others (Shah & Philpott, The Fall and Rise of Religion in International Relations: History and Theory, 2011, pp. 24, 27). The Enlightenment thinkers of the late 17th and early 18th centuries believed the process of modernization, with its emphasis on rational thought and scientific enquiry, would corrode religion's impact on society, discrediting religious explanations in favour of secularised theories and answers to individual and societal issues. This would lead people to become more "free, rational and

[8] Erin K. Wilson describes secularization as "the gradual restriction or removal of religious influences in the public realm, the separation of the transcendent and supernatural from the immanent and natural, through various institutional, political, legal, social and even theological mechanisms" (Wilson, 2012, p. 15).

cosmopolitan" (Toft, Philpott, & Shah, 2011, p. 50). As the church was abandoned by the state the lack of symbolic and financial support weakened it further (Toft, Philpott, & Shah, 2011, p. 50).

Additionally, the Enlightenment was hostile to traditional sites of power, namely the political power of the Roman Catholic Church, and the political and economic privileges of the aristocracy. Themes usually associated with the French Revolution of 1789, such as liberty, equality and fraternity, placed individual rights at the forefront and thus religion was made to "respect the values of the public sphere" (Friedman, 2016). Cultural and philosophical changes that grew out of Modernism in the 19th and 20th centuries strengthened this move away from tradition bringing in admiration for the culturally new and unexplored. Religion was thought to be too 'volatile' to be involved in politics and the ideology of political secularism developed.

The aforementioned developments set the basis for the emergence of Secularisation Theory in the 20th Century, which describes religion as waning in the face of modernisation and progress. Falk argues that the separation of church and state "was intended to facilitate governmental efficiency as well as to provide the basis for a unified politics of the state in the face of religious pluralism, and a background of devastating sectarian warfare. Ostensibly, in the modern world, religious identity was declared irrelevant to the rational enterprise of administering the political life of society" (Falk, 1988, p. 381). Secularization Theory internalised these developments making them the basis of its assumptions. It thus assumes religion to be a force that impedes the management of political matters in a state, and insists that it be relegated to the private sphere (Hurd E. S., 2009, p. 32). Put succinctly, the main tenet of Secularization Theory is: "The assumption that religion will tend to disappear with progressive modernization" (Casanova, 1994, p. 7). However, whilst rational enterprise and modernisation supported the development of secularization in the European context, it has not done so in much of the rest of the world, indicating that Secularisation Theory was not a universal explanation for religion and politics and that an alternative one was needed.

Jonathan Fox's Secular-Religious Competition Perspective explains that secularism emerged as an ideology in Europe that competed with religion to influence government[9] (Fox, 2015, p. 33-34). According to Fox, in Europe "rather than causing religion's decline, modernity has caused the rise of secularism" (Fox, 2016, p. 155). As a result, in Europe, secular actors from the 15th Century onwards increasingly saw an opportunity to oust religious actors from political power in order to greatly strengthen their own power. Secular actors developed a narrative which asserted that sectarian violence was attributed to the involvement of religion in politics, and therefore religion had to be held accountable. The solution offered was to separate church and state. However, as the genocide against the Jews in WWII demonstrates, Europe was quite capable of sectarian violence within a secular system where separation of church and state was well established. Although IR theory typically describes Europe as secular, this description of the history of religion and politics in Europe serves to remind us that the Middle East's tight nexus between religion and politics is, historically, the norm. As the next section explains, Post-Secular Theory seeks to correct the assumptions of Secularisation Theory. As such, post-secular investigations emerged as a challenge to the literature declaring that the global decline of religion was inevitable.

Challenges to Secularization Theory

Undermining Secularization Theory's most basic premise is the fact that large parts of the world, including the Middle East, have modernized since the 18th Century, yet religion has not declined in Muslim states to a significant degree. In the early 2000s, scholarship focused on a resurgence of religion and surmised that its influence on international politics would grow accordingly (Hatzopoulos & Petito, 2003, p. 12). The proportion of religious communities continues to grow at a greater rate than the religious non-affiliated population in the global population. Population projections from the Pew Research Center predict that the religiously non-affiliated category is set to grow from the 2015 figure of 1.17 billion to 1.20 billion by 2060. However, due to population growth, the number of non-affiliated persons is expected to shrink as a proportion of world population, from 16% in 2015 to 13% in 2060. Additionally, the Center sees little indication to suggest that as states modernise and grow economically

[9] The Competition Perspective views religious politics as a competition between religious and secular ideologies.

there will be a decline in religiosity. There is limited evidence to support this in the Middle East, and in India numbers have remained constant (Lipka & McClendon, 2017). In contrast, the world's largest religions, Christianity (31% of world population) and Islam (approximately 23%) are predicted to continue to rise by 2060 as a proportion of the world's population; Islam faster than Christianity (Pew Research Center, 2015)[10].

Thus, Secularization Theory has begun to unravel. In 1968, renowned sociologist Peter Berger stated that "by the 21st century, religious believers are likely to be found only in small sects, huddled together to resist a worldwide secular culture" (Berger, 1968, p. 3). At the time, developments supported the theory with the influence of major religions over culture and politics in decline on every continent. Ideologies such as nationalism, socialism and modernism were on the rise, science was exposing religion as superstition and democracy and free thought were repressing religion in the name of progress (Toft, Philpott, & Shah, 2011, pp. 1-2). However, by 2013, Berger withdrew his 1968 assertion that secularism would spread worldwide as modernization advanced. He declared that "the data doesn't support this" (Berger, 2013). Research indicates that religion is holding its own against secularism. The Pew Research Center released statistical analysis for 234 countries which projected that in 2070 two thirds of the globe would likely be either Christian or Muslim, suggesting that not all populations are becoming more secular. Given projected population increases within the two largest religions, religion around the globe is expected to become more homogeneous. Green sums it up as follows: "The world is on track to become a more homogeneously religious place, not a more diverse and secular one" (Green, 2015). Many scholars also presented secularisation, especially its key emphasis, the separation of church and state, as a desirable political outcome, although they did not prescribe a programme for the implementation of secularization. Rather, they assumed that religion could not survive under the conditions of modernity.

The increase in religious adherence and/or religion's continued prominence across the globe, has highlighted the theoretical shortcomings of IR theory when it comes to religion. Renowned International Relations scholar, Professor Robert Keohane, stated that "the

[10] For definitions of the religious groups refer to Appendix C of the Pew Research Center's report titled *The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2070* (Pew Research Center, 2015)

attacks of September 11 reveal that all mainstream theories of world politics are relentlessly secular with respect to motivation. They ignore the impact of religion, despite the fact that world-shaking political movements have so often been fuelled by religious fervour" (Keohane, 2002). Academic attention was further drawn to religion after the publication of Samuel Huntington's article "The Clash of Civilisations" in *Foreign Affairs*, revitalising research in the field (Hehir, 2012, p. 19). Even in Western Europe, where most adults to do not claim to be practising Christians, a majority still continue to identify as Christian: for example, in France, 18% of all adults claim to be practising Christians, 46% non-practising Christians and 28% are religiously non-affiliated (Pew Forum, 2018). Approximately 8% belonged to other religions (Pew Forum, 2018). This has important implications for politics. The Pew Research Center found that amongst Western Europeans, identifying as Christian was associated with higher levels of nationalism and wariness of immigrants, for example (Pew Forum, 2018).

Post-Secular Theory

As a consequence of the data refuting the universal spread of secularism, interest in Post-Secular Theory emerged in the late 1990s. This theory constitutes the academic rebuttal of Secularization Theory; specifically, its key assumption that the "relevance of religion has waned". Post-Secular Theory is described by Jurgen Habermas as a "change in consciousness" that acknowledges that Secularisation Theory is specific to the development of European secularisation. Post-secularism represents a shift towards an intellectual understanding that religion is relevant within political analysis. According to Hent de Vries, religion "lives on" and that "issues of pluralism and social cohesion, the quest for identity and the need for integration, respect for other (that is to say their beliefs and values), as well as the liberty in principle to express oneself", are also relevant within political discussion (Mavelli & Petito, 2014, pp. 1-2). The post-secular viewpoint rethinks the boundary between religion and state and attempts to work towards a de-Westernization of the political theory of international relations (Mavelli & Petito, 2014, p. 7). This research seeks to add to this, through the study of the Middle East in the post-secular framework. Falk argues that part of this new direction is an acknowledgement of the continued prominence of religious and civilizational identities on the international scene (Mavelli & Petito, 2014, p. 9). Post-Secular Theory also questions the validity of the argument that modernization and progress can only proceed in the absence

or waning of religion (Habermas, 2008, p. 20). Erin K. Wilson describes how "globalisation has contributed to the emergence of post-secularism in society, to opening up spaces for faith based organisations to participate in contemporary politics" (Wilson, p. 220). As such, the post-secular turn recognises the redistribution of political power in the international system such that the authority and power of the state is fluid (Wilson, 2014, p. 220) and conditioned by entities such as transnational religious groups. An acceptance of post-secularism also underlines the need for ongoing research into religion and politics, including research into the use of religion within competitive shaping strategies and in regions outside of the West. Competitive shaping is a term coined to describe strategies used in the growing arena of competition between states that falls short of outright war. This arena between political competition and outright war is often called the grey zone. The Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI) defines it as follows:

> Competitive shaping is the art of a country or non-state actor altering the context in which an opponent makes a decision such that the country or group attempts to bend the opponent to its will through measures short of the use of major coercive military force (Elkus & Noonan, Competitive Shaping in World Politics: A Bibliographic Essay and Course Outline, 2018, p. 3).

Wilson points out that both "secular and religious actors are using religious worldviews and values as one among numerous resources to challenge dominant neoliberal/market globalist paradigms…[as such] faith based actors are enjoying increased recognition as powerful forces in contemporary politics" (Wilson, 2014, p. 225). The primarily secular far right and populist movements in Europe are utilising Christianity as an identity marker, as opposed to a faith, in order to advocate for the reassertion of European civilization at the expense of globalisation, pluralism and liberalism. It appears that increased exposure to the global creep of Western cultural norms has strengthened Islam as a key identifier, whilst the influx of immigrants and fear of Sharia law across Europe has, in turn, increased the West's identification with its Christian heritage. This is strengthening religious identification within politics. Thus, Post-Secular Theory asserts that religion is relevant to international relations and politics. It fails, however, to describe how religion is instrumentalised within foreign policy (Hamid, 2014); it is not enough to say it is, the how and why need explaining. As such, Post-Secular Theory opens up IR theory to accepting that religion is relevant internationally, though it gives little guidance as to how to understand and interpret this growing awareness within IR.

Additionally, although academic discussion of the Middle East in post-secular scholarship is sparse, Luca Mavelli points out that religion can operate as a "crucial provider of moral norms for a secular domain" in his research on the 2011 Egyptian revolution (Mavelli, 2012, p. 1059). This is also evident within the Middle East's secular regimes such as Syria, whereby religion is instrumentalised both as an identity and to provide the regime with moral legitimacy. Mavelli further identifies that in the Middle East, secularism is not a political project based around modernisation, but around disciplining religion to the state's survival needs through the political mechanisation of secular-religious competition. Thus, regimes use their political agency to "foster expressions of religiosity" and secularism that work to strengthen the regime (Mavelli, 2012, pp. 1077-1078). This research looks to further investigate the use of the secular-religious dynamic as an authoritarian survival strategy within the regional sphere.

Sarah Feuer argues, and this thesis also takes this position, that globally: "Most governments have continued to exhibit a mix of religious establishment and a separation of religious and state authority, while religion has remained a central part of people's lives around the world" (Feuer, 2014, p. 5). In order to increase its usefulness, Secularisation Theory would have done well to abandon its sole focus on conclusions gained from studying the West's historical experience, and drawn instead from global medieval and modern history, looking for the alternative routes secular politics can take in competition with religious power. Secularisation Theory fails to explain all the possible choices available to political actors regarding religion and politics, focusing solely on moves towards secularism as an inevitable path. This creates issues for looking at religion and politics through IR theory, as these theories are based on a basic acceptance of the secularisation thesis. To correct this, and in order to grasp the political complexity of highly religious regions like the Middle East, IR theory needs to move towards a greater adoption of Post-Secular Theory's understanding of politics, whereby religion can and frequently does coexist with modernity and with secularist ideology.

The Theoretical Framework: Theories on Religion and Political Survival

Post-Secular Theory emphasises the ongoing significance of religion in politics. As a result of the adoption of post-secularism, new theories that explain the relationships between religion and politics are being developed. The theories utilised in this thesis are: Jonathan Fox's Secular-Religious Competition Perspective (Fox, 2018); Hintz's theory on the use of identity

within hegemony contests (Hintz, 2016, Vol. 22(2)); and Feuer's work on government regulation of religion (specifically where her insights apply to political opponents) (Feuer, 2014). The theoretical framework also includes de Mesquito and Smith's Selectorate Theory that considers political survival and competition (Mesquito & Smith, 2011) as well as Buzan's idea of the state and Regional Security Complex Theory (Buzan, 2007).

De Mesquito and Smith's Selectorate Theory

De Mesquito and Smith's theory of political survival outlines what drives political decisions. They assert that leaders ultimately make decisions aimed at political survival. Leaders calculate who their domestic political 'base' is, or what de Mesquito and Smith call the *real selectorate*, which is the actual support base from within the broader potential support base which is called the *nominal selectorate*. From within the *real selectorate*, regimes need the support of a *winning coalition*. The *winning coalition* is the essential supporters whom the ruler needs to remain in power or the "quantity of selectors whose support the leader must retain to remain in office" (Smith, Morrow, De Mesquito, & Siverson, 2008). In de Mesquito and Smith's words, Selectorate theory is as follows:

> For leaders, the political landscape can be broken down into three groups of people: the nominal selectorate, the real selectorate, and the winning coalition. The nominal selectorate includes every person who has at least some legal say in choosing their leader. […] …in Saudi Arabia's monarchy it is the senior members of the royal family". […] (The winning coalition) are the people whose support is essential if a leader is to survive in office. […] Fundamentally the nominal selectorate is the pool of potential support for a leader; the real selectorate includes those whose support is truly influential; and the winning coalition extends only to those essential supporters without whom the leader would be finished. A simple way to think of these groups is: interchangeables, influentials, and essentials" (Mesquito & Smith, 2011, pp. 4-5).

Dena Motevalian further explains that "a leader must manage the struggle for power among political coalitions to garner support and maintain a position of power" (Motevalian, 2016). Dictatorships only require a small coalition to remain in power as autocratic power is largely maintained by heavy use of internal security forces, the provision of private benefits to the elite, and the use of authoritarian religious practices in places like Saudi Arabia, which de Mesquito and Smith describe as having a "tiny nominal and real selectorate, made up of the

royal family and a few crucial merchants and religious leaders" (de Mesquito & Smith, 2011, pp. 6-7). "In small-coalition polities like dictatorships, leaders can stay in power through the judicious use of private rewards. However, in some dictatorships, various selectorate members competing for loyalty can be observed, while in others, there are few selectorate members and the dictator is vulnerable to them" (de Mesquito & Smith, 2011, p. 5). A diagram illustrating Selectorate Theory features below:

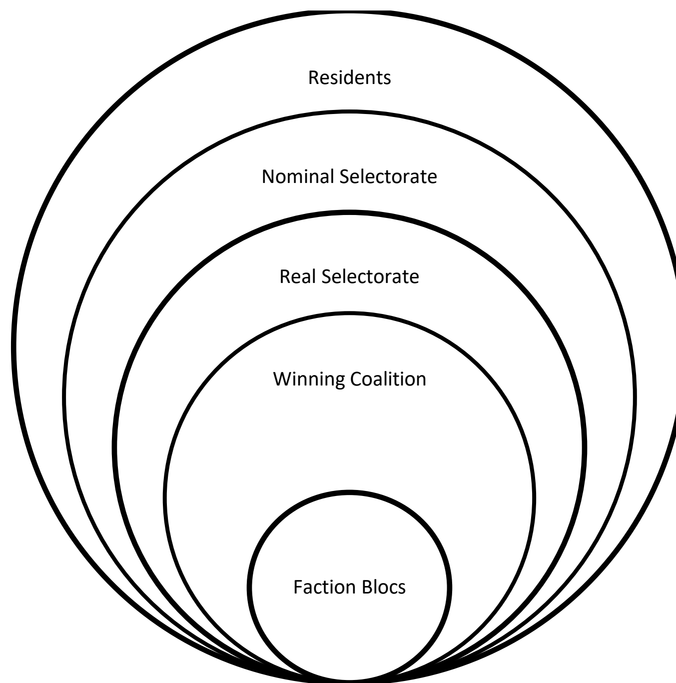

Fig. 2.1. Diagram Representing Selectorate Theory (de Mesquito, 2014, p. 82).

Essentially, this theory emphasises that politics is about groups competing to defend their interests (Gobry, 2018) and elite's strategies to get into and remain in power relative to those interests. As de Mesquito and Smith state:

> States don't have interests. People do. […]National interest might have been on each of their minds, but their personal political welfare was front and center. The prime mover of interests of any state (or cooperation for that matter) is the person at the top – the leader. So we started from this single point: the self-interested calculations and actions of rulers are the driving force of all politics. The calculations and actions that a leader makes and takes constitute how she governs. And what, for a leader, is the "best" way to govern? The answer to how best to govern: however is necessary first to come to power, then to stay in power, and to control as much national (or corporate) revenue as possible all along the way. […] Every

> type of politics could be addressed from the point of view of leaders trying to survive (de Mesquito & Smith, 2011, p. xxiii & xxiv).

De Mesquito and Randolph M. Siverson have stated that variations in the two institutions of state power, the *winning coalition* and *real selectorate*, can have repercussions in foreign policy. For example they state that "leaders in states with small winning coalitions should be able to take greater risks in their policies, because if these fail, they will be able to mobilize and distribute private goods to reinforce their position" (de Mesquito & Siverson, 2017). This research seeks to use variations in the two institutions to explain differing choices regarding militia sponsorship in the Syrian and Yemeni conflicts. Therefore it explores the ability of Selectorate theory to predict foreign policy.

Feuer's Ideas of Religious Regulation

Sarah Feuer also looks at political survival, stating that the "nature and degree of state regulation of religion (or 'religious regulation') in the Arab world has been a by-product of authoritarian regimes' strategies of political survival" (Feuer, 2014). She outlines how "State regulation of religion in these countries is also shaped by the form and tenor of the group(s) a regime perceives to be its most formidable political opponent(s). Specifically, the degree to which a regime's political opponents frame their demands and base their own legitimacy on religious grounds will colour the state's regulation of religion" (Feuer, 2014, p. 20). She outlines how the opponents are related to the regime's alliances and how regimes consolidate power. Feuer includes the hegemonic political party in her analysis, as part of what Selectorate Theory describes as the *winning coalition* (Feuer, 2017, pp. 10-27). She goes beyond the '*winning coalition*' of support that is essential for regime survival by also investigating the impact of political opponents on religious policy, as well as ideology and institutional strength. She states:

> State regulation of religion in these countries has resulted from the interaction of three factors: (1) the regime's ideology of legitimation, (2) *the nature of the regime's primary political opponents in society*[11], and (3) the robustness of the regime's institutional endowment, as reflected in the presence or absence of a hegemonic political party and the relative strength of the state's bureaucratic apparatus.[…] A regime's *ideology of legitimation* – i.e. the overarching set of justifications a regime offers for its right to rule – influences state regulation of religion" (Feuer, 2014).

[11] Italics added.

For the purposes of this research, Feuer's ideas on the impact of the regime's political opponents on religion and politics is relevant, and her work on religious regulations is related to Selectorate Theory. Given the need to appeal to the *real selectorate*, Middle Eastern regimes tend to reflect, to varying degrees, traditional stances on religion. This is all part of a "bid for political legitimacy" (Feuer, 2014). Feuer describes the religious identity framework within which a state must work as progressing from traditionalist to non-traditionalist (Feuer, 2014). The theoretical pillars used in this research instead employ a scale from secular to fundamentalist (outlined in the methodology section of this chapter).

Buzan's Idea of the State

There is a link between Feuer's stress on politicians using religious legitimacy and Buzan's 'idea of the state'. If the idea of the state contains a substantial religious component, the more likely it is that both the regime elites and their political opposition will use religion for legitimacy and to undermine each other[12]. By using Islam as the key idea of the state, for example in Iran and Saudi Arabia, states are able to gain religious legitimacy, and thus attempt to outflank both Islamist and secular opposition. Buzan describes how a "widespread and deeply rooted idea of the state" holds the "territorial-polity-society package" together. Without an idea of the state, it would have difficulty operating and ruling over its territory (Buzan, 2007, p. 70). Fundamentalists and other religious extremist groups also have a key idea that holds their group together, albeit without the territorial structure of a state.

Religion as a political idea has important implications. Buzan outlines how a state is bound together by more than its physical base and its institutions. States are bound by a sense of purpose around a unifying "idea of the state" (Buzan, 2007, p. 75). He continues: "A strong idea of some sort is a necessary component of a secure state, and the clear implication has been that the idea of the state must not only be coherent in its own rights, but also widely held" (Buzan, People, 2007). This could take the form of the expression of the dominant nation, and/or an organising ideology such as Islam, democracy or communism for example. The idea of the state can be deeply rooted: for instance, Zionism is linked to the very formation of the Israeli state, and democracy is strongly identified with Europe, to the point

[12] This is not to discount that there could be genuine religious sentiment amongst leaders. However, this research focuses on the use of religion as a political tool.

that in these instances, shifts towards new ideologies or ideas of the state would be transformational and probably highly destructive. The idea can be weakly held or strongly held, but contested within the state. In either case, the state "stands on fragile political foundations" (Buzan, 2007, p. 80). Given that a state's internal socio-political cohesion is a key indicator of its strength as an entity, the idea of the state is central to state security. Thus, the ideas/ideologies need to be defended and they are "vulnerable to [the] interplay of ideas" (Buzan, 2007, pp. 79-80) and "ideologies can be penetrated, distorted, corrupted and eventually undermined by contact with other ideas. They can be attacked through their supporting institutions and they can be suppressed by force" (Buzan, 2007, p. 80). In non-secular states, religion typically forms part or all of the idea of the state. The idea of the state always contains a stance on religion – including where the organising ideology sits on the scale between secularism and fundamentalism. For instance, in a discussion about the battle between Islamism[13] and Western secularism in the Middle East, Bassim Tibi explains this contest for power as follows, "Islamists attempt to topple secular regimes as a step in their quest for a new world order. Islamism as a variety of religious fundamentalism is not about terrorism, but rather the order of the state and the world. This process takes place as a *war of ideas*[14] (Tibi, 2010, p. 162). It could also be argued that the strength of non-state Islamism could also weaken the religious legitimacy an outwardly Islamist state such as the UAE for example.

Political rivals in religious states typically express the ongoing tension over the role of religion in politics: that is, where on the scale between secular and fundamentalist should governance sit. This ongoing conflict between the secular and religious is an ideal target for competitive shaping strategies with some Middle Eastern states using foreign policy to target this dynamic. Competitive shaping strategies typically aim at switching the elite in power, dividing the state's citizenry and/or challenging the idea or ideology of the state. Buzan describes this as state (A) seeking to manipulate the internal factions of state (B) for the purposes of backing

[13] Tibi describes Islamism as follows: "Islam is for Islamists a system of government based on a concept of a divine order to be established both in the Muslim world and worldwide. The utopian fantasy of Islamist fundamentalism is to replace the prevailing Westphalian secular order of sovereign states with an Islamic one. It is for this reason that political Islam is a concern for international security. Because Islamism is a variety of religious fundamentalism that claims universality for its political beliefs, Islamists place Islamic civilization in conflict with the rest of humanity and create divides within Islam" (Tibi, 2010, p. 163).

[14] Italics added.

the faction which pursues policies favourable to state (A) (Buzan, 2007, pp. 134-135). Leveraging internal divisions over religion, specifically how secular or religious the idea/ideology of the state should be, is a political strategy used by states within the Middle East.

Fox's Secular-Religious Competition Perspective

In line with this reasoning, Jonathan Fox's Secular-Religious Perspective extends the post-secular argument, embracing the consensus that religion's role in politics has not waned with secularization in much of the non-Western world, and proceeds to analyse instead how religion and politics coexist. Fox posits that religion in politics primarily manifests as an ongoing competition between religious and secular ideologies. This rests on the assumption that secular and religious elites contest to dominate "in social and political settings to fill the same social and political space" (Fox, 2015, p. 17). Political success between religious and secular actors is, therefore, about the success of a "worldview", with the prevailing worldview discourse becoming hegemonic; in the West, the secular discourse, and thus secular actors, have emerged triumphant.

Fox tested this in his research on secular-religious competition in Western democracies from 1990 to 2014 (Fox, 2016, p. 155). In support of his theory, he outlined shifts in thinking away from Secularization Theory. First, he advocated for a move towards seeing secularization not as inevitable progress but as an ideology (i.e. secularism). He describes secularism as "an ideology or set of beliefs that advocates the marginalization of religion from other spheres of life" (Fox, 2015, p. 27). Fox narrows this definition further, concentrating on political secularism which he defines as "an ideology or set of beliefs advocating that religion ought to be separate from all or some aspects of politics and/or public life" (Fox, 2016, p. 155).

Whereas in the past religion was the "primary form of social control and order"[15] (Fox, 2015, pp. 20), the growth of secularism presents an alternative ideology that was able to emerge because of the following factors:

[15] Michaela Neulinger describes this in Austria prior to World War 2, whereby the Catholic Church was so dominant that it represented a "morality of coercive power", ruling the ethical debate over societal rules with little resistance (Neulinger, 2018).

> Religion is no longer needed for legitimacy. Modern political ideologies now fulfil this function. Second, religion is no longer the primary source of knowledge. […] Third, religion is being replaced as the primary form of social control and order. In the past, people obeyed social rules and norms because they believed in an omniscient, omnipotent God who punishes transgressions. Today social control is enforced primarily through the fear of getting caught by humans". […] Religion is moving from the public sphere to the private sphere. […] Fifth, secular institutions are fulfilling functions formerly provided by religious ones […] including welfare, education, and medicine. […] Sixth, relative truth is replacing absolute truth. Religion holds to an absolute truth. Today, many consider truth relative (Fox, 2015, pp. 20-21).

This description aptly fits the West, although Hussein Agrama qualifies this position for the Middle East and North Africa, defining the relationship between the state and religion as being one of sovereignty; for example, the state exercises its sovereign power when it regulates religion. Religion continues to operate strongly as a competing force in religious states such as Saudi Arabia, contesting norms and rule setting. Therefore, the measure to which a state is free from religious limitations or considerations is a measure of how sovereign the state is in relation to religion within society (Agrama, 2010, p. 500), and this dynamic is measured within the secular-fundamentalist scale index shown later in the chapter.

Fox outlines how secularism has challenged religion's place as the dominant political ideology and, according to Agrama, wrestled with religion for greater sovereignty over state decisions. This dynamic has developed into a shifting scale of influence between the two in the modern era. The challenge from secularism has generated shifts within religion in response, the most notable of which is fundamentalism which has risen to challenge the legitimacy of secular political and social orders. Fundamentalism, however, has not managed to stop the shift away from the pre-modern era when religion and the state shared the task of maintaining order, to one in which state power is dominant over religious power (Fox, 2015, p. 34). Teije H. Donker tested Fox's Secular-Religious Competition Perspective in his research on post-revolutionary Tunisia. Donker critiques the theory as being too narrow in its analysis of the religious-secular dynamic. Both Donker and Agrama emphasise that secular-religious competition is a continual process of "drawing the boundary" between religious mores and secularity rather than just simply an ideological contest, and that actors have considerable agency over this process. Donker asserts that this dynamic is an ongoing feature of society. Whilst this research does not take Donker's view that Fox excluded this position, Donker does

raise a point that requires emphasis; that the conflict regarding state-religion relations not only reflects the difference in the extent that religion and state should be integral or separate, but also how actors relate the two (Donker, 2013, pp. 2-6). As such, this research focuses on how political actors relate to the secular-religious dynamic; i.e. specifically how they strategize this dynamic for political survival. Additionally, applying the secular-religious competitive perspective to the Middle East helps to separate the elite's sectarian strategies that involve divisive political tactics based on religious affiliation, from the "ideational confrontation over the norms of political Islam" (Santini, 2017, p. 104) and secularism that is particularly evident in the Saudi-led Sunni regional bloc consisting of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and to a lesser extent Kuwait and Egypt, following the 'Arab Spring'.

Buzan's Regional Security Complex Framework

The use of sectarian tactics by political elites is not just a domestic phenomenon; sectarianism is strategized in the Middle Eastern regional order as well. To analyse the impact of competing religious identities on regional politics, this research uses Buzan's Regional Security Complex Theory. Buzan's describes regional security complexes as a subset of states within which the security of each state cannot be understood within analysing the "pattern of security interdependence in which it is embedded" (Buzan, 2007, pp. 157-159). Patterns of amity and enmity develop between the states within security complexes, and in some cases become so involved that they constitute sub complexes within the greater security complex (Buzan, People, 2007, p. 166). Within this system, there exists a hierarchy of power among the states with the larger and more powerful states often competing for the role of regional hegemon. Regional powers are able to set the rules and norms of the region to their own advantage, and have the "material, organisational and ideological resources for regional and international power projection" (Schrim, 2005, pp. 110-111).

Given the instability of the Middle East, security issues occupy a very prominent place in states' foreign policies; in line with Realist thinking, the Middle Eastern states operate under the assumption that the more powerful they are, the more secure they should be. Therefore, among the more powerful Middle Eastern states the contest for security – both regime security and state security – is centred on battles for regional hegemony. Efforts to alter the regional balance of power are reflected strongly in the patterns of enmity and amity between

states (Buzan, 2007, pp. 158-160). States adopt different approaches to their regional security complexes. Status quo states wish the dynamics of the regional security complex to remain broadly the same and work towards this end. Revisionist states push against the dominance of the status quo, thus competing with status quo states. Buzan describes revisionist states as being either orthodox, radical or revolutionary. Orthodox revisionism focuses on power and status. These states are not working to change the existing rules and norms of the system, but seek to rise up the hierarchy in the system. Revolutionary revisionism involves a struggle for power and a challenge to the existing rules and norms. Radical revisionist states take the middle ground; there is no central attempt to completely restructure the system, but an attempt to reform aspects of it and increase the power of the radical revisionist state (Buzan, 2007, pp. 241-244).

The Middle Eastern security complex features three sub-complexes, North Africa, the Levant and the Gulf. Previously, the Levant sub-complex, which centres on the Arab-Israeli conflict, had dominated the region's narratives, however the Gulf sub-complex (including Iraq and Iran) has become increasingly prominent in the region's security dynamics. The Gulf sub-complex drives the two dominant geopolitical rifts that shape the region: the Middle Eastern regional security complex is characterised by an "increased salience of the regional geopolitical rivalry between a Saudi-dominated Sunni camp and an opposing Iran-led one" and an intra-Sunni split over degrees of secularism and Islamism. Ruth Hanau Santini outlines how the Saudi-Iranian competition "should have led to the strengthening of intra-camp cohesion and solidarity" (Santini, 2017, pp. 93-94). However, the Sunni camp has been marked with significant disagreements over Qatar's position on Islamism, secularism and the emergence of Islamist democracies. This division is driven by the Saudi and UAE-led anti-Islamist counter revolutionary efforts in reaction to the 'Arab Spring', which was capitalised on by Muslim Brotherhood linked Islamist political actors in Egypt and Tunisia. The election of Islamist parties is not seen as being in line with Saudi and Emirati interests and therefore Qatar's close relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood caused a dilemma for the Saudi-Emirati anti-Brotherhood axis (Koca, 2017, p. 45).

Adding to the complexity following the 'Arab Spring', Egypt and Tunisia experienced "deep contestations over the institutionalization of democracy" (Koca, 2017, p. 45). Given both of the elected ruling parties at the time were Muslim Brotherhood linked, this contestation was

overlaid with disagreements over the norms of political Islam and secularism. Furthermore, Egypt's short lived Muslim Brotherhood government and Tunisia's Ennahda looked to another aspirational regional hegemon as a guide for creating Islamist focused democracies: Turkey under the Justice and Development (AKP) party. Turkey's former Prime Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, referred several times to Turkey's close relationship with the first democratically elected governments in Tunisia and Egypt stating that in his opinion the three governments operated as if they were the cabinet of one country (Koca, 2017, p. 51). In contrast, Saudi Arabia and the UAE supported the military coup that subsequently toppled the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood government. The anti-Muslim Brotherhood axis's blockade of Qatar in 2017 intensified its counter revolution efforts. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt imposed the blockade in 2017, accusing the regime of supporting terrorism whilst laying down a set of demands, including that Qatar shut down Al Jazeera. In response, Turkey sent troops to protect Qatar's sovereignty. The post-'Arab Spring' environment in the Middle East is essentially one in which regimes are attempting to insulate themselves against further uprisings and it has been marked by division about how to do this amongst the Sunni states.

The more prominent split in the Middle East is between the two alliances respectively led by Iran and Saudi Arabia. This new regional cold war between Iran and Saudi Arabia is centred on "securitized rivalry" whereby the securitization of religious identity groups has driven sectarianism into a defining "regional cleavage" (Santini, 2017, p. 103). This politicization of the sectarian divide serves two purposes - it distracts from the domestic vulnerability of the regimes following the 'Arab Spring' and potentially serves to unify intra-bloc cohesion. However, the aforementioned rift in the Sunni bloc centred on disagreements regarding the norms of religion and politics, and electoral Islam - and the impact different secular-religious balances will have on quietening civilian unrest following the instability of the uprisings. These defining regional confrontations involve religion and the divide between the Iranian led Shia bloc and the Saudi Arabian led Sunni bloc, and the second rift between the Saudi Arabian led anti-Islamist bloc and the pro-Islamist bloc, form the basis of this research into the use of religion in regional politics.

Table 2.2. Key Actors in the Gulf Subsystem of the Middle Eastern Regional Security Complex: Sectarian and Secular-Islamist Positions.

State/Regional Position	Revisionist or Status Quo	System: Position on Secular/Religious Norms	Preferred Leadership of Regional System
Qatar	Radical Revisionist, increased Islamism	Moderate Islamist, not resistant to democratic Islamism in the region, but opposes democratic Islamism domestically	Diffuse or balanced, not Saudi Arabia-led, Sunni bloc
United Arab Emirates	Status Quo, some mild revisionism towards religious secularism[16]	Seeks movement towards religious secularity and moderate Islam	Saudi Arabia/UAE-led, Sunni bloc
Saudi Arabia	Status Quo, faint revisionism towards religious secularism	Some movement towards religious secularity, Salafi Islam	Potential Hegemon, Sunni bloc
Iran	Revolutionary Revisionist	Potentially seeks more States led by Shia Islamists	Potential Hegemon, Shia bloc

(Table created by author from assessments based on the research).

Hintz's Theory of Identity Hegemony

In the Middle East, although the states rule through autocratic power, religion still shares with the state the role of maintaining social order. This gives greater scope for the political instrumentalisation of religion. Hintz relates this to political struggles that contain clear evidence of identity contestation, such as between conservatives and moderates in Iran for example. She proposes that religious identities can be instrumentalised in the regional sphere

[16] Religious secularity is a term taken from Naser Ghobadzadeh's research on secularism in Iran where religious secularist discourse is calculated to discredit the Iranian regime's claim to religious legitimacy. This research uses the term religious secularism and/or religious secularity to describe this secular-religious position and applies it outside of the Iranian context. Religious secularism is described here as advocating for the secular elite control over politics, religion and society, whilst emphasising moderate Islamic laws (moderate Islamism), a Muslim identity for the state and a strong presence of Islam within society.

for domestic political purposes, with foreign policy serving as an "alternative arena in which elites can politicize identity debates" (Hintz, 2016). She "argues that elites choose to take their identity contests to the foreign policy arena when identity gambits at the domestic level are blocked" (Hintz, 2016, p. 335). The foreign policy arena can be useful for advancing identity moves as "the contenders and rules in the foreign policy contest differ" to the domestic setting (Hintz, 2018, p. 9 of Chapter 21). Specifically, domestic opponents lack resources in the regional setting in comparison to the state's elite so by moving the identity proposal contest into the regional arena the state typically gains an advantage. Additionally, domestic opposition movements with regional political links are affected by moves to thwart their transnational networks. This helps explain the reasoning behind UAE attempts to weaken the Muslim Brotherhood regionally in order to decrease its ability to appeal to citizens at home.

Hintz's ideas conceptualise political form and identity as dependent on the "political inclusion and exclusion" of societal blocs; in this analysis, identity is not primordial but constructed to further the interests of social and political groups (Howarth, 2010, pp. 313-314). As Hintz describes, contests over the identity of a particular social group carry "immense ontological significance, as groups compete against each other to delineate, among other standards, the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, desired goals of the group, and friends and enemies – essentially who 'we' are and how we should behave" (Hintz , 2018, pp. 19). The stronger the domination of an identity group over the others, or an identity proposal for an identity group, the less able the alternative national identity proposals are able to influence policy and the more the elite of the dominant identity group are able to secure support by distributing dividends. Identity in this instance does not solely refer to permanent identity structures such as sectarian group, but the different identity proposals that a sectarian group, for instance, can adopt. Competing elites need an ideology and an identity from which to generate support.

The next section establishes the theoretical pillars for analysing religion and foreign policy. It does this by synthesising and extending the above theories further and relating them to the international realm.

Religion, Power and Political Survival: Theory Adaptions to Fit International Relations

The theoretical framework adopted and utilised by this thesis seeks to establish an analytical toolbox for researching the religiously based strategies prominent states use in the Middle East in their pursuit of security, power and survival. The framework considers multiple factors where they intersect with religion. These include:

1. The need of ruling elites to maintain the support of the *winning coalition* for regime survival (de Mesquito & Smith, 2011);
2. The strategic use of religious regulation and religion to weaken domestic opponents (Feuer, 2014);
3. The ongoing societal contest between religious and secular ideologies (Fox, 2015);
4. The idea of the state (Buzan, 2007) and hegemonic battles that feature identity (Hintz, 2016).

These features sit in this framework as contributing factors for the choice of religious strategies that states employ in their quest for regime security and power. The aforementioned theories are adapted here to fit the regional context. Although these theories are extended and synthesized to fit the regional sphere, their focus on regime political survival and power is kept so as to not extend these theories so far that their explanations are no longer valid.

Fox's theory outlines how competition between the religious actors and secular actors in the political arena has been, and still is, an ongoing feature of domestic politics. (Fox, 2015). This research extends this to look at the political use of the societal contest between religious and secular ideologies, specifically looking at how regimes use the competition between secularism and religion for regime survival and to obtain political power. Feuer's focus on how moves to counter domestic political opponents affect the religious strategies of the ruling elite is also adapted in this framework to focus on how that ruling elite moves the contest between secularism and religion into foreign policy in order to thwart domestic opponents. This strategy has the potential to be effective because many religious political opposition groups in the Middle East have links to transnational networks. If we take the Muslim

Brotherhood, for example, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, fearful of the Brotherhood's support of the 'Arab Spring', have sought to weaken the network so as to weaken the influence of their Brotherhood-linked domestic opponents (Lacroix, 2014). Additionally, in religious societies, politicians find it very hard to avoid taking a stance on the role of religion in politics[17] – as such, this stance can be used against a political opponent. This research tests whether or not the domestic contest between religious and secular ideologies, as outlined by Fox, is moved into the foreign policy arena when the opportunity arises. However, whereas Fox stresses ideological competition, this research will additionally focus on competition between secular and religious actors. This dynamic can relate to domestic opponents, and also to regional opponents in the battle for hegemony, and the contest for/against the status quo[18] within a regional security complex.

The framework also draws upon de Mesquito and Smith's Realist analysis which finds that ruling elites need to maintain the support of their *winning coalition* - who are drawn from the *real* or *potential selectorate* for regime survival. The theory states that support is gained through the provision of private and public goods. In his recent research, Peter S. Henne also drew on de Mesquito et al's work, alongside other theories that focus on political institutions and political survival.[19] Henne states that his theory of political survival stems from the "dual nature of political behaviour – survival seeking leaders and principled ideological religious groups – and the tension between religious groups' beliefs and leaders' self-interest" motivates his theory of religious political relationships (Henne, 2016, p. 28).

In his research on domestic politics and counterterrorism policies, he concluded that a "regime's primary motivation is to survive" and that as a result "religion will only influence a regime's behaviour if it affects regime elites' survival calculations". He goes on to state that this is most likely to happen when religion and the state are closely linked (Henne, 2016, pp. 13-14). This research takes the position that closely linked means that religious citizens and groups are the key members of a state's *real selectorate* and, ultimately, their *winning*

[17] I.e. particularly in relation to where the state fits on the scale between secular and fundamentalist.
[18] You could argue quite convincingly that the status quo in the Middle East is intimately connected with identity and religion.
[19] Henne's theoretical platform draws from such works as Smith and de Mesquito's "The Logic of Political Survival", Acemoglu and Robinson's, "Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity and Poverty", Smith's " Political Groups, Leader Change and the Pattern of International Cooperation" and Smith and de Mesquito's "Contingent Prize Allocation and Pivotal Voting".

coalition; therefore, retaining the support of religious actors is of primary importance. Illustrating this, Henne claims that close relationships between religion and the state is an indicator of how cooperative or not a regime will be regarding US counterterrorism strategies. The closer the tie to religion and religious support for survival, the more reluctant the state will be to carry out counterterrorism measures (Henne, 2016, p. 14). Although this research makes the exception that this is unless these measures are used to frame opponents as terrorists as is the case in Syria and Egypt following the 'Arab Spring' for example. Henne further asserts that reluctance to pursue aggressive counterterrorism measures is more of an indicator of the impact this will have on their religious domestic audience than evidence of support of Islamist or extremist groups (Henne, 2016, p. 14). This calculation is not static and is likely to change over time and in response to specific events. Henne's adjustment to Selectorate Theory will be put to use when analysing amity and enmity patterns relating to the Muslim Brotherhood in the case study states.

Amir Bagherpour's research on Selectorate Theory in the Middle East and North Africa reached the conclusion that the theory's emphasis on public/private rewards at the exclusion of non-material benefits, such as religion, ignored the fact that in the Middle East and North Africa region religious dividends, as separate from material dividends, have a significant impact on political support. Bagherpour argued that "the public private goods argument does not hold because the leadership is driven by ideological preferences that have less to do with financial gain and more to do with the acquiescence of Islamic principles" (Bagherpour, 2012, p. 77). He discovered that "political survival (i.e. stability) is best achieved in Middle East and North Africa through the right proportion of private-public goods and an element of religiosity that is expressed either by religious parties or official partnership with the government at large" (Bagherpour, 2012, p. 79). This research accepts Bagherpour's positon that de Mesquito and Smith's Selectorate Theory needs to include religion to be relevant to the Middle East North Africa region, and thus extends the Selectorate Theory to include the provision of both material and non-material dividends to supporters. Furthermore, this research's framework asserts that *real selectorates* in domestic politics have an identity component; regime supporters are more likely to be from the same identity group as the political elites and that religious legitimacy is a key factor in the survival of the case study regimes in the face of the 'Arab Spring'. In the Middle East, the *real selectorate's* identity

group is decided on religious grounds and therefore, the elite is likely to belong to the same sectarian group as the dominant identity group, i.e. both the elite and the *real selectorate* are Sunni in Saudi Arabia. Identity is a useful base for a political *selectorate* due to in-group favouritism and out-group hostility that is to varying degrees prevalent in identity groups. Within each religious identity group there are often other identities which can also be politically very important, for instance tribal affiliations in the UAE and Qatar. However, this research's key focus is on religious identity in terms of sectarianism and the contest between secularism and religion as features of the support base of the regimes, and of their authoritarian survival strategies.

This framework also extends Selectorate Theory, using a stacked Venn diagram to illustrate the support base of the regimes, but also applying the theory in order to show where potential sites of political opposition in terms of religiosity and sectarian exclusion sit relative to the regime. For instance, Qatar's regional connections with Islamists help to bolster its religious credentials at home, and this is evident in the regime's tactics in both the domestic and regional arenas. In contrast, the UAE excludes Islamists from its support base and instead of attempting to encourage their cooperation, it works to repress domestic Islamist forces. This is also evident in its domestic and regional tactics and is outlined in later chapters.

The framework's recognition that identity groups feature within the dynamics of Selectorate Theory gives us a greater ability to establish which religious identities a state is likely to feature within its international or regional strategies. This is particularly applicable to the Middle East where religious identities represent the competing factions within political contests for power. As such, given social identity relates to a regime's *selectorate* of potential support, and religious identity groups in the Middle East exist across borders, religious identity based factions can be engineered by using religious strategies in foreign policy[20]. For instance, this might include moves to bolster a particular religious identity as the natural leader of the Muslim Umma where this identity reinforces the strength of the *winning coalition's* identity at home. This particularly applies to the Turkish and Saudi Arabian foreign policies which seek identity hegemony.

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[20] Such a strategy might include supporting a like-minded religious militia in a neighbouring state's civil war for example.

Regional and domestic contests for hegemony included in this framework are strengthened by the incorporation of Hinz's Theory of Identity Hegemony, whereby contests over identity that are blocked domestically are moved into the foreign policy arena to attempt to secure a breakthrough. In deciding which religious identity is being contested in foreign policy, a state's grand narrative or idea of the state needs to be examined. These grand narratives "Constitute a range of broad guidelines for legitimate political action but also to function as a sort of navigation compass for the state. As legitimacy is an important precondition for regime stability in most states, overall policies tend to be identity-guided in this broad sense" (Danish Political Science Association, 2012, p. 8). Therefore, where the idea of the state is strongly religious, and where the *real selectorate* is predominantly made up of the dominant sectarian identity group, religion by necessity becomes one of the key considerations regarding an elite's political survival and this is reflected in both domestic and foreign policy.

The theoretical pillars for this research are demonstrated by the diagram below.

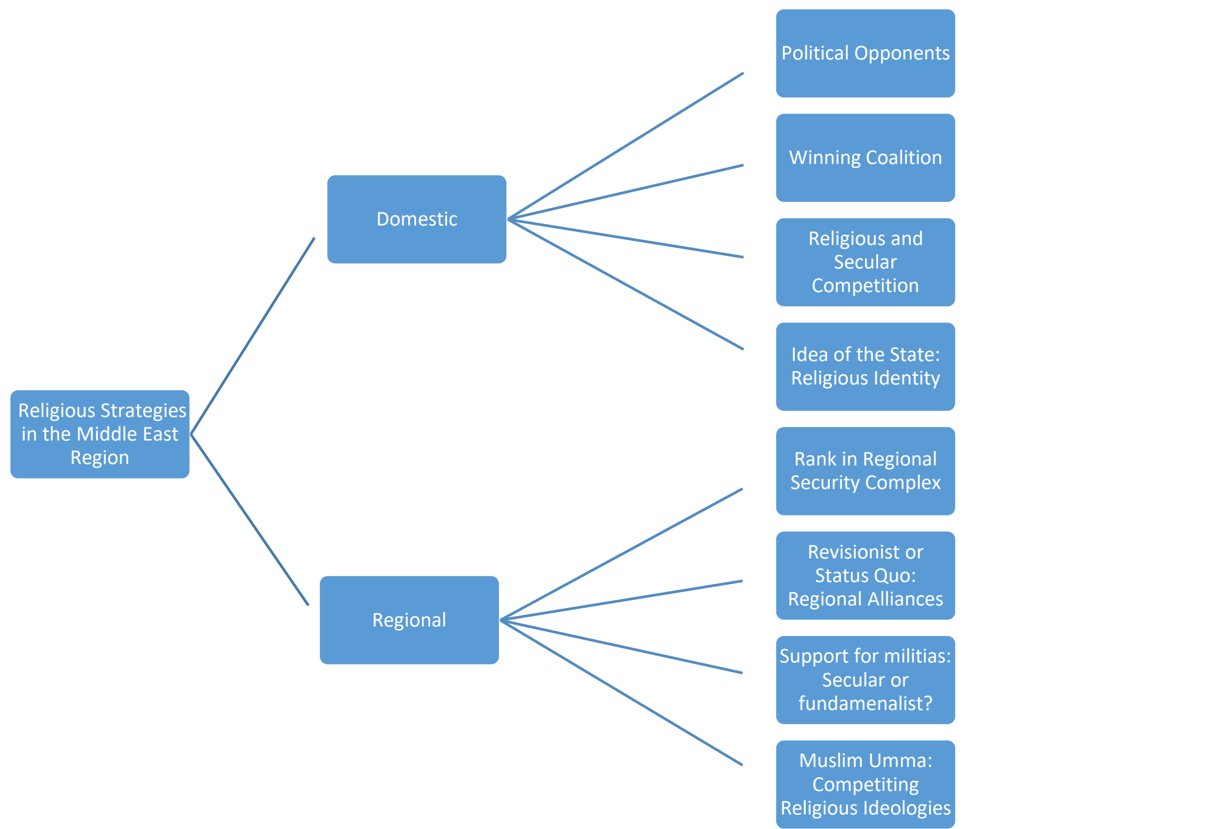

Figure 2.3. Map of Theoretical Pillars. Source: Author

Authoritarian Survival Strategies in the Regional Sphere

Along with increased attention on the role of religion in politics, the use of foreign policy to strengthen autocracy at home has also been the subject of a growing number of research projects. Work by Adele Del Sordi, Emanuela Dalmasso, Johannes Gerschewski, Karen Young and Marlies Glasuis focuses on the international mechanisms with which autocratic regimes seek to legitimise and sustain their rule (Sordi & Dalmasso, 2018); (Gerschewski, 2013); (Young, 2015); (Glasius, 2018). Much of this research follows from Gerschewski's identification of legitimation, repression and co-optation as the key pillars of stability for authoritarian regimes. Shkel and Gareev apply Gershewski's conceptual framework to Selectorate Theory investigating how the "sustainability of a non-democratic regime depends on the autocrat's ability to form a loyal empowered coalition that includes the principal segments of influential elites" (Shkel & Gareev, 2015, p. 206). Sebastian Hellmeier and Nils B. Weidmann also draw on Selectorate Theory arguing that when mobilising rallies in support of their authoritarian regimes, "autocrats mobilize their supporters selectively as a strategic response to political threats" (Hellmeier & Weidmann, 2019, p. 1). Looking beyond the organisation of rallies, this research looks into the selective mobilization and co-optation of supporters through a sectarian and religiosity framework. Maria Josua analyses the success of different types of co-optation patterns in Jordan, ranging from structural, traditional, identity related, material and personal co-optation patterns. She explains that authoritarian legitimation and support patterns do not work through democratic institutions and procedures but alternatively use co-optation to secure the support of strategically important segments of society (Josua, 2011, p. 2). These authors' findings help to support this research which focuses on identity related co-optation, and specific inclusion/exclusion patterns which have featured significantly as authoritarian survival strategies in the post- 'Arab Spring' context. Patterns of inclusion and exclusion in the Middle East are frequently based around religious societal structures. However the dividing line is not just inter-sect through sectarian identities, but also intra-sect, with a focus on levels of religiosity and/or secularism. These two patterns of inclusion/exclusion form the key frame in this research.

In exploring authoritarian strategies of domestic political survival, research has moved towards looking at the operation of these strategies internationally, with researchers such as Adele Del Sordi and Emanuela Dalmasso investigating how regimes "use their international

activities to boost legitimacy at home" (Del Sordi & Dalmasso, 2018, p. 95). Del Sordi and Dalmasso created a dynamic legitimation model to explain how authoritarian elites seek to create a positive international brand that reinforces their domestic strength (Del Sordi & Dalmasso, 2018, p. 95). This ties into Lisel Hintz's research into the movement of identity contests into the regional or international sphere when they are blocked at home (Hintz, 2016, Vol. 22(2)). Lisel Hinz's research, alongside work by Jonathan Fox, Bruce Bueno de Mesquito and Alastair Smith, Sarah Feuer and Barry Buzan, provides the grounding of this research.

Knitting it Together: Realist Constructivism

Realist Constructivism: Power and Identity

There are implicit tensions between the theories in the framework. Selectorate Theory's position which holds that states do not have interests - political elites do -, sits alongside Buzan's 'idea of the state' whereby each state has a unifying idea, whilst accepting that the structure of the international system impacts on geopolitical decision making. All these elements impact elite's decisions regarding the authoritarian survival strategies which are studied in this research. These seemingly contradictory approaches reflect the complexity of the Middle East; it is a region where realpolitik plays a prominent role, but where religion also plays an important role in politics and society. Realist Constructivism is used to knit the theoretical frame together and to bridge religion to IR theory by incorporating it into a Realist Constructivist theoretical framework. The 'grand theories' have not dealt with religion in much depth. This includes Constructivism, although it's focus on narratives, identity and norms make it the most obvious choice to tackle the objective of bringing religion into the sphere of IR theory. This research positions religion within Realist Constructivism, welding together realism's competitive hierarchical world, with the socially constructed politics of Constructivism.

Alexander Wendt asserts that the makeup of a state's material interests is decided by the state's *ideas* around which interests they should or should not pursue, and how they define those interests (Wendt, 1999, pp. 92-96). Therefore, within each state there will be specific ideas that contribute to decision making regarding interests – and to some degree this will be constituted from a state's position on religion and secularism. As such religion is an idea that

goes, as Wendt would say, “all the way down” (Wendt, 1999, p. 92). Traditional IR treats religion as simply an instrument to pursue national interests. This research takes the position that religion can also be a state interest. Murray, Knox and Bernstein describe this further,

> Realpolitik suggests that decision-makers can strip strategic calculations of all considerations save those of pragmatism and power. The term exudes a sense of hard-headed sagacity. In fact, however, it is profoundly misleading – and even ideological – for the naked exercise of power for its own sake is seldom the ultimate goal. Power is a means, not an end. It exists to advance or defend the interests of the groups who control it. The fundamental assumptions about the nature of society and even the purpose of human life of those groups in turn shape their perceptions of interest. From a historical perspective many, if not most, case studies of the making of strategy would make no sense without consideration of the role of belief systems (Murray, Knox, & Bernstein, 1994, p. 13).

Wendt asserts that power and interests have the impact they do because of the ideas that constitute them (Wendt, 1999, p. 35)[21]. The degree of socialisation of an idea speaks to its strength and impact on the political system. Wendt outlines that socialisation can change the state’s properties, thereby refuting the neorealist emphasis on material based explanations for systemic structure (Wendt, 1999, p. 102). Furthermore ideas make up culture. Wendt believed that ‘“culture” lurks just behind “interest”’ (Wendt, 1999, p. 104).

Regime’s religious authoritarian strategies are constructed out of cultural ideas regarding sect and religiosity. Regime survival is focused on the accumulation and exercise of political power. Hence, in order to account for the instrumentalisation of religion in politics, the framework needs to move beyond Neorealism or Structural Realism’s treatment of states as “black boxes” wherein a state’s place in the system’s hierarchical structure rather than their internal dynamics or governance regime is prioritised in analysis (Mearsheimer, 2010, pp. 78-79). Therefore, although realist ideas and assumptions about hierarchy and competition are within this framework, given religion is a socially and culturally constructed phenomenon,

[21] This relates to Gramsci’s thoughts, which Kendie describes as follows: “Ideas build societies. Ideas move nations from one stage of development into another. When people are exposed to ideas, they become conscious. In effect, the battle field for Gramsci is the struggle of ideas. He maintains that revolution is about people. Its primary objective is to challenge society for the better. But change is the result of the stimulus evoked by the friction of one group of ideas upon another. Thus, when members of the same group maintain different ideas with regard to the same subject in opposition, they necessarily evoke comparison, debate and discussion, thus enhancing consciousness. It is in this light that one should study Gramsci's theory of domination, hegemony, consciousness and revolution” (Kendie, 2006).

constructivism is clearly a highly relevant theoretical tool through which to analyse religion in the international system (Barkin, 2010, pp. 156-157).

The Realist explanation regarding regional policies focuses on national interests and structural considerations. Wendt states that the two defining features of Realism; power and egotistic national interests, are accepted features across IR, and indeed within Constructivism. He qualifies this by stating that the purpose for which material forces are employed is what drives social and political function, not the material forces themselves (Wendt, 1999, p. 113). Authoritarian survival strategies are constructed from the regimes understandings of how to instrumentalise the power of religion and sect to ensure their political survival.

Wendt goes on to state that he is not positioning "interest as a rival explanation to power, nor claiming that interests cause power to have certain effects". Instead he asserts "that power only explains what it explains insofar as it is given meaning by interest. The argument is constitutive, not causal" (Wendt, 1999, p. 109). This is not an either/or argument, "material forces are not solely constituted by their social meaning, and social meanings are not immune to material effects" (Wendt, 1999, pp. 109-110). The interest in question in this research is not religion for its own sake, but for the political survival of elites. Given the combination of realpolitik and the political mechanisation of religious ideas and social constructs, Realist Constructivism is used to knit this eclectic selection of theories together into this research's conceptual framework.

Methodology

The explanatory variable in this research is the relationship between religion and the state. The outcome studied is the differing patterns of militia support based on the secular-fundamentalist Index and sectarian considerations. This research adapts the pluralist methodological approach to International Relations research by using both quantitative methods and interpretive qualitative methods in the research process. This is important given that political science involves both measurable and observable factors as well as unobservable entities and processes. Wedeen outlines some key concerns related to researching aspects of culture such as religion and ethnicity. "Constructions" of ethnicity are hard to measure for instance, putting it at odds with the quantitative direction IR research has taken. However, anthropologists assert that intensity of identity matters when it comes

to ethnic violence (Wedeen, 2002, p. 724). Furthermore governments work on assessing which terrorists groups are the most severe security threats (these assessments often need more accuracy). Therefore assessments relating to extremism and the political construction of religion and identity are clearly important. Although as Wedeen states “coding ethnic groups is an inherently perilous enterprise” (Wedeen, 2002, p. 724), the fact that governments and analysts do assess terrorists groups across a range of metrics points to the fact that such assessments, while difficult, can inform policy and practical recommendations for reducing risk and combatting threats. As Lisa Wedeen relates: “Mathew Kocher has pointed out to me that the *locus classicus* for factors analysis is IQ. Like intensity of identity, we cannot measure intelligence directly, so scientists have devised a number of tests that operate as ‘functions of intelligence’” (Wedeen, 2002, p. 725). Although the direct impact of religion on regime survival and hegemonic contests is difficult to measure, support for militias in conflicts, actions against religious activists, and the intensity of violent fundamentalism within religious narratives, for instance, help to test for patterns of violent or aggressive political behaviour. By analysing the political choices of the case study states where religion plays a large role in political life and society through the theoretical framework’s extension of the aforementioned theories on, this thesis hopes to discover these patterns of behaviour. These patterns typically reflect strategies in response to shifts in support and opposition for a regime and as such are purely pragmatic. The analysis consists of four case studies, which allows for cross-case analysis to account for variation between cases, and within case analysis, which focuses on the causal mechanisms connecting religion-state links to the sponsorship of foreign militia groups.

The Secular-Fundamentalist Scale

In this effort, additional tools are used to advance the analysis and address, at least in part, the following questions: how do you quantify a religious group or political actor? How do you measure the use of religion as an instrument? Establishing a criteria to test for and measure the strength of religion’s involvement in politics would enhance research into the instrumentalisation of religion, religious motivations, and identity’s role in both domestic and regional hegemonic contests. The *secular-fundamentalist scale,* created by the author of this thesis by synthesising various definitions of fundamentalism and secularism as articulated by Bob Altemayer, Bruce E Hunsberger, Alfred Stepan, Lina Khatib, Harold G. Koenig et al., Hasan

Mustafa, Jonathan Fox and the Pew Research Center is an attempt to help bridge this gap (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2004, 14(1)); (Stepan, 2011) (Khatib, 2016); (Koenig, Wang, Al Zaben, & Adi, 2015, 6(3)); (Mustafa, 2015); (Fox, 2018); (Pew Research Center, 2017). Feuer describes how a regime's ideology of legitimation influences its politics. She gleans that from the "speeches and writing of ruling elites, foundational documents such as constitutions, and rituals performed by the state, we can imagine regimes falling somewhere along a spectrum of ideological legitimation" (Feuer, 2014, p. 20). While Feuer describes regimes sitting on a spectrum of ideological legitimation that moves from traditionalist to non-traditionalist, this research's framework considers the ideological position on a scale from secular to fundamentalist.

While the secular-fundamentalist scale operates as a fairly rudimentary test or measure when applied to research from primary and secondary sources it allows us to test certain criteria. For example, when considering the question 'does Qatar support extremist Salafi groups in Syria?' This research tests this by comparing the secular–fundamentalist rating of militias supported by the case study states with the regimes' *winning coalitions*. The secular-fundamentalist scale aids with further discovery. Amir Bagherpour claimed that acquiescence to religious norms by leaders led to greater stability in face of the 'Arab Spring' (Bagherpour, 2012, pp. 78-79). Therefore, where a regime sits on the secular-fundamentalist scale potentially has implications for regime stability and survival. During the region-wide discontent of 2011, Bagherpour argued that citizens showed greater support for the regimes in the Middle East that were less secular and had greater religious legitimacy. This is particularly evident when we consider that both Syria and Saudi Arabia are identified by Bagherpour's model to be equally autocratic and maximalist in their approach to internal security; however, Islamist Saudi Arabia survived the 'Arab Spring' whereas the comparatively more secular Assad regime has been fighting to survive. Bagherpour, however, neglects to assess whether the regime elites belong to the majority or minority religious sect[22] or alternative explanations regarding regime survival of the 'Arab Spring' unrest, such as co-optation and resource mobilisation; whilst this research focuses on the contest between

[22] One of the risks of strict hypothesis testing in International Relations is that the limits of the hypothesis can neglect to account for other potential variables. For instance, Bagherpour does not take into account whether or not the sectarian group of the regime elite in question is a minority or majority, and what impact this has on his assessment.

secularism and religion as an authoritarian survival strategy, these alternative explanations are acknowledged in this research. Bagherpour asserts that when looking at regime security and stability you need to address how well “the ideological preference of the society is being addressed by the extent of religiosity” (Bagherpour, 2012, p. 80). As such, Bagherpour makes clear that “religious preferences must take into account the calculus for political survival in MENA” (Bagherpour, 2012, p. 76); thus it is likely that regime stability in the Middle East since 2011 is to an extent related to how well regimes balance between religion and secularism. Given this research looks extensively at domestic stability as a motivation for regional religious strategies, this finding is significant and thus the secular-fundamentalist scale below was developed for this research through synthesizing a variety of literature on religiosity and types of secularism.

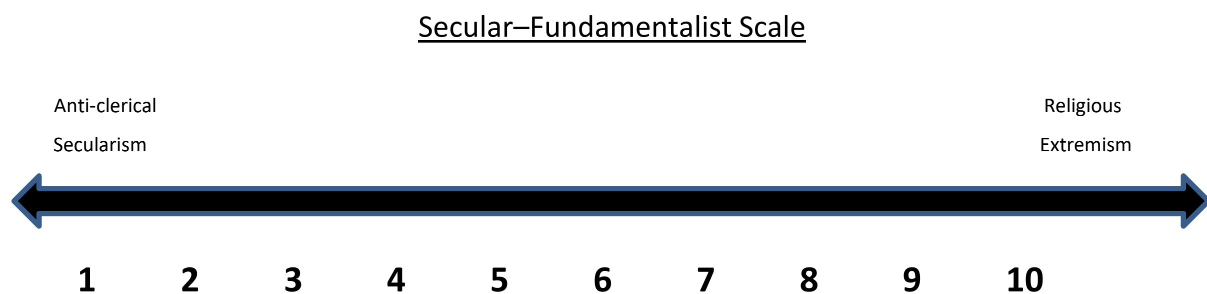

Table 2.4. Secular-Fundamentalist Scale

1	**Anti-clerical Secularism**: hostile to religion, high level of control over religion, predominantly autocratic, varied levels of religious intensity across society but suppressed by government, a higher ideology that is placed as a ruling value system for society i.e. communism, state system.
2	**French Laicite:** one weakly preferred religion, emphasis on rational thought and science, progressive, modern, egalitarian, multi-cultural in theory, religion limited to the private sphere, varied levels of religious intensity across society/very high levels of non-religious, there is no ‘correct’ religion, state system.
3	**Anglo-Saxon Secularism**: preferred religion but respect for all, principled distance from religion, religious neutrality by state, accommodates established religions, varied levels

	of religious intensity across society/high levels of non-religious, no 'correct' religion, religion limited to private sphere, state system.
4	**Secular Model of Religious Accommodation:** preferred and established religion, modern, does not deny religion a place in public sphere but religion generally considered a private affair, varied levels of religious intensity across society tending towards publically visible preferred religion, state system.
5	**Politically Secular/Religious:** Established preferred official religion, political elites more powerful than often co-opted religious elites, separation of church/mosque and state, secular governing ideology with accommodation of highly religious populace, religiously diverse, moderately high levels of religious intensity, some groups highly religious, some hostility to outgroups, state system.
6	**Religious Secularism:** political elites more powerful than religious elites, considerable separation of church/mosque and state, official religion constitutionally privileged, highly religious with religious state identity, some weak religious pluralism but dominance of the official religion strictly maintained, high levels of socially embedded religion, one true religion, some hostility to outgroups, state system.
7	**Politically Theocratic/Highly Religious:** religious elites influence political elites, supports scriptural based law, comparatively non-sectarian, state identity strongly religious, nationalist, promotes sectarian unity, anti-Western, high levels of religious intensity in society, religion socially embedded, one true religion, hostility to religious outgroups, state system.
8	**Highly Theocratic**: religious leaders subordinate to, but highly influential with, political leaders and over society, religious police, official religion, authoritarian, very high levels of religious intensity in society, religion socially embedded and forced, Sharia/Biblical source of law, religious ethnocentrism, state identity religiously linked, one correct religion, hostility to outgroups, highly extrinsic religion orientation[23], state system.

[23] Extrinsic religion is defined as a means of achieving some self-serving end that promotes social support, comfort and self-esteem, whereas intrinsic religion is defined as being an ultimate end in itself, for those involved in this type of religion. People with an intrinsic religious focus are mainly encouraged by a promise for personal spiritual development and for a deeper, more meaningful relationship with God. In contrast, extrinsic religion is typically co-related with higher levels of out-group prejudice and intrinsic towards more favourable out-group attitudes and a tendency to view religion as a quest or journey.

9	**Religious Fundamentalism/Theocratic:** religious leaders are the political leaders, official religion, nationalist religious ideology, religious police, very high religious intensity, socially embedded and forced religion, authoritarian, religious ethnocentrism, some features of religious imperialism, one correct religion, high level of hostility/violence towards outgroups, conversion away from official religion dangerous, Sharia/Biblical source of law, religious state identity, highly extrinsic religion orientation, state system.
10	**Religious Extremist:** Global religious imperialism, transnational, belief that religion is the source of law and political leadership, high level of control over religion, hierarchical, traditionalist, ethnocentric, autocratic, religious identity, return to purity of 'golden years' or early religious prophets (archaism), extreme outgroup hostility, highly extrinsic religion orientation, disregard for state boundaries.

N.B. This scale was created by the author through synthesising varying definitions from literature by the following authors: Altemeyer and Hunsberger's revised religious fundamentalist scale (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2004, 14(1)); Alfred Stepan's work on multiple Secularisms (Stepan, 2011); Khatib's 'More religious yet still secular?' article (Khatib, 2016); Koenig Wang, Al Zaben and Adi's Belief into Action Scale (Koenig, Wang, Al Zaben, & Adi, 2015, 6(3)); Hasan Mustafa's list of vetted Syrian militia groups (Mustafa, 2015); Jonathan Fox's secularism models (Fox, 2015, pp. 29-32); and the Pew Research Center's research on state official and preferred religions research (Pew Research Center, 2017).

Rather than generating fieldwork data, this research focuses on evaluating existing data and data from open source intelligence on-line platforms and clearinghouses through the parameters of its theoretical framework, which is made up from merging and extending existing theories, including emerging theories on religion and politics. The vast majority of theories on religion and politics focus on the domestic sphere. This research tests the explanatory power of a relevant selection of these theories outside of their domestic grounding to see if they possess a broader relevance than anticipated; i.e. to see whether the theoretical dynamics established at the domestic level are present at the regional level as well. This research needs a large selection of difficult to access data which has therefore been gathered from a broad selection of secondary sources such as foreign correspondents,

government officials, the theses of Henn, Baghourpour and Hintz, and data from the Pew Research Center for instance. The data analysed is broad, comprehensive and gathered by people with close access to events with institutional levels of research resources and as such aptly meets the needs of this research. It would be impossible to personally collect from fieldwork such a comprehensive and reputable data set with which to work. Furthermore, primary sources were difficult to access given that there is a considerable amount of secrecy and sensitivity about information relevant to national security and religion in the Middle East. Therefore, this research relied on information gathered from external and open sources of information and intelligence including the following:

- **Professional and Academic Publications**: information acquired from journals, conferences, symposia, academic papers, dissertations, and theses.
- **Media:** print newspapers, magazines, radio, and television. Most of these sources are in English, except where Arabic media has an English version of their publication available online.
- **Public Government Data**: public government reports, budgets, hearings, press conferences, websites, and speeches. Although this source comes from an official source they are publicly accessible and may be used openly and freely.
- **Internet**: open source intelligence platforms, clearinghouses for terrorists publications, online publications, blogs, discussion groups, citizen media (i.e. – cell phone videos, and user created content), YouTube, and other social media websites (i.e. – Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.). This source also outpaces a variety of other sources due to its timeliness, ease of access and the availability of translations of Arabic, Farsi and Turkish sources into English.
- **Commercial Data**: commercial imagery, financial and industrial assessments, and databases.
- **Grey literature**: preprints, working papers, business documents, unpublished works, and newsletters.

Militia Sponsorship Patterns: Method, Language Sources and Data Issues

The militia sponsorship patterns in chapters 5 and 6 were created by identifying the dominant sect of fighters in each militia sponsored by each of the case study states, then comparing

them to the sect of the regime elites. An additional test was carried out in which the ideology of each militia, particularly as it related to sect, religion and secularism, was identified and put into the theoretical framework and subsequently given a secular-fundamentalist index rating. This was then compared to the corresponding sponsoring regime. The sectarian and secular/religious data was then collated and demonstrated by tables and pie charts.

Where possible the information gathered on the militias has been collected from Arabic speaking analysts who have contact with those on the ground in Syria and Yemen and/or provide English translations of their work. Open source intelligence platforms who rely on predominantly Arabic primary sources, such as Bellingcat, have also been used to make assessments regarding the militias in the sample. Other sources are typically based in the Western academic sphere or material from clearinghouses that translate literature from Islamic extremist groups and other Arabic sources into English.

Another issue with the gathering of data regarding the militias is that civil wars are highly fluid. Given this some militias have disbanded, reformed, changed leadership and name, merged or switched umbrella group or sponsor. This has been sorted out where possible but in some cases conflicting information has meant that a militia is included that may or may not have changed names or other alterations. The number of these instances has been relatively few and not enough to affect the trends identified in the findings.

Research Focus and Case Studies

This research investigates the political survival strategies of Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar from the 'Arab Spring' uprisings of 2011 to 2019 at the regional level. These case studies allow the role of religion and foreign policy to be considered insofar as the fall-out from the 2011 'Arab Spring' carried implications for the regimes' ideological underpinnings, political opponents, regional alignments, and *winning coalitions*. The post 'Arab Spring' responses of these states offer a useful test of the use of religion in foreign policy to secure regime survival and to shift regional allegiances. There is also rich data related to the case studies chosen in this research. For example, despite the difficulty of gathering primary source information, the two civil wars examined in Chapters 5 and 6 are heavily reported on, and investigated by, those with access. Furthermore, the four states of interest are either major status quo (Saudi

Arabia and UAE) or revisionist (Qatar[24] and Iran) players in the Middle Eastern security complex and religion is active within their foreign policies. The theoretical importance of these states is also evident in the strong domestic and regional sectarian based alliances that they maintain, and the character of Sunni-Shi'i relations internally. All these states, to varying degrees, harbour considerable suspicion of their minority Shia populations or in the case of Iran, minority sectarian groups such as the Sunni. For instance, in 2019 33 activists, all Shia, were executed by the Saudi regime, in what was seen as an effort to repress minority dissent against the regime (Dadouch, 2020). Additionally, at times the UAE has deported non-citizen Shia out of suspicion of support for Iran and Iranian allies (Katzman, 2020). They also extend this suspicion into the regional sphere, tending as a rule, and again to varying degrees, particularly in the case of Qatar, to favour alliances with transnational groups, states or movements that consist of the same sectarian group as themselves. Nevertheless, given these alignments are essentially strategic in nature there are variations to this sectarian pattern where the opportunity presents itself, for instance Iran's alliance with Sunni Hamas and some Lebanese Christian groups. However, these variations are not as common as alliances with groups of the same sectarian identity. Within their sectarian group, they tend to favour alliances with groups that have the same secular-fundamentalist rating as themselves. For instance, in a display of sectarian unity and out-group distrust, developments since the 1979 Iranian revolution spurred Sunni fears of Shia Islamists driving to install similar theocracies, leading to the declaration from the Jordanian King in 2005 that the region was under threat from a "Shia crescent" led by Iran (Black, 2007). The four countries vary in their approach to religion-state relations, with the UAE a relatively secular state, towards Iran, the Shia theocracy. They are all considerably closed political systems, and with the exception of Iran, the three Gulf States are all monarchies. All four states have strong religious narratives and a religious identity, and engage with religious issues and with co-religious communities internationally. The differences in relationship between religion and the state among the case studies allows for the comparison between the mechanisms connecting religion-state connections and foreign militia sponsorship. Thus this research studies the relationship

[24] As a radical revisionist as opposed to a revolutionary revisionist, Qatar's revisionist aspirations are considerably more restrained than Iran; i.e. some resistance to Saudi Arabia as the regional hegemon, and an acceptance of Islamism outside of monarchy.

between varieties of secularism (Qatar and the UA E) and fundamentalism (Iran and Saudi Arabia) on patterns of foreign militia sponsorship in the Yemeni and Syrian civil wars.

An additional observation needs to be made regarding these case studies. As noted, this research adopts Bagherpour's position which asserts that;

> Power is gained and maintained not just from economic benefits but also by appeasement of the rising religious preferences within the Middle East North Africa *selectorates*. The countries that are least prone to collapse are predicted to be those who have religious elements within their *winning coalitions*. Those leaders which have largely ignored the rising religious tides in their countries have suffered at their own peril (Bagherpour, 2012, p. 77).

Even the new Egyptian President, despite assuming power through the removal of the Muslim Brotherhood, has increasingly used religion to bolster his legitimacy, "calling publicly for a "religious revolution" to help combat extremism", whilst shutting down religious entities that do not support his leadership or his version of a controllable religion (Walsh, 2016, p. 1). This strategy is similar to that used by Assad in Syria.

This research employs the case study method which has "considerable advantages in studying complex phenomena" (Bennett & Elman, 2007, p. 171). As Andrew Bennett and Colin Elman state, "many puzzles in IR [are] difficult to model formally and to test statistically" (Bennett & Elman, 2007, p. 171): the Middle East is a particularly complex region, with high levels of conflict, sectarian contests, oil resources and foreign power involvement. The focus of this research, religion, is difficult to quantify given it is an ideational concept, heavily dependent on identity, narrative, sectarian solidarity and in-group/out-group dynamics; all of which are difficult to measure statistically as political strategy. This means that this research is focused instead on investigating through the use of emerging theories on religion and politics. The case study states were chosen for a specific set of criteria that relate to its search into the use of religion in two sets of strategies; within the secular-religious contest and within sectarian dynamics. The four states considered in the case studies emerged as some of the most stable in the Middle East following the 'Arab Spring', at least in part due to their extensive use of domestic religious policy, albeit alongside other authoritarian survival strategies. Given this, it is assumed that religion is used in their regional strategies as well. Additionally, these states feature Islam heavily in their idea of the state – both Saudi Arabia and Iran are Islamist regimes

for instance – and both have intervened in the Yemeni and Syrian civil wars in the aftermath of the 'Arab Spring' which is examined in Chapters 5 and 6. Yemen and Syria are/were autocratic, politically secular regimes. In contrast, the four case studies are comparatively more Islamist, although Qatar and the UAE have some elements of political secularism. The case studies' high levels of political Islam, in contrast to the secular states where their foreign policy is studied, is a useful dynamic for this research given that it helps to highlight the testing of Fox's variable; that is, secularism versus religiosity in the political sphere.

In order to guide this research and connect it to the strategic use of religion in the regional sphere, existing theories that seek to explain the use of religion domestically are adapted to fit this purpose. As Walt and Mearsheimer state, "the creation and refinement of theory" (Mersheimer & Walt, 2013, p. 429) is the most important focus of social science. Therefore, this research aims to closely link theory and method and, as such, the method applies the theoretical pillars in order to see if observable relationships are discovered between regional strategies and religion. The theoretical pillars of this research are grounded in relatively new theories; as such, if the assertions of these theories bear out in this research their explanations will be strengthened. The information gathered in accordance with the theoretical framework will be assessed to see if there is an observable relationship between religion and religious identity and the strategies employed by the case study states in their interventions in Syria and Yemen. The links between the research on the use of religion as a political instrument and the theoretical structure of this research are illustrated in the table below.

Table 2.5. Theoretical Framework

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	**Description of Theory and Extensions for Framework**	**Possible Observable Relationship**
Selectorate Theory	The state's ultimate aim is survival, primarily achieved through dividends to supporting *selectorates.*	Relationship between religion and religious identity groups and the *winning coalition*. Establishes the relationship between the regimes and foreign militias along the lines of their secular-fundamentalist position.
Buzan's Idea of the State	Religion as idea, identity and legitimacy.	Relationship between a state's religious narratives and the sponsored militia's narratives and ideologies.
Secular-Religious Competition Perspective	The political use of this ongoing social dynamic.	Relationship between a state's rating on the secular-fundamentalist scale and the rating of sponsored militias in Syria and Yemen.
Identity Hegemony Theory	States seeking to advance domestic identity projects through regional strategies.	Relationship between domestic identity aims and support for specific militias in Syria and Yemen.

Political Opponents and Religion	Religion and the marginalising of political opponents through regulation and repression.	Relationships between the suppression of domestic political opponents, transnational Islam and militia groups in Syria and Yemen.

Conclusion

Given IR theory has largely accepted the key insight of Secularization Theory - that as modernisation spread, religion's political importance would correspondingly shrink - religion has not been adequately incorporated into this research field. The part of IR literature that is interested in religion's implications for politics has since moved on from the basic, and erroneous, assumption at the heart of Secularisation Theory. Post-Secular Theory supports the idea that whilst secularization did take place in Europe, religion has remained prominent in the rest of the world, continuing to effect both society and politics. As the international system appears to be moving from unipolarity towards multipolarity, regional systems are going to have an increasing impact on the interactions of the largely secular international system. This research tests the extent to which regional systems feature the political use of religion. In order to test the use of religion in regional systems, this research adopts a framework that extends theories about domestic political behaviour that explain that religious strategies are aimed at political survival and power. Focusing on regime survival and the quest for power, the actions of the four case study states are assessed in the Middle East to see if these dynamics exist in the regional sphere as well. This research hypothesises that religion is used regionally as an extension of domestic regime survival strategies and that cynical identity politics at the domestic level is linked to regional hegemonic contests.

This chapter makes the case that religion is relevant to International Relations, and outlines the theoretical framework for researching religion in regional politics. This consisted of identifying theories that helped to analyse the intersection between domestic politics and religion. These theories were then adapted to fit international relations, specifically within the regional sphere. In the following chapters, research is conducted into the sponsorship of militias by the case study states in Yemen and Syria through the lens of religion as instrument

and motivation. The information gathered will be assessed using the theoretical pillars in order to test for the extension of the domestic religious strategies for political survival into regional politics. Before this takes place, the next chapter examines the specific domestic religious strategies used by the case study states in preparation for testing for their use within the regional sphere.

Chapter Three: Secular-Religious Competition and Religious Identity in Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar

The aim of this chapter is to lay out the domestic strategies that involve religion for regime survival in the case studies. In particular, it focuses on the way in which sectarian solidarity and the secular-religious contest are used strategically by politicians. The previous chapter outlined the theoretical pillars of this research: Fox's Secular-Religious Competition Perspective, Selectorate Theory, Feuer's observations on the relationship between religious regulation and domestic opposition, Buzan's idea of the state, and Identity Hegemony Theory[25]. In this chapter, these theories are applied to the case study states as a framework for discovering the domestic mechanisms of religion and politics. The emphasis is on identifying patterns and strategies, with the state as the focal unit. There is an overall focus on the strategic use of the ongoing competition between secularism and religion, and patterns of sectarian support. This chapter lays the groundwork for applying the theoretical framework in later chapters by establishing how sectarian solidarity and the contest between secularism and religion are used as regime survival strategies at the domestic level in the case study states. These strategies are then isolated for use in later chapters. These strategies coalesce around Gerschewski's three pillars of authoritarian stability: legitimation, repression and co-optation (Gerschewski, 2013, p. 13). Shekl and Gareev, through following the fundamentals of Selectorate Theory, created the table below to demonstrate the principal functions of the three main strategies identified by Gerschewski.

[25] Identity Hegemony Theory is included in the final section of this chapter but not in the body of the text as it relates to the regional sphere.

Table 3.1. Derived from Shkel and Gareev's *The functions of the three strategies of authoritarian government in regards to principal political actors*

Strategies	Actors	
	Insiders	Outsiders
Co-optation	Extend dividends: material, political, religious and societal (status).	Marginalise and frame as a threat to stability.
Repression	Enforce a high price for organising against the regime, monitor closely.	High price for organising against the regime and framed as threat to main supporters of regime.
Legitimation	Maintain loyalty given lack of alternatives, religious legitimacy.	Marginalise or eliminate any leadership so no alternative leadership available.

(Shkel & Gareev, 2015, p. 206)

Drawing from this, the survival strategies regimes use at the domestic level which are structured around religion are shown in figure 3.2. below.

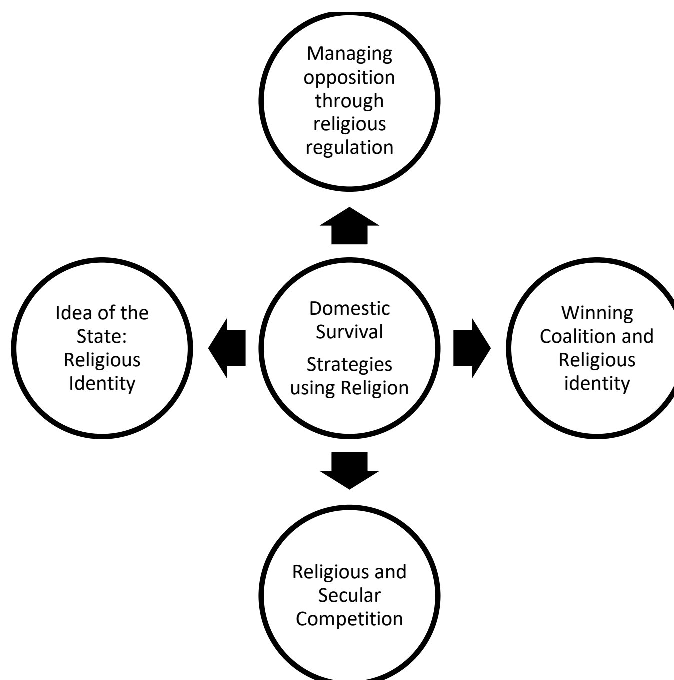

Figure 3.2. Domestic regime survival strategies that use religion. Source: Author.

As Røbæk observes “political rulers who rely on exclusivist governance structures have incentives to exploit available identity divides to stengthen their hold on power when faced with popular unrest such as that seen during the Arab uprisings” (Røbæk, 2019, p. 25). In the Middle East the predominant identity marker is based on religion, with Røbæk’s research presenting descriptive statistics that show that the Middle East is the only region in the world where this is the case and that in the Middle East people are more likely to be excluded from politics based on religious affiliation than other developing regions (Røbæk, 2019, p. 23). This finding is supported by research by N. Bormann, M. Vogt and L. Cederman, who found that “ethnic exclusion and discrimination are highest in the Arab world” (Bormann, Vogt, & Cedermann, 2012, p. 5). Therefore, co-optation patterns of political inclusion and exclusion are insitutionalised along religious and sectarian lines. However, it is important to recognise that exclusion and inclusion from politics is also driven by other factors in the Middle East, such as material and social-institutional factors including the development of a new crony capitalist/state arrangments, material co-optation, tribal and clan connections, uneven economic development and environmental impacts exacerbating existing inequalities, for instance the drought in Syria between 2004-2008 (Abboud, 2019; Josua, 2016; Josua, Co-optation Reconsidered: Authoritarian Regime Legitimation Strategies in the Jordanian "Arab Spring", 2016; Richani, 2018). Maria Josua argues that “mechanisms of institutional-structural and material co-optation” is complemented by “traditional and identity related co-optation” which accounts for the “context-specific dynamics especially in Arab monarchies” (Josua, Co-optation Reconsidered: Authoritarian Regime Legitimation Strategies in the Jordanian "Arab Spring", 2016, p. 32). This research focuses on the engineering of identity related co-optation, specifically religious divides, for the purposes of authoritarian survival. This is demonstrated through Selectorate Theory, which focuses on the inclusion of important groups into the regime’s support base, in this chapter.

The thesis accepts a Machiavellian view of religion and politics. On the one hand, while it accepts that religion can be an interest, it mainly focuses on the use of religion as a means rather than an end. It is assumed that acquiring and strengthening power is the key focus of political actors, a viewpoint strongly reflected in De Mesquito and Smith’s Selectorate Theory. Whilst accepting the idea that Muslim leaders may genuinely have religious motivations, it shares the position, articulated by Machiavelli that “the supremacy of political power over

religious principles [occurs] in political decisions" (Ali, 2015, p. 246). In order to describe the relationship between religion and secularism in Qatar and the UAE, a term is borrowed from Ghobadzadeh's research on Iran. He describes a specific cleric-driven Iranian discourse on secularism as 'religious secularity', which he outlines as a "position between top-down secularization and top-down Islamization" (Ghobadzadeh, 2014, p. 14). Although Ghobadzadeh uses this term in relation to Iran, in this research this term is used to describe the discourse surrounding the growing evolution of a Middle Eastern model of secularism.

One of the key difficulties that politicians must navigate in the Middle East is the unresolved issue of Islam's relationship with the state (Hamid, 2017). Since the introduction of the Western derived state system in the Middle East after World War I, this question has remained unresolved; hence, the secularism v. Islamism divide and balance of influence between religion and state power is a central feature of Middle Eastern politics.

The chapter is structured around the respective theories with each theory applied to the four case study states. The first section discusses Fox's secularism-religion competitive perspective and identifies survival strategies using this dynamic. This is followed by de Mesquito and Smith's Selectorate Theory and how religion impacts on Selectorate dynamics in the case study states. The third section outlines religion and the idea of the state and the fourth deals with the use of religious regulation to weaken domestic opposition. The final section isolates the strategies outlined in the chapter for application in subsequent chapters which show how religious strategies used domestically extend into the regional sphere.

Alternative Explanations

This thesis focuses on the contest between religion and secularism as an explanation for elite' political choices in the MENA region with regards to regime survival strategies. However, it is important to establish that this explanation is crafted to sit alongside, not replace, existing explanations for regime decision making. A key explanation for regime survival decision making is Rentier Theory. This theory argues that the wealthy MENA states extend rents, from oil and gas revenue, to their citizenry, whereby financial security decreases demands for political participation and increases acceptance of a trade-off between freedoms and security (Gengler, 2013, p. 3). However, Justin Gengler points out that Rentier Theory neglects to consider the non-material benefits that these states attempt to secure support from their

citizens with, such as attempts to secure legitimacy through emphasising the Muslim identity (Gengler, 2013, p. 5). This argument is picked up by Bagherpour who argues that in order for Selectorate Theory to apply in the Middle East it needs to include non-material dividends that are extended to citizenry in order to attempt to win and retain their political acquiescence (Bagherpour, 2012, pp. 77-79).

Furthermore, distribution of financial resources within the Gulf MENA states is uneven, with political power and financial opportunity typically granted to those closest to the regimes. This is an example of crony capitalism, whereby the support of the *winning coalition* is secured by granting economic privileges to those that actively support the regime, creating a financial and political divide between insiders and outsiders (Malik, Atiyas, & Diwan, 2019, pp. 1-3). Additionally clientele and patronage networks "play an important role with respect to gaining access to material and immaterial goods and for the (re)distribution of private and public resources in everyday life" (De Elvira, Schwarz, & Weipert-Fenner, 2019, pp. 1-2). These networks are often based on tribal and agnatic structures.

> Rentier Monarchy, the outcome of a special combination of oil and tribalism, is also a hybrid of tradition and modernity virtually unique to the Middle East region. […] Large extended royal families substitute for the ruling parties of the republics and tribal networks are the equivalent of corporatist associations. The threat from the military that toppled many monarchies has been contained by keeping it small and/or recruited heavily from royal families and tribes rather than the urban middle class. All classes – bourgeoisies, middle classes, working classes – become dependent economically on the rentier state; and because the majority of those residents that do much of the work are not citizens entitled to state benefits, even the least of citizens has a stake in the system (Hinnebusch, 2006, p. 383).

Until the Arab Spring, Arab exceptionalism was a common explanation for the endurance of authoritarianism in the Middle East. It asserted that in contrast to global trends at the time, most states in the Middle East were not interested in democracy. This was frequently based on the acceptance of Rentier Theory; that citizens were content economically in many Middle Eastern countries so were less likely to resist the authoritarianism which was commonplace in the region (Hinnebusch, 2006, pp. 373-374). Explanations varied from Modernisation Theory's emphasis on cultural factors to Democratisation Theory whereby Hinnebusch pointed out that the regimes reformed in ways that strengthened authoritarianism in reaction

to democratic pressures, rather than reforms that were progressing towards democracy (Hinnebusch, 2006, pp. 373-374). Further explanations sought to explain that the fragmentation of nations within the Middle East's Western imposed borders was detrimental to the political mobilisation needed for citizens to pressure for democratic change given this weakened identification with the state (Hinnebusch, 2006, p. 378).

Regime Survival and the Secular-Religious Contest in the Middle East

In the Middle East, discussion around divine versus popular sovereignty emerged following the death of the Prophet Mohammad in the seventh century CE. This developed from a rift in the faith community, which arose over who was to assume the mantle of leader in the place of the Prophet Mohammad. Ghobadzadeh explains:

> When the Prophet died in 643 CE, Muslims were faced with two options to determine his successor. The majority of Muslims, the Sunnis, believed that governance was not a sacred matter and should be decided by Muslims, whose consent (baya'at) is the source of the ruler's authority. The minority group, the Shi's, contended that the ruler possesses divine right and that God had appointed the Prophet's son in law Ali, as the rightful successor. Thus, in Shiite austere theology, popular sovereignty cannot constitute a basis for legitimacy (Ghobadzadeh, 2014, p. 32).

Shi'ite issues with popular sovereignty laid the groundwork for the Iranian theocracy's claim to political legitimacy. Indeed, ongoing issues between popular and religious sovereignty form part of the continuing renegotiation between shifting varieties of secularism and Islamism which is a central feature of political contests in the Middle East. Thus, Fox's assertion that secularism behaves as a rival political ideology to religion, is highly prevalent in this region.

In order to measure the degree of religiosity and/or secularism of the case study states the secular-fundamentalist scale is used. However, it is important to make a distinction regarding the secular fundamentalist scale; it is predominantly a measure of the involvement of religion in politics. At the extreme ends of the scale, this is frequently tied to authoritarianism and highly repressive governance. However, this needs qualifying, as the scale is primarily a measure of governance as it relates to religion. As such, it is separate from measures of repression. Therefore, a state can be more religious in terms of the direct and formalised role

religion plays in politics but its domestic governance may be less repressive than states in which religion has more distance from government.

Regime Survival and the Secular-Religious Contest in Iran

An example of the vulnerability of regimes to disagreements within the secular-religious spectrum was evident in the revolution which overthrew the Iranian Pahlavi regime. “The authoritarian secularism of the Pahlavi regime triggered a revolution in 1979 that resulted in the establishment of an Islamic state” (Ghobadzadeh, 2014, p. 4). The Shah held that secular officials should lead, therefore justifying his own power. On the eve of the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini declared that Iran should be ruled not just by an ideologically Islamist regime, but by a clerical regime; one in which the clerics were the ruling class. Khomeini’s case was helped by public resentment of the secular superpowers, the US and the Soviet Union, against which he pitched the political power of Islam stating, just prior to the revolution that “we are fighting against international communism to the same degree we are fighting against the Western world” (Halliway, 1980). Analysing the Iranian revolution through Selectorate Theory, it appears that Iranian clerics recognised that they had enough support from within the *selectorate* to run an Islamist agenda. Many of the groups vying for leadership of the revolution were secular; for example, the liberal constitutionists, the National Front, and Marxists like the Fedaian guerillas. This fed on, and into, broader regional dynamics of the time as a Shia religious revival was sweeping the region in response to suppression by Sunni regimes, Westernization and Western dominance. In this context, claiming leadership as God’s messenger was a potent argument and this assisted Khomeini’s drive to emerge as the figurehead of the revolution. This is in keeping with Feuer’s understanding that positions on religion reflect the domestic dynamics of political competition.

The Iranian Islamic state is rated 9 (religious fundamentalism) on the *Secular-Fundamentalist Scale*[26] featured in chapter one*;* it “believes that the leadership of the Shia clergy is divinely ordained and that political power rests with God, and not with the people” (Mohseni, 2016, p. 42). However, within the regime, there are other factions: “the Republican, or comparatively more secular end of the scale, believes that power rests with the people and

[26] See Appendix 11, *Secular-Fundamentalist Ratings for Case Studies*, page 338.

works to reform the Iranian system to make it more responsive to the populace" (Mohseni, 2016, p. 42). However, political opposition from outside the regime looks to discredit the regime's Islamist structure. Thus, Daesh is being challenged by a "religious secularity discourse that strives to liberate religious experience from state intervention" (Ghobadzadeh, p.4). Given this theological discourse exists outside of the political sphere, it is able to avoid the ruling clergy's repression (Ghobadzadeh, 2014, p. 3). The two most significant political movements against the Islamic regime have been the reformist movement (1997-2005) and the Green movement (2009 onwards). Both of these political movements' narratives included this religious discourse, offering an alternative understanding of Islamism than the Iranian regime's *velayat-e faqih*. This religious secularity narrative opposes both "the politicization of Islam and authoritarian secularism" (Ghobadzadeh, 2014, p. 6). Whereas Western secularism sought to emancipate politics from religion, in Iran the religious secularity discourse seeks to rescue religion from the corrupting influence of politics. The argument is that the formation of the Iranian Islamic state has demonstrated that using religion to govern transforms religion into a political instrument of the state (Ghobadzadeh, Religious Secularity: Shi'ite Repudiation of the Islamic State, 2014, p. 4.5).

Additionally, religious reformist scholars argue that Islam is compatible with contemporary conventions such as "democracy, human rights, freedoms, and secularity" (Ghobadzadeh, 2014, p. 4). They assert that religion is God-given and that as the religious experience is a private affair state domination of religious belief disrupts the traditions of Shi'a and their religious beliefs. As such, Islamist reformist scholars seek the emancipation of religion from the corrupting influence of the state (Ghobadzadeh, 2014, p. 4). As Ghobadzadeh explains: "The formation of the Islamic state is claimed to have been inevitable in order to implement the socio-political dimensions of Islamic teachings. Politics, in this articulation, should be used to accomplish religious goals. However, the experience of the Islamic state in Iran has proved antithetical: religion has been employed as a tool to achieve political ambitions" (Ghobadzadeh, 2014, p. 27).

Religious secularity as a discourse is not confined to Iran. Ghobadzadeh points out that religious secularity has emerged as a growing discourse following the 'Arab Spring', which have driven a surge in the questioning of both state dominated secularism, and of state dominated Islamism (Ghobadzadeh, 2014, p. 10). It appears the 'Arab Street' wants a new

arrangement regarding religion and secularism in the region. The Iranian regime's efforts to counter this narrative come under its general efforts to counter all forms of opposition. The religious secularist opposition to the regime thus face a number of challenges, including:

> The biggest challenges include a strong clerical oligarchy with its own formidable military/security establishment; massive ideological apparatuses for indoctrination; and continued mass support of layers of society whose livelihood depends on mosques and *bonyad*s (religious foundations) and who are ready at the polling booths, as well as in the suppressive arms of the regime against the opposition (Rahnema, 2011, p. 45).

In sum, given the theocratic and authoritarian nature of the Iranian regime, which in some ways contradicts core tenets of Shia religious doctrine and custom, political opposition has developed around a religious secularity narrative that challenges Khomeini's *velayat-e faqih* and seeks to sever the theological link between religion and politics in Iran. In terms of regime survival, this represents a potential rift to the regime's patterns of inclusion and exclusion as religious clerics are typically within the regime's support base, however here the challenge to the regime's religious legitimacy is coming from within the religious institutions.

Regime Survival and the Secular-Religious Contest in Saudi Arabia

Qatar and Saudi Arabia are the only Wahhabi states. However, whilst Qatar has kept religious power in check, Saudi Arabia was forged on the back of the Wahhab reform movement and the political ambitions of the Saud family. Thus, Saudi Arabia is highly theocratic and is rated 8 [27] according to the Secular-Fundamentalist Scale [28]. Saudi Arabia seeks to maintain domestically the politically quietist strand of Salafism, Wahhabism. The ulama helps the regime in this task, with the Grand Mufti Abd al Aziz al Sheikh delegitimising the 'Arab Spring' protesters during 2011 by claiming that protesting was Un-Islamic (Roelants & Aarts, 2016, p. 16).

Since the 'Arab Spring', this arrangement between religious and political power has come under scrutiny from the al-Saud elite. In 2017, Crown Prince Muhammed bin Salman announced that Saudi Arabia would "return" to a "moderate Islam [29] that is open to all

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[27] See Appendix 11, *Secular-Fundamentalist Ratings for Case Studies*, page 338.

[28] The Secular-Fundamentalist Scale is outlined in Chapter 2, page 49.

[29] In this research, moderate Islam is understood in relation to radical or extremist Islam, which has a strict radical interpretation of Islam and believes in the superiority of the Islamic faith, promoting the persecution or

religions". He continued, stating that Saudi Arabia would "eradicate promoters of extremist thoughts" and that the state was "returning to what we were before – a country of moderate Islam that is open to all religions and to the world" (Al Jazeera News, 2017). As a result of this strategic and somewhat disingenuous shift, the Saudi ulama have become concerned that members of the Saud royal family are working towards a greater separation of religion and state. In an illustration of these tensions, in 2013, Prince Mutaib, in the presence of the King, stated, "religion (should) not enter into politics." In response, the Saudi Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdul Aziz al-Taifi, warned that "whoever says there is no relationship between religion and politics worships two gods, one in the heavens and one on earth" (Dorsey, 2014). For the regime, this emerging moderate narrative reduces the threat of both secular reformists and the extremists who the Saudi government can no longer completely outflank given the more fundamentalist example of DAESH.

In contrast to the key assumption of Secularization theory, Saudi Arabia has moved towards modernism, albeit at a slower pace than the UAE and Qatar, but also retained a role for religion in its politics. This represents an attempt to broaden the base of support for the regime to include emerging influential groups, such as women and the large youth population for example. This cannot be done however, without lessening the power of the religious establishment. As the dominant faith in the state, Wahhabi Islam is supported by Saudi wealth and power (Rentz, 1969, pp. 274-277). Wahhabi conservatism rests in its drive to purify the Islamic community by returning to the ways of the Prophet and the first generations of Muslims, placing an emphasis on the literal interpretation of the Qu'ran and the Hadith (Alrebh, 2017, p. 278-279; (Rentz, 1969, p. 271). Conservatism in Saudi Arabia is well entrenched, therefore reducing the fundamentalism of the Saudi state risks disrupting the unifying force on which the state is built, including the patterns of inclusion and exclusion relative to the regime. However, it appears that King Salman has calculated that the risks of societal stagnation and extremism are greater, and that strategic moves towards modernism and religious moderation are in order to co-opt new support groups, especially as the region's

repression of alternative faiths, cultures and Islamic sects. Moderate Islam, in contrast, promotes the coexistence of Islam with other faiths and is thus pluralist in nature. Moderate Islam supports the right of others to their own faith and does not impose its own beliefs or convictions onto others. Moderate Islam accepts the diversity of religions, cultures, and other Islamic sects (Al-Issa, 2018).

youth bulge and their related under/unemployment helped drive the ‘Arab Spring’ across the region. Alternatively, perhaps, as part of his wider reshuffle of the political elite which began in 2018, he has decided to correspondingly reduce the power of the religious clerics.

Regime Survival and the Secular-Religious Contest in the UAE

The United Arab Emirates follows the Maliki School, which was established by Malik ibn Anas al-Asbahi in the eighth century on the Arabian Peninsula. The Maliki School is less conservative than the Wahhabism, scoring 6 on the Secular-Fundamentalist Scale[30]. It represents a form of religious secularism, and this is reflected in the UAE’s approach to religion and politics (Esposito, 2014). The degree of secularism in the UAE is unrelated to its repressive with regards to religion, in fact Pew Research Forum findings have indicated that the UAE has relatively high governmental restrictions on religion and there is some governmental hostility towards minority religious groups (Pew Research Center, 2018).

Recent developments in Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar suggest a deliberate state-led shift towards limited political secularism, or at least towards moderate Islam. This ongoing shift is a counter-revolution tool to help consolidate state power following the challenges of the ‘Arab Spring’. (The National, 2017); (Athanasoulia, 2020); (Roberts D. , 2016); (Brignone, 2018). However, Michele Brignone argues that whereas Qatar interprets Sunni Islam as a “political reading of Islam, based on criticism of the existing order and authoritarian regimes, that is attentive to social justice, that advocates for a project for the re-Islamisation of societies and establishment of ‘Islamic-democratic’ regimes”, the UAE is focusing on a move towards “an Islam that is focused on personal spirituality, is against violent interpretations, and which is present on the public scene but does not interfere with the political and economic choices of rulers” (Brignone, 2018, p. 3). Stella Athanasoulia argues that Prince Salman bin Muhammad is seeking to promote a move towards moderate Islam that is “more amenable to the renewed perceptions of the Saudi economic model and would voice no opposition to those reforms that seem too Western-like and risk alienating the society from its conservative norms” (Athanasoulia, 2020, p. 11). The ‘Arab Spring’ provided an opening for Islamists, and saw the development of democratic religious secularism in Tunisia where

[30] See Appendix 11, *Secular-Fundamentalist Ratings for Case Studies*, page 338

the Islamist political party Ennahda evolved into a self-described 'Muslim-Democrat' party (Ounissi, 2016). This Tunisian reconciliation of democracy, religion and limited secularism challenges the UAE's efforts to tie religious secularity to monarchical autocratic governance. Given Michael D. Driessen's research[31] has argued that there is a regional preference for pious political leaders but not for clerical rulers, this could have implications for the Gulf regimes. Driessen outlines this finding: "[it] illustrates a broad, consistent preference for the indirect influence of religious values on politics and little support for direct forms of religious interference in politics" (Driessen, 2018). Islamists, including the Muslim Brotherhood, have broadened their range of strategies including softening their Islamic ideology and increasingly embracing "norms related to human rights and democracy" (Volpi & Stein, 2015, p. 282). A new governing arrangement with Islam has evolved in Tunisia, where "the majority of Islamists do not support the idea of an 'Islamic state' that dominates (through outlawing) politics", instead "supporting the idea of bringing Islam to the state, through democratic political means" (Donker, 2013, p. 221). This potentially represents a challenge to Emirati legitimacy, linking moderate Islam to the democratic model of transferring political power. The most significant threat to elites sometimes comes from those opponents that share their most salient idea, but link it to another concept. For an autocratic state that advocates for a more personal and less political Islam, the success of political Islam within a democratic system is an immediate threat to the dominance of the existing elite.

The UAE ties moderate Islam to a form of secularism. However, secularism in the Middle East is not the same as secularism in the West. David Roberts, wrote in *Foreign Affairs* that: "Emirati decision-makers hold a deep belief in the importance of separation the church and the state in the Arab world" and that, "[f]or all the GCC states, religion represents an important dimension of governance" (Roberts D. B., 2016). Roberts believes that while the UAE seeks to distinguish between politics and religion, it is able to emphasise the importance of Islam to the country with projects such as the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque (Roberts D. B., 2016). Dr Alshateri, from the National Defence College in Abu Dhabi, argues that, "Gulf states without exception carry many religious functions. They oversee mosques and imams. The various governments of the Gulf include a mandatory subject of Islam in public and private

[31] Driessen's research used data collected from 15 years of surveys by the Arab Barometer and the World Values Surveys.

schools. The Islamic legal courts or Sharia Courts are part of state institutions and governments implement much of Sharia by the force of the law, especially, on family status matters" (Langton & Dajani, 2017). This is explained further by Dr Mohamad Habash, associate professor of Islamic studies in Abu Dhabi: "Many of the existing UAE laws are civic or secular, but they do not contravene Islamic basic principles as defined by Islamic scholars" (Langton & Dajani, 2017).

The UAE's domestic situation enables it to pursue limited secularism or religious secularism. The political elite enjoy a significant level of charismatic legitimacy[32], freeing them somewhat from the need to enlist further support through the ulama and religious networks (Christie, 2010 , p. 29). Additionally, the state has considerable financial ability to secure political support (Christie, 2010, p. 209). Furthermore, clerics are 'encouraged' to speak solely on religious and theological matters, and to espouse involvement in politics or current affairs (Pinto, 2012, pp. 209-211). In September 2015, for example, a popular Emirati Islamic Scholar, Sheikh Waseem Yousef, tweeted on August 18 that "all Muslim Sheikhs agreed that building temples for infidels is forbidden" (Roy, 2015). The tweet, released during the visit of the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, was seen to be criticising the UAE regime's decision to allot land for the building of a Hindu temple in Abu Dhabi. In response, Yousef's primetime programme on Noor Dubai TV channel was axed and he was publically reprimanded by Dr Farouq Hamada, the religious advisor to the Crown Prince Court in Abu Dhabi, who stated, "the UAE has established policies for religious tolerance. […] Such divisive and radical ideas do not belong in the modern world" (Roy, 2015).

Emirati moves towards secularism and moderate Islam are framed to weaken the state's political opponents, particularly Islamists. The UAE regime believes that involving religion and clerics in state affairs encourages extremism and threatens regional stability (Partrick, 2017). The UAE's Ambassador to New York described the UAE position as follows:

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[32] Qatar's political elite, like the UAE's, similarly possess a measure of charismatic legitimacy. Charismatic leadership is forward thinking, focusing on inspirational ideas and change. Frequently among the top five nations with the highest GDP per capita, Qatari citizens clearly enjoy considerable wealth, this also contributes towards the goodwill generally held between the Qatari regime and its people. As such, the UAE and Qatar both have considerable power to control the religious establishment than less secure regimes in the region.

> You're talking to a country [the UAE] that favors the Western approach of separating religion from governance. And part of the reason the UAE has become what it is today is because we don't inject Islam when we're debating our economic policy; we don't find a religious verse that helps guide our energy policy (Otaiba, 2017).

Otaiba's words followed a co-authored editorial titled 'Extremism between Religion and State', written in the state approved newspaper Al Ittihad a few days earlier. This article, written in Arabic, alleged that religion had been used as a political ideology, which is the founding basis of the Muslim Brotherhood. The editorial went on to state that the idea of a religious caliphate belongs to history and that the Middle East needs to move forward. It further described that the classical period[33] of Islam was reworked to support the imperial projects of the Umayyad, Abbasid and Ottoman empires (Hasan, 2017). This is a clear refutation of a radical Islamist tactic; the use of Islam during the classical period to form a political ideology to structure modern states.

However, despite strategically positioning itself as a tolerant and modern Muslim state and encouraging a personal spirituality that is present socially but does not challenge the State, the UAE faces opposition to its drive towards political secularism domestically. Data from a rare public poll shows that two-thirds of Emirati citizens disagree that "'we should listen to those among us who are trying to interpret Islam in a more moderate, tolerant, and modern direction. Overall, then, Emiratis tend to be socially traditional and conservative politically, despite the glamour and glitz of downtown Abu Dhabi or Dubai" (Pollock, 2018). However, the regime promotes moderate Islam, focusing on pragmatism in matters relating to religion, not absolutism (Pinto, 2012, pp. 209-211). Efforts to counter extremist Islam focus on building on moderating Islam in the UAE, and discrediting extremist voices. These efforts extend towards suppressing voices that counter the UAE's efforts to establish religious secularism.

Regime Survival and the Secular-Religious Contest in Qatar

Qatar also mirrors this trend towards religious secularism, thus rating 6 on the Secular-Fundamentalist scale[34], encouraging a moderate separation of Mosque and State, whilst maintaining a strong Islamic presence in society. Despite sharing Wahhabism with Saudi

[33] The classical period describes the first generation of Muslims who co-existed with the Prophet Muhammad.
[34] See Appendix 11, *Secular-Fundamentalist Ratings for Case Studies*, page 338.

Arabia, the Qatari treatment of religion is strikingly different. This has become increasingly evident since Qatar sought integration into the global market. The political relationship between mosque and state is also different in Qatar. Whereas there is a mutual dependence between the ulama and the state in Saudi Arabia, Qatari politics has a more secular character. Qatar's political elites have been able to maintain relative domestic independence from the religious scholar class due to the lack of an indigenous ulama (Baskan, 2011) meaning that there has been little domestic pressure from clerics to have a say in state matters. This ability to dominate the religious clerics, has meant that the political secular elites are able to hold power in Qatar and to introduce more progressive norms into society, particularly relating to women's rights, education (Al-Muftah, 2017) and media (Seib, 2005).

Religious power is also limited through the structure of the state's political institutions. There is no equivalent to the Saudi religious office or title of Grand Mufti, both of which provide religious support, sometimes in the form of fatwas, for the Saudi state's policies. Furthermore, in Qatar high profile religious scholars with enough stature to fill the role of religious political leadership are typically non-nationals, and thereby subject to visa sponsorship. As such, the state is able to monitor and regulate them with great efficiency (Birol Baskan, 2011). Muslim Brotherhood exiles from such states as Egypt, Syria, Palestine and Libya are not able to practise politics in Qatar. Although clerics such as the high profile Muslim Brotherhood-linked Yusuf Qaradawi have a good relationship with the state, religion and religious establishments are not generally players within domestic politics of Qatar, however Qaradawi is active in regional politics.

The Qatari royal family belongs to the same tribe as al Wahhab, the founder of Saudi Arabia's Wahhabism, the Banu Tamim tribe. Whilst this contributes to the Al Thani's legitimacy, it also presents a potential risk as this could be an avenue for Saudi Arabian leverage over Qatar (Khlebnikov, 2015). The previous Emir Hamad al Thani's communications director, reiterated that Qatar alone would direct religion within Qatar irrespective of that fact that the Wahhabi faith originated in Saudi Arabia, and despite Saudi pressure for Qatar to adhere to strict Saudi Wahhabi interpretations (Dorsey, 2013). There are long standing rumours that the Saudi government resisted the leadership of the previous Emir Hamid al Thani after he staged a peaceful coup against his father. Any moves that strengthen Saudi ties domestically, including

a close embracing of Saudi leadership of the Wahhabi school, could potentially provide openings for Saudi interference against the current branch of the royal family.

In a continued effort for their shared Wahhabi religious tradition to not be a gateway for greater Saudi influence, Qatar's religious scholars are sent to Egypt's al Azhar University as opposed to Saudi religious institutions such as the Imam Mohammed Ibn Saud University in Riyadh. Without native religious scholars, and with the Saudi scholars influence obstructed, the Al Thani's are able to avoid enforcing the strict traditions of the Wahhabi school. The Qatari regime is thus able to pursue a greater separation of Mosque and State. For instance, women are able to drive, non-Muslims can consume alcohol and Qatar sponsors Western arts such as the Tribeca Film Festival (Dorsey, 2014).

Qatar perceives that the Saudi clergy's role in policy making has prevented the Saudi regime from developing the flexibility to adapt as conditions change and thus Saudi Arabia has been unable to provide the region with visionary and effective leadership. Given the challenges to existing regimes and their claims to legitimate leadership as a result of the 'Arab Spring', Qatar sees Saudi Arabia's political relationship with a conservative and restrictive ulama as outdated and uninspired (Dorsey, 2014). Qatar believes that the region needs to move forward, and move forward of its own accord, before it is pushed, if the present elites are to remain in power (Dorsey, 2014). The previous Emir, Hamad al Thani, has said that he believes that the region's 'Arab Street' is inevitably going to demand democracy, and that when democratic elections take place, Islamist governments will come into power (Al-Thani, 2005).

The Al Thani's rely on a religious secularity strategy to help support their governance, whereby a strong public presence of religion is balanced by considerable power in the hands of the political elites. Despite some separation of religion from politics, the Al Thani's are highly religious and support select Sharia laws. They represent pious secular rulers who grant citizens material and religious rewards and retain the support of the highly religious Sunni population.

Conclusion: Secular-Religious Competition Perspective

Without having gone through the secularization process of the West, both Qatar and the UAE have managed to separate religion from politics to a significant degree, whilst resisting

secularization socially and culturally. The Qatari and Emirati experience refutes the assumptions of Secularisation Theory, proving that religion and the state can separate politically in the Middle East without religion becoming marginalised and whilst retaining an Arab Muslim state identity. In contrast, both Iran and Saudi Arabia are more dependent on religion for legitimacy. With the exception of Qatar, however, the Gulf States and Iran face Islamist opposition that looks to differentiate their position from their regimes, either by aligning with democratic ideals and some form of religious secularism, or by expressing a more fundamentalist approach to Islamism.

The Arab states have shown significantly different approaches to Islamism following the 'Arab Spring'. It appears that shifting the state's position on the scale from religious towards religious secularism has emerged as a key tactic for negating Islamist opposition - this is particularly evident in Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Alternatively, Qatar has openly supported transnational Islamists in order secure their cooperation with regime interests and to neutralise their appeal to citizens through preventing domestic Islamists from being able to present themselves as the more Islamist alternative to a religiously illegitimate regime. This split between the Qatari approach and the anti-Muslim Brotherhood counter-revolutionary tactics of Saudi Arabia and the Emirates has become so severe it has developed into a significant cleavage in the Gulf sub-complex. The intensity of this disagreement, which has shifted the patterns of enmity and amity in the Gulf, likely indicates how significant these regimes, or at least the Emirates and Saudi Arabia, view getting the position on the Secular-Fundamentalist scale right for counter-revolution efforts and to help avoid future unrest. However, Iran does not appear to be seeking to renegotiate its position on the scale from fundamentalist to secular, which would be difficult for the regime to successfully carry out as their core legitimacy and idea of the state is firmly based on Shia fundamentalism. An attempt to shift a state's core legitimacy could bring the whole structure down. What is clear is that getting 'right' the state's position within the ongoing societal tensions between secularism and fundamentalism is seen as closely tied to the ability of regimes to retain the support of their same-sect base.

Authoritarian Durability, Political Selectorates and the Secular-Religious Contest

This section uses Selectorate Theory to indicate the strength of the links between religion and a state's survivability. De Mesquito and Smith's theory purports to explain how the support of the *winning coalition* in a polity is essential for regime survival; it follows that the groups within the *real selectorate* and the *winning coalition* get greater dividends from the regime in order to retain their support. Peter S. Henne's research adds to this understanding. He concludes that the strength of the ties between religion and the state is indicated by the presence of religious groups in the regime's *winning coalition*[35]. The greater the state dependence on religion for survival, the greater the influence clerics and religious groups possess (Henne, 2013, p. 83). This research uses this test to identify the presence of religious actors in the *winning coalitions* of the case study states. Sectarian groups are also positioned in the selectorates. This research additionally incorporates Bagherpour's assertion that the dividends received by the *real selectorate* and the *winning coalition* are not just material; they can be religious dividends, for example. Additional research by Michael D. Driessen supports Bagherpour's claim, indicating that displays of "religious favouritism increases support for publically pious religious candidates" (Driessen, 2018, p. 26), strengthening the idea that religious benefits can act as political dividends within the Middle East. Bagherpour argued that the degree of Islamism within regimes was indicative of their ability to survive the 'Arab Spring'. As Figure 3.3 shows, support for Sharia law to be the legal system is fairly prominent across the Muslim world lending strength to this finding.

[35] Henne's measure also incorporates the type of regime as well, i.e. whether the regime leads a weak or strong state (Henne, 2013, p. 83).

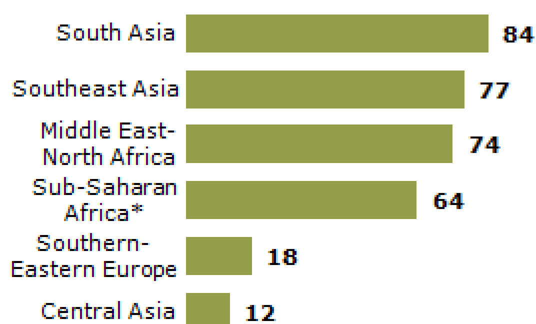

Figure 3.3. Support for Sharia Law. Reprinted from *The World's Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society* (Pew Research Center, 2013)[36]

However, whilst this research explores religiosity and secularism as authoritarian survival strategies, it is important to avoid reductionist conclusions, particularly given that alongside religious co-optation strategies Saudi Arabia used material strategies such as increasing the allocation of rents in the face of the 'Arab Spring' for example. Bagherpour also failed to account for the sectarian arrangements of the regimes he surveyed. Bagherpour identifies that most of the regimes that fell or face serious revolutions were/are the more secular ones: Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Syria, and Tunisia. However, in terms of regime survival in the face of the 'Arab Spring', sectarian dynamics, alongside military, economic and political dynamics, have also emerged as an important indicator of stability in the face of unrest. Referring to the states that faced significant uprisings but survived (i.e. Syria and Bahrain), large numbers of the majority sect participated in the uprisings, specifically the sect to which the regime elites did *not* belong. The regimes of both states initially securitised sectarian divisions as a means of discrediting cross-sectarian unity against their rule, and this became part of their successful counter-revolutionary strategy, which also included foreign military intervention in both states, with the Peninsula Shield Forces clearing protests in Bahrain and the military support of Russia and Iran shoring up the Assad regime in Syria. The regimes that have fallen, including

[36] The Pew Research Center grants permission to publish their website content. A statement to this effect is available here: https://www.pewresearch.org/about/terms-and-conditions/

Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Tunisia, all faced revolutions from within a cross-sectarian mobilisation or from the same sectarian group as the existing regime, meaning that dividing the protest movements along religious lines was difficult. Consequently, this research assumes that when designing a counter-revolution strategy following the 'Arab Spring', states were less concerned about sect driven uprisings from within marginalised sects, and more about uprisings that mobilised from within the same sectarian group as the ruling elites. In most Middle Eastern examples, the sect of the elite is the majority sect, excluding Syria and Bahrain. Additionally, the societal secular-religious contest was leveraged as a regime survival strategy. For instance, following the 2013 coup which ousted the Muslim Brotherhood and installed President Abdel Fattah al Sisi, President Sisi has attempted to portray the Brotherhood as a religiously extreme terrorist group. However, religious co-optation is only one regime survival strategy. Nevertheless, shifts in the degree of secularism and Islamism, and the securitarisation of sectarian insecurity, have emerged as mechanisms within the counter-revolution effort.

Given the relative importance of the degree of religiosity to regime survivability in the Middle East, not only does the state co-opt its own sectarian group with favouritism, it is logical to assume that the more a state relies on religion for legitimacy and for maintaining the support of its *winning coalition*, the more the state represses and monitors religion[37]. Pew Research Center data contained in Figure 3.4 indicates that the Middle East has significantly more restrictions on religion than other regions, indicating concern over maintaining same-sect support, mobilisation through religious networks and concern over sectarian mobilisation. The Pew Research Center's 2018 data places Saudi Arabia, Iran and Syria in the *very high* restrictions category with scores of 7.71, 8.3 and 7.31 respectively (Pew Research Center, 2018). Given the reliance on religion for political survival, it would be expected that following the 'Arab Spring', Middle Eastern states adjusted governmental restrictions on religion as part of the counter- revolution effort. Figure 3.6 indicates that this is the case, with data concluding that governmental restrictions on religion rose in the Middle East following the 'Arab Spring'. In terms of applying Selectorate Theory, Amir Bagherpour argued that Selectorate Theory needed to be revised to account for the role of religion stating that

[37] Overall the worldwide trend is towards greater restrictions on religion and rising social hostility towards religious groups.

regimes that have survived the ‘Arab Spring’, such as Saudi Arabia, possessed “legitimacy derived from implicit approval of their Islamist allies” (Bagherpour, 2012, p. 2). This research therefore accounts for religion by including religious leadership as part of the *winning coalition* or *essentials*, given their support has proven to be essential for regime survival in terms of the ‘Arab Spring’.

Table 3.4. Government Restrictions 2011: Comparing the Middle East and North Africa with the Rest of the World. Reprinted from *The World's Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society* (Pew Research Forum, 2013).

Government Restrictions 2011: Comparing the Middle East and North Africa With the Rest of the World

GRI QUES-TION	TYPE OF GOVERNMENT RESTRICTION	Percentage of the 20 countries in the Middle East-North Africa region with the restriction	Percentage of the 178 countries in the rest of the world with the restriction	Ratio of the difference between Middle East-North Africa and the rest of the world
20	High government favoritism of religion	95%	12%	7.9
7	Government limits on religious conversion	95	15	6.3
1	Constitution does not provide for religious freedom	95	19	5.0
12	National government violence toward minority religious groups	65	17	3.9
5	Government limits on public preaching	80	25	3.2
6	Government limits on proselytizing	85	27	3.2
13	No national government intervention in religious discrimination cases	60	25	2.4
19	Government force used toward religious groups	85	37	2.3
9	Government limits on foreign missionaries	90	39	2.3
8	Government limits on religious literature or broadcasting	90	40	2.3
14	Government organization manages religious affairs	100	53	1.9
16	National government bans certain religious groups	40	21	1.9
11	Government intimidation of religious groups	100	61	1.6
10	Government limits on wearing of religious symbols	40	25	1.6
3	Some lack of government respect for religious freedom in practice	100	64	1.6
17	National government attempts to eliminate a religious group	20	13	1.5
4	Government interferes with worship or certain religious practices	90	66	1.4
2	Constitution qualifies or contradicts concept of religious freedom	100	78	1.3
18	Government registration requirements for religious groups	90	88	1.0
15	National government denunciation of religious groups as "sects"	10	13	0.7

* The types of government restrictions on religon are ordered by the ratio of the difference in their prevalence among the 20 countries in the Middle East and North Africa compared with the prevalence among the 178 countries in the rest of the world in 2011. For instance, 95% of governments in the Middle East and North Africa limit conversion compared with 15% of countries elsewhere in the world (95 divded by 15 = 6.3). Therefore, the share of countries with limits on conversion is 6.3 times higher in the Middle East and North Africa than elsewhere in the world.

See Summary of Results for full question wording.

Arab Spring Adds to Global Restrictions on Religion, June 2013 • PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Table 3.5. Government Restrictions on Religion in the Middle East and North Africa before and after the Arab Spring. Reprinted from *The World's Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society* (Pew Research Forum, 2013)

Government Restrictions on Religion in the Middle East and North Africa Before and After the Arab Spring

Number and percentage of countries with each type of restriction

GRI QUESTION	TYPE OF GOVERNMENT RESTRICTION	year ending JUN 2010 No.	year ending JUN 2010 %	year ending DEC 2011 No.	year ending DEC 2011 %
11	Government intimidation of religious groups	20	100%	20	100%
2	Constitution qualifies or contradicts concept of religious freedom	20	100	20	100
3	Some lack of government respect for religious freedom in practice	20	100	20	100
14	Government organization manages religious affairs	19	95	20	100
20	High government favoritism of religion	19	95	19	95
1	Constitution does not provide for religious freedom	19	95	19	95
7	Government limits on religious conversion	16	80	19	95
4	Government interferes with worship or certain religious practices	19	95	18	90
8	Government limits on religious literature or broadcasting	18	90	18	90
9	Government limits on foreign missionaries	17	85	18	90
18	Government registration requirements for religious groups	17	85	18	90
19	Government force used toward religious groups	17	85	17	85
6	Government limits on proselytizing	16	80	17	85
5	Government limits on public preaching	15	75	16	80
12	National government violence toward minority religious groups	11	55	13	65
13	No national government intervention in religious discrimination cases	12	60	12	60
10	Government limits on wearing of religious symbols	8	40	8	40
16	National government bans certain religious groups	6	30	8	40
17	National government attempts to eliminate a religious group	5	25	4	20
15	National government denunciation of religious groups as "sects"	2	10	2	10

The types of government restrictions on religon are ordered by the share of the 20 countries in the Middle East and North Africa that had the particular restriction at the end of 2011.

See Summary of Results for full question wording.

Arab Spring Adds to Global Restrictions on Religion, June 2013 • PEW RESEARCH CENTER

The next sections itemise the support for the case study regimes by applying Selectorate Theory, thereby establishing the significance of sectarian and religious support necessary for their survivability.

Applying Selectorate Theory to the Case Study States

Strategies for Maintaining Identity-based Real Selectorates: Iran

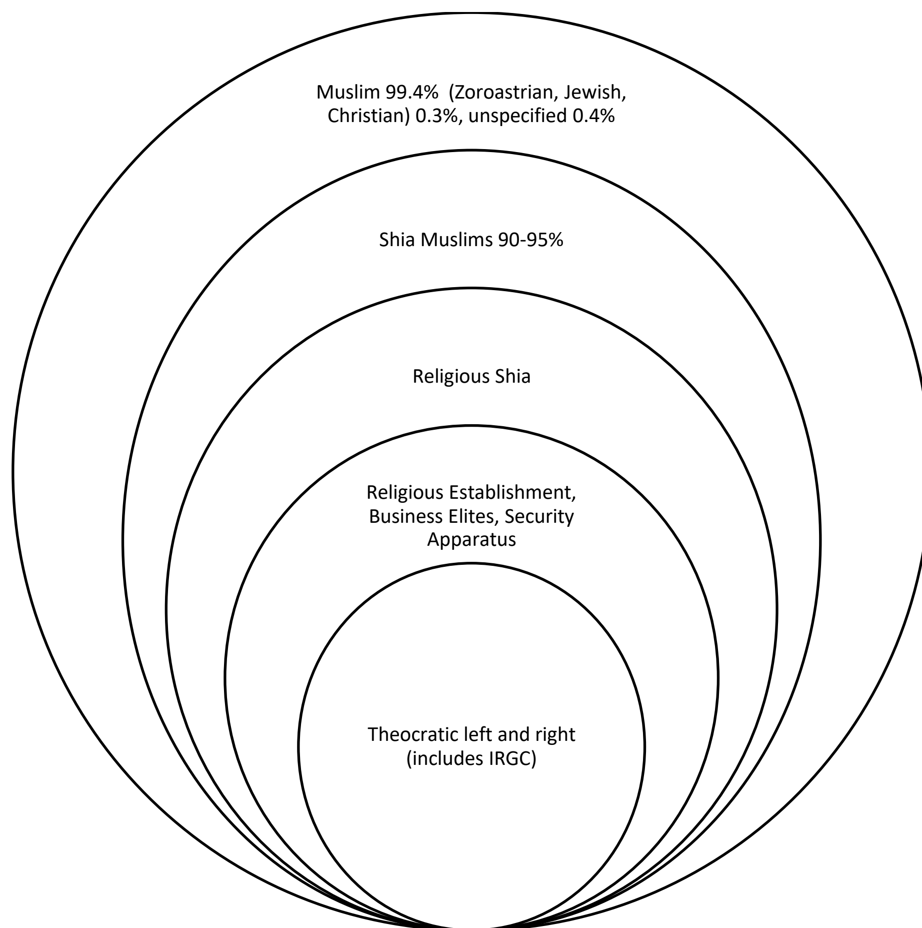

Figure 3.6. Selectorate Structure of Iran. (Venn diagram created by author from assessments based on the research).

Inputting the societal pillars of support for the Iranian regime into Selectorate Theory clearly establishes the sectarian basis of support for the regime. Iran's *real selectorate* is made up of religious Shia, with the *winning coalition* of essential support made up of Shia who are either highly religious or at least outwardly support the theocratic basis of the regime, who are present in the business elite, religious establishment, and the upper echelons of the security apparatus. Given the degree of legitimacy and support the theocracy generates from Islam, religion is clearly an important mechanism for regime survival, however, as a Reuter's investigation revealed, this exists alongside the material co-optation of religious elites (Steckow, Dehghanpisheh, & Torbati, 2013). Ghobadzadeh's research on religious secularity

in Iran indicates the extent of control religion exerts over society when religious identity forms the cornerstone of the *winning coalition*. He describes this below:

> The clergy's role in Iran's political sphere goes well beyond the positions mentioned specifically in the Constitution and other legislation. For example, a Friday Imam, a leader who possesses enormous power to influence local issues, is appointed for each and every city. Almost all state organizations include a cultural branch, which is generally led by a cleric. Every university has an office that represents the Supreme Leader, filled without exception by clerics. Furthermore, a set of religious courses designed by clerics are included in all university curricula, and all students, irrespective of their field of study, are expected to study them. Another institution led by the clergy is the Sazeman-e Aghidati Siyasi (Political and Ideological Organization), a powerful division within the armed forces, including the country's army and the Islamic Revolution. The clergy is omnipresent in the country's political mosaic. (Ghobadzadeh, 2014, p. 148).

Shia are a clear majority in Iran, however, given Iran is a Shia theocracy, the religious dividends for religious Shia are considerable as indicated by data collected by the Pew Research Center. If we refer to Appendixes 1-4, which feature the Pew Research Center's survey questions on Governmental Restrictions on Religion (GRI), the results indicate that privileges and government access is granted to Shia Muslims and/or that minorities are discriminated against. This backs up Baghourpour's claim that dividends to government's support base as outlined in Selectorate Theory includes both material and non-material benefits, and additionally supports Driessen's assertion that religious favouritism encourages support for outwardly pious politicians. Whilst there are other dividends, such as financial benefits, religious favouritism is part of the bargain between the Iranian regime and its support base. Iran, however, also relies heavily on the security apparatus to enforce control. As such, financial, religious and status privileges are granted to the security apparatus. Through religion and the primacy of security for the maximal [38] Iranian regime, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has emerged as an essential part of the *winning coalition* and as such is given considerable resources and power.

[38] Barry Buzan referes to maximal states as a state that is more responsive to the regime elites than its citizens. As such, they tend to have a disproportionate internal security apparatus as there is less reliance on harmonizing state and individual interests to maintain stability (Buzan, 2007, pp. 53-54).

The Iranian military consists of two parts: the regular military and the IRGC. The key difference between the two are their raison d'etre. The regular military is tasked with defending Iran's territorial integrity. The IRGC, whilst it also works to defend Iran, is tasked with the defence of the Iranian theocratic regime. This task links the IRGC intricately with the theocratic elite, and this has enabled it to expand its influence beyond mere defence and into the "politics, economic, strategic and sociocultural arenas" (Ostovar, 2016, p. 5).

The US sanctions regime enacted against Iran between 2006-2015 and again after 2018 to discourage efforts to develop nuclear capabilities, significantly enabled the IRGC to gain dominance over the Iranian economy. The state, strapped for funds after being unable to trade internationally, turned to the IRGC in a move that "saved the country". With the private sector only amounting to 20%, "the reality is that the Guards Corps are the locomotive for our economy" stated Bahman Esghi, Secretary General for the Tehran Chamber of Commerce (Erdbrink, 2017). The IRGC has oversight of the powerful Basij militia and Quds Forces. The Quds Force is concerned with foreign interventions so is not described here, however, Ostovar outlines the civilian Basij's function as follows:

> It pervades all levels of Iranian society through local chapters affiliated with schools (primary schools through to universities), factories, government offices, and mosques. Iran's regime's regime has encouraged the development of the militia as a means of creating an ideologically and religiously orthodox citizenry devoted to the leader and Iran's theocratic system….the Basij functions primarily as a sociocultural organization. It provides instruction and sponsors religious orientated events meant to cultivate affection for Iran's Islamic system, its social mores, and the supreme leader. It also acts as a security force involved in activities such as moral policing and counter protest operations (Ostovar, 2016, pp. 5-6).

Belonging to the Basij provides considerable economic privileges that are not available to other citizens, such as employment preferences, welfare provisions and other material support.

> The ultimate goal of the Basij's economic activities is different from that of the IRGC. While Basij commanders have benefited from the financial privileges of controlling companies, the Basij's economic activities are less profit-centered and more oriented toward populism. The Basij's entrepreneurships concentrated mainly in two different branches (the BCF and the CBO). Each of these clusters has a specific function, such as motivating enlistment in the Basij,

distributing propaganda through public services, and controlling the market (Golkar, 2011, p. 637).

Golkar describes how the IRGC-controlled Basij has become “one of the biggest economic networks in Iran, with influence in every sector of the economy from banking to construction, the retail sector to stocks, and import/export activity” (Golkar, 2011, p. 636). The IRGC’s power and influence could reach a level that would make it a potential threat to the Iranian regime itself. As Svolik identifies, regimes face the danger of a military coup when the military has a high level of dominance over both the economy, foreign policy and domestic repression of dissent. The more indispensable the military is to the political regime, the more power it has to usurp the political elite’s power (Solvik, 2012, p. 127).

The Iranian budget further reflects the prominence and influence of both religion and security. In 2017 the budgets showed the amounts allocated to the state’s religious institutions, military and paramilitary forces. Following protests in 2017 focused on economic issues, these figures were criticised by activists given the large IRGC budget and the increase in money allocated to Iran’s wealthy religious foundations (Cunningham & Mufson, 2018). An example of such gains are the US$17 million allocated for the mausoleum and residence of Ayatollah Khomeinei in an effort to protect his ideological heritage. These foundations have other revenue streams, most significantly donations from the faithful. For instance, Astan-e Qods Razavi foundation, which controls a local Shi’ite shrine in the city of Mashhad, own 43% of the real estate in the city making it the biggest real estate owner. These budgetary gains indicate that “The theocratic regime of Iran considers such institutions vital for its survival. Through propaganda at the national and international level, they recruit and train new supporters for the regime” (Radio Farda, 2017). Additionally, a Reuters investigation into the assets of the Supreme Leader and other regime elites revealed that Senior Ayatollah’s have huge business empires, with both real estate and industry ownership as well as investments (Steckow, Dehghanpisheh, & Torbati, 2013).

Strategies for Maintaining Identity based Real Selectorates: Saudi Arabia

Figure 3.7. Selectorate Structure of Saudi Arabia. (Venn diagram created by author from assessments based on the research).

In Saudi Arabia, the Sunni Arabs and co-opted Shia make up the *real selectorate,* however the *winning coalition* consists of Sunni elites. Because the *winning coalition* includes the religious establishment, its support for the Saudi regime is essential. However, the factions that make up the regime only come from within the wealthy Saudi royal family. As de Mesquito and Smith describe, “dictators, monarchs, military junta leaders, and most CEOs all rely on a smaller set of essentials. It is more efficient for them to govern by spending a chunk of revenue to buy the loyalty of their coalition through private benefits[…] Thus small coalitions encourage stable, corrupt, private goods orientated regimes” (Smith & de Mesquito, 2011, pp. 11-12).

The GRI in Appendix 2 indicates that the Saudi regime favours Sunni Islam, thus granting religious privileges to its support base. As status and societal preference is granted on the basis of religious identity, the faithful are essentially tied to the regime as it is very difficult to leave their essentially captive sectarian group given conversion is prohibited. This also means that actively opposing the regime when a citizen belongs to the same sect as the elite can be framed as acting against the interests of your sectarian group. This cements in-group, out-group competition as a highly significant political mechanism, and means that regimes can securitise sectarian dynamics to their advantage. In common with Iran, strict religious rules operate to discipline the citizens to the religious legitimacy of the Saudi regime. Appendix 2 shows governmental restrictions on religion are very high, with Saudi Arabia rating 7.71 out of 10 as show in Table 3.5. Religious police, although their power has been restricted in recent years, operate to enforce religious norms. There is a reason for this; alongside oil wealth, religion is the cornerstone of Saudi Arabia's regional status and domestic legitimacy, and thus the regime must ensure that religion retains its dominance in society, and remains powerful as the creator and enforcer of societal norms.

Strategies for Maintaining Identity based Real Selectorates: UAE

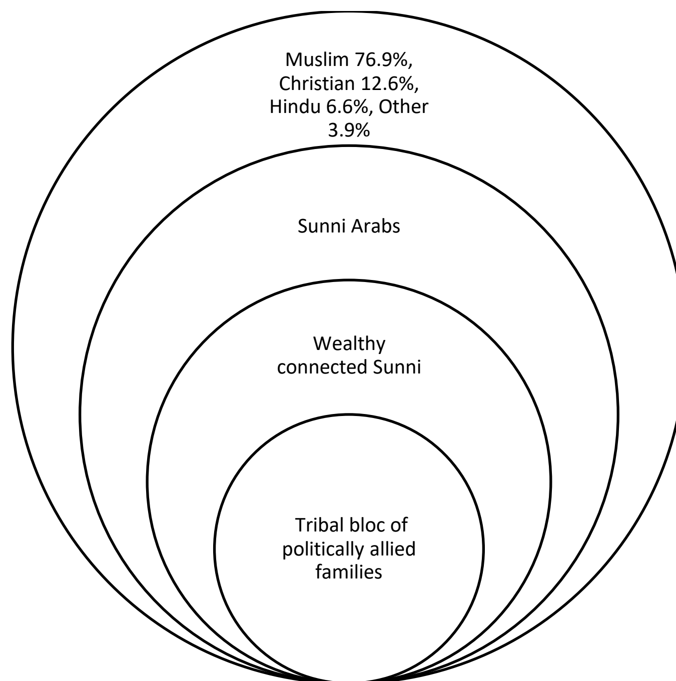

Figure 3.9. Selectorate Structure of the UAE. (Venn diagram created by author from assessments based on the research).

Correlating the Pew Government restriction figures in Appendix 3 with the diagram demonstrating the selectorate structure of the UAE, we can see clear indications that Sunni Muslims receive non-material dividends that relate to their religion and religious identity within the UAE. Furthermore although the Emirates is less restrictive then Saudi Arabia and Iran, it still maintains a high level of control over religion, with an index figure of 5.53. If, as de Mesquito and Smith assert, states are predominantly preoccupied with survival, then this will be indicated in their treatment of religion – if religion is important to political survival than we expect to see both a high level of control and monitoring of religious identities and the distribution of religious dividends. Appendix 3 clearly shows that the UAE government favours one religious group: Sunni Muslims.

Additionally, in common with Saudi Arabia, the UAE has co-opted the ulama into their service, with control of religion extending to directing the ulama's narratives. The topics of sermons, for instance, must be approved by the Federal Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs. This means that sermons serve as strategic narratives in the interests of the state. For example, in 2017 the General Authority of Islamic Affairs and Endowments released the text of the sermon for the coming Friday titled *On Sectarianism*. This sermon asserted that "Islam is a religion that calls for respecting the humanity of mankind with no discrimination on basis of race or colour" (Al-Mujadila: 18) (General Authority of Islamic Affairs and Endowments, 2017). Sermons on national unity and opposing religious extremism are clearly in the interests of state stability and in keeping with the UAE's promotion of moderate Islam. Another government sanctioned sermon worked towards state harmony and was titled *Equity and Moderation in Islam: Islam as the "Middle Path"* (General Authority of Islamic Affairs and Endowments, 2011). Among the goals of the General Authority, as listed on the regime's website, is to "instil the principle of moderation in Islam through religious guidance to achieve security and enhance religious awareness" (General Authority of Islamic Affairs and Endowments, 2010). The UAE's less conservative Maliki theology enables it to criticise Islamism more directly and to soften its Islamic identity towards moderation, enabling the regime to discredit Islamist opponents.

Strategies for Maintaining Identity based Real Selectorates: Qatar

Figure 3.9. Selectorate Structure of Qatar. (Venn diagram created by author from assessments based on the research).

Through examination of the Pew Research Center's investigation of the governmental restrictions on religion and on social hostility relating to religion which appears in Appendix 4, it emerges that Qatar favours Islam above other religions. Conversions are restricted and the government highly regulates religious affairs, particularly of the preferred religion, Islam. Referring to Appendix 4, with the exception of GRI.Q.12, Qatar's results are very similar to the UAE's, showing a clear favouring of the Sunni sectarian group which is the most prominent in the *real selectorate* and the *winning coalition*. The favouring of this sectarian group over the others when it comes to religious matters, shows that in order to maintain regime strength the Qatari government grants both non-material, (i.e. religious benefits) and material benefits to this group. As Baghourpour has pointed out, religious populations expect religious concessions and privileges to secure their loyalty.

Conclusion: Strategies for Maintaining Identity Based Real Selectorates

In keeping with the breakdowns demonstrated through applying Selectorate Theory, Justin Gengler outlines how a regime's core constituency is typically from the same religious and ethnic group as the regime leaders (Gengler, 2017, p. 182). According to Ethnic Conflict Theory, this strategy makes political sense as the dynamics inherent within identity groups are useful for managing loyalties within selectorates. For instance Social Identity Theory describes how identity groups have varying levels of in-group favouritism and out-group suspicion. Clearly, the Middle Eastern states are utilising this dynamic through their securitization of their minority groups; i.e. the Saudi leadership equated Shia protests with Iranian regional motivations in order to prevent the unrest they experienced during the local 'Arab Spring' protests from unifying across sectarian lines.

Applying Selectorate Theory clearly demonstrates which religious identity groups receive the greatest financial and social status dividends from the state. Effectively, Selectorate Theory demonstrates the sectarian hierarchy within the state. This hierarchy is evident when the results from the Pew Research Center's GRI and Social Hostility Index (SHI) are applied against Selectorate Theory. Additionally, focusing on a select sectarian group reduces the size of the *real selectorate*, as does the political marginalisation of women – minority religions and women become politically irrelevant. Therefore, as Albertsen and de Soya describe, the regime can focus on passing dividends to a smaller *Real Selectorate* and *Winning Coalition*, thus enabling the regime to "control people at minimum cost", and retain the "ruler's control over enormous wealth" generated from oil and gas (Albertsen & de Soya, 2018, pp. 256-257).

The breakdown of a state's selectorates demonstrates how political competition is structured within a state. It reveals which groups are marginalised and which are incorporated into the support base of the regime. Within a democracy such as the US selectorates are structured around competition between left and right through the agency of political parties. The Gulf monarchies do not have a democratic system, thus political parties cannot effectively compete amongst themselves through guaranteeing benefits to their voters/selectorates; thus, instead, political competition is fought through identity groups rather than political parties. An important dynamic to note in this instance is that citizens cannot easily leave a sectarian group, unlike a political party. Therefore, the importance and permanence of

sectarian identity makes it highly relevant politically in the Middle East. Ethnic Conflict Theory explains the actions of this dynamic with ethno-sectarian groups ranked hierarchically in order of dominance from the ethnic elite towards subordinate and unranked ethnic groups, with identity groups seeking to advance their political and social power relative to other sects (Horowitz, 1985, pp. 22-23). Therefore, uprisings and revolutions can be instigated by ethno-sectarian groups wanting to force a redistribution of economic and political power (Horowitz, 1985, pp. 83-84). However, whilst within the context of the 'Arab Spring' this was a significant driving factor in the Syrian, Yemeni and Bahrain uprisings, Egypt, Tunisia and Libya faced uprisings from within the same sectarian group as the regime elites. Looking at the results of the 'Arab Spring', whereby the successful revolutions came from same-sect uprisings against their regimes, we can conclude with some confidence that same-sect uprisings are the greatest domestic threat to regime survival. How well the regime addresses the dominant sect's identity needs through the idea of the state has an impact on the strength of this group's support for the regime, and thus affects regime survivability. This is discussed in the following section.

The Idea of the State and Secular-Religious Competition

Buzan has described state stability as being tied to having a strong and well accepted 'idea of the state', whilst Anne-Marie Slaughter explains that states need "an overarching national narrative" (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle, 2013, p. 3). This idea, or narrative, of the state is closely linked with legitimacy and the identity of the state. Within the Middle East legitimacy is closely tied to Islam, and state identity is tied to the hegemonic Muslim identity within each state. For instance, the Saudi state identity is linked to the dominant identity, i.e. Sunni Islam, specifically Wahhabi Islam. Furthermore, research by Feuer and Bagherpour showed that not only was it important for regime survival in the face of the 'Arab Spring' to have Islam heavily featured as the idea of the state but furthermore rulers were judged by the degree to which they adhere to their chosen ideological preference (Feuer, 2014) (Bagherpour, 2012, p. 77). Bagherpour established that the Islamist regimes survived the 'Arab Spring' intact, whilst the more secular regimes, or in the case of Yemen, confused, regimes faced difficulties. However, of the regimes that survived considerable uprisings such as Syria and Bahrain, the uprisings were led primarily by a competing sectarian group. Of the

regimes that fell during the 'Arab Spring', the uprisings came from within the regime's own sectarian group. The regime survival tactics as they relate to the dominant religious identity group contain a focus on the state's position on the secular-fundamentalist scale, and understandings about religion and governance. The idea of the state plays heavily into this dynamic and as will be apparent for each case study state.

The case study states in question use religion as the identity/idea of the state. Beyond the appeal of group bonds and in-group dynamics, Wedeen makes further observations about religion and political obedience in her book, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*. She observes that the highly visible and ritualised daily displays of religion (calls to prayers five times a day, mosques, women's dress, etc.) can act as a 'disciplinary device" and that by "inundating daily life with [religious] symbolism, the regime[s] exercised a subtle yet effective, form of power" (Wedeen, 2002, p. 723). Ownership and control of religion and the linking of religious symbols with the regime elites through ritual, dress, mosque building and references in speeches, all work to strengthen the regime's power by permeating religion's power and influence over society. Religion is spiritually meaningful and, in religious societies, to challenge religion is highly risky as the Pew Research Center's SHI demonstrates. As such, religion disciplines its faithful to obey its values and norms, or face social repercussions. With regimes aligning themselves as the promoters and defenders of the faith, they are able to control and commandeer this obedience which often has large historical meaning and is a lifelong, if not generational, habit. Tying obedience to religious authority to political authority turns religion into a valuable strategic tool. Building an idea of the state that relates to the dominant religious identity is a key part of linking regimes to religion's social power. Furthermore, Islam and Arab traditions both place a strong emphasis on the 'virtues' of obedience to leaders. Culturally, such social and religious norms strengthen autocratic leadership.

Iran and the Idea of the State

The Iranian idea of the state rests on the following key points: a Shia religious identity, guardianship of the Islamic jurists, leader of Shia solidarity, supporter of the oppressed and its religious moral superiority (Aarabi, 2019).

The current identity of the Iranian Islamic Republic emerged under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini who seized power during the 1979 revolution. To strengthen his regime's religious and political legitimacy, Khomeini sought to recast the idea of political leadership in Shia theology. He asserted the right of clerics to rule through what he called the *velayat-e faqih* (rule of the Jurists). This form of governance rests on the notion of divine sovereignty. In 2009 Ayatollah Khamanei described this as follows:

> All Muslims ought to obey the commands of the Valey-e Faquih (Supreme Leader) and submit themselves to his orders and prohibitions…Commitment to the Valey-e Faqih is not separated from commitment to Islam and guardianship of the infallible Imams (Ghobadzadeh, 2014, p. Pg. 30).

In order to justify clerical leadership, Khomeini asserted that the Islamic Jurist-led government was the highest religious institution. He emphasised religious narratives in order to ensure regime survival, positioning cleric rulers as a branch of the Prophet Mohammad's guardianship (Ghobadzadeh, 2019). He is quoted supporting this idea below:

> A government which is a branch of the Prophet Mohammad's absolute guardianship is one of the primary Islamic precepts and takes priority over all subsidiary precepts, even over praying, fasting and pilgrimage…if necessary, [a] governor can close or destroy mosques (Ghobadzadeh, 2019).

Thus, the legitimacy of the state is claimed to be given by God – essentially the Iranian regime uses Islam as an "authoritarian legitimation strategy" (Lorch, 2019, p. 263). This discourse between divine versus popular sovereignty is the initial basis of the Shia-Sunni division and can be traced back to the death of the Prophet Mohammad. Ghobadzadeh outlines that whereas the Sunni decided that governance was not a religious concern and that rulers should be chosen by the people, the Shia believed that the "ruler possesses divine right" and that God had chosen the Prophet's son-in-law as his successor. Therefore, in fundamental Shi'ite theology, popular sovereignty is not the basis of legitimacy (Ghobadzadeh, 2014, p. 3&4 of Chapter One). The religious claims of an Iranian state are crystallized into three forms: (a) claim of divine foundation for the state, (b) conflation of religion and state, and (c) the exclusive right of the clergy to political leadership" (Ghobadzadeh, 2014, p. 17 of Introduction). In order to de-legitimize the Iranian state, religious scholars are challenging this idea of divine sovereignty (Ghobadzadeh, 2014, p. 11 of Chapter 1). To counter opposition

narratives, the regime attempts to raise the idea that, given the state is the highest religious institution, to challenge the state is to attack religion.

The Iranian idea of the state positions the state as leader of the region's Shia. This enables the state to leverage influence from the strength of Shia sectarian solidarity. As Gengler describes, the historical narrative of Shi'ism is one of struggle and self-sacrifice in the face of more powerful, but corrupt, political and religious oppressors (Gengler, 2011, p. 336). Iran seeks to locate itself within this narrative as the defender of the oppressed, drawing strength from the narrative's historical relevance. Domestically, this narrative is mirrored by Iran's perception of itself as surrounded and targeted by enemies – the Sunni states, Israel and the US. Discourse around defending the oppressed has a relevance outside of the Shia sphere with the Muslims identifying with the oppression of Palestinians by Israel which Iran looks to exploit. However, since the 2011 Arab protests and uprisings, the narrative around oppression has become linked to the Arab citizens in their struggle against corrupt and autocratic leaders. As a consequence, Iran's support for the counter-revolution in Syria against the Assad regime has damaged Iran's ability to cast itself as the supporter of the oppressed (Mansour, 2019).

The domestic opposition would need to develop narratives that work to de-link the regime from religion in order to avoid the charge that its challenge to the state is a challenge against Islam. This narrative is typically based on asserting a form of secularism that preserves the dominant role of Islam in society, described here as religious secularism. The Iranian regime relies on outbidding its domestic opponents on matters of religion. It remains to be seen whether religious secularity shifts the religious and political arena in Iran.

Saudi Arabia and the Idea of the State

Saudi legitimacy, like Iran's legitimacy, rests heavily on its religious credentials. Saudi Arabia has considerable religious capital given the following factors: it is the custodian of the Holy sites of Islam in Mecca and Medina, the origin state of the Islamic faith, the birthplace of Mohammad and the regime is a combined historical project between the prominent Salafi theologian Muhammad Al Wahhab and the al-Saud family. Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud's statement outlining the Saudi regime's Vision 2030 plan emphasises the role of the King as Custodian of the Holy Mosques and the state's religious significance:

> The first pillar of our vision is our status as the heart of the Arab and Islamic worlds. We recognise that Allah the Almighty has bestowed on our lands a gift more precious than oil. Our Kingdom is the Land of the Two Holy Mosques, the most sacred sites on earth, and the direction of the Kaaba (Qibla) to which more than a billion Muslims turn at prayer. […] All this comes from the directive of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud, may Allah protect him… (Saudi Arabian Government, 2019).

Given the conservatism of the Wahhabi faith and the spread of Salafi Islam across the region, in order to retain domestic legitimacy the Saud's must outflank fundamentalist opposition figures. This had become challenging in the post-'Arab Spring' environment given that Islamist moderates and extremists have inserted themselves into the power vacuums and electoral processes that have developed across the region. However, the worldwide condemnation and downfall of Daesh (also known as the Islamic State or ISIL) has discredited extreme Salafi Islam to Saudi Arabia's advantage. To differentiate the Wahhabi faith from Islamic extremism and to delegitimise Islamic terrorism, Prince Muhammad bin Salman has worked to specify that the Saudi idea of the state is conservative, not extremist, Islam.

The UAE and the Idea of the State

The idea/identity of the Emirates is first and foremost a moderate Arab Sunni identity. However, one of the most significant challenges facing the UAE is how to sustain monarchical rule in the face of rapid modernization. The Western path to modernity outlined by Secularization Theory must be avoided if the state's religious legitimacy is to remain valid. Vania Pinto states that increasing the profile of religion and culture in order to sustain the status quo – monarchical leadership - has been a significant part of the efforts to manage this within the UAE (Pinto, 2012, pp. 49 , 51).

In another potential challenge to its religious culture, the UAE relies heavily on foreign nationals for labour (Snoj, 2015). Given the resulting high number of expatriates,[39] Emiratis fear a loss of traditional culture and a weakening of religion. Therefore although the legitimacy of the Emirati regime is significantly grounded in its ability to provide the domestic conditions for generating wealth, it must also address the gap between the expatriates and their conservative citizens. Religion, Khaleeji culture and identity are the primary means

[39] UAE citizens number only 11% of the total population, i.e. 1,084,764 of a total 9,577,000 (Snoj, 2013).

through which both the Qatari and Emirati regimes reassure their citizens that their traditions, and the hegemony of the Sunni Arab identity will not be overtaken by Western and other influences (Pugliese, 2011).

Promoting moderate Islam as the idea of the state enables the regime to create the conditions necessary to both generate wealth (for which they need foreign labour) and to protect the Islamic identity. To help facilitate this, the regime has been working to incorporate an acceptance of religious pluralism into its version of moderate Islam (Samir, 2015). There are 24 churches in the UAE, partially funded by local rulers. With Christian numbers in the UAE, including non-citizens, at 10 per cent, demographics and the UAE's integration into global and Western economies makes it wise to facilitate the faith within the UAE provided it poses no threat to the dominance of the hegemonic Sunni Muslim identity. Additionally, a new law passed in 2015 making it illegal to discriminate based on Islamic law, therefore calling someone else an 'infidel' is punishable by law, providing protection towards non-Muslims or heterodox Muslims. This anti-discrimination law reveals differences between the Middle East and North Africa region and the West. Whereas in the West much discrimination is racial, discrimination in the Middle East is first and foremost religious (Samir, 2015). Sheikh Maktoum, the Vice-President and Prime Minister of the UAE, outlines his reasons for the new law:

> The new law adds to our assets, the strength of our social fabric as well as the mechanisms of protecting our country and people from the plagues of fanaticism, discrimination and hate spread by extremist and terrorist ideologies and ignorance, in Arab and Muslim countries as well as across the globe (Maktoum, 2015).

In 2016, the UAE created two new ministerial positions, the Minister of State for Happiness and the Minister of State for Tolerance. Sheikh Maktoum tweeted that it was hoped that the Minister of State for Tolerance would work towards establishing tolerance "as a fundamental value in UAE society". Given the growing stigma surrounding Salafi Islam, an Islamic identity that tilts towards political secularism and religious tolerance yields considerable 'global capital' (BBC, 2016) (United Arab Emirates Government, 2019).

In a speech commemorating the UAE's 44th national day in 2015, Sheikh Maktoum emphasised that they "have no alternative but to engage in a confrontation with those who

use religion to achieve goals that are not endorsed by the religion. Those who distorted our religion, more than the enemies of our religion ever could, have inflicted on all Muslims damages that are unprecedented in terms of scale, depth and consequences" (Maktoum, Sheikh 2015). In a region where leaders are beset by the threat from radical and political Islam, but where Islam remains the unifying and central idea, the UAE is attempting to shift the orientation of its own domestic Islam towards a moderate version that strengthens the state's security. The Ambassador to the EU, Mohamed Issa Abushahab links moderate Islam and regime stability stating: "At a time when our societies are facing threats from outside and within, there is a growing recognition that tolerance and diversity is a powerful counter-measure to extremism" (Abushahab, 2018). Referring to the Pope's visit which marked the UAE year of Tolerance in 2019, he described the UAE as "a hub in a volatile region, where cultural diversity is ingrained as part of our social fabric. The values of openness and tolerance are critical prerequisites for stability" (Abushahab, 2018).

The UAE, alongside Chechnya and Egypt, are looking to develop a functional model of moderate Islam, one that possesses the Sufi orientation on personal spirituality rather than a political and social focus (Makahleh & Karasik, 2016). The emphasis on moderate Islam is not a move, though, towards Western style secularism with its removal of religion from both political and social spheres: such secularism would provide a political opportunity to Islamist opposition to the regime. Instead, the Emirati royal families have worked to stress the importance of religion in the Emirates, making mosques among the most prominent landmarks in the UAE as a means to boost the status of religion as a cultural and identity marker. For instance, the Awqaf Ministry constructed 54 new mosques in Al Ain city, bringing the total mosques built in 2016-2017 to 94 (Awqaf, 2017). This governmental support of mosques as identity markers helps to retain support from the Sunni Muslims that make up the *real selectorate*, and to outflank Islamists (Pinto, 2012, pp. 49, 52, 58-61).

Qatar and the Idea of the State

Qatar's idea of the state and legitimacy is strongly linked to the Arab Muslim identity, therefore the hegemony of the Kahaleeji tribal identity over potential alternatives is important for the longevity of the regime. The brand of Islam promoted by the regime as the

idea of the state is Wahhabi Islam; however, the regime has worked to create a progressive model of the faith.

Similar to the UAE, Qatar is dependent on expatriates to expand its labour force. The need to cater for these expatriates, and integrate into the Western dominated international economy, has shifted the regime's calculations regarding religious pluralism. With Christians numbering approximately 100,000, making up 13% of the Qatari population[40], Qatar opened its first church in 2013. Reverend Bill Schwartz, of the Church of Epiphany in Qatar, thanked Qatari leaders and the Qatari people "who generously accept the principle that the large expatriate workforce in their country should be encouraged to follow their own religious heritage and traditions" (Davies, 2013).

Although in comparison to other Middle Eastern states, Qatar is unusually open to European culture in the commercial sphere, following the 'Arab Spring', it became clear that Qatar still held the previous Emir's belief that the 'Arab Street' preferred some form of Islamic governance (Al-Thani, 2005), with Qatar signalling the importance of the Arab Muslim identity (Anderson, 2016). As such, the first challenge outlined in *Qatar Vision*, the mission statement of the Qatari government, is the challenge of modernisation and the preservation of traditions. This statement reads:

> Preservation of cultural traditions is a major challenge that confronts many societies in a rapidly globalizing and increasingly interconnected world. […] Moreover, the greater freedoms and wider choices that accompany economic and social progress pose a challenge to deep-rooted social values highly cherished by society. Yet it is possible to combine modern life with values and culture. […] Qatar's National Vision responds to this challenge and seeks to connect and balance the old and the new (General Secretariat for Development Planning, 2008).

Within his speech inaugurating the 45th Advisory Council session, the Qatari Emir, Tamim al Thani, declared a continued commitment to "genuine Arab and Islamic values and traditions" (Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016). In keeping with this, the regime has undertaken projects that emphasise the Arab Muslim identity; for instance the Museum of Islamic Art, which opened in 2008 and is highly publicised by the regime, features an unprecedented

[40] This figure includes non-citizens.

display of Islamic art spanning the full 1400 years of the Muslim religion (Museum of Islamic Art, 2017). Additionally, in 2013, Qatar's Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs opened 25 new mosques leading up to the year's Ramadan (Marhaba, 2014). Qatari reactions to the blockade led by the UAE and Saudi Arabia have resulted in intensified efforts to develop both cultural capital and increased openness to the world.[41] Proud of his independent stance, a cult of personality has developed around the Emir, and national pride is strong (Adams, 2016). This dynamic is also evident in Saudi Arabia and the UAE; all three Gulf States are increasingly seeking to strengthen their legitimacy through a militarised nationalism which links their Islamic and Arabic heritage with the military domain, with Saudi Arabia and the UAE linking their military intervention in Yemen to national pride (Ardemagni, 2020).

Conclusion: Idea of the State

Imad Mansour identifies that state building begins with ideas that are developed through narratives. All the case study states feature Islam and some degree of Islamism as one of their core ideas, if not, as is the case with Iran and Saudi Arabia, the main idea of the state. Two forms of Islamist actors rose to prominence in the aftermath of the 'Arab Spring'. First, the democratic religious secularity of Muslim Brotherhood linked actors such as Ehnahda in Tunisia and, second, extremist actors such as ISIL in Syria and Iraq. These actors have differentiated their ideas around Islamism in relation to the existing regimes and as a result intensified the political salience of the secular-religious debate. Given the reliance on Islam as a pillar of the regimes, the outcome of this debate has important implications for the stability of the case study regimes. The states are attempting to outflank these emerging Islamist challenges. In the case of the UAE, the state is working to advance a state sponsored version of religious political secularism that serves the interests of the state elite (Fox & Tabory, 2008).

The Emirates, and Saudi Arabia to a lesser extent, stand out as working to shift the idea of the state, probably in reaction to the Islamism within the 'Arab Spring'. The Emirates appears to be attempting to shift its idea of the state away from religion, possibly in order to reduce the

[41] "Qatar has become the most open country in the Middle East and the 8th most open in the world in terms of visa facilitation according to The World Tourism Organization's (UNWTO) recently updated visa openness rankings" (The Peninsula, 2018).

appeal of Islamism and to shift the regional norm away from religious involvement in governance, towards a more secular stance that stresses the primacy of secular, but pious politicians, over religion. As Tije H. Donker notes, the use of Islam as a political tool is not exclusive to Islamists (Donker & Nettertorm, 2017, p. 152). This political action is described by Anne Marie Wainscott and Fox: "all states regulate religion", (Fox & Tabory, 2008), "[S]ome states go a step further, [however], attempting to shape the content of citizen's religious beliefs in-line with an official state sponsored theology" (Wainscott, 2018, p. 3). This regulation and construction of religion is a means of obstructing political opponents who pursue a religious agenda.

Countering Political Opposition through the Secular-Religious Dynamic

Feuer's research focused on religious regulation and regime survival. She outlined how state regulation of religion is "also shaped by the form and tenor of the group(s) a regime perceives to be its most formidable political opponent(s). Specifically, the degree to which a regime's political opponents frame their demands and base their own legitimacy on religious grounds will color the state's regulation of religion" (Feuer, 2014). Taking its cue from Feuer's findings, this section looks into the severity and key patterns of religious regulation used by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar and Iran to suppress political opposition. It also investigates links between religious regulation and regime survival, referencing the Pew Research Center's GRI and SHI data[42], particularly as they relate to the sectarian blocs within the *selectorates* of the Iran, Saudi Arabia, the Emirates and Qatar.

The 'Arab Spring' has established collective action against the regime as the key threat to regime survival. Social Movement Theory outlines three casual factors that lead to protest movements: political opportunity, mobilising structures and framing. Religion can play a part in mobilising uprisings, as collective action is typically mobilised through established social structures and communicated through existing social networks (Jackson, 2012, p. V & 4). Mosques and religious groups are able to form the structures, narratives and vehicles for mobilisation. Eghdamian and Hessler outline this below:

[42] See Appendixes 1-8, page 320.

> Mosques not only served as sites from which protestors received their motivation, they also functioned as centres for protesters to prepare for demonstrations (Hessler 2011). Without mosques, political mobilisation during the Arab Spring would have been impossible. Beyond this 'mosque to square' narrative, ideological support for activists in the Arab Spring also lay in Islamic concepts and motives that had shaped the political landscape of the region for centuries (Eghdamian, 2014).

The case study states also use religion's existing social networks, narratives, moral status and social structures for political purposes, as is evident from the religious morality focus of Saudi Arabia's religious police, which help establish the power of the regime through religious regulation. This is discussed further below.

Regime Security, Political Opposition and Religious Regulation in Iran

Minority Mobilisation

In Iran, Shia make up 90-95% of the population and the Sunni 5-10%. The other minority groups make up 0.6% (World Population Review, 2019) and face marginalisation, particularly the Baha'i faith[43]. The Iranian regime engages in significant repression of its minority identity groups. Its repression index figure is in the very high category for the GRI ranking as is apparent in Appendix 1 and Appendix 5. Bozorgmehr reports that the regime works to keep the profile of Sunni Islam low; Sunni imams are appointed and vetted by the Shia regime and they are unable to run their own religious schools. They are also unable to build Sunni mosques in the capital and have to follow the Shia religious calendar (Bozorgmehr, 2015). In 2013 the UN Special Rapporteur also reported the persecution of minority religious groups stating:

> Reports from and interviews with members of the Bahai, Christian, and Sunni Muslim communities continue to portray a situation in which adherents of recognised and unrecognised religions face discrimination in law and/or in practice. This includes various levels of intimidation, arrest and detention. A number of interviewees maintained that they were repeatedly interrogated about their religious beliefs, and a majority of interviewees reported being charged with national security crimes and/or propaganda against the state for

[43] It is likely that some of the persecution of Bahai'is relates to theology; the Bahai'is believe that prophets are relevant to a people, place and time, and that as such other prophets will and do follow Muhammad.

religious activities. Several interviewees reported that they were psychologically and physically tortured (Shaheed, 2013).

Rehman adds to this, stating: "More broadly, the Special Rapporteur notes that reports of his predecessor have described how some ethnic minority groups in Iran constitute a disproportionately large percentage of persons executed or imprisoned" (Rehman, 2018).

Cross-Sectarian or Same-sect Mobilisation?

There have been five waves of unrest since 1979 in Iran, with three in the last decade and the most recent occurring in 2018. Iran uses the following methods to discourage cross-sectarian or Shia based mobilisation against the regime: intelligence and surveillance (including the IRGC), operations against protest movements (involving the regular police, police special forces, the Basji, the IRGC and its Imam Ali Forces and Thar Allah[44]), the judiciary, media, plain clothes police forces and providing financial and logistical means, including steadily increasing budgets for security forces, and providing financial support for loyal groups (Veisi, 2018).

The IRGC has grown to become one of the pillars of the regime, essential for its political survival. It positions itself as the guardians of the Islamic revolution and defends the Islamic system of governance seeing itself as involved in a cultural war against Western values, secularism and democracy. The citizen Basji works in society to develop proper citizens who are devout and support the Islamic *velayat-e faqih* system of government (Ostovar, 2016). The IRGC's primary focus is clearly its military tasks. However, Ostovar identifies the IRGC as "a religious organisation" but goes on to argue that "religion is malleable. How it is emphasized, when it is evoked, and to what degree it shapes behaviour are all in part determined by political factors" (Ostovar, 2016, p. 237). This supports Feuer's assertion that religion is regulated in accordance with the survival needs of the state (Feuer, 2014); religious regulations and religious narratives are designed to protect the regime.

[44] Translates to 'The Revenge of Allah'.

Regime Security, Political Opposition and Religious Regulation in Saudi Arabia

Minority Mobilisation

Appendices 2 and 8 indicate that there are very high levels of religious restrictions in Saudi Arabia with the state receiving a GRI score of 7.71. To limit the advancement of Shia, Shi'ites are banned from holding high status jobs and government positions. Additionally social hostility against minority religions is high in Saudi Arabia, with the Pew Research Center reporting that religious groups have acted to prevent the operation of other religious groups. The Shia in Saudi Arabia's Eastern province are "treated as a security threat rather than a community to be integrated" (Strobl, 2017). This securitization of the sectarian dynamic has its roots in the discourse of state linked takfiri[45] Wahhabi clerics who declare the Shia are guilty of apostasy. This discourse has become deeply embedded in the identity of the Sunni elite and the regime (Strobl, 2017, p. 215). As Strobl notes, "what is notable is that Bahrain and Saudi Arabia arrived at the institutionalization of their ongoing sectarian anxieties, and [have] found ways to build the existing Saudi hegemony and anti-Shia order" (Strobl, 2017, p. 218).

Cross-Sectarian or Same-sect Mobilisation?

Faced with protests during the 'Arab Spring', the Saud regime drew on Wahhabi positions to discourage unity across sectarian, ideological and tribal lines and to counter the non-sectarian demands of the new activist groups such as the National Youth Movement. For instance, the protest entitled the 'Day of Rage' was described by the regime as a "Shia conspiracy" (Walther, 2016, pp. 9-10). Iran was depicted as being the master mind behind protests in the Kingdom and the Saudi regime was further defended by co-opted Sunni clerics dutifully issuing fatwas declaring it was un-Islamic to protest (Burke, 2011).

The Saudi state also faced opposition from Salafi dissidents who oppose westernisation and claim the Saud state is neglecting to sufficiently implement its sacred duty towards Islam, essentially questioning the Saudi state's commitment to its core idea of itself as a

[45] A Muslim who accuses another Muslim (or an adherent of another Abrahamic faith) of apostasy. The accusation itself is called takfir, derived from the word kafir (unbeliever), and is described as when 'one who is a Muslim is declared impure'.

conservative Islamist state. The Saudi leaders portray Saudi Arabia as "the purest model of the Islamic state, declaring it is modelled on the example of the Prophet Muhammad's state in seventh century Arabia" (Bunzel, 2017, p. 241). However, as Jasim Lorch identifies, high levels of Islamism in the state may drive Islamist opposition to take increasingly radical stances in order to distinguish themselves (Lorch, 2019). As such, ISIL and other extremist groups have mounted a counter claim that they represent the 'purist' example of the Prophet's Islamic State. An added difficulty for the Saudi state is that whereas AQAP focused on the 'far enemy', Westerners and Western interests in the Middle East, ISIL has a distinctly anti-Shia, and anti-'apostate' focus. With the exception of Oman, the anti-Shia alignment in many ways ties in neatly with the Sunni Gulf States fears that the Middle East is in danger of domination from a Shia crescent led by Iran. ISIL outlines this narrative, declaring that "the Shia aspire to a massive state in the shape of a crescent, stretching from Syria through Iraq down through eastern Arabia to Oman and Yemen, ultimately encompassing Islam's holy places in the Hijaz". It continues, "Shia of the Eastern Province are secretly loyal to Tehran and are readying to free themselves of the Sunni yoke when the time is right" (Bunzel, 2017, pp. 250-251). ISIL used the regime's securitization of the Shia issue to its advantage, criticizing the Saudi regime for failing to contain the Shia 'threat', stating, "The Al Salul will never protect you from the Rejectionists. Indeed, they have been unable to protect their artificial borders from the Houthi scum, so how will they protect you from the Rejectionists if they join together against you?" (Bunzel, 2017, p. 250).

The anti-Shia outlook of the Wahhabi school has created additional problems for the Sauds in that it is difficult for their scholars to criticise ISIL in defence of the King (Bunzel, 2017, p. 251). Therefore, with extremism becoming a problem, in 2014 the late King Abdullah criticised the clerics for their reluctance to address Daesh, which in part is due to the Salafi clerics' support for the rebels and the 'jihad' against the Syrian regime (Bunzel, 2017, p. 257). In 2001, after September 11, the King also called on his scholars to steer away from the dangers of "extremism". This move towards moderating Wahhabi Islam has been continued by Prince Muhammad bin Salman who declared in 2018 that Wahhabi Islam needed to correct its course and emphasising moderation. As he put it, "We are simply reverting to what we followed – a moderate Islam open to the world and all religions" (Bunzel, 2017, p. 258).

The dangers from Islamism are not only at the fundamentalist end of the scale. Saudi Arabia's legitimacy is also threatened by the idea of a democratic Islamist country. As such, Saudi Arabia is wary of the Muslim Brotherhood, particularly given the Muslim Brotherhood's English language website indicates support for democracy (Ikhwan Web, 2014); (Ikhwan Web, 2017). Through a hegemonic identity lens, a moderate democratic Sunni Islamist government may be able to challenge the al Saud's claim to religious leadership of the Muslim world, hence the Saudi - Turkish hostility. It could also weaken the appeal of Saudi Arabia's identity which features a strong commitment to its puritanical Islamist dogma and autocracy. This all means that Qatar's erstwhile promotion of political activism, Islamic or otherwise, is viewed as a threat. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia's social contract, which is similar to the approach taken by other Gulf States, is based on the combined financial benefits of no taxation and the provision of welfare in exchange for political rights[46]. Given it is extremely difficult to tackle the regime on the basis of economic provision, this requires domestic opposition to challenge it on positions regarding "culture, ideology and civic society" (Dorsey, 2013). Thus, Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood, a political group that focuses on issues of religion and culture, is seen as a direct threat to the rest of the Gulf (Dorsey, 2013).

Regime Security, Political Opposition and Religious Regulation in the UAE

Minority Mobilisation

Referring to Appendices 3 and 7, the UAE scored highly on the Pew Research Center's index for governmental restrictions on religion, coming in at 5.53. This lower score can be attributed to the UAE's efforts to move towards greater secularism and pluralism. However, there is governmental hostility towards minority religious groups and a discriminatory practice of asking religious groups to register. Due to greater theological and cultural openness however, the SHI score of the UAE was comparatively lower than other Middle Eastern states.

[46] This is described in rentier state thesis which claims that "economic satisfaction breeds political indifference in resource dependent states". This has since been qualified by Justin J. Gengler, who asserts that within Bahrain "the Sunni-Shia conflict disrupts the mechanism of the political buy-off available in Bahrain" (Gengler J. J., 2011, pp. 2-4).

Despite an initial rise in sectarianism following the 'Arab Spring' between Sunni headed states led by Saudi Arabia and mostly Shi'a regional alliance led by Iran, the UAE continues to have a relatively integrated Shi'a community. Like Omani Shi'a, Emirati Shi'a are financially integrated, with Shi'i families amongst the wealthiest in the state. Nonetheless, the increase in sectarian tension between Sunni and Shi'a regionally has had an impact on the regime's attitude towards Shi'a in the UAE. There is greater wariness regarding Shi'i who follow Iranian imams for instance, and Iranian influence over UAE Shi'a is monitored closely (Majidyar, 2013).

Unlike Saudi Arabian Shi'a, the UAE's 10-15% Shi'i community are able to worship and congregate in their own mosques and husseiniyas[47]. Although these religious buildings are private property, governmental financial assistance is available for maintenance and building. Ironically, the Shi'a have more religious freedom then the Sunni, probably because Shi'i are not the *winning coalition*[48] or even the *real selectorate* (Smith & de Mesquito, 2011, p. 5). Thus in contrast to the Sunni majority, Shi'i are able to choose their own mosque leaders and write their own sermons whereas the identity group on which the regime depends for continued legitimacy and support, the Sunni, are monitored more closely. However, there is an implicit assumption that these Shi'a sermons will not go against the interests of the state.

Cross-Sectarian or Same-sect Mobilisation?

Given Friday prayers and mosques became sites of revolutionary mobilisation during the 'Arab Spring', religion has come under extra scrutiny in the Emirates. In a move designed to decrease the ability of same-sect opposition to organise through mosques - a common feature in the 'Arab Spring' - in 2018 the state passed the following laws, reducing the ability of mosques to act as sites of political mobilisation:

> The New law requires prior licensing of the following activities:
>
> 1. Hosting lectures and sermons
> 2. Organizing seminars within the mosques
> 3. Conducting Quran memorization circles

[47] Shi'ite congregation hall.

[48] Essential supporters without whom the leader/regime would be finished (Smith & de Mesquito, 2011, p. 5)

4. Collecting donations or other aid
5. Assigning or appointing any person on a temporary or permanent postion to hold or organise any religious or social events
6. Distribute books, leaflets, video or audio recordings
7. Bringing food to the mosques
8. Belonging to any illegal group or carry out any political or organizational activities

The following are prohibited:

I. Mosque employees are prohibited from preaching, reciting or teaching religious lessons, or Quran memorization activities outside the mosques
II. Involving oneself in entities authorized in participate in any media activities without prior permission
III. Belonging to any illegal group or carry out any political or organizational activities (STA Law, 2018)

It is likely, as Wainscott points out in relation to Morocco, that the rise of extremists has provided the UAE and the other case study states greater opportunity to regulate religion and therefore gain greater control of the state's religious identity (Wainscott, 2018, p. 5).

Additionally, with regards to the Sunni majority, the 'Arab Spring' has had a dramatic effect on Abu Dhabi's calculations, resulting in a crackdown on Islamist groups both domestically and regionally (Roberts, 2016). The largest opposition group in the UAE is the Muslim Brotherhood linked Al-Islah. Al Islah's platform includes emphasising moderate Islam, moral guidance and discouraging extremism. Its agenda includes an elected national assembly. Al-Islah is the sister organisation to Ennahda which is an Islamist political party in democratic Tunisia, with whom the Emirati regime has a troubled relationship. In order to counter Al-Islah's appeal the state casts it as promoting an agenda that is counter to the UAE's religious and cultural tolerance, a threat to political stability and a threat to the successful transformation of the Emirates from a tribal society into a wealthy modern state (Hakala, 2012). The regime propagates a narrative that opposition figures and Islamists are extremist destabilising elements in society and/or foreign agents employed to disrupt the UAE. The Emirati regime has been conflating Islamists with highly publicised extremists across the region such as ISIL, and promoting its version of religious secularity as the antidote. The

Emirati US ambassador outlined this support for moderate Islam in an interview with *The Atlantic*,

> Sunni extremism comes from within. Sunni extremism attempts to hijack our religion and then use it for political reasons to gain power, like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, like Hamas in Palestine. These groups hide behind religion but use religion for political purposes (Otaiba, 2017).

Hundreds of al Islah members were arrested, the group was officially disbanded and the Muslim Brotherhood was labelled a terrorist group. Other civil society groups were disbanded or expelled as well, with some groups unrelated to Islamism, such as the Gulf Research Center, caught in the wide net cast by the government. Although the contagion of the 'Arab Spring' protests did not reach the UAE, the high visibility of regional Islamists within the aftermath of the uprisings - particularly within the Syrian and Libyan civil wars, Tunisia's initial elections and Egypt's revolution - intensified Abu Dhabi's concern about Islamist groups. As such, the UAE's domestic and foreign policy have since reflected an extreme distrust of Islamists (Roberts, 2016). However, despite the regime's best efforts, support for the Muslim Brotherhood remains persistent. Following a poll conducted in the UAE, David Pollack describes the situation as below:

> Fully one-third of the country's Sunni citizens[49] continue to have at least a "somewhat positive" attitude toward the Brotherhood. That number has not budged in the past three years, despite a vociferous and at times heavy-handed official campaign against the group (Pollock, 2018).

Although the UAE is actively opposed to Islamism, and advocating for greater political secularity in the Middle East to push back against the rising influence of Islamists following the 'Arab Spring', it is also careful to emphasis its commitment to Islam. Abu Dhabi's construction of a huge and enormously expensive mosque, the Sheikh Zayed Mosque, emphases this point. Islam the faith is firmly secured and supported within the UAE, in contrast to the political ideology of Islamism.

[49] Sunni make up 90% of the total population.

Regime Security, Political Opposition and Religious Regulation in Qatar

Minority Mobilisation

Qatari Shia represent around 10% of the population (Pew Research Center, 2009) and, generally speaking, they are well integrated into society. They tend to support the regime and are able to practise their religion with considerable freedom. They are present across most government departments and also have their own Shia family court system. Given the Shia are present in low numbers, plus the close relationship between the Qatari regime and the Shia merchant class, the Qatari regime are not significantly perturbed by Iranian attempts to influence Qatari Shia. Of the two main regional Shia theological centers in Iran and Iraq, Qatar's Shia tend to be followers of Iraq's Najaf center lead by Ayatollah al Sistani who is comparatively moderate. Additionally, although they have religious networks linking them to Shia in Iraq, Iran and Lebanon, Qatari Shia do not typically maintain political connections outside of Qatar. Prior to the 'Arab Spring', the Emir of Qatar maintained relationships with Shia leaders, unlike other Gulf nations. For instance, he discussed the Bahraini protests with Iraqi Shia leader Muqtada al Sadr in 2011, and met with Iranian Ayatollah al Khamenei in Tehran in 2010. However, Qatar's involvement with the Gulf military unit, the Gulf Peninsula Shield Force, and the suppression of the Shia led uprising in Bahrain in 2011, has complicated matters. Additionally, the rising sectarian tensions across the region have also impacted Qatar. In June 2013 Qatar deported Shia, in this case 18 Lebanese Shi'ites. This was due to concerns and anger regarding Hezbollah's support for the Syrian regime and expanding Iranian influence (Majidyar, 2013).

Cross-Sectarian or Same-sect Mobilisation?

Like the UAE, Qatar does not allow the Muslim Brotherhood or other Islamists to operate domestically. However, Qatar has long served as a refuge for Islamist exiles fleeing from their home countries, with the proviso they do not attempt to engage in Qatari politics. Abdel Ghaffar Hussain describes in the Emirati paper Al Khaleej how in the 1950s and 1960s Muslim Brotherhood members sought refuge in Qatar. Among them was the high profile cleric Yusuf al Qaradawi, but also another prominent member of the Muslim Brotherhood, Sheikh Abdul Badi Saqr. Saqr became the advisor to the Qatari ruler and Director of the Qatar National

Library. What this signifies is the high levels of contact with the regime that some Muslim Brotherhood members had at the time (Mubarak, 2013). However, despite this, the Qatari Muslim Brotherhood has struggled to gain ground domestically. Proselytization is difficult in Qatar, as the Wahhabi creed of Salafi Hanbali Islam is firmly entrenched and is at odds with the Muslim Brotherhood's more moderate approach. Although the regime's orientation and policies do not chime with a standard interpretation of the Wahhabi faith, the elites are not seeking to undermine its influence in the private sphere. Furthermore, Qatar provides limited opportunities for political influence by religious scholars, and this includes Muslim Brotherhood clerics. As David Roberts states "Doha does not entertain the notion of religious influence on politics at the institutional level" (Roberts D. , 2014). This has limited the political influence of both Muslim Brotherhood affiliates and Wahhabi clerics. Furthermore, with the wealthy state adequately supporting local initiatives often undertaken by the Muslim Brotherhood elsewhere, i.e. running food banks and local sports clubs etc., there is limited opportunity for the Muslim Brotherhood to insert their leaders into the mezzanine level of rule between the government and the people within Qatari society (Roberts D. , 2014, pp. 25-26). Essentially, the internal structure of Qatari society means that political secularism is able to be established with greater ease then elsewhere in the Gulf.

By remaining politically quietist within Qatar, the Brotherhood obtains a refuge and is able to use Qatar as a "launching pad for its expansion into the Emirates and especially Dubai" (Roberts D. , 2014). The Brotherhood also strengthens the regime's legitimacy as it serves as evidence of the regime's support for Islam. The regime is wary of increasing the profile of Wahhabism given Saudi Arabia is considered the custodian of the Wahhabi faith along with being the guardian of the two holiest sites. A high profile for Wahhabi Islam in Qatar could increase religious fidelity to Saudi Arabia. Therefore, instead, Qatar used the religious profile of the Muslim Brotherhood to increase its Islamic credentials, giving it greater control over the Qatari based Brotherhood members than any potential Saudi clerics. Furthermore, the Muslim Brotherhood ideology is more popular and widespread than Wahhabism within the region as a whole (Roberts D. , 2014, pp. 26-27) providing Qatar with networking opportunities. Qatar's open door policy to Muslim Brotherhood members has enabled it to engage through Brotherhood networks within Egypt, Syria and Libya during and since the

Arab Spring. However, as indicated in Appendices 4 and 8, Qatar still maintains a high level of control (6.17) over the religious activities of both its minority groups and the Sunni majority.

Conclusion: Regime Survival and the Regulation of Religion

The regulation of religion is aimed at reducing the dangers to the regimes from Islamist opposition and from minority sects attempting to gain greater access to state resources and power. Religious states act as both regulators and participants in the religious marketplace, structuring religious opposition and support through both religious regulations and religious dividends as they compete to dominate the religious sphere (Wainscott, 2018, p. 4). Restricting and monitoring religion is part of the religiously based survival strategies of the regimes. Additionally, minority sects have less religious support and often face greater religious restrictions and social hostility. Furthermore, given the theological teachings of minorities often clash with the idea of the state and thus a key pillar of the regime's legitimacy, regimes work to reduce the visibility of alternative religious influence in society. However, as is evident in the UAE, the engagement of the same-sect religious institutions and clerics in political and ideological matters is highly monitored, often more than the minority sects. This reflects the vulnerability of the regimes to religiously based political challenges from within their own sect, particularly towards charges of abandoning Islam. This is especially evident given that during the 'Arab Spring' regimes that were toppled by same-sect uprisings were typically relatively secular by Middle Eastern standards. Many of these protest movements were organised through and after Friday prayers, with the movements using the pre-existing networks of the mosque to facilitate organising protest marches. Additionally, Islamism is the most prominent means of opposing the autocratic regimes; therefore, it is expected that monitoring of the majority sect's religion will be significant. Qatar takes a dual approach to the regulation of religion; on the one hand it significantly monitors sectarian groups, and on the other it also makes use of the Islamist networks across the region as a source of influence. Regimes restrict and monitor religion in order to reduce the ability of Islamists and opposition forces to use religion to mobilise opposition whilst attempting to harness the political power of religion themselves through incorporating religion into the idea of the state.

Conclusion: Domestic Religious Strategies and Regime Survival

The 'Arab Spring' shattered notions of an 'Arab exceptionalism[50]' and established a new political environment the case study regimes have to navigate. The purpose of this chapter has been to show the domestic strategies these states use to help secure political survival. These strategies centre on the contest between religious secularism and Islamism, sectarian based *selectorates*, the idea of the state, and the monitoring and/or favouring of specific religious groups. The tactics identified in this chapter are outlined in the table below in relation to the theoretical pillars of this research. Subsequent chapters will continue to consider these strategies, where they will be tested to investigate how the case study states use religion for political survival in regional politics.

Table 3.10. Domestic Tactics relating to Theoretical Pillars

Theoretical Framework	**Domestic Tactics relating to Theoretical Pillars**
Secular-Religious Competition Perspective: Fox	Strategic religious narratives that counter opposition positions on secularity/religion, labelling opposition groups as terrorist/extremist, collaborating with groups that share the same understanding of religious secularity, supporting a religious group that has no domestic heritage.
Selectorate Theory: de Mesquito and Smith	The regime's sect predominantly features in the *real selectorate* and the *winning coalition*, the *winning coalition* includes religious elites and religious security forces, the regime distributes religious dividends to it's same-sect supporters.
Idea of the State: Buzan	Religious basis for idea of the state which counters both secularist and Islamist opposition forces, the state strongly supports a specific

[50] The assumption that the Arab world remain autocratic for a variety of reasons, including the provision of wealth to citizens through rentier economies, and the culture of Arab Islam.

	religious identity, the state works to shape citizens' religious beliefs in line with an official state-sponsored theology.
Religion Regulation & Political Opponents: Feuer	Use of religious ideology to frame security forces' purpose, strict monitoring of both minority and same sect groups, monitoring of mosques activities and limiting the reach of dissenting clerics.
Identity Hegemony Theory: Hintz	This theory investigates the projection of identity contests blocked domestically into the regional sphere, and as such will be applied to the above strategies in the following chapters.

If, as Milan V. Solvik states, authoritarian control and survival has a core problem; "the problem of conflict between small authoritarian elite in power and the much larger population excluded from power" (Solvik, 2012, pp. 123-124), then analysing the key issues in the chapter points to religion being an important part of the case study regimes' strategies to resolve this tension. This is despite the fact that the 2011 Arab protests were significantly motivated by non-religious aims and ideas related to dignity, democracy, free elections, human rights, employment, the resignation of oppressive regimes, more political freedom, less corruption, less unemployment and reduced food scarcity. The regimes are unwilling or unable to grant many of these demands, such as democracy, free elections, human rights, resignation of regimes, more political freedom, less corruption (as this impacts crony networks) as they weaken or remove the authoritarian structure of the regimes which is crucial to their survival. Therefore the states must focus on other means of placating or suppressing political opposition that does not weaken autocracy. Given many citizens express a clear preference for some measure of Islamism, this is therefore likely to have some impact on citizen satisfaction with the regimes and is an issue on which the regimes can shift without damaging their structure, and in fact this can be manoeuvred in order to suppress dissent. This helps to explain the increased focus on where states, and Islam as a whole, should position the relationship between religion and politics. Additionally the increased securitization of sectarianism following the 'Arab Spring' has been another tactic the regimes have chosen to use as part of their counter-revolutionary efforts. Middle Eastern states rely

on the securitization of sectarian divides in order to marginalise and suppress the sects outside of the regime's *real selectorates*, whilst attempting to tie the security of the sect within the *real selectorate* to the survival of the regime.

The 'Arab Spring' has placed the authoritarian regimes on notice. The protests were a clear signal that the existing structures that maintained their power were creaking under the weight of 21st century communications technology, and the unmet needs and wants of their citizens. In order to strengthen their authoritarian fortresses against the unrest, the regimes have used a variety of tactics, including tactics that centred on the strategic use of religion. Table 3.11 shows that the domestic strategies that use religion concentrate on either sectarian competition or the ongoing contestation between religion and secularism within same-sect political competition. As such this research hypothesises that the regimes' use of sectarian identity politics and the contest between religion and secularism within their own sectarian group will also be instrumentalised within the regional sphere and this will be explored in the chapters that follow. Ultimately, states work to secure the allegiance of status quo citizens, groups and states, against those that would reconstruct the socio-political order, both domestically and regionally. To an extent, the socio-political order in the Middle East reflects patterns of sectarian solidarity and regional contests between varieties of Islamism and religious secularism. As such these dynamics have been used as counter-revolutionary tactics to shore up existing regimes, strategies to undermine the survival of rival states facing unrest and within efforts to shift both the pattern of alliances across the regional system and the balance of power between them.

Chapter Four: The Securitization of Regional Rivalry and Transnational Islam

Introduction

The Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar and Iran look to expand their power and influence in the international arena beyond their geographical location and immediate population. The three most powerful tools at their disposal are oil and gas, wealth, and religion. Using their financial and military resources, the states have employed tactics to utilise Islamic bonds across regions to their own advantage. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar's wealth is invested globally, thereby extending these states' financial reach and strengthening their connections within the wealthy Western financial sphere in particular. By utilising religion and the international political economy, Qatar and the UAE have become wealthy small states that have been successful at projecting their influence onto the world stage. Within the Middle East, Qatar and Iran have typically worked to project influence through sectarian or Islamist actors; however, the 'Arab Spring' saw a rise in foreign policy activism from all the case study states, including the UAE and Saudi Arabia. The states clearly saw a need to ensure the region's fluctuating dynamics shifted to support the survival of their regimes.

Religious capabilities are a form of latent power. States use their religious capabilities to project influence in the regional and international sphere to achieve foreign policy goals. Saudi Arabia, Iran, Qatar and the UAE attempt to reorder regional and international hierarchies by disrupting and manipulating the internal dynamics of competitor states. This is connected to Joseph Nye's idea of 'soft power', described by Mandaville as the idea that you can get states to do what you want by the appeal of your ideas and norms (Mandaville & Hamid, 2019). Although Nye does not equate soft power with religion, in the Middle East the appeal of Islamic mores are used to increase a state's influence. Peter Henne elaborates,

> Religion intensifies transnational influences in the domestic sphere. Increasing societal religiosity tends to correspond to greater identification with coreligionists abroad and global religiously salient issues. Religion also creates tangible transnational connections through networks of activists, scholars and religious institutions (Henne, 2016, p. 30).

These tactics fit what the Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI) describes as competitive shaping. Competitive shaping is a term coined to describe strategies used in the growing arena of competition between states that falls short of outright war. This arena between political competition and outright war is often called the grey zone (Elkus & Noonan, 2018, p. 3). This chapter investigates tactics that use religion as a competitive shaping strategy or as Elkus and Noonan describe "the shaping of the heart and the mind by doctrines designed to achieve advantage via moral force" (Elkus & Noonan, 2018, p. 3).

Many of these strategies involve strategic narratives. Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle point out that "domestic political contestation over strategic narratives is central to political outcomes" (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle, 2013, p. 8). In order to ensure their political survival, it is important for the regimes to control the strategic narratives in the region. The idea of the state that makes up a state's identity and ideology are built up by narratives, and many key narratives in the Middle East centre on Islam and the contestation between secularism and fundamentalism. Roselle et al. identify that domestic policy legitimacy can be pursued at the international level when conducting foreign policy (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle, 2013, p. 8). As such, the secular-religious dynamic has emerged as a key focus of regional strategic narratives in the post-'Arab Spring' Middle East.

The 'Arab Spring' also created an opportunity for sub-state and transnational religio-political opposition groups in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The lack of an effective and flexible response to the protests by most of the regimes, who largely remain committed to the status quo, has contributed to a decentralisation of authority into local entity hands. Ungoverned spaces in Yemen, Syria, Libya, Iraq and the Sinai have enabled non-state actors to create enclaves from which to mobilise opposition and to project operations against states and other competing groups. Most of these non-state actors directly address or confront issues of either secularism or religion. These issues relating to religion and politics are a prominent feature of the governance issues facing the region (Alaaldin & Mezran, 2018, p. 25). This creates the opportunity for Islamism to be the main opposition movement across the Middle East. Islamism's focus on religion forces the regimes to address religious governance issues and intensifies the importance of religious narratives and sectarian bonds across the region.

Iran works to promote its own interests through transnational Shia networks, establishing links, both political and religious, with Shia communities in other states and with regimes faces common regional and international foes, such as Syria. These communal bonds are reinforced by the marginalisation of the Shia in Sunni dominated states and within regional politics. The Sunni states also use religion to pursue their own interests, funding the spread of their own political theologies. For instance, Saudi Arabia has sponsored Muslim institutions across the global Muslim Umma, leading to criticisms that it has spread a conservative and intolerant brand of Islam that has heightened tensions between the Muslim diaspora and their host countries.

Part I of this chapter investigates Iran's use of Shia transnational networks in the MENA region and relates this to Iran's competition with Saudi Arabia for hegemony over the Muslim Umma. Part II outlines the religious diplomacy of Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar finishing with Part III that analyses the rifts within Sunni Islam between the pro-Qatar Islamist camp and the Emirati/Saudi led anti-Islamist front, and the contest between religious secularism and fundamentalism across the region.

Part I. Iran and Shia Transnational Networks

Theology, Exporting the Revolution and the Evolution of Velayat al-Faqih

Since the Iranian revolution in 1979, the regime has sought to reinforce its legitimacy by exporting its revolution. Iran assumed that Shia, typically marginalised minorities within Sunni led states, would be receptive to a transnational Shia political network supported by the Shia theocracy. The success of a regional Shia movement would lend strength to the key pillar of the clerical power in Iran; Khomeini's new dictate, the guardianship of the Islamic jurists or *velayat-e faqih'.*

Theologically, Shia Islam is more tied to governance than Sunni Islam. For instance, in contrast to Sunni Islam, Shi`ism asserts that the faithful need religious leaders as an intermediary between Allah and themselves, potentially marginalising solely political leaders. As the Shia Islamic community developed, the religious scholars, who are said to have filled the vacuum created by the missing Imam from the ninth century, became the religious and political leadership, collecting taxes and administering justice, alongside interpreting religious texts

(Louer & Rundell , 2020, pp. 7-20). However, it was not until Ruholland Khomeini (1901-1989) created the doctrine, *velayat-e faqih*[51] in 1970, that clerical leadership was described as having the right to govern the state (Louer, 2012, p. 6). Louer explains this further,

> The presence of clerics at the highest level in the structures of command is without question a characteristic distinctive of the Shia version of political Islam. Sunni political Islam, both in its ideology and in terms of its social base, was from the outset built up in opposition to the traditional religious "establishment", which it views as having been appropriated by impious governments, and consider as responsible for the decline of Islam. The development of Shia political Islam, by contrast, is inextricably bound up with that of the clergy though there are also anti-clerical currents within it (Louer, 2012, p. 5).

Thus, Iran's theological and political significance to Shia has not just grown out of Khomeinei's revolutionary doctrine, but it is also a historically constructed phenomenon. For instance the Shia Safavids (1501-1722) used conversion, orchestrated by imported religious scholars, to shift Sunni loyalty towards themselves. "Tasked with endowing the new regime with legitimacy, they developed Shia doctrine and ritual, while refining the process of recruitment to the clerical hierarchy which thus developed the necessary critical mass. Persia became the incontestable religious and political centre of the Shia world, and it was during the Safavid era that Shi'ism became a defining feature of the Iranian state" (Louer, 2012, p. 7). Under the Shia Qajar dynasty (1781-1925) the clergy levied taxes on the faithful. This partially accounted for their proselytising zeal amongst the tribes as the greater the number of Shia, the more financial means became available (Louer, 2012, p. 8). As such, we can see that prior to the establishment of states, religion and religious conversation was closely tied to the expansion of territorial power through religious identity. This was not just seen in the Muslim world: it was also evident during the expansion of European colonial power, which saw the military domination of nations supported by the spread of Christianity, enabling Christian clergy to socially contest the existing leadership structures. The idea of exporting a religion, often with an accompanying religio-political ideology, in order to expand spheres of influence is an enduring state strategy.

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[51] Literally means "Authority of the Doctor of the Law". Khomeini's doctrine stipulates that during the period in which the twelfth Imam is obscured from view, the Imam's political powers and governance of the state may be legitimately exercised by religious scholars.

Looking at Iran through the framework of the extended Competitive Perspective and Identity Hegemony Theory makes two things clear; firstly, following the revolution against the Shah the state's religious leadership manoeuvred itself into a position of absolute power over any potential secular leadership and secondly, Iran's foreign policy is a policy of identity hegemony, specifically fundamentalist Shia Islamism. As Iran is outnumbered by Sunni states (demonstrated in Figure 4.1 below), many of whom are hostile to it, the Iranian regime often seeks allies from within states, specifically within Shia populations or Shia political opposition movements. Iran initially attempted to spread its theocratic concept across all Muslim sects, but this proved to be unsuccessful with the exception of Sunni Hamas and some Lebanese Christian groups.

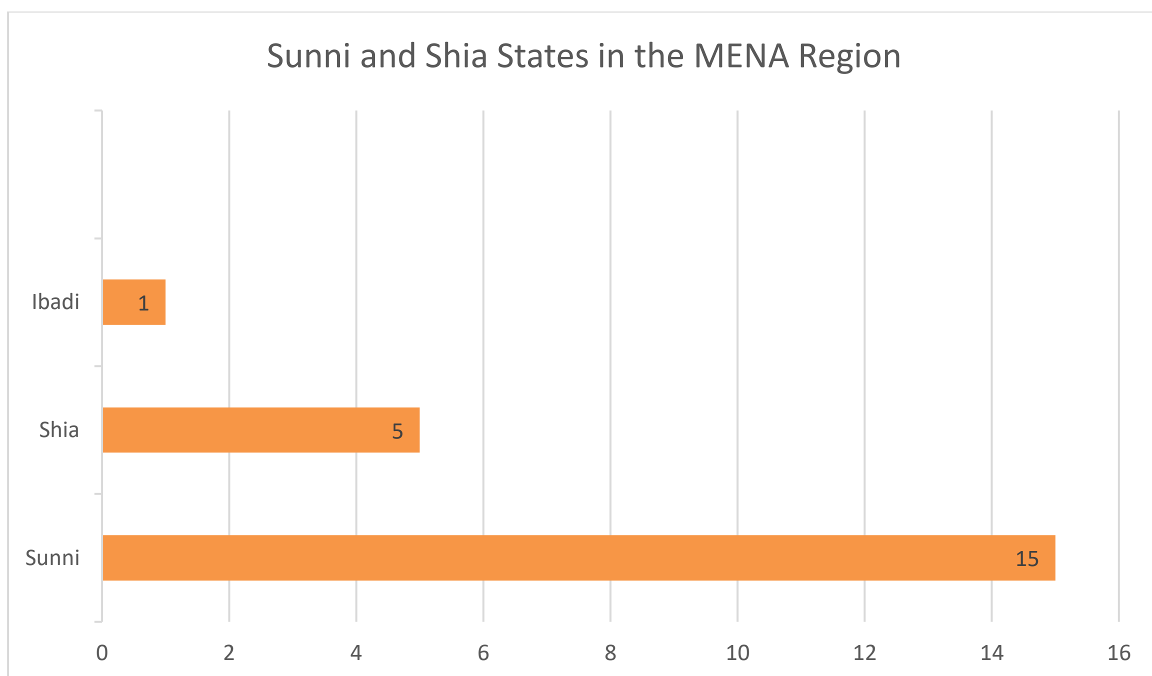

Figure 4.1. Proportion of Sunni to Shia states in the MENA Region

Transnational Islam, Hegemony, and Iran's Attempts to develop Regional Shia Solidarity

Iran's mosque diplomacy began in 1979 with the Iranian Revolution. Given Shi'a are the minority Muslim sect at approximately 15% of the global Muslim population, Iran's tactics are more nuanced than Saudi Arabia's (Mandaville & Hamid, 2019). In order to involve themselves in political tensions within other states, Iran has tailored narratives for different audiences. When engaging with Sunni, their revolutionary Shi'a identity has been downplayed.

Additionally, very few Shi'a leaders or militia groups deny that Sunni are legitimate Muslims, in contrast to some Sunni Salafi groups who refuse to acknowledge Shia as Muslim. Cross sectarian narratives of resistance sit tidily with the Iranian identity, thus we see Iranian cultural diplomacy in Gaza with aid given to Palestinian Sunni from the Imam Khomeini Relief foundation (Mandaville & Hamid, 2017, p. 18). The Iranian regime has reworked the historical Shia identity, from one of oppression and dispossession at the hands of the Sunni majority to a revisionist agenda, framed as resisting the US's new imperialism. The 2003 war in Iraq gave considerable fodder to this narrative, driving up anti-Western and anti-American sentiment. Despite some outreach to receptive Sunni groups such as Hamas, Iran's religious outreach typically focuses on Shia and Shia-linked sects, from the Shia majority in Sunni-led Bahrain and the Shia minorities in Saudi Arabia, to the Shia and Alawite minorities in Alawite-led Syria. Iran works to wedge itself into political and religious narratives in order to drive up and unify Shia activism. This indirect approach can be difficult to counter. Iran's soft power outreach is at times accompanied by a hard power strategy. Hezbollah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) coordinate and carry out the hard power policies of the regime (Mandaville & Hamid, 2019).

Iran and Saudi Arabia are involved in a struggle over the hegemonic identity of Islam. However, this is part of a bigger struggle for geopolitical leadership of both the MENA region (Degang & Zhang, 2020, p. 230) and of the Islamic Umma, which Kamran Bokhari calls "geosectarianism" (Mandaville & Hamid, 2017, p. 9). The Iranian revolution of 1979 began "a new phase of 'geo-religious' competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran – both of them vying to assert supremacy among Muslim countries" (Mandaville & Hamid, 2017, pp. 8-9) (Degang & Zhang, 2020, p. 230). However, the Shia identity and the Shia theocracy's core doctrine of *velayat-e faqih*, whereby the clerics lead the state, both have limited appeal. Although initially the region's Sunni Islamists saw the Iranian regime as a potential ally against the existing autocracies, it became apparent to Khomeini that spreading the revolution had internal Muslim barriers. Given this, and the balance of power in the Middle East, a bargain was struck with the Alawite led, secular although Muslim, Syrian Baath regime (Degang & Zhang, 2020, pp. 230-231). Despite the secular nature of the Syrian regime, during the Syrian civil war Iran initially leveraged sectarian narratives by framing Hezbollah's presence in Syria as protecting Shia religious shrines for instance (Mandaville & Hamid, 2017, pp. 15-16).

Following the 1979 revolution, Iran circulated religious narratives that challenged the legitimacy of Saudi Arabia's religious prominence in the Muslim world and even guardianship of Mecca and Medina; the Iranian Ayatollahs sought to position themselves as an alternative leadership of the Muslim Umma. In the 1980s, Saudi investment in the international Muslim community increased in response (Al-Rasheed, 2005, p. 155). With Iran's influence within Western Muslim communities restrained by its open antipathy towards the West, this contest for influence is predominantly contested in the Middle East and the resource rich, but poorly governed, Africa. For instance, the presence of Salafi and Shia centres in Senegal funded by Saudi and Iranian interests is indicative of the situation on the African continent. Al-Mustafa University is based in the Iranian city of Qom and overseen by Khamenei, with branches in 50 countries. The Senegal's campus is overseen by an Iranian Branch Director, and teaches Farsi and Iranian culture alongside Shia theology. Nearby, Salafi clerics working for the Islamic Preaching Association for Youth which funnels money from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Dubai and Kuwait, argue that Senegal's secular state was forced on it by its British colonisers and that Salafism is preferable to the state's moderate apolitical Sufi[52] orders. With transnational Islam existing before the state system and retaining a system of religious leadership from earlier eras, religious conversion correlates with increasing support for the theological authority of Qom in Shia Iran or Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia. Possessing religious authority gives states significant political influence amongst transnational religious communities (Cocks & Sharafedin , 2017). Thus, given the transnational nature of religion, religious sites can create additional sites of influence for states. Iran's Qom, as the site of the mausoleum of Fatima the sister of the eighth Imam, was already a pilgrimage destination when the suppression of the ulama in Iraq during Saddam Hussein's reign drove Najaf's scholars into Iran. This led to a revival of Qom as a centre for religious studies. Najaf in Iraq retains a high religious status due to it being the burial place of the Imam Ali and as the place of residence for the most important Maraji`[53]; however now Qom is also a key location for the training of Shia clergy (Louer, 2012, p. 11). Additionally, Shia religious authority centralised in Najaf and Qom where previously both religious authority and training had been local. This was a significant step

[52] Sufism is a mystical Islamic belief that aims to find the truth of divine love and knowledge through a personal relationship with Allah. Modern Sufi's practise tolerance and pluralism, putting them at odds with many Salafi Muslims.
[53] Literally means the "Source of Emulation". Refers to the supreme religious authority/scholar whom Shias should refer to in matters of religious doctrine (Louer, 2012, p. xi).

towards the development of a Shia transnational religious movement, through which Iran sought to export its 1979 revolutionary aims. As Louer describes,

> The centralisation of religious authority in Najaf had therefore the effect of bringing into existence a transnational clerical infrastructure spanning the Shia world. From the close of the 1960s, this has been a key element in the system of recruitment of Shia Islamic activists and their movement from one place to another. It is what perpetuates the interconnection between Shia movements across the Middle East (Louer, 2012, pp. 27-28).

The Shia political movement exists as an opposition force against the Sunni majority in many Muslim states. Historically, in order to avoid Sunni political domination, the Shia ulama moved to geographical areas in which the caliphate's authority was low; for instance, the eastern province of Saudi Arabia. In these regions they were able to establish political entities based on rebellion against the Sunni caliphs (Louer, 2012, p. 6). The historical precedent of Shia as an opposition force is interwoven into the Iranian revolution's narrative. This was aptly described by IRGC chief commander Mohammed Ali Jafari: "The Islamic Revolution has two key dimensions, one internal and the other external. The external dimension of the revolution is expanding by the way of the Islamic resistance in the region and across the world". Jafari asserts that Iran is the regional leader of the 'resistance axis' (Majidyar A. , 2017), an alliance which resists Israeli Zionism and Western intrusion into the Middle East. The axis alliance consists of Syria, Lebanese Hezbollah, Hamas, various Iraqi and Syrian Shi'a militias and Iran. The state and non-state actors that make up this alliance, for the most part, form the basis of Iran's networks in its drive for regional hegemony against Saudi Arabia (Sullivan, 2014, p. 9).

The establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran had a significant impact on Shia Islamic transnational networks such as al Dawa, the Shirazists and the Sadr clerical family's networks. With Iran announcing that a key platform of their foreign policy was the export of the revolution, these transnational networks became the key channels for advancing this strategy (Louer, 2012, p. 52). Social Mobilisation Theory[54] outlines how political ideologies and models seldom spread without the help of pre-existing networks (Jackson, 2006). Thus, Iran was able

[54] This theory asserts that the three causal factors that lead to social movements/political activism are 'political opportunity, mobilisation structures and framing'. Collective action is typically mobilised through established social structures and communicated through existing social networks (Jackson, 2006, p. v & 4).

to mobilise its revolutionary zeal through these historically established transnational clerical networks. This in turn led to the establishment of other transnational connections, such as those through Lebanon's Hezbollah (Louer, 2012, p. 52 & 60).

Iran's ability to influence the Shia transnational networks, however, took a blow during the succession from Khomeini to Khamenei. Khamenei did not have the religious credentials of his predecessor who was from the clerical establishment and considered a *marja*[55] (Louer, 2012, pp. 78-79)[56]. Khamenei's lack of clerical credentials cast some doubt on his legitimacy which he sought to strengthen by asserting his status as *marja*. Whilst this was somewhat overcome, he failed to wholly establish his self-proclaimed *marja`iyya* status, domestically and abroad which resulted in a deepening of a pre-existing division within Shia circles between pro- and anti-Iranian factions (i.e. a split between those who supported the concept of *velayat-e faqih* and those that rejected it) (Louer, 2012, pp. 78-79). This split has deepened to the point that whilst for the most part Shia movements back Iran in return for support, they also ensure they keep a suitable distance. Too close a relationship discredits them with their fellow compatriots who do not want to be beholden to Iran's leadership. This has meant the 'export the revolution' Iranian foreign policy prong has become a secondary consideration amongst Shia movements. Instead Shia movements primarily reflect domestic concerns rather than regional goals (Louer, 2012, pp. 82-85).

The potential of the Iranian revolutionary Shia movement seems exhausted although the 'Arab Spring' has provided Iran with opportunities to insert its sectarian political aims into the resultant uprisings and civil war (Louer, 2012, pp. 94). The 'Arab Spring' protest movements represented attempts to revise the arrangement between citizen and state in the Middle East. This clearly presented a threat to the existing regimes, but it was also an opportunity to attempt to revise the distribution of power and reform the region to favour their own

[55] Title given to the highest level of Shia religious authority. After the Quran and the prophets and imams, the maraji are the highest authority on religious laws. By the nineteenth century Shi'ite clerics had looked to centralise authority over the Shia community. This led to the creation of the *marja al-taqlid*. Although initially designed to be an office only held by one *marja* for all Shia, and that the whole Shia community was held to obey his decrees, this only lasted for the first two *marja*. The current system is that several *marja* exist at one time, and their authority tends to be regional, not global (Ostovar, 2016, p. 28).

interests whilst things were in a state of comparative flux. For instance, Iran saw a regional opportunity to engage with Shia rebels by "initiating a concerted campaign of transnational influence operations in countries across the Middle East – particularly in the Gulf region – where grievances of Shia communities align with the themes that inspired the toppling of regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen" (Mandaville & Hamid, 2017, p. 17). These alliances are ultimately not about religious or ideological affinity despite the sectarian bonds holding them together, but are a recognition that the involved parties benefit from such an alliance (Louer, 2012, p. 94). Additionally, despite the 'Arab Spring', opportunities for Iran to establish allies in the Sunni sphere remain limited, with the exception of its alliance with Palestinian Sunni group, Hamas. It is the strength of religious community bonds, not loyalty to religious doctrine, which ultimately secures sectarian political alliances. These religious community relationships can have significant impacts on politics; for example, Khamenei-led religious foundations over the years have funnelled support to Hezbollah, contributing to the political party's army growing in size to exceed the strength of the national military. Additionally, the 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel reinforced Hezbollah's reliance on Iran as Khamenei's religious foundations were the predominant providers of aid during this time (Louer, 2012, p. 122).

Clerical families and Shia Islamic activists are key links in these religious community networks (Louer, 2012, p. 45). Iran provides sanctuary for Shia Islamic activists, in return hoping to gain extra influence amongst activist transnational networks (Louer, 2012, p. 66). Exiled Islamist activists are often seen as part of the marja`iyya, i.e. as having religious authority. Therefore the local elites would receive them both as exiled political activists and as religious scholars (Louer, 2008, pp. 115-118). The extension of the transnational networks through these exiles brought with it "not only political ideas but also a general worldview" (Louer, 2008, p. 129). Elvire Corboz outlines the inner workings of the Shia religious networks as follows:

> The constitution of interpersonal networks, the distribution of patronage and political participation each constitute a sphere of social engagement within which relations of authority are built and sustained. […] the marja`iyya provides the best illustration of the value of international networks for the diffusion of clerical fame. Maraji` are the holders of transnational authority par excellence, yet they do not, in fact, have much face-to-face interaction with their worldwide following, for their travels abroad and the possibility for

> people to visit them are quite limited. Instead it is through their networks that connections are established (Corboz, 2015, p. 190).

These networks have made good use of the additional tools supplied by globalisation. Many clerics and marja` have considerable investments in media and are thus able to reach followers at considerable distance to themselves. This has also given them greater capacity to operate within the restraints of the authoritarian states they inhabit (Louer, 2008, p. 269).

The transnational political bonds of the Shia has led to the perception across the Middle East by Sunni regimes that their Shia citizens are the "Trojan horse of Iranian interests" (Louer, 2008, p. 15). However, Shia communities and movements across the Middle East are predominantly focused on domestic concerns. This is despite the foreign policy aim of Iran to unite Shia across the region and thus strengthen the regional Shia political presence. Due to the focus on domestic goals, transnational links do not set the agendas of Shi'ite movements (Corboz, 2015, p. 265). This is not to say, however, that Iran is not an important part of the Shia movements' strategic calculations. In order to assert their position, whether politically or militarily, the support of Iran is invaluable. Furthermore, in accordance with sociologists views of diffusion, as Louer states, "the Shia religious institution therefore provided the ideal framework through which to diffuse political ideologies", with transnational ties between political activists following "previously established lines of interaction" (Louer, 2008, p. 103). Both Iran and Iraq, due to the significance of their religious centres have been key proponents of the Shia resurgence (Louer, 2008, p. 103) (Mandaville & Hamad, 2018, pp. 16-17).

Generally, the revolutionary zeal of the Iranian regime's foreign policy has not been that successful. However, "the Islamic Republic's greatest successes of exporting the revolution have come through the development of client armed groups in Shi'ite societies. Shared religious identity is the foundation for these relationships. Shi'ism is the ether through which Iran's influence is most effectively transmitted" (Ostovar, 2016, p. 239). Thus, Iran sees regional conflicts as opportunities to engage with already formed and active Shia opposition or militia groups. Iran's agenda has been strengthened by the rampant sectarian and anti-Shi'i rhetoric of groups such as Daesh (Ostovar, 2016, p. 239). A few days after the fall of Mosul in 2014 and a day after 1600 Shia were killed in the Camp Speicher massacre, top ranking Iraqi

cleric Ayatollah al Sistani issued a fatwa that called for Shia to come to Iraq to help defend Iraqi Shia against Daesh threat. Existing Shia militias and thousands of volunteers entered Iraq. The resulting militias, called Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU), relied on Iranian funding and support and were overseen, alongside Syrian Shia militias, by Qassem Soleimani - a top ranking Iranian military official who leads the Quds Force. The Quds Force is the military force that is responsible for Iranian extra territorial and clandestine missions. Reflecting the importance of Iranian support these militias draw inspiration from Twelver [57] Shia jurisprudence and *velayat-e faqih*. The Iranian militia exist alongside more quietist groups who work to strengthen the Iraqi central political structure. Despite then Iraqi Prime Minister Al Abadi, with the support of the Iraqi religious establishment, calling for the militia's demobilisation once ISIL was largely defeated the militias are reluctant to disband. Instead, some militia leaders have resigned to run for office, whilst others align themselves with politicians (Mercadier & Arash, 2018).

Iran has sought to capitalise on both the power vacuums created by the US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan and, more recently, from the fallout of the 2011 'Arab Spring'. This has resulted in the cultivation of a raft of various Shia militias across the region in the Palestinian territories, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq and Afghanistan. As was evident in Syria and Iraq following the declaration of the creation of the ISIL, Iran frequently frames its support for the creation and support of Shia militias as defending the Shia nation against Sunni extremism and intolerance. The networks through which Iran projects influence are based on sectarian community bonds and are facilitated by the bonds between Shia religious establishments and clerical connections (Mandaville & Hamad, 2018, pp. 15-19).

The Limits of Religion as a Prong of Iran's Foreign Policy

As Laurence Louer describes, "the most reliable means by which Iran can exercise its influence remains its ability to intervene in theatres of action, such as Lebanon, that are sometimes far from its frontiers, through the instrumentalization of Shia Islamic movements" (Louer, 2012, p. 1). This is limited, however, by both the sectarian focus solely on Shia, and by the primary domestic focus of Shia Islamic movements (Louer, 2008, p. 265).

[57] The Twelver Shia sect is the largest Shia branch, and believes that there are twelve divinely ordained Imams and are waiting on the reappearance of the twelfth Imam.

The first limit on Iran's ability to spread its foreign policy ideals, and to extend its influence, is sectarian. Iran belongs to the minority Shia sect. A 2017/2018 poll discovered that 66% percent of Arabs held negative views towards Iran (Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2017-2018, p. 30). Therefore, attempts to extend political influence into the Sunni world have proved to be limited, although with regards to Iran's alliance with Hamas, ultimately resilient despite differences over the Syrian civil war (Amer, 2020). Iran's support for the Assad regime in Syria against the mostly Sunni protesters in the Syrian uprising forced Hamas to pick sides. They chose the Sunni street over the Iranian state, despite Iran's financial and rhetorical support of their cause. Iran's meddling in regional crises, such as the post-2005 civil war in Iraq which descended into Sunni versus Shia chaos, and the Syrian civil war where Iranian military support has so far helped the Assad regime's survival, has further damaged Iran's reputation with Sunni citizens. According to Daniel Byman, the increasingly sectarian reputation of Iran has been capitalised on by its regional foes, with Saudi Arabia and the UAE playing up any sectarian moves made by Iran. This includes Iran's involvement in the Yemeni civil war on the side of the Zaydi Shia Houthis, where Saudi Arabia and the UAE are attempting to install a 'friendly' new regime in post-revolution Yemen (Byman, 2018). Further to this, Iran's influence amongst Shia has inflamed resentment from the Sunni Arab publics and states. The growth of the virulently sectarian and anti-Shia ISIL is an example of this (Ostovar, 2016, p. 241). This increased sectarianism is not good for the region or for Iran. With Shia increasingly seen as a fifth column, Sunni states are wary of this sectarian dynamic.

Another factor limiting the regional expansion of Iran's power is the comparative weakness of its regional alliances. Syria has been its key state alliance, hence its support for the Assad regime in the current crisis. Iran also leverages regional influence through client organisations such as Lebanon's Hezbollah, Iraq's Badr Corps, Kataib Hezbollah, and Asaib Ahl al Haq (Ostovar, 2016, p. 238). However, currently Syria is in no position to engage in any regional power plays and has little credibility as a government on the international or regional scene. Furthermore, Iran's client organisations, with the possible exception of Hezbollah, would struggle if directly challenged by a state.

Part II. Mosque Diplomacy: Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar

Mosque Diplomacy

The mosque is an important part of a shared Islamic identity, serving as a unifying symbol within the Islamic world, and a place of prayer and socialization. In the past, large monumental mosques were symbols of a ruler's power and authority. Today, mosques still serve to strengthen the ruling elite's legitimacy, but they also represent nationhood and the continued prominence of Islam in the Middle East (Kishwar, 2015, p. 13). Rizni Kishwar describes how "mosques in the contemporary Middle East are built through both local and transnational patronage networks, and their architecture reflects the complex and heterogeneous nature of religious identity in the Islamic world" (Kishwar, 2015, p. 13). The Mosque is a key symbol of state identity and a shared symbol of international Muslim identity.

By the second half of the twentieth century nation-building projects began to include the building of state mosques, linking nations to their Islamic past (Kishwar, 2015, pp. 15-17). State mosques serve as an important conduit of political and religious ideology, whether religion is subtly restrained by state legislation or controlled by state ministries (Kishwar, 2015, pp. 15-17). Both nationalist and fundamentalist movements contain a narrative that includes an idealisation of a 'golden age' and seeks to return to the traditions and standards of this time. Mosques represent this narrative, and aim to maintain Islam's relevance across time zones. Today, religion has reclaimed its place in society to levels not seen since the early years of the twentieth century (Kishwar, 2015, pp. 15-17). Given Islam's high profile across the MENA region, the Gulf States all seek to use religion as a source of influence, developing religious links in the manner described by Joseph Nye as soft power, particularly in the form of aid, often to assist with the building of mosques. This influence can be used to shift the norms of global Islam to suit the donor state, impacting on leadership, politics and theology in the Muslim realm.

Iran and Mosque Diplomacy

The Iranian regime made clear from 1979 that exporting the revolution was a key foreign policy aim of the new theocracy. The Iranian revolution and the resurgence of political Islam in the 1970s saw the two heavy weights, Iran and Saudi Arabia, looking for new ways to

survive. This resulted in both seeking to export their own "ideologically tailored religious beliefs that justified their rule" (Jayamaha, et al., 2019). However, the most successful part of these efforts has been the leveraging of Islamist discontent, particularly Shia discontent towards their own interests. The main strategy has involved the support of militias in regional conflicts and the promotion of their own ideology to these groups. The most successful example of this has been Hezbollah in Lebanon. However, the Iranians have applied much of what they learnt through their experience with Hezbollah in Syria, and through attempts to export the revolution in the 1980s and 1990s, within the Syrian civil war. It has not just been the military strategy through proxy groups in the conflict that have been used to steer Syria's internal dynamics, but also religious, political and cultural efforts. Similar to the Muslim Brotherhood's strategy, Iran has supported social, religious and economic programs aimed at communities that lack alternative means of securing support. For instance in as part of their efforts to secure the south western province of Deraa, and supporting the development of military networks there, Hezbollah and the Iran have "constructed at least eight local Shia religious centres and five religious schools" (Ghaddar & Stroul, 2019). The construction of mosque and religious schools has been part of the Iranian regimes attempts to survive by promoting its own version of theocratic rule, *velayat-e faqih*. Religious influence is part of the construction of the security umbrella that Iran offers to Shia in the region and beyond (Jayamaha, et al., 2019).

Saudi Arabia and Mosque Diplomacy

The twentieth century saw a side-lining of religion as the region engaged in a quest for independence and modernity. However, monumental mosques continued to be built during this period. At the same time, mosque building by Middle Eastern state sponsors of the European Muslim diaspora emerged[58] (Kishwar, 2015, pp. 15-17). The 1980s was a period of unprecedented mosque building in the Islamic world. Saudi Arabia began its practise of globally sponsoring mosques, "as a way to expand its political influence and simultaneously disseminate Salafist religious goals" (Kishwar, 2015, p. 23). Kishwar describes further:

> In countries where the Kingdom has sponsored the mosques, the government also appoints the prayer leaders, or imams and provides the fundamental educational literature (often read

[58] Some mosques had been built in Europe from at least the nineteenth century (Kishwar, 2015, pp. 15-17).

> as "propaganda"). In such cases, the mosques are extensions of the donor country, sites for propagating ideology, and home to covert political machinations. In many cases the historical style serves as shorthand for ideology; it is a conscious decision undertaken by the builders and patrons of transnational mosques (Kishwar, 2015, p. 23).

Information gathered by Antontio Giustozzi[59] from Saudi intelligence operatives confirms that Saudi Arabia has a policy of funding Islamic fundamentalist and Islamist insurgencies. This sponsorship creates a dependency on the Saud government and can result in a reduced tendency to criticise the Saudi regime and some leverage over the group/s by the regime. For example, indicators point to both Saudi Arabia and Qatar sponsoring the Taliban in the 2000s (Giustozzi, 2017, p. 145).

> The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia plays an important role in the dissemination of political and religious ideology throughout the Muslim world. The Kingdom, a proponent of the Salafi Sunni doctrine, is legitimized by its guardianship of the holiest sites in Islam, the Ka'ba in Mecca and the holy mosque of the Prophet, Muhammad, in Medina. The Government is an active patron of mosque building in Saudi Arabia and has contributed financially to the construction of mosques and Islamic schools around the world (Kishwar, 2015, p. 28).

Within Saudi Arabia, religious authority is linked to the Sunni identity and mosque building emphasises this point (Kishwar, 2015, p. 29). Mosques built in Muslim states outside of the Middle East point to efforts to unite the Islamic world thereby strengthening Islam and essentially broadening its civilizational borders (Kishwar, 2015, p. 31). Most of the Gulf States specifically seek to unite global Islam under the Sunni banner. The late King Fahd devoted resources to this end. His efforts at international proselytization were reported by the Washington Post in 2004:

> King Fahd issued a directive that "no limits be put on expenditures for the propagation of Islam" according to Nawaf Obid, a Saudi oil and security analyst…King Fahd used the cash to build mosques, Islamic centres and schools by the thousands around the world. Over the next two decades, the kingdom established 200 Islamic colleges, 210 Islamic centres, 1500 mosques and 2000 schools for Muslim children in non-Islamic countries, according to King Fahd's personal website (Kishwar, 2015, p. 88).

[59] Antonio Giustozzi is an independent researcher who has worked for the UN and at King's College in London.

By propagating Islam, Saudi Arabia is seeking to strengthen its position as the guardian of not only Mecca and Medina, but of the Sunni faith as a whole. Ideally, the Saud's, perhaps with the exception of the current Crown Prince, would like to achieve a global Islamic identity in accordance with the Salafist position[60]. Beyond this, mosque building is also seen as a diplomatic gesture, working to forge political and ideological alliances. Salafism appeals to a significant number of modern followers of the Islamic faith; backed by Saudi money it has become increasingly accessible. Therefore, "the popularity of global Salafism is thus monumentalized in the transnational mosques that mark its presence in almost all quarters of the world", with Saudi built mosques spread from Indonesia to Rome and Culver city, California (Kishwar, 2015, pp. 87-103, 101). Often the architecture of transnational mosques reflects the style of the longest standing and most powerful Muslim empire, the Ottoman Empire. Currently rulers seek to strengthen the appeal of the Islamic identity by evoking this successful period in Islamic imperial history (Kishwar, 2015, p. 104). Furthermore, supporting Islamic religious endeavours in secular states such as in Western Europe helps to ensure that secularism does not emerge as a dominant Arab ideology amongst the diaspora; political secularism challenges the Saudi regime identity and legitimacy and as such is resisted by the Saudi Arabia.

However, recent moves by the Saudi Arabian Crown Prince, Muhammad bin Salman, possibly indicates a shift towards Islamic moderation. Illustrating his position, Muhammad bin Salman stated:

> Terrorism is a result of extremism, no doubt. Amid the need to confront it, we announce today the launch of the International Center for Combating Extremism, a measure aiming, in collaboration with peace-loving countries and international organizations, at spreading the principles of moderation, confronting the attempts to lure the juniors, vaccinating families and societies against deviant thought and waging a fierce war against the weak logic and controversy of the terrorists (Arab News, 2017).

Mike Kelvington claims that Saudi Arabia lost control of the transnational Salafi networks and ideologies they supported and as such these networks have less utility (Kelvington, 2019). This

[60] There appears to be a shift in policy by the Crown Prince, Muhammad bin Salman, towards a more moderate and tolerant Islam but it is too new to see how this extends to the Muslim networks Saudi Arabia has internationally.

could explain the Saudi Crown Prince position. However, domestically Saudi Arabia's control over the religious establishment remains firmly in place. For instance, the religious establishment supports the government by participating in delegitimising campaigns against foreign enemies of the ruling dynasty, with the Council of Clerics excommunicating Ruhollah Khomeini and Saddam Hussein for example. Beyond excommunication, the *ulama is* involved in long-standing campaigns against enemies of the regime on religious grounds with the Grand Mufti Abdulaziz Al Sheikh claiming in 2016 that Iranians were not Muslims for instance (Puteaux, 2018).

Saudi Arabia operationalizes religious soft power in both the domestic and international sphere. It is able to do this because of the significance of religion within the Muslim umma. Given Saudi Arabia is both a monarchical and Islamist regime, it is therefore sensitive to changes in the Islamist dynamic in the region. As such, to protect regime security Saudi Arabia has sought to rein the Islamist groups in that have capitalised on the 'Arab Spring': the extremists groups like ISIL, and the Muslim Brotherhood for example. Both challenge the regime's legitimacy in terms of its Islamic credentials and its right to govern as a monarchy. The 'Arab Spring' has intensified difficulties around how to configure religion and domestic legitimacy for the region's regimes. This will impact on the way that Saudi Arabia conducts its religious diplomacy.

The UAE and Mosque Diplomacy

Islam has a high profile in Emirati society with a mosque in every neighbourhood. Mosques serve to communicate, both to citizens and the migrant workers who constitute 80% of the population, the centrality of Islam to the key idea and ideology of the Emirati nation (Kishwar, 2015, p. 169). The regime uses mosques domestically to strengthen the Al Nahyan family's right to lead the Emirates, and the founding father Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al Nahyan's identity is a national 'brand'. For instance, the national mosque, which was completed in 2007, is named the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque. The mosque itself is a modern adaption of the great imperial mosques from Islamic history. Sheikh Zayed's tomb is positioned on the northern side of the mosque, and within the tomb the Quran is recited continuously (Kishwar, 2015, pp. 176-177).

The state also works to project religious legitimacy overseas, particularly focusing on moderate Islam. This serves to present the UAE as a tolerant and religiously open society, thereby encouraging foreign workers and investors to participate in the economy (Kishwar, 2015, p. 169). The building of transnational mosques and Islamic cultural centres is an important part of the UAE's external projection of its political ideology and religion. A notable example is the Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan Mosque in Jerusalem which sits atop a hillside opposite the site of the Dome of the Rock and the al Aqsa Mosque, the 3rd holiest site in Islam. The mosque is the second largest in Jerusalem after the al Aqsa mosque, and is capable of accommodating over six thousand worshippers (Kishwar, 2015, pp. 184-185).

A well utilised platform for projecting international influence is their state charitable foundations. The UAE's Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahya foundation was founded in 2007. The charitable organisation was established to "pioneer initiatives in the service of humanity," with a strong focus on education, health and emergency assistance. In 2010, the organisation provided aid to thirty eight countries, "including twelve Arab countries, thirteen Asian, four African, and eight European, as well as Australia" (Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan Foundation, 2010). Internationally the foundation also focuses on establishing clinics and educational facilities. Both at home and overseas the foundation helps with free meals during the month of Ramadan (Kishwar, 2015, p. 183), for instance in 2010 the foundation provided dates and free iftar[61] meals in France, Spain, Indonesia and Bangkok (Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan Foundation, 2010).

Rizni Kishwar further describes the UAE's agenda to use religion to strengthen bonds with states that also have an Islamic identity:

> In order to make itself viable on the transnational arena, the UAE brings the world to the Gulf. Now, however, the wealthy nation is starting to assert its ideological agenda outward, through the patronage and construction of monumental transnational mosques in other countries chosen both for their sympathetic political vision and for their compatible economic agendas (Kishwar, 2015, p. 191).

[61] Iftar (or Fatoor) (Arabic: إفطار 'if ṭār 'breakfast') is the evening meal when Muslims end their daily Ramadan fast at sunset. Muslims break their fast at the time of the call to prayer for the evening prayer.

Regimes like Morocco and the UAE have sought to "reinforce their religious purchase" and similar to the case of Saudi Arabia, to develop "new religious messages to distinguish themselves from both domestic and foreign opponents" (Mandaville & Hamid, 2017, p. 19). Mandaville and Hamid discuss how Morocco's use of religious soft power "solidifies regime legitimacy" by reinforcing the religious credentials of the monarchy, at the same time as elevating "Morocco in the international arena as an important voice for religious 'moderation'" (Mandaville & Hamid, 2017, pp. 19-20). The same description aptly applies to the UAE as well. Narratives in support of moderate Islam help to neutralise domestic competition for religious legitimacy from Islamist movements who seek to reform the state. This is particularly important given a recent poll observed that two-thirds of Emirati citizens disagree that "we should listen to those among us who are trying to interpret Islam in a more moderate, tolerant, and modern direction" (Pollock, UAE Public Privately Split on Key Issues, New Poll Reveals, 2018). Given this obstacle to the moderate Islamist identity at home - in line with Hintz's theory on identity hegemony - the UAE seeks to advance religious secularism and moderate Islam in the Muslim world.

With the moderation of Islam central to the UAE's financial plans and internal stability, the UAE has begun to actively oppose the spread of Salafist transnational Islam. Anwar Gargash, the UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, explained the existence of religious extremism and terrorism in the Middle East whilst outlining the issue as a "battle of ideas" in a speech at George Washington University. He laid the success of Islamism at the feet of the three geopolitical events; the secular Arab nationalists defeat in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, the Iranian revolution of 1979 and its propagation of narratives against secular leaders and the West, and the defeat of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan and the success of the extremists Jihadis who fought them (Gargash, 2017):

> Our cosmopolitan society and globalised economy depend for their very existence on the containment of the divisive and regressive ideologies and the associated terrorism that have taken a foothold in some other parts of the Middle East. [...] Daesh[62], Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups have fed off a wider current of extremist ideas that have been allowed to go unchecked for too long. These extremist narratives have been propagated and used by

[62] The Islamic State.

> political Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood for decades. Their narratives are backward-looking and reject open, pluralistic societies (Gargash, 2017).

On a systemic level, the UAE has embraced secular, economic globalisation in contrast with such states as Pakistan and Iran who support Islamic globalisation. This focus has helped to highlight economic priorities, and dilute Islamic currents. This has also worked to counter globalisation's tendency to reinforce religious extremist groups as globalisation tends to threaten local tradition thereby intensifying reactionary religious radicalism (Christie, 2010, pp. 209-211). The UAE Ambassador Usef al-Otaiba asserts that the UAE wants "more secular, stable" governments in the region, an order he claimed Qatar "fundamentally opposed" (The National, 2017). Kishwar believes that whilst other Middle Eastern nations look to export their ideology, the UAE typically conveys an image of embedded transnationalism, i.e. all of the UAE's international actions are aimed at supporting their domestic agenda. As such, their support for transnational Islam places an emphasis on the moderate Islam and progress they emphasise at home (Kishwar, 2015, p. 159). Taking into account Hintz's discoveries, this research extends Kishwar's assertion; whilst states such as Iran and Saudi Arabia look to export their ideology, in common with the UAE their international actions also support their domestic agenda, working to ensure the survival of their regime.

Qatar and Transnational Islamist Networks

As a small wealthy state Qatar has sought to protect its sovereignty from its large and powerful neighbour, the fellow Wahhabi state Saudi Arabia. Part of this strategy has been to maintain ties with transnational Islamic institutions and leaders. Qatar has typically maintained networks across the moderate Islamist networks. With the outbreak of the 'Arab Spring', it was clear that Qatar saw the potential of its connections in the transnational Brotherhood and Salafi networks to amplify its reach and political influence. Many of the exiled Islamists that resided in Qatar returned to their home countries to bid for political power in the space opened up by the uprisings. However, despite initial gains, the 'Arab Spring' turned out to be a difficult event to capitalise on both for these networks and Qatar. Uprisings broke down into conflicts mired in division and external interference. Whilst the US tolerated Qatar's response to the Arab uprisings, Qatar's neighbours had clearly had enough. By 2014 a diplomatic crisis broke out when fellow Gulf countries, the UAE, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia,

withdrew their ambassadors and threatened Qatar with suspension of its GCC membership (Dickinson, 2014) due to its support of pro-Muslim Brotherhood Islamists in the 'Arab Spring', and also over its media's, specifically Al Jazeera's, negative reporting on fellow Arab states.

During and since the 'Arab Spring' Qatar has been the focus of suspicion regarding its support of transnational political Islam. CNN's Christiane Amanpour queried Qatar's reaction to this criticism in an interview with Qatar's new Emir. Emir Tamim al Thani responded by saying the dispute had arisen over disagreements regarding which movements are considered terrorist groups and which are not, stating, "some countries [say] any group that is Islamist is terrorist and we don't accept that" (Thani, 2014). This defence has not quietened criticism of the Qatari state nor some of its wealthy citizens over the funding of Islamist groups. *Foreign Policy* ran an article in 2014 which explained that Qatari support of Islamist groups had contributed to increased destabilisation within the region's conflicts. The article pinpointed several examples, such as the proxy funded militias in Libya where Qatar and the UAE support opposing forces, the internally divided Syrian opposition that has been overrun by extremists, and the humanitarian plight in the Gaza strip, arguably prolonged by outside backing of Hamas by entities such as Qatar (Dickinson, 2014). Qatar's Islamist networks are recognised widely as being held through the Muslim Brotherhood, but this network also includes Salafi activist connections. Qatari Salafi networks are linked through such charities as the Sheikh Eid bin Mohammad al Thani Charity, described by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace as "probably the biggest and most influential activist Salafi-controlled relief organization in the world" (Dickinson, 2014). The diplomatic uproar broke out again in 2017 when select Middle Eastern states, primarily from the Gulf and led by the UAE and Saudi Arabia, again ended diplomatic relations with Qatar in protest over its support of 'terrorist' groups, and its comparatively neutral attitude towards Iran (Meuse, 2017). Qatar has been described by Dr Salah Eddin Elzein, the center director for the Qatari Al Jazeera Center for Studies, as supporting change across the Middle East, whereas the other Gulf monarchies are fighting to maintain the status quo (Dickinson, 2014). The Muslim Brotherhood seeks to change the governance structures and leadership of the Middle East and has affiliated parties across the region (Laub, 2019). The 'Arab Spring' enlivened Qatar's Islamist networks, and strengthened Qatar's conviction that the moderate Islamist networks would emerge as

sources of political power in the future, and that monarchical and autocratic regimes would face serious civil Islamist challenges in the long term.

An aspect of Qatar's revisionism has gone almost unmentioned by the media and within the media releases pushed by the UAE and Saudi Arabia. This is that Qatar has gained considerable soft power within the Arab Street for its support of the Arab protests, and through Al Jazeera's round the clock coverage of the 'Arab Spring'. Qatar's support for Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and Tunisia's Ennahda who both, initially at least, support democratic Islamism, is aligned with a sentiment in the region which favours moderate democratic Islamism. This region-wide sentiment, as it relates to democracy, was demonstrated by Pew Research Center's survey which found that 55% of respondents from the Middle East preferred democracy over a strong leader (Pew Research Center, 2013). The Qatari Emir, Tamim al Thani, has gained considerable soft power through his alignment with the Arab protests. He illustrated the Qatari position in an interview with CBS: "We stood with the people because they wanted freedom and dignity, and I think we made the right choice when we stood with the people" (Thani, 2017). *The Financial Times* quoted a Western diplomat describing Qatar's support for Islamists within the 'Arab Spring' despite being an autocratic state, "The Qataris say if there's a tsunami coming your way you ride it, not let it hit you" (Fielding-Smith & Khalaf, 2013). Whilst most have focused on Qatar's support for the Islamist current in the uprisings, Qatar's media support of liberalising and democratic revisionist movements that helped drive the uprisings has largely gone unreported. Ali Fadi claims that "Doha's relationship with the 'Arab Spring's societal movements—despite the tension it causes to relations with the rest of the countries—continues to be an important source of popular regional power for Doha and will continue to serve the country well in the future" (Fadi, 2018). Qatar's heavy investment in media and information, particularly through Al Jazeera, has given Qatar the ability to give media coverage to these social movements (Fadi, 2018). None of this goes down well with its neighbours: fellow dictatorships working to secure their hold on power following disruption of the 'Arab Spring'.

The 'Arab Spring' has weakened the states in the Middle East and North Africa region, and combined with the subsequent decentralisation and fragmentation, this has affirmed Qatar's commitment to developing relationships with both states and non-state actors. The Muslim Brotherhood is the most prominent non-state actor in the region. The Brotherhood network

has also played an important role in politics following the 'Arab Spring'. However, it does not make sense at first glance, in terms of Selectorate Theory's paradigm that regimes seek first and foremost to survive, that Qatar would support Islamism. Islamists want to topple and replace the autocratic regimes, including the Persian Gulf's monarchical regimes. However, if we consider Peter Henne's statement that "Muslim states' uncooperative behaviour [regarding suppressing Islamic terrorism] is not due to regimes' embrace of Islamic groups: it is because regime's survival calculations in the face of powerful Islamist pressure" (Henne, 2016, p. 14), Qatar's cynical manipulation makes more sense. With a strong Islamic identity at home, and perceiving potential risks from the Arab Street's drive for greater political freedoms, Qatar's support for democratically elected Islamist groups and Islamic actors across the region potentially convinces their citizens that the Qatari regime is less resistant to shifts in the status quo than its neighbours, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and, more significantly, gives it considerable regional soft power with the Arab Street.

The 'Arab Spring', Mosque Diplomacy and Islamists

The 'Arab Spring' highlighted the differences between the Middle Eastern and North African regimes; specifically, how they reacted to the subsequent domestic and regional threats to their political survival. Initially, the protests were very secular in character, with aims revolving around dignity, freedoms, political corruption and economic issues. However, as the uprisings progressed religious debates came to the fore as Islamist groups – the most organised opposition groups in the region – began to participate and assume leadership of the opposition movements. Unrest was strongest where secular regimes significantly restricted religious practices such as Syria, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt (Henne, 2016, p. 203). It is important to note that these regimes may have been relatively secular, but it was a religious secularity in which Islam's influence was still visible in politics and society. Baghourpour has observed that: "Those leaders which have largely ignored the rising religious tides in their countries have suffered at their own peril" (Bagherpour, 2012, p. 77). Protests were frequently organised after Friday prayers and participation often organised through the mosques, (Henne, 2016, p. 203) and research by Michael Hoffman and Amaney Jamel argued that "individual piety [..] is associated with higher levels of protest (Hoffman & Jamel, 2014, p. 593).

Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE faced domestic pressure to support these uprisings. Qatar was the most supportive, allowing the uprisings to be broadcast from the protesters' perspectives on Al Jazeera, and reportedly supporting the participating Islamist movements, including providing foreign economic aid to Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood when they temporarily ran the Egyptian government. Saudi Arabia allowed citizens to support Syrians engaged in the Syrian civil war, whilst keeping a close watch on these activities. The UAE was particularly reticent about the 'Arab Spring', and chose to focus on countering Islamic extremist activities, joining in airstrikes against ISIL under US direction in 2014 (Henne, 2016, p. 203; Ulrichsen, 2014, pp. 9-19). However, it was the Muslim Brotherhood's emerging role within the uprisings that generated the most concern in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, probably because of all the Islamist groups, they are the most likely to succeed in supplanting the existing regimes. Additionally, the Muslim Brotherhood aims have shifted towards a greater acceptance of democracy, at the very least as an avenue to get into government. This intensified Saudi and Emirati hostility to the movement in the wake of the 'Arab Spring'.

Thus Islamism gained prominence in the 'Arab Spring' due to its pre-existing role in opposition to the existing regimes. Courtney Freer describes how "in the restrictive states of the Middle East, then, political Islam, multifaceted as it is, has become, in Ayubi's words, 'on the whole a protest movement'" (Freer, 2018, p. 23). Freer goes on to state, "Islamism aims to deliver on ideological and practical promises", and that the "Muslim Brotherhood has been particularly successful in appealing to followers with its wide-ranging platform and political ideology" (Freer 2018, p. 23). This meant that the Brotherhood was ideally placed to capitalise on the protest movements given it was also the "world's oldest, largest, and most influential Islamist organization" (Leiken & Brooke, 2007).

Part III. Rifts in the Sunni Camp

The UAE has worked to counter both Qatar's transnational favourite, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Saudi Arabia's ultra conservative movements, Wahhabi and Salafi, by seeking to advance a more liberal interpretation of Sunni Islam (Dorsey, 2014). These splits within Islamism, between the moderate and Salafi positions, and between Islamist and secular positions, is reflected across the Sunni Muslim world.

Primary Rift: Anti-Islamist versus Pro-Islamist Camps

The rift between the pro- and anti-Islamist camps is typically framed in religious terms. For instance the pro-Qatar camp has accused the Emirati-led quartet of Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt, of having betrayed Islam and attempting to shift the Middle East towards Western secularism. Al Jazeera journalist, Ahmad Mansūr, accused the Emirates and Saudi Arabia of attempting to secularise their Muslim states. Additionally Michel Brignone outlines how Soumaya Ghannouchi, the daughter of the founder and leader of the Tunisian Islamist party Ennahda, described the confrontation between the pro- and anti-Islamists camps as between a "democratic and liberal Islam versus an authoritarian system that had previously used religion but has turned secularist" (Brignone, 2018). These claims are being resisted with the Emirati camp accusing the pro-Islamists of being the cause of the region's unrest, both in terms of the 'Arab Spring' and terrorism, laying particular blame on the Muslim Brotherhood (Brignone, 2018).

However, for Qatar, the Muslim Brotherhood's moderate Islamism helps to balance against the Islamic power of Saudi Arabia. Mandeville and Hamid describe how, "in a sense, today's 'moderate Islam' can be understood as the most recent chapter in a much longer effort by countries in the Middle East to offset the influence of the region's most well-resourced religious hegemon" (Mandaville & Hamid, 2017, p. 22). This also helps explain Qatar's close relationship with Turkey. Turkey has moved towards a strengthening of neo-Ottoman Islamism and a foreign policy turn towards the Middle East, further offsetting Saudi's religious hegemony (Maziad & Sotiriadis, 2020). Like Qatar, Turkey has also provided a haven for exiled members of the Muslim Brotherhood following the 'Arab Spring' (Black, 2014).

The current Gulf leaders all belong to the same prominent families that contested for power over 150 years ago; the al-Thanis in Qatar, al-Nahyans in the UAE, the house of Saud, the Al-Busaidis in Oman, the Al Sabah's in Kuwait and the Khalifas in Bahrain. Rumours of assassination plans between ex Qatari Emir Hamad al Thani and the now ousted leader of Libya, Colonel Gaddafi, and orchestrated coup attempts against the Al Thanis abound[63]. As such, Saudi leadership of the Sunni identity in the region is not in Qatar's best interests. The

[63] For instance in 2018 reports emerged that then US Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, had intervened to prevent the invasion and subsequent take-over of Qatar by Saudi Arabia and the UAE (Emmons, 2018).

Qataris need the transnational networks, and Turkey, to balance against the power of the UAE, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia and their attempts to direct Qatari policy (Sly, 2018) and possibly even remove the current branch of the Al Thani family from power. Thus in the interests of political survival, the Al Thani's have developed influential allies within the Islamist networks, projecting their need to balance against the Saudi and Emirati regimes into the regional sphere.

However, Emirati concerns regarding the Muslim Brotherhood began prior to the 'Arab Spring'. In a 2004 cable revealed by Wikileaks Abu Dhabi Crown Prince and Armed Forces Chief of Staff Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahayan, informed the US that "we are having a (culture) war with the Muslim Brotherhood in this country" (Dorsey, 2014). In 2006 Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince spoke again on the matter, telling Frances Townsend, the Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counter terrorism, that if the UAE held elections, as was encouraged by the US, that the Muslim Brotherhood would likely be voted into power. The Emirati regime saw the Muslim Brotherhood as the most organised political opposition group in the Emirates (Wikileaks, 2006). In 2009 the Crown Prince stated flatly to US officials that "Qatar is allied with the Muslim Brotherhood" and that the he saw the "Iranian influence in the Brotherhood very clearly as both a way to agitate the Arab populace and render the traditional leaders of Arab society impotent" (Wikileaks, 2009).

It is evident that both Saudi Arabia and the UAE consider Islamism and democracy key threats to the autocratic regimes. The democratic election of a Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt following the Egyptian revolution was a turning point. Not only was this event exactly what Qatar's previous Emir predicted – that democracy in the Middle East would led to the election of Islamist governments (Al Thani H. b., 2005) - but it also occurred in the region's most populous country. A democratic, Islamist-led Egypt could potentially enliven the activism of the rest of the Middle East's Islamists and democratic citizens. Qatar supported the Morsi government whilst Iran hailed Morsi's rise to President as an "Islamic Opening". In contrast, Saudi Arabia and the UAE supported General Sisi's 2013 coup against President Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood in (Al Jazeera, 2012); (Wehrey, 2015); (Roberts D. B., 2017). As Tamara Cofman Wittes explains;

> After Brotherhood political parties won elections in Egypt and Tunisia (pluralities, not majorities, in both places), these governments came to understand the Brotherhood as an existential threat: a model of governance that challenged their own authoritarian, monarchical Islamism with populist Islamism rooted in the democratic process (not civil liberties, but the monarchies don't care much about civil liberties either). Thus began a campaign to re-brand the Brotherhood as a terrorist organization, ideologically indistinguishable from al-Qaida, a threat that must be rooted out with brutal discipline (Wittes, 2018).

A recent poll showed that 1/3 of Emirati citizens still support the Muslim Brotherhood despite the regime's best efforts to undermine their standing (Pollock, 2018). With efforts to reduce support for the Muslim Brotherhood seemingly stalled at home, moves to ensure they did not emerge powerful from within the turmoil and disrupted regional power structures after the 'Arab Spring' became a key motivation of the UAE government. The regime needs an additional mechanism to combat the domestic influence of the Brotherhood. As such, this issue has been pushed out into the foreign policy arena. Given Qatar's assertive support for Muslim Brotherhood and Islamist factions during and following the 'Arab Spring', the UAE has sought to counter the impact of this support and has extended these efforts as far as Europe. A report emerged from *The Guardian* that the UAE had proposed financial incentives in order to encourage the British government to crack down on the Muslim Brotherhood. Measures included completing a lucrative arms contract and oil deals worth billions of pounds if then British Prime Minister David Cameron worked to constrain the Brotherhood's operations. The report revealed that the UAE was concerned because "our ally is not seeing it [Muslim Brotherhood] as we do: an existential threat not just to the UAE but to the region" (Ramesh, 2015).

European Islamists protested UAE interference. They felt that both the UAE and Saudi Arabia had pressured the UK to commission the report on the Muslim Brotherhood. Controversy at the time became so heated that the release of the report was delayed. It was not released publically until 17 December 2015. The report was accused of being politically motivated. At the time then Prime Minister David Cameron made the following statement in relation to the report's findings,

> The main findings of the review support the conclusion that membership of, association with, or influence by the Muslim Brotherhood should be considered as a possible indicator of extremism...We will also intensify scrutiny of the views and activities that Muslim Brotherhood members, associates and affiliates – whether based in the UK or elsewhere – promote overseas (Al Jazeera and Agencies, 2015).

However, following political pressure, the report's findings were followed by the release of a new report in 2016. This revised report took a softened stance on the Brotherhood and addressed earlier accusations of political manoeuvrings and bias. Within this revised version political Islam was described as a potential firewall against more extremist religious ideologies. This description is presented below,

> Based on the experience of Tunisia, political Islam could in some countries be a way of providing a democratic alternative for political, social, and economic development and a counter-narrative against more extremist ideologies. […] Political Islam is far from the only firewall, but in the Muslim World it is a vehicle through which a significant element of citizens can and should be able to address their grievances (Foreign Affairs Committee, 2016, p. 50).

In his written evidence provided to the Foreign Affairs Committee for the report Rifai Sulaiman further contradicted the Emirati stance, stating that:

> Scholars such as Prof Hashim Kamali, Prof Abdul Haleem, Prof Tariq Ramadan, Prof Abu Sulaiman and thousands of Muslim intellectuals [have] maintained democratic principles are enshrined in Islamic teaching…. Of course, there are some social values and democratic traditions which clash with basic teachings of Islam. There are clear cut differences between western social values and democratic traditions in some areas of theological, economic, political matters. Islamic theology dictates that sovereignty belongs to God alone whereas western democratic traditions say that sovereignty belongs to people (Sulaiman, 2016).

As the political brouhaha stirred by this report indicates, fears and hopes regarding political Islam escalated during and following the 'Arab Spring'. Sulaiman describes an increasing trend towards citizen engagement with the Islamists, a position which appears to match Qatari calculations. This increased engagement with democratic Islamism is the basis of this split within Sunni Islam. US President Donald Trump has attempted to weigh in on this rift, despite having his hands somewhat tied by the fact that Qatar hosts the largest US military base outside of North America. Despite analysts pointing out that the Muslim Brotherhood does

not meet the criteria for being designated as a terrorist organisation, Trump has still sought to have this label applied, in keeping with the anti-Islamist Quartet's wishes (Benjamin & Blazakis, 2019); (Iftikhar, 2019).

Secondary Rift: Religious Secularism/Moderate Islam versus Fundamentalism

Olivier Roy categorises transnational Sunni Islamic movements into two main streams; Salafism, primarily supported by Saudi Arabia, or through extremist networks, and the neo-Ottoman movement, typically sponsored through the structures of the Turkish state or through non-state groups such as the Gulen Movement, which has been truncated since the 2016 coup attempt (Roy O. , 2015, p. 243). Qatar has connections with another Sunni Islamist movement, moderate or pluralist Islam, predominantly through the Muslim Brotherhood. However, as James Dorsey points out, the UAE is seeking to advance another strain, that of Sufi Islam or a form of religious secularity, which, with its more liberal interpretation of Islam, is the perfect foil against which to push back the advance of fundamentalist and intolerant strains of Islam (Dorsey J. M., 2016). This presents a dilemma for the al Saud's as their support of Salafi Islam has, up until Saudi Prince Muhammad bin Salman's declaration of support for Islamic 'moderation', coincided with Saudi designs to constrain the Islamic credentials of Iran (Mandaville & Hamid, 2017, p. 8).

Therefore, although Saudi Arabia and the UAE are united in their front against moderate Islamist non-state actors such as the Muslim Brotherhood, they are at opposite ends of a theological shift within Sunni Islam. Since the rise of Sunni terrorism and ISIL, criticism of the Wahhabi religion and its fundamentalism has not been confined to the Iranians. Over 25-27 August 2016 an Islamic conference was held in Chechnya's capital, Grozny. The conference was paid for by Putin's ally, the Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov, who is ostensibly Sufi (Mamouri, 2016) and co-organised by the Tabah Foundation[64] (Diwan, 2016). Saudi Arabian clerics were not invited to attend and only a limited number of Qatari clerics were present (Mohsen, 2016). The Tabah foundation, which is based in Abu Dhabi, aims to direct Islamic discourse away from Salafi elements, and shares the UAE regime's focus on the acceptance of diversity (Diwan, 2016); (Dorsey, 2016).

[64] A non-profit organization that focuses mainly on problems facing the minority Muslim communities within Western societies.

The declared aim of the Grozny conference was “Ahl al-Sunna wa’l-Jama’ah” (Kadhim, 2016), or a discussion amongst various Muslim sects on the ‘true interpretation of Islam’. The focus of the conference appears to have been to create a narrative that Wahhabism is not true Islam, and to strengthen the position of the moderate and peaceful Sufi sect within the Muslim world. This is a reversal of the normal state of affairs, in which purist Salafi voices hold the moral high ground and declare that sects such as the Sufi, Ash’airis and Maturidis are not part of the Muslim Umma. Predictably the Saudi’s reacted with fury to the conference and its conclusions (Kadhim, 2016).

The Saudi’s have spent an estimated US$100 billion globally in support of Wahhabi Islam in order to give legitimacy to their claim to leadership of the global Sunni umma (Norton, 2016). This conference is a direct challenge to that assumed leadership, and an attempt to redirect the path of Islam away from purist voices and the ultra-conservative leadership of Saudi Arabia’s faithful (Kadhim, 2016). In another example of concern regarding theological differences, in 2015 Malaysia’s National Fatwa Council declared that Wahhabism was not welcome in Malaysia due to the propensity for Wahhabi leaders to declare other Muslims apostates when they do not follow Wahhabi dictates (Malay Mail Online, 2015). This rift is not enough to prevent close cooperation between the UAE and Saudi Arabia, but perhaps points to the future direction of Islamic discourse and identity.

Despite the UAE’s move to shift the region’s Islam towards religious secularity and moderate Islam, the Saudi’s and Emiratis remain closely aligned. In terms of the region’s security complex, the drive to suppress the Muslim Brotherhood, linked to efforts to curb Qatar’s foreign policy, is the most significant shift. It represents a shift in the patterns of amity and enmity across the region, with Qatar and Turkey aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamist actors, against the Saudi led bloc. This battle is primarily fought in regional and proxy wars, such as the Syrian, Libyan and Yemeni civil wars.

Conclusion: Transnational Islam and the Regional Strategies of Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar

The Middle East derives considerable ideational power from its stewardship of the Islamic holy cities of Mecca and Medina and as the birthplace of Islam. The cities of Mecca and

Medina, combined with the financial might of the wealthy Gulf nations, position the region as the epicentre of the Islamic world. This combination has enabled the Arab states in the region to fund and export Sunni Islam as a means of expanding their soft power and influence. Additionally Shia Iran's claim to religious authority as the region's sole Shia theocracy enables it to sponsor and deepen existing transnational Shia networks.

It is clear that competition between sectarian groups is prevalent in Middle Eastern politics. The instability in Syria, Yemen, Bahrain and Iraq attest to the presence of this dynamic. James Lacey describes how "rivalries, at their base, are power contests over who will dominate a specific sphere of interest and establish *the rule-set*" (Lacey, 2018). Religion and sectarianism are significant instruments in these contests over power in the Middle East and this chapter looked at how states use these dynamics as competitive shaping strategies in the region. For instance, the global export of Islam and the provision of religious aid represent a state's attempt to strengthen the regional Muslim identity that best serves their elites interests – typically this will be the hegemonic identity within the aid donor state. This hegemonic identity is the identity that the ruling elite share with the *winning coalition,* for instance the Shia identity in Iran and Wahhabi Sunni identity in Saudi Arabia. This identity is instrumentalised to negate any domestic competition or any potential domestic resistance to regime leadership on a sectarian or religious basis. For instance, for the Gulf States of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar the hegemony of the Sunni identity helps to repress the Shia minorities. Furthermore, promoting the ideal religious identity across the region is aimed at increasing political ties between sectarian communities and negating any competing identities. Saudi Arabia works to increase the profile of the Wahhabi identity and to overshadow the Shia and Sufi identities for example. These efforts extend beyond the Middle East to include the Muslim diaspora. Shared identities and consequent aid strengthens the Muslim Diaspora's ties to foreign states.

Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar use Islam to extend both their influence, and the idea of the state that matches their stance on secularism and religion. Thus the states use their wealth and religious credentials to promote the Muslim theology that bests serves their domestic interests. Analysing the patterns of mosque diplomacy reveals several patterns. The first pattern is that the states typically seek influence within their own sect; Iran sends aid to Shia religious institutions and organisations, the Sunni states to the Sunni mosques. The next

pattern is between the Islamist and anti-Islamist camps. Regimes tend to sponsor religious groups that best match their position on the scale between secularism and fundamentalism, and do not undermine autocracy. Beyond this, they also work with specific religious institutions and groups that are part of a particular Islamic network – for instance, Saudi Arabia tends to focus on Salafi networks and Qatar with Islamist Muslim Brotherhood networks. Michele Brignone describes how the Qatari camp focuses on a political reading of Islam; Qatar is attempting to revise the current order, through addressing issues such as gender issues and social justice alongside the re-Islamisation of societies and the establishment of "Islamic-democratic" regimes. In contrast, the Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Zayid represents the rival interpretation of Islam, pushing for changes the move Islam into the realms of personal spirituality, opposes violent interpretations of Islam and towards religious secularism (Brignone, 2018). These connections and splits reflect the patterns of amity and enmity in the Middle Eastern security complex with Qatar facing a blockade from a Sunni state faction led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE for example. This blockade is an attempt to get the Qatari regime to fully align with the regional aims of Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

These patterns are extensions of domestic survival concerns of the regimes in question. The UAE and Saudi Arabia are wary of the potential for the Muslim Brotherhood to capitalise on the citizen dissatisfaction that was revealed during the 'Arab Spring'. The Brotherhood is the most established opposition organisation in the region and made gains, albeit temporarily in the case of Egypt, in the aftermath of the revolutions. Additionally, surveys in the region show that both moderate Islamism and democracy have considerable sway with the Arab Street. The Muslim Brotherhood, having shifted its position to include democratic norms, now stands to represent both of these political aims. Given the Muslim Brotherhood has a reasonable domestic presence in both Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the group represents a significant threat to these regimes. The second rift in the Sunni camp is between the religious secularism and moderate Islam of the UAE and the fundamentalism of Saudi Arabia. This rift, whilst significant, has not led to changes in the pattern of amity and enmity in the region i.e. alliances remain in place despite this debate about how secular or religious Islam should be.

Religion is an important source of legitimacy and political identity for Middle Eastern states. Whilst this is immediately clear in states such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, it is also evident within

and the UAE and Qatar. The national mosques built in these states serve to signpost the state's political and religious ideologies, plus unify the state under a religious and cultural shared identity (Kishwar, 2015, pp. 193-194). As Kishwar states "the complex interplay of political and religious ideologies is at the core of contemporary discourse in the Middle East" (Kishwar, 2015, p. 195). Regionally, and further abroad, mosque building and charity foundations have become an important means of asserting an ideological and religious preference globally, both for the donor nation, and for global political Islamic connections. Through establishing connections with fellow Muslim nations and Muslim Diasporas, the borders to the Middle East are broadened beyond their geographical limits. Following disenchantment with communism and capitalism and a weakening of Arab Nationalism, political agency within the Middle East in the twenty first century has turned towards religion (Kishwar, 2015, pp. 200, 204, 206).

The next two chapters look at the specifics of the state's engagement with religion and secularism across the region. The focus is on the sponsorship of militias by the case study states in the Yemeni and Syrian civil wars. This sponsorship is analysed in terms of the sectarian and secular or fundamentalist stances of the militia groups, and then related back to state identity through the secular religious index rating and sectarian identities of Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar.

Chapter Five: Intervening in the Syrian Civil War: Regime Survival Strategies as Foreign Policy

Introduction: Religion and Political Survival in the MENA Region

The previous chapter outlined the ways in which sectarianism, secularism and fundamentalism are used as regional strategies by Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar in the MENA region. This chapter narrows the focus to specific regional strategies used by these states in the Syrian civil war. As such, the militias sponsored by each state in Syria are investigated in terms of their sectarian makeup, and religiosity. The militias are then compared to the regime/s that sponsor them.

This test is undertaken to ascertain the impact of sectarianism, fundamentalism and secularism on patterns of militia sponsorship in the Syrian civil war. We previously established, states use the domestic contest between religion and secularism to build support and undermine their political rivals. This chapter looks to see if this authoritarian survival strategy is also used in the regional sphere. Another authoritarian survival strategy, the favouring or repression of certain sectarian groups, is also tested for within the Syrian civil war. These factors are then tested against Selectorate Theory by looking for patterns of militia sponsorship in Syria that indicate that the primary focus of ruling elites in the domestic sphere (i.e. their own political survival) is also evident in regional politics.

The chapter proceeds as follows. It starts by establishing the context through outlining sectarian and secular-religious competition in Syria and in the Syrian civil war. It then moves on to analyse the data collected on militia sponsorship. For instance, Iran's militia sponsorship is examined for signs of sectarian favouritism. The militias sponsored by Iran are compared to the sectarian makeup of Iran's *winning coalition* and *real selectorate*, and where the militias place on the secular-fundamentalist is compared to the regime's index rating to see whether the regime's domestic favouring of fundamentalist Shia is extended into the regional sphere. Next, the ratings of the loyalist militias that Iran sponsors are compared against the loyalist militias that Iran does not directly support to establish the importance of a militia's religiosity to Iran in terms of selecting which militias to support from within the Assad camp. The militias directly sponsored by Iran are then compared to the regime using the theoretical pillars

outlined in Chapter 2. These same tests are then applied to Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar. Following this, the findings are evaluated in relation to the research's key questions, and then tied to the theoretical framework. The conclusion ends by relating this chapter's research criteria and findings to the next chapter which applies these same tests to militia sponsorship in the Yemeni civil war.

Part I. The Syrian Civil War

The Sunni – Shia Sectarian Divide in Syria

The structure of power in the Syrian state, with disproportionate number of Alawite elites at the top and the other groups comparatively more marginalised or repressed, accounts in large part for why the state collapsed into civil war in 2011 with opposition to the regime significantly coming from the Sunni sect. This is despite cross-sectarian support for the regime, particularly from co-opted or secular Sunni, the merchant class and Christians. The Alawite sect were persecuted by Sunni for centuries, eventually driven to seek sanctuary in the harsh environment of the 'Nusayriyya' mountains in today's Syria in order to avoid Sunni prejudice (Talhamy, 2010, pp. 181-183). After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire following WWI, this Alawite area, alongside other areas which were later to form Syria, was placed under French administration and initially administered as a separate area. Many Alawites were fearful of Sunni domination and persecution so were wary of reunification plans, which the French were later forced to carry out and which included integrating the Alawite area into Syria (MacKey, 2011). Once integrated into Syria, Alawites were on the bottom most social rung and marginalised in the new state.

With few other options available to them, the Alawites joined the military in order to climb out of the lowest social rung. Over time, the Alawites came to dominate the officer class paving the way for an Alawite General, Hafez al Assad, to seize power in November, 1970. Hafez al Assad established a regime that relied on the minorities' greater fear of Sunni persecution than the regime's repression, and the co-optation of the Sunni business class and moderates. In the current era, Sunni make up the majority of the armed forces. However, in the higher ranks, the regime has engaged in sectarian stacking, with Alawite's disproportionately occupying officer positions (Bhalla, 2011); (Nassif, 2015); (Malik C. , 2016).

Defining the Syrian military as an Alawite institution, though, is problematic given that Sunni make up the greatest proportion of the rank and file. It is the leadership – both military and political - that is Alawite dominated, with Syria effectively ruled by an inner circle of security chiefs led by Bashar al Assad and his brother Maher al Assad (Tabler, 2013); (Abuhamad, 2013). Unlike Ben Ali's Tunisia, where the ruling elite did not have a significant hold over the military and thus were quickly toppled by the 2011 uprising, the Syrian elite have the loyalty of a significant portion of the military leadership. The Assad family's hold over the military is secured through sectarianism and patronage with internal loyalties based around corruption, and patronage distribution channels reminiscent of mafia networks (Simpson, 2018; Sadowski, 1987).

With the strong Alawite presence within the Assad regime, and its religious identification with Shia Islam, it makes ideological sense that the Assad clan would seek ties within a Shia political alliance with Iran and Lebanon's Hezbollah. However, the relationship is based more solidly on geopolitical calculations; both resist the Israeli and the US presence in the Middle East, and both saw Saddam Hussein's Iraq as a threat, additionally both regimes have few allies in the region for instance (Byman, 2006). This is an important alliance for Iran as Syria provides a land bridge for Iran to Hezbollah in Lebanon, allowing Iranian power to reach as far as the Mediterranean. Since protests broke out in 2011, Iran has supported the Assad regime and is now considerably invested in the survival of the Assad regime against the Sunni dominated uprising. The Iranian regime's narrative frames their involvement in Syria as an integral part of resisting Sunni terrorism and takfiri[65] groups such as Daesh which threaten the safety of Shi'a (Pantucci, 2016, p. 4). The narrative was subsequently broadened, "framing the conflict in Syria as part of both a wider ideological struggle (driven in part by ethnic and sectarian tensions) and a geopolitical (or structural) competition for power with Saudi Arabia" (Pantucci, 2016, p. 4).

This sectarian narrative was is somewhat mirrored by the Syrian regime, who beyond blaming Western and Zionist conspiracies, positioned the regime as a secular actor fighting against Islamist forces and as a guarantor of stability in the region, thus framing their strategic narrative in terms of fundamentalist Sunni extremism (Scartozzi, 2015, p. 324). Whilst this

[65] Professed Muslims who are considered unbelievers.

reflected political reality to a significant extent, it is also a propaganda tool of the Syrian regime. Playing off minorities' fear of Sunni political power against their comparative sense of security with the Assad regime's secularism, specifically Sunni extremist's rejection of Christian and obscure Islamic sects such as the Alawites, the regime worked to frame the conflict in terms of the secular-religious contest, positing itself as the protector of secularism and minorities in a religiously chauvinistic and dangerous neighbourhood (Farha & Mousa, 2015, pp. 182-185). The regime also strove to obscure the Arab Street's dissatisfaction with the Assad regime, reframing the initial protests and outbreaks of violence as the work of Sunni terrorists (Scartozzi, 2015, p. 324). However, regime's narrative has switched to a focus on sectarian inclusion and patriotism as the regime looks to put the state back together again (Assad, 2019).

The Secular-Religious Dynamics of Syria and the Syrian Civil War

The Assad regime presents itself as politically secular and supportive of religious minorities such as the Christians and Druze. However, secular militias are split between supporting and opposing Assad (Al Tamimi, 2013); (Phillips, 2018). Additionally, there are extremist Islamist Shia groups fighting for the regime (Sinjab, 2012). These extremist groups tend to be under Iran's tutelage. The secular loyalists include militias such as the Syrian Social Nationalist Party's armed unit, the Eagles of the Whirlwind, whose youth camps and workshops focus on secularism and encouraging Syrians to identify as Syrian in preference to their sectarian identity (Samaha, 2016); (Al Tamimi, 2013). The predominantly secular loyalist groups[66] contrast with the conservative religious Sunni groups in the opposition such as the Sunni Jihadi group Daesh, who resist not only secularism, but also other religions and branches of Islam that differ from Sunni Salafi Islam.

Sunni Jihadism in Syria grew as an offshoot of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. In the past, the Muslim Brotherhood prior to 1980, and the Jihadists sought to lead resistance movements and challenge the existing elites in Syria. A prominent Jihadi who sought to challenge Hafez

[66] Of the sample of loyalist militias studied in this research 44% had a secular rating (3-4) on the Secular-Fundamentalist Index Scale and 10% had a rating of 5-6 so were moderately or somewhat secular. So just over half of the militia were secular or somewhat secular. This is shown in Figure 5.9 on page 175 of this chapter.

al Assad, the former President of Syria, was Abu Musab al-Suri[67] who wrote that "Allah knows that the most important for me after believing in him is Jihad against Alawite Nusayris, Jews and Crusaders who desecrated the holy soil of Al-Sham"[68] (Adyan Foundation, 2015, p. 22); (Alvarez-Ossorio, 2019, pp. 51-54). This historical narrative, drawn from Hanbali tradition and Ibn Taymiyya, has been used as a sectarian mobilisation strategy throughout the current conflict (Alvarez-Ossorio, 2019, pp. 51-54). Successful suppression by the regime during the 1990s and 2000s reduced the impact of Jihadi activity (Adyan Foundation, 2015, p. 40), however, the opportunity provided by the Arab protests has given groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Al Qaeda room to manoeuvre against the regime.

The Jihadis are not the only group within the civil war to use fear as part of an identity driven narrative. The regime's discourses against Islamism and the weaponisation of religion paradoxically also features attempts at religious and sectarian mobilisation. The Syrian regime portrays itself as the "secular defenders of religious pluralism" (Phillips, 2018). The regime favours political secularism, although Islam is portrayed as an important part of Syria's identity, partly to ensure the regime does not isolate conservative Muslims, particularly amongst Sunni. For instance, although in 1973 the regime introduced a decree into the constitution which states that Syria's President must be Muslim, it works to limit the use of Sharia law to govern society. Like Qatar and the UAE, the Assad regime is engaged in a balancing act between political secularism and religion. This balancing act reflects Syria's *selectorate* options; for instance, its *winning coalition* is predominantly made up of elite minority sect members who support pluralism and secularism. To maintain support from minority sects such as the Christians, Twelver Shias, fellow Alawites and the Druze, the regime's key narrative is that it is the bulwark against an Islamist Sunni government and against Salafi Sunni Islamist groups, both of which might persecute minorities. Yet Syria's *nominal selectorate* features a majority of religiously conservative Sunni[69] citizens. Given these issues the regime tends to swing towards political secularism, but does not support the

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[67] A Syrian Jihadist who joined the 'Fighting Vanguard' and fought during the Hama uprising against the regime in 1982.

[68] Al Sham is Bilad al-Sham was a Rashidun, Umayyad and later Abbasid Caliphate province in what is now the Levant.

[69] "Current reports estimate that between 71-74% of Syrians are Sunni" (Khatib, 2016, p. 4). However, this figure is likely to be affected by the vast death and displacement of Syrians, especially since 2015.

removal of religion from society in the manner of secularism in Western Europe. Syrian analyst Lina Khatib describes the Syrian regime and its religious/secular stance as follows:

> One outcome of the authoritarian upgrading that the Syrian regime undertook over the two decades preceding the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in 2011 was the promotion of religion in a way that accommodates the secular vision – and, one might add, the authoritarian nature – of the state. Arguably then, Syrian secularism is no longer the hard line, uncompromising ideology that the Ba´ath party intellectuals once promoted, but rather a more complex ideology that is transforming Syrian society and pulling it in many directions that cannot simply be categorized as 'religious' or 'secular' (Khatib, 2016, p. 1 & 3).

Khatib describes how Syria embraced a secularism that accommodated religious nationalism in the post-colonial period due to citizen desire for change and to help create unity in a highly diverse nation (Khatib, 2016, pp. 44-47). This shifted in the 1950s and 1960s where the Ba'thists sought to modernise society and move towards secularism by positing "secularism against religiosity". With rifts developing over this issue, however, the regime shifted again, to a secularism that positions religion prominently within society and in the state's identity, but supported political secularism. Following the 1976-1982 Islamist rebellion led by the Muslim Brotherhood, Lina Khatib and Joseph Daher point out that clerical networks that were able to be co-opted were encouraged to serve the state's political agenda (Khatib, 2016, pp. 3 & 4, 45) (Daher, 2019, p. 10) with the remainder marginalised or repressed (Mosinger, 2018). Hafez al Assad had noted the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and protests against the secularisation of Syria (among other issues), and thus had moved Syria towards a more pragmatic compromise between secularism and Syria's "Sunni religious leaders who had ruled Syrian political life for centuries" (Khatib, 2016, p. 51). By the end of Hafez al Assad's rule, the state sanctioned religious movement dominated the religious landscape and had largely supplanted the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (Khatib, 2016, p. 53). Upon succeeding his father, Bashar al Assad "made it clear in his inaugural presidential address that it was important to recognise and to communicate with Islamists in order to avoid the radicalization of their discourse. The idea was that radicalism is less likely to prosper within an environment that recognises the vital role of religion in society" (Khatib, 2016, p. 53). State sanctioned Sunni discourse was given priority with the Grand Mufti of Syria Admad Hassoun, who has been described as a mouthpiece of the regime, embracing both secularism and interfaith dialogue (Khatib, 2016, pp. 53-54); (Glass, 2012, p. 86).

The state sanctioned religious discourse;

> Stressed the importance of dialogue, co-existence and tolerance between citizens, between different Muslim sects and between Muslims and non-Muslims. […] Islam is promoted as a religion of peace predicated on communication with and acceptance of the other […] In this context, secularism seems to have become a framework for religious pluralism and co-habitation, and Islam a religion that accepts to exist within that secular framework (Khatib, 2016, p. 55).

At the onset of the civil war, Assad developed narratives that were careful to integrate secular Arab nationalism with a unifying Muslim identity, whilst at the same time using religiosity to identify the rebels as the extremist 'other' who sought to divide Syrians through the application of their "takfiri extremist ideology" (Matar, 2019, pp. 2406-2409). Even though these state sanctioned religious leaders are discredited as being mouth-pieces of the regime, they have also opened up space to discuss secularism within Syria (Khatib, 2016, p. 59). Khatib's description of the relationship between religion and secularism as being a dynamic and continually evolving mechanism of regime survival is a key observation of this research, and draws upon Fox's Competition Perspective which states that religion and secularism are continuously engaged in an ongoing contest for dominance over the social and often also political spheres.

The Sectarian Dynamics of the Syrian Civil War

Despite the regime's version of secularism, the Syrian civil war still contains significant sectarian mobilisation. Spurred by the contagion effect of the rapid success of the Egyptian and Tunisian uprisings, the Syrian civil war began as a social movement for democracy, freedom and human rights. Across the region, civilians were frustrated by rising poverty, the lack of opportunity for the relatively more educated youth population bulge (60% of the region's population is under 25 years), corruption and human rights abuses (Wilkins, 2011).

Largely due to Sunni being the majority sect in Syria, there was a high level of Sunni participation within the protests. However, this resulted in the uprising developing a significant Sunni face. The leadership was typically Sunni which discouraged cross-sectarian participation. The high number of Sunni protesters can be attributed to several factors. Bashar al Assad abandoned his support for the rural and urban poor, the greater numbers of whom

were Sunni, in favour of policies and networks that favoured his contemporaries within the wealthy urban elite (International Crisis Group, 2011, p. ii; Kilcullen & Rosenblatt, 2014, p. 37) whose support is essential for his political survival. There was also a general perception amongst Sunni that the regime discriminated against their sect, in favour of the Assad's Alawite sect. The continued acquiesce of the Alawites is also essential for Assad's political survival. This perception of sectarian bias has endured despite the presence of Sunni within the wealthy urban elite that supports Bashar al Assad's Presidency, and despite most Alawites being poor and not benefiting directly from the Assad regime (Tsurkov, 2019).

Assad's abandonment of large sections of the population, particularly rural, to the oversight of the security forces meant that citizens felt very alienated from the regime. Ultimately, they turned to other affiliations for support fuelling the development of a layer of leaders in Syrian society that sit between the regime and the citizens, acting within what Michael Crawford and Jami Miscik call the mezzanine level (Crawford, 2010). Most of the mezzanine leaders were from religious organizations which provided charitable and social support, filling the gap left by the regime (Hamidi, 2005). Similar to the Iraqi experience, the mosque had increasingly provided an important social space for citizens to connect over their dissatisfaction with the regime (Jackson, 2006, p. 17), with protests typically taking place after Friday prayers (Grira, 2011). Subsequently, the increased stature of religious organisations enabled the use of Sunni mosques and religious institutions as the starting points for protests in 2011 (Khalil, 2017, p. 148); (Ozgul, 2020, p. 168). Additionally, a corresponding rise of the Muslim Brotherhood across Syria, and funding from Muslim Brotherhood members in exile replacing government subsidies, drove Muslim Brotherhood and Wahhabi ideologies amongst poorer Sunni Syrians (Khalil, 2017, p. 148). Significant Sunni mobilisation through the mosques meant that an increasing number of Syrians saw the uprising as potentially a threat to non-Sunni sects, and as Sunni retaliation for Hafez al Assad's atrocities against the Sunni dominated Muslim Brotherhood insurgency in the 1980s (Khalil, 2017, p. 141); (Wimmen, 2016, p. 21).

The protests that preceded the Syrian civil war were primarily organised to start after Friday prayers as the Sunni mosques were the only places where congregation was possible (Ozgul, 2020, p. 159). This highlighted the presence of Sunni as a sectarian group within the uprising and impacted on the uprising in the following ways:

> First, it deterred Syrians who did not take part in the Friday prayers. Second, it deterred many Syrians who feared the sectarian nature of the protests. Third, adopting mosques as the main sites of the protests implied a sectarian nature of the protests that was not inclusive or engaging to various segments of the heterogeneous Syrian society that allowed for different religions, sects and ethnicities; rather it addressed only a specific segment of Syrian society, that is, religious Sunni. Fourth, by making from mosques after Friday prayers, many times led by the imams, protesters were strongly indicating that their Sunni religious identity was more important than their national identity, and this deterred the diverse Syrian populace from joining the demonstrations as they perceived and feared the sectarian nature of the protests. Last, and the most important, the Friday protests made associations between very specific religious affiliations and protesting for a national cause, which divided Syrian society across various political and religious lines rather than uniting it for a national political purpose (Khalil, 2017, pp. 148-149).

Additionally, some of the protest's chants had verses that 'stressed the Sunni identity of protesters in opposition to the Alawite regime, such as "Christians to Beirut, and Alawite to Coffin"' (Khalil, 2017, p. 146) thus moving the some of the framing of the struggle from one against political and economic grievances into a narrative that described a religious struggle against a specific minority sect (Khalil, 2017, p. 150); (Wimmen, 2016, p. 5). However, whilst sectarian tensions were increasingly present in the protest movement, dissatisfaction with the regime was felt across the sectarian divide, with the initial protests in Dara'a featuring cross sectarian participation for example (Brønd, 2016, p. 21). Despite this, fears of sectarian conflict emerging from within the protest movement continued to grow. Moreover, this sectarian element developed despite the co-optation of much of Syria's religious leadership, with Grand Mufti Admad Badreddin Hassoun seeking to rally his Sunni followers to the regime, in return receiving dividends from the government. Other religious leaders and scholars were under the same arrangement. The regime's close relationship with the religious clerics of the country's sects helped strengthen the regime's image as inclusive and secular to the minority sects and co-opted Sunni (Wimmen, 2017, pp. 71-72), and helped contradict the widespread suspicion that the Alawites were favoured. The regime was, in fact, engaged in a policy of partial sectarian favouritism, although this was set against a pragmatic effort at sectarian balancing to ward off potential sectarian opposition to the regime (Wimmen, 2017, pp. 72-73). Since the 1960s, part of this sectarian balancing involved downplaying Alawite religiosity and encouraging Alawite participation with Sunni mainstream religious practices (Wimmen,

2017, p. 73). However, despite favouring privileged Alawite elites from clans and tribes connected to the Assads, the main currency for privilege and prominence within Syria was loyalty to the Assads (Wimmen, 2017, p. 70), which given that the regime's *real selectorate* contains a significant identity group element with strong minority support still meant that a disproportionate number of the regime's *winning coalition* are Alawite. This is indicated in Figure 5.1 below.

Figure 5.1. The Assad's Sectarian Governing Structure. (Venn diagram created by author from assessments based on the research).

The high number of Sunni in the protests meant that the Assad regime could leverage off minority fears of Sunni Islamic conservatism and Alawite fears of sectarian revenge to mobilise their base against the uprising. Assad played into existing minority fears of extremists through circulating a narrative that the uprising was the work of Salafist terrorists and criminals (Yazbeck, 2011). The regime's attempts to frame the opposition as Sunni extremists

and themselves as non-sectarian appears to have been fairly convincing, especially amongst the minority sects. For example, Aymenn Al-Tamimi interviewed activists belonging to the Druze militia group Katiba al-Muwahhiden, who stated that '"people's committees for the protection of villages and towns" have been formed to fight against "terrorism," working "in cooperation with the Syrian army." The militia also praised the Syrian army as non-sectarian, claiming that "the Syrian Arab Army is for all Syria. In it are Druze, Alawites, Sunnis, and Christians" (Al Tamimi, 2013). Despite this militias support for Assad, Druze loyalty to the regime was not assured. However, security concerns generated by the civil war, some rebel attacks on Druze villages, and the Assad's strategic narrative that they represent the secure and stable choice for minorities has generated reluctance acquiesce from many Druze (Balanche, 2016). This type of strategic narrative is typical of authoritarian counter-insurgency tactics. Ucka describes how regimes frequently seek to generate fear of rebels based on sectarian, racial or ethnic considerations and frame them as either criminal elements or terrorists with no legitimate agenda or cause (Ucko, 2016, p. 39).

This narrative has considerable power within the Christian and Alawite communities (Worren, 2007, pp. 57-60). The Christians, for example, are reassured by the secular stance of the Ba'ath party given their fear of an Islamic state (Collet, 2010, pp. 84-85). However, it is important to qualify Christian support for the Assad regime. For instance, Hazim of the Greek Orthodox Church in Syria claimed that fear of radical Islam does not translate into enthusiastic support for the Assad regime, but rather fear of the alternative (Khoury, 2012, pp. 48-49). This fear of radical Islam, alongside the dominant presence of Sunni within the uprising, has led Syrian Christians to generally shy away from the uprising in favour of supporting the status quo. These minority apprehensions were stoked by the Assad government. According to the regime, without its protection the minorities would instead be dominated and persecuted by the Sunni. The Assads have thus been able to leverage the fears of minorities to their own advantage.

Syria and the MENA Regional Security Complex

A defining feature of Middle Eastern international society is the sectarian politics that permeates inter-state and intra-state relations. In the current era, Shia remain the minority, accounting for between 10-15 percent of the global Muslim population. Middle Eastern

Shi'ites are concentrated in Iran, southern Iraq and southern Lebanon with significant Shia populations in Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan and Pakistan (Shuster, 2007). Despite the current tension between the two religious blocs, around which political alliances and rifts have formed, over the centuries there have been periods of time in which both sects have lived relatively peacefully alongside each other.

Tensions in the current era, however, run high. In 2006, the King of Jordan declared that Sunni domination of the Middle East was under threat from the rise of the Shi'a and that an Iranian led Shia crescent of power was developing through southern Iraq, Iran, Lebanon and Syria which sought to politically link, and therefore strengthen, Shi'a populations across the region. This alliance, principally between Iran, Iraqi Shi'a, Syria and Hezbollah, identified itself as the axis of resistance to the 'evil' of the US supported occupiers in Israel and railed against US 'imperialism' in the Middle East (Abdo, 2013, p. 4). Sunni fears grew due to new developments within Shi'a regional politics. Hezbollah was on the rise in Lebanon, and has since cemented power, having the largest military in the state. Hezbollah's rise in status has been achieved with the support of the Iranian government. Moreover Iraq, from a Sunni point of view, was effectively handed to the Shia by the US after the ouster of Saddam Hussein and the predominantly Sunni Ba'ath party. The Alawites, an eclectic sect most commonly linked with Shi'ism, dominated Syria and the Assad regime were aligned with Iran. Given these developments, Iran was able to cement political links with these states and also with other state's Shia minority communities. Iran was able to do this in part because these groups were often marginalised by their Sunni governments. The 'Shia crescent' demonstrated the split between revisionist and status quo states in the Middle Eastern security complex. Sunni dominated the region and many of the Shia communities within the region, and consequently Shia were keen to revise the power structure within the security complex to one more favourable to themselves. It also revealed that the divides between political units on a regional level, rather than being state based such as you might see in Europe, were often based on sectarian political alliances that extended beyond state borders.

Structural Realism outlines how states international behaviour reflects the hierarchies and power realities between states. Neorealism treats states as "black boxes" wherein a state's place in the system's hierarchical structure, rather than their internal features or governance regime, is prioritised in analysis. A state's place in the international hierarchy is largely

dependent on a state's material capabilities, thus Neorealism describes power as "based on the material capabilities that a state controls" and on latent power; i.e. "the socio-economic ingredients that go into building military power" (Mearsheimer J. J., 2010, p. 72). A state's capabilities are typically assessed according to five criteria: its natural resources, its demographics, economic, military and technological capacity. This materialist explanation can also be applied to the hierarchical relationships between states within regional security complexes. The next section, through testing to see if religious domestic survival strategies are reflected in the regional sphere, essentially tests Structural Realism's assertion that domestic politics has little relevance in the international realm because, as Mearsheimer states, "the international system creates the same basic incentives for all great powers. Whether a state is democratic or autocratic matters relatively little for how it acts towards other states. Nor does it matter much who is in charge of conducting a state's foreign policy. Structural realists treat states as if they were black boxes: they are assumed to be alike, save for the fact that some states are more or less powerful than others" (Mearsheimer, 2010, p. 78). Applying the theoretical pillars of this research to the regional sphere is essentially alleging that Selectorate Theory applies beyond its theoretical focus on domestic politics; that the international choices of a state reflect the ultimate aim of the ruling elite - to survive as political leaders. This challenges the assumptions of Structural Realism. This research argues that Selectorate Theory also applies to the international and/or regional sphere, and tests this through searching for indications of domestic survival strategies within the regional sphere. This research therefore argues, that ultimately foreign policy will reflect the structural pressures of the international system, *and* the political survival strategies of the ruling elite. As such the next section analyses the patterns of militia sponsorship by Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar in the Syrian civil war, and analyses what these patterns reveal regarding the domestic religious survival strategies of the state's ruling elites.

De Mesquito and Smith outline how the primary focus of the state is its own survival. As such, this research tests how intervention in civil wars relates to the domestic survival strategies of states. In the Middle East, the prominence of Islam means that survival strategies typically feature either degrees of Islamism or secularism as a means of offsetting, co-opting or countering potential domestic opposition. Previous chapters have shown how Saudi Arabia, Iran, the UAE and Qatar use religion to manage domestic survival and the use of transnational

Islam to strengthen their regimes' legitimacy and identity. This section looks at how patterns of militia support in Syria relate to these previous discoveries.

As Iran's key state ally, Syria has an important role to play in the regional animosity between the Iranian alliance and the (now divided) Sunni camp. Therefore, the outcome of this conflict has geostrategic considerations for all the states considered in this research. Actors within the conflict are compelled to pick a side in this regional hegemonic contest in order to secure support from state backers. Figure 5.2 below demonstrates the differing levels and types of involvement in the Syrian civil war of each of these regimes. What is clear is that all the case study states have an interest in the outcome of the civil war and all of them are working, to varying degrees, to advance the outcome that best suits their own domestic and regional interests.

Table 5.2. Case Study State Involvement Levels in Syrian Civil War

State/Involvement	Iran	Qatar	Saudi Arabia	UAE
Neutrality or Non intervention	N	N	N	N
Political Involvement, expressions of approval by government officials	Y Political support for Syrian state	Y	Y	Y
Economic Involvement: financial aid	Y Financial Aid given to Syrian State	Y Financial Aid to Opposition and MOC[70]s	Y Financial Aid to Opposition and MOCs	Y Financial Aid to moderate Southern MOC
Propaganda Involvement	Y	Y	Y	Y

[70] Military Command Centre: established to coordinate funding etc. to secular and moderate Islamist opposition forces, reportedly run and funded by the US and allies including Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar.

through state media				
Covert Involvement	Y	Y	Y	Y
Semi Military Involvement, military aid or advisors without participation in fighting	Y	Y	Y	N
Direct Military Intervention	Y	N	N	N
Support for Muslim Brotherhood	Pragmatic regionally – oppose in Syria	Y	Actively Oppose	Actively Oppose

(Figure created by author from assessments based on the research into favoured militias in the Syrian civil war and on the regional security complex dynamics).

Additionally, actors in the Syrian conflict, including states, all have an ideology with which and for which they hope to gain supporters. Given the religiosity of the region, these ideologies prominently feature a position on the scale between political secularism and fundamentalism. Therefore this research analyses the civil war's militias through their position on the Secular-Fundamentalist Index. The militia's ratings are compared to their key state sponsor. Before comparing the militias and their state sponsors, the key actors of the civil war are described.

Table 5.3. Key Actors in the Syrian Civil War.

Position/Actor	**Relationship to Assad's winning coalition**	**Secular-Fundamentalist Index**	**Idea of the State**	**Revisionist aims within the State**	**Revisionist aims within the Region**
Syrian Regime	Winning coalition	Secular/Mild Islamism 3-5	Religious Secularity, stability protect minorities	N	Y

Alawite Sect (Shia)	Crucial for coalition	Secular/Mild Islamism 3-5	Political secularism	N	Y
Christian Sect	Needed for Coalition support	Pluralist, political secularism 2-3	Political secularism	N/Y	Y
Sunni Sect	Some Sunni needed for Coalition	Broad range 2-10	Predominantly Religious Secularism to Islamism	Mostly Y	N
Sunni Kurds	Pragmatic attitude to regime	3-6	Kurdish Interests:	Y Kurdish autonomy in Syria	Y Kurdish autonomy in Syria
Muslim Brotherhood	Threatening to Winning coalition	Democratic Islamism 6	Sunni Islamism	Y	Y
Jihadists: ISIL/Tahrir al Sham etc	Threatening to Winning Coalition	Salafi/Jihadist 9-10	Autocratic Theocracy	Y	Y
Free Syria Army	Threatening to Winning Coalition	Secular democracy through to moderate Islamism Predominantly 6-8	Predominantly Islamism, possible democracy and pluralism	N	N
US backed Kurdish groups: YPG	Pragmatic attitude to Regime	3-6	Kurdish Interests: pluralist democracy Kurdish Autonomy in Syria	Y Kurdish autonomy in Syria	Y Kurdish autonomy in Syria

(Figure created by author from assessments based on the research into favoured militias in the Syrian civil war and on the regional security complex dynamics).

The table above provides a broad overview of the key actors and sects in the Syrian civil war, including their relationship to the *winning coalition* of the Assad regime, their Secular-Fundamentalist Index rating, their key idea, whether they aim to revise the state, and whether or not they are revisionist or status quo in terms of regional dynamics.

The outcome of the Syrian civil war does not just potentially affect regional dynamics - particularly the Sunni/Shia state contest over hegemony - it also impacts the domestic stability of the region's states. Elections in Syria, with the potential for Islamist participation, would particularly threaten the predominantly autocratic governments in the region for example. Although civil war has been arguably won for now, with ongoing instability, by the Assad regime's sponsors, Figures 5.4 to 5.7 below demonstrate how threatening each potential outcome of the civil war would be from the perspective of each of the states under consideration (Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar). For instance, in Figure 5.5, the most severe threat to Saudi Arabia's domestic political arrangements is presented as the success of the democratic pluralist or democratic populist Islamist actors. However, as these factions are predominantly Sunni, it would be likely that they would support the Sunni camp in the region. The ideal outcome for the Sunni quartet of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain in terms of their own domestic survival and their regional contest with Iran would be an autocratic moderate Sunni Islamist government. Iran, on the other hand, is keen for the existing Syrian regime to remain in power due in part to its sectarian alignment with the Shi'i identity, and despite its largely secular status which clashes with Iran's theocratic ideology. Geopolitically, the regimes share a stance against Sunni extremism and have few friends amongst the Sunni states and actors in the region. It appears that regional and domestic security policy trumps religious ideology in this context.

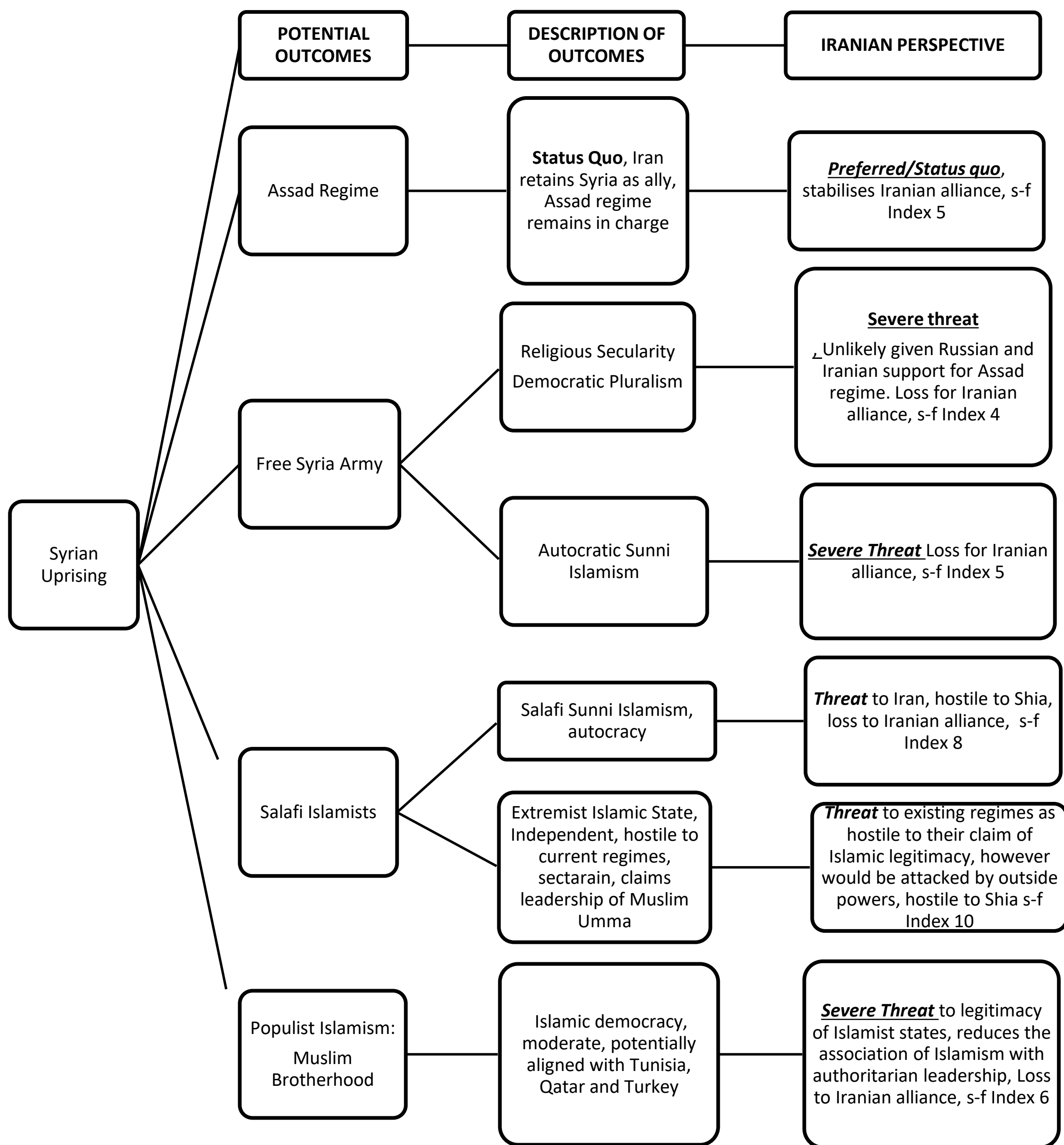

Figure 5.4. Potential Outcomes of Syrian Civil War: Iranian Perspective. (Figure created by author from assessments based on the research into favoured militias in the Syrian civil war and on the regional security complex dynamics).

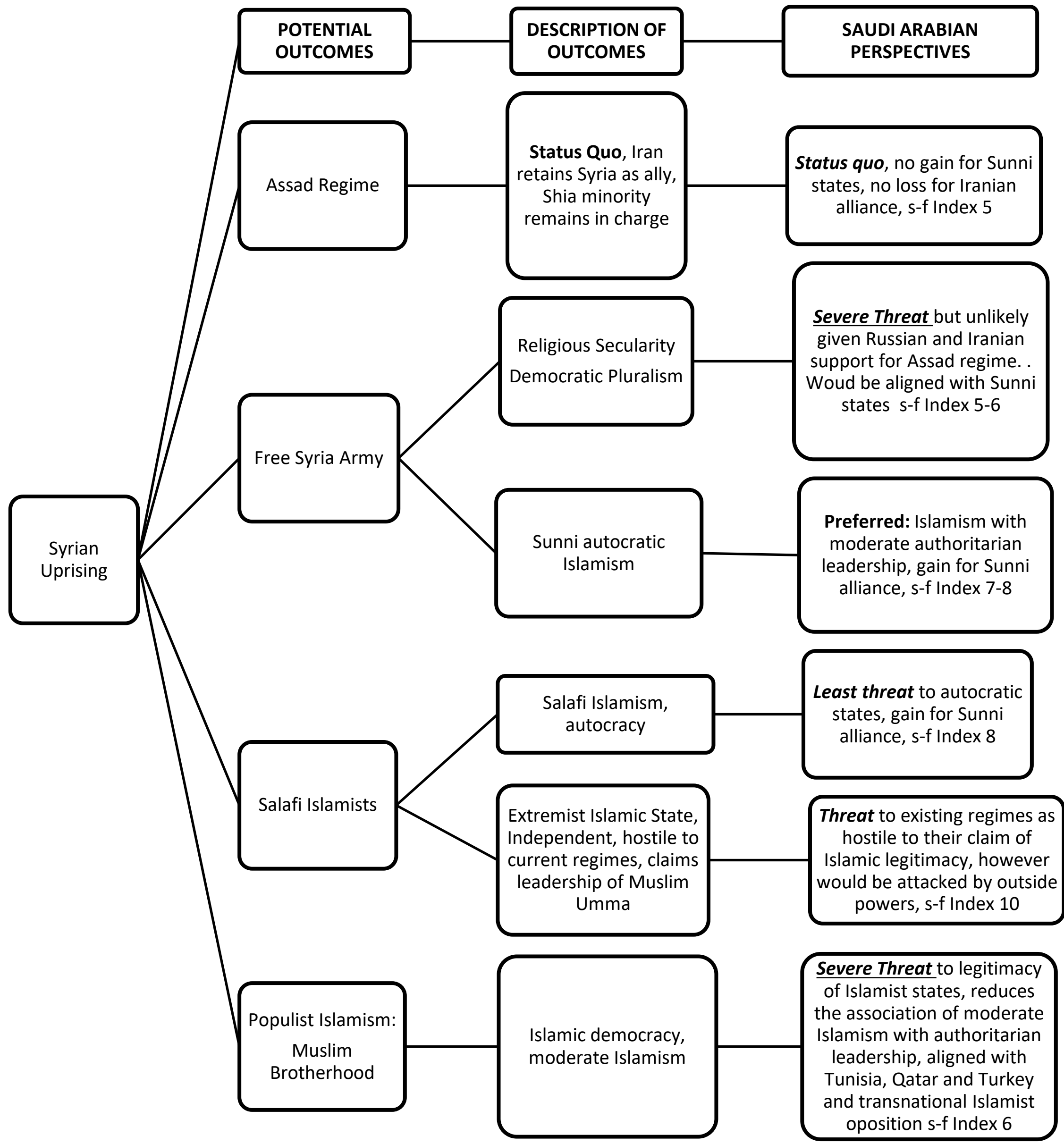

Figure 5.5. Potential Outcomes of the Syrian Civil War: Saudi Arabian Perspective. (Figure created by author from assessments based on the research into favoured militias in the Syrian civil war and on the regional security complex dynamics).

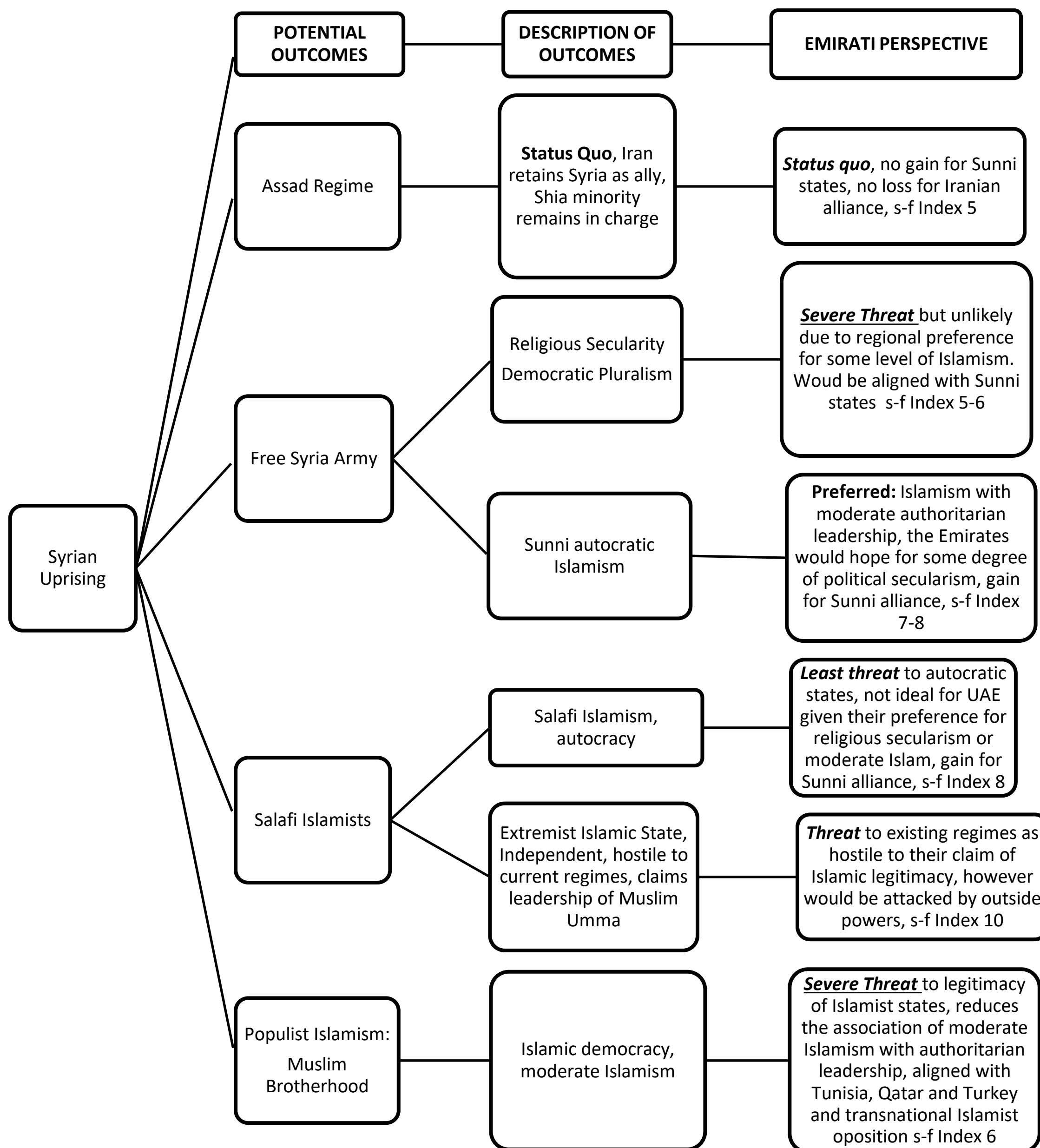

Figure 5.6. Potential Outcomes of the Syrian Civil War: Emirati Perspective. (Figure created by author from assessments based on the research into favoured militias in the Syrian civil war and on the regional security complex dynamics).

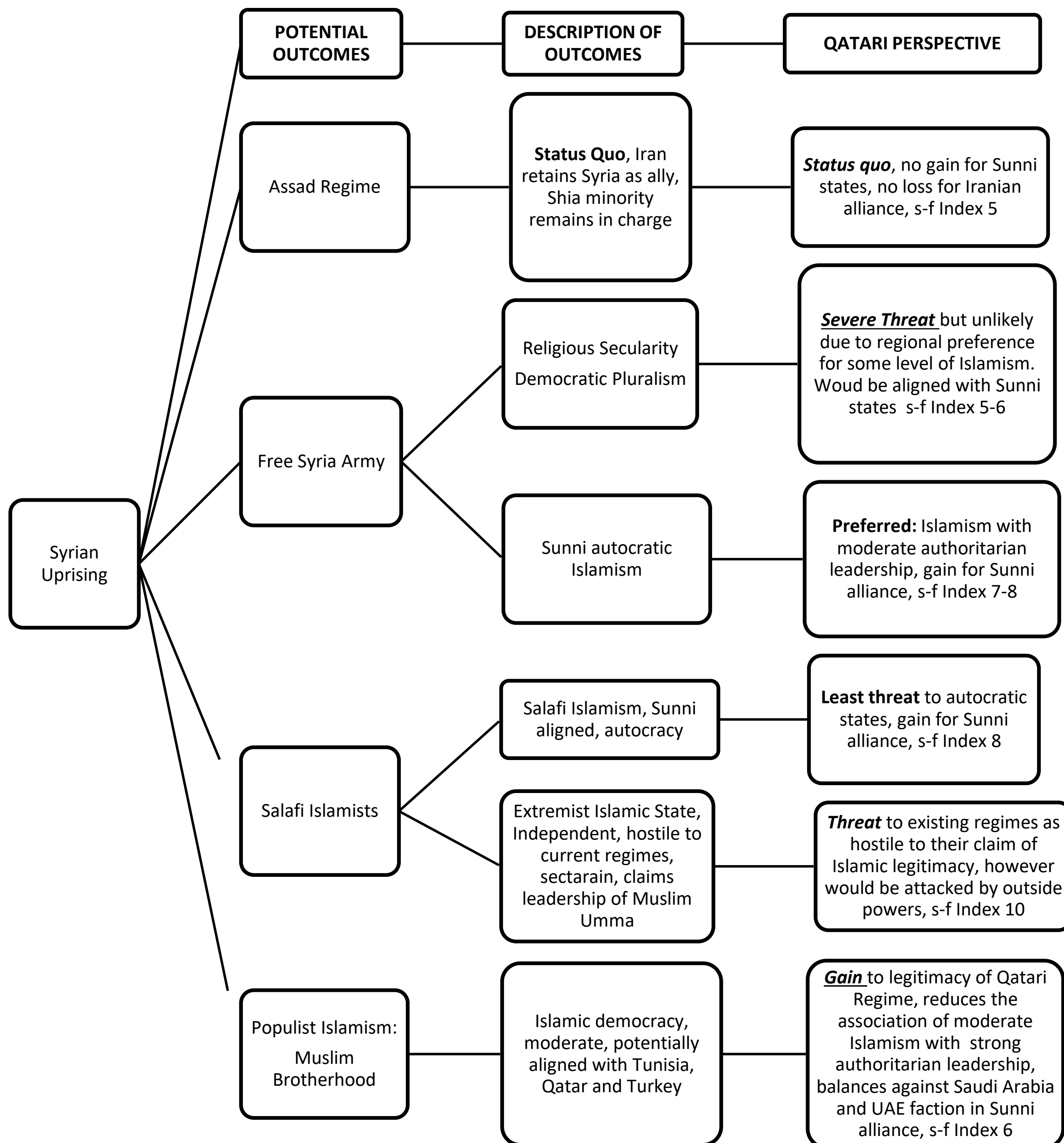

Figure 5.7. Potential Outcomes of the Syrian Civil War: Qatari Perspective. (Figure created by author from assessments based on the research into favoured militias in the Syrian civil war and on the regional security complex dynamics).

Part II: Sectarianism and 'Secularism versus Islamism' as Regime Survival Strategies in the Regional Sphere: Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar

Militia Sponsorship and Sectarianism in the Syrian Civil War

The outcomes in the following sections on the militias in the Syrian civil war have been calculated by correlating data from sources that report and analyse actors in the Syrian civil war. These sources are listed under the figures, however, all data has been cross-checked across multiple additional sources to ensure veracity. Given the fluid nature of militia in an active civil war, militias are not stable units. They merge, divide, fade from significance and emerge throughout the civil war. Therefore these figures, and those in the chapter that follows on the Yemeni civil war are used to extrapolate trends, not exact numbers in relation to the data. The first feature investigated is the relationship between sect and militia sponsorship. Figure 5.8 reveals that the states in question predominantly support militias that are the same sect as their ruling elites. Thus, there is a clear sectarian bias in militia sponsorship; Sunni states predominantly support Sunni groups and Iran predominantly supports Shia. This correlates with two features: firstly, the regional hegemonic contest between Sunni states and Shia Iran, and secondly, the patterns of domestic sectarian inclusion and marginalisation as demonstrated by applying Selectorate Theory to each state in Chapter 3. For instance, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar all marginalise Shia citizens with predominantly Sunni included in their *winning coalitions*, and Iran marginalises Sunni and other minority sects, with Shia featuring within its *winning coalition*. This supports the idea that states move religiously derived domestic survival tactics into the international sphere, particularly when it also serves regional interests.

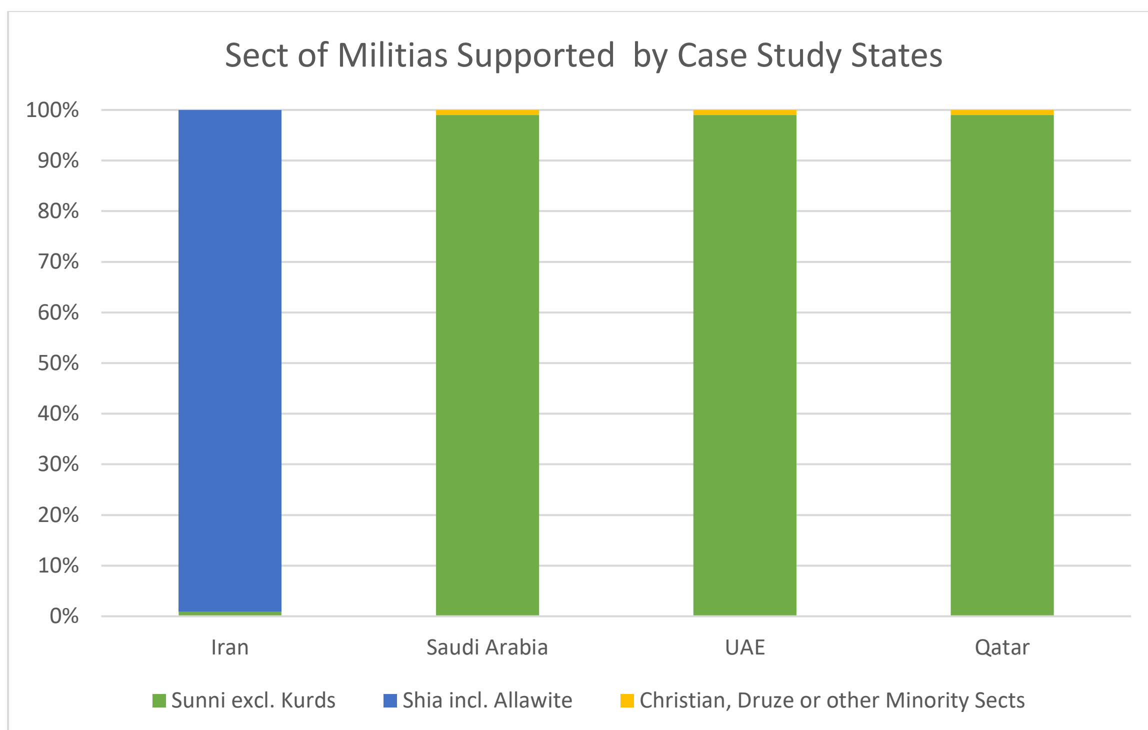

Figure 5.8. [71] Sect of Militias Supported by Case Study States. (Sources: see Appendix 9, *Citation List A.* on pages 333-334, Source Description: see Appendix 10, *Description of the Sources used for Syrian Militia Data*, pages 335-336).

The next sections analyse the specific sponsorship of the case study regimes, and compares the Secular-Fundamentalist Index[72] ratings of the regimes[73] against that of the sponsored groups to see if there is a religious pattern beyond sectarian affiliation.

Militia Sponsorship and Secular-Religious Competition

Patterns of Iran's Militia Sponsorship in the Syrian Civil War

As shown in Figure 5.9, the largest bloc of militias in the loyalist alliance are secular militias. Given the secular nature of the Assad regime this is not surprising. Additionally, given the strong link between religion and politics in the MENA region, and the fundamentalism of the Iranian regime, it is also not surprising that approximately 25% of the sample share Iran's religious conservatism. Breaking this down further, Figure 5.10 shows that all the militias in

[71] In the bar graph above, the Sunni militias that Iran sponsors are Palestinian Arab groups, clearly beholden to Iran for its support of their fight against Israel.
[72] Shown in Chapter 2 in Table 2.4, page 51.
[73] Shown in Appendix 11, page 338.

the loyalist sample that Iran directly sponsored were in this category, rating 9 on the Secular-Fundamentalist Index Scale. This indicates that despite working to secure the survival of the relatively secular Assad regime, Iran has also worked to encourage and support Shia fundamentalism within Syria during the civil war. Iran is both supporting its domestic interests in supporting the militias that share the regime's fundamentalism and supporting its regional interests through encouraging Shia militias to fight on behalf of the Assads, ensuring that Iran's state ally survives. This has caused tensions in Syria between the Assad regime and the Alawi and other minorities (Alam, 2019); (Al Souria Net, 2016).

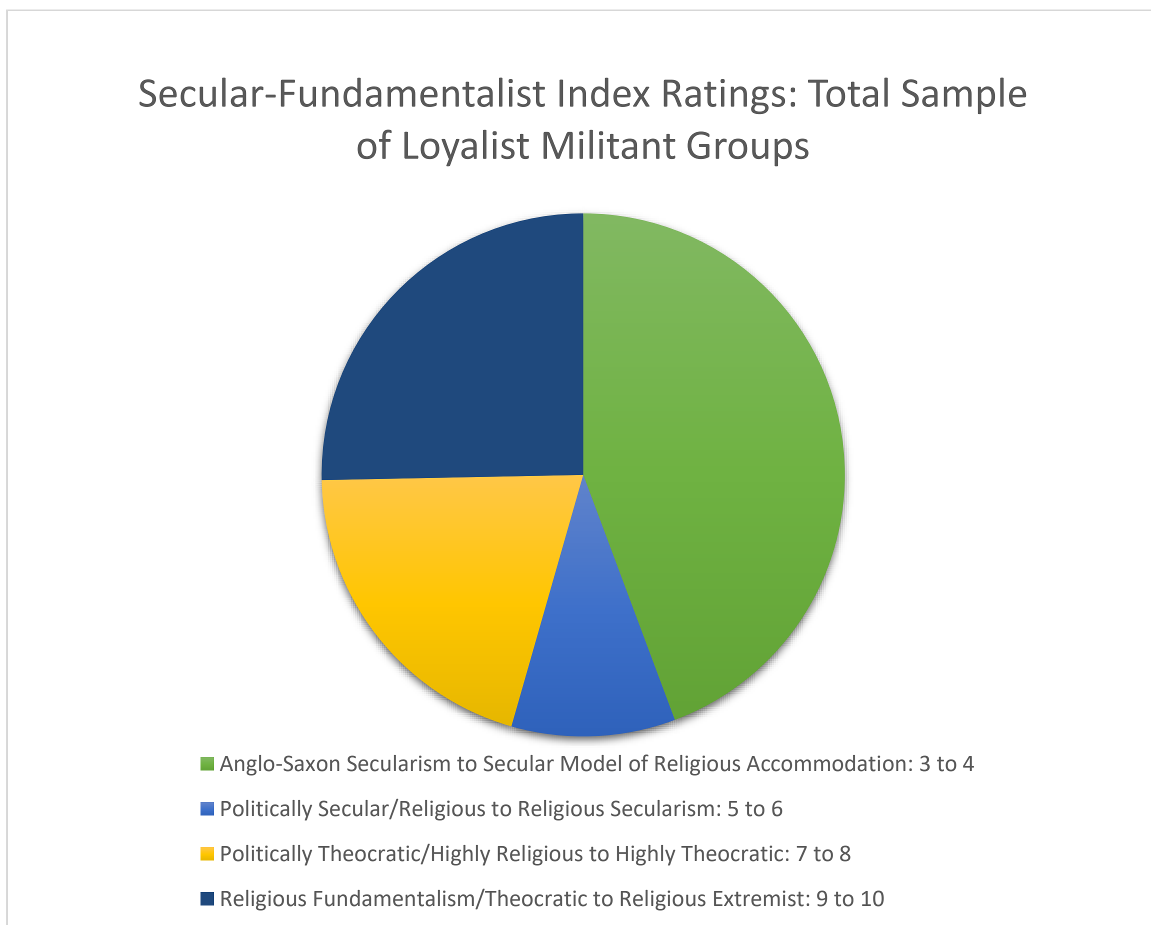

Figure 5.9. Secular-Fundamentalist Index Ratings (Sources: see Appendix 9, *Citation List A.* on pages 333-334, Source Description: see Appendix 10, *Description of the Sources used for Syrian Militia Data*, pages 335-336).

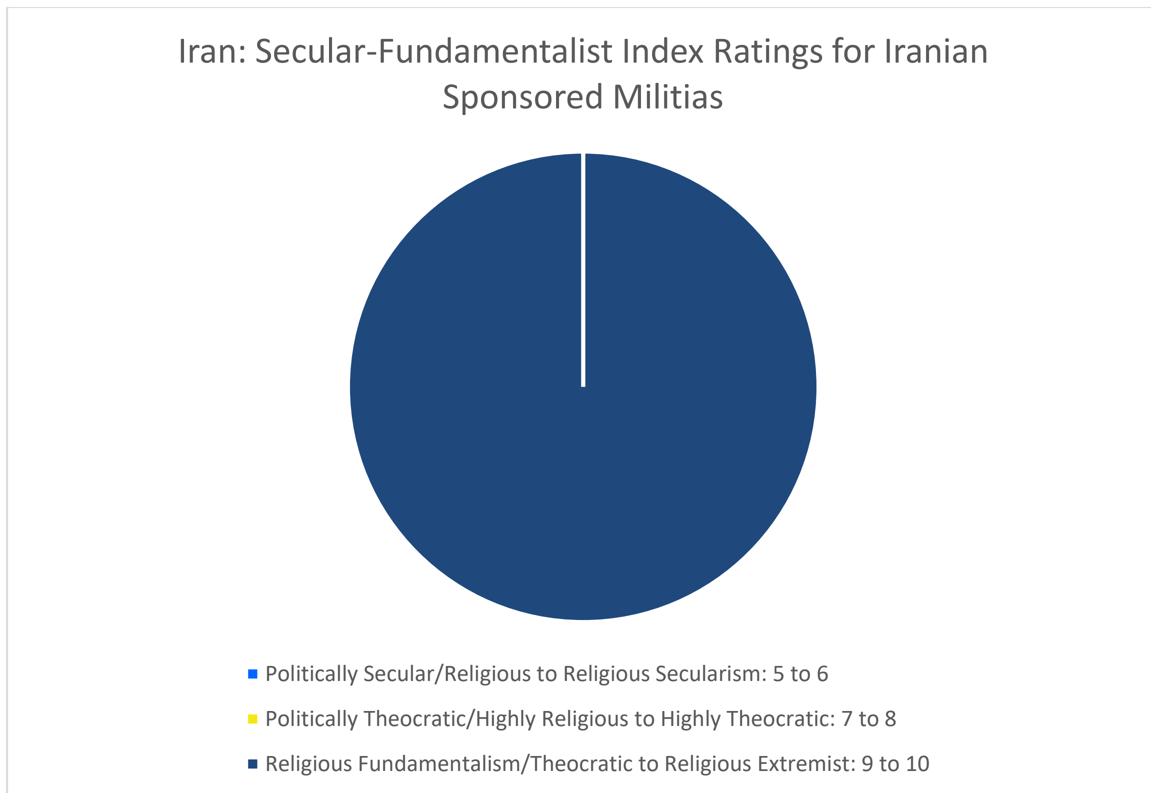

Figure 5.10. Iran: Secular-Fundamentalist Index Ratings for Iranian Sponsored Militias (Sources: see Appendix 9, *Citation List A.* on pages 333-334, Source Description: see Appendix 10, *Description of the Sources used for Syrian Militia Data*, pages 335-336).

In order to reveal in more detail how Iran's sponsorship of militias in Syria relates to the regime's religiously based domestic survival tactics, the positions of the militias directly sponsored by Iran are compared to the regime's tactics in accordance with the theoretical pillars[74]. As such, Table 5.11 below shows the Iranian regime's positions relative to the theoretical pillars. This is then contrasted with the positions of the Iranian sponsored militias in Table 5.12.

[74] Shown in Chapter 3, Table 3.10, page 115.

Table 5.11. Iran's Domestic Stance Relative to the Theoretical Pillars.

Theoretical Framework	Iran's Position relative to the Theoretical Pillars
Idea of the State	• *Velayat e-faqih* • Conservative Shia Islamism • Leader of the axis of resistance against Israel and the West
Religion Regulation & Political Opponents/Outgroups	• Represses both the moderate Islamist opposition and Islamic extremists who oppose the state. • Suppresses sects such as Sunni, Bahai'i and other minority sects. • Works to discredit secularists.
Secular-Religious Competition Perspective	• Resistance to secularization through enforcement of conservative religious dictates such as the women wearing the hijab. • Police enforce the regime's Islamist ideology. • Rewards given to volunteers who join the Baij[75] and the religious institutions. • The IRGC has a significant hold over the economy and thus politics. • Secular-Fundamentalist Index Rating: 9
Selectorate Theory	• Religious authority: the Shia theocratic left and right are cornerstone of the winning coalition/essential support for the regime.
Identity Hegemony Theory	• Conservative Shia Islam

[75] The Sāzmān-e Basij-e Mostaz'afin, or Mobilisation Resistance Force is a paramilitary volunteer militia that is involved with internal security and religious ceremonies among other things. The Volunteers get greater access to state provided resources.

Regional Security Complex	• Iran leads a largely Shia alliance that seeks to constrain Sunni hegemony, Israel and the US.

(Table created by author from assessments based on the research).

Table 5.12. Iran's Support of Specific Militias Explained through the Theoretical Framework

Theoretical Framework	**Patterns of Militia Support in Syria**
Idea of the State	• Only 9 out of the 77 Iranian backed militias were able to be confirmed as supportive of *velayat e-faqih*, however all Iranian sponsored militia's ideologies were conservative Shia Islamism. • The Palestinians groups sponsored by Iran actively opposed Israel, it is extremely likely all the rest of the militias do as well.
Religion Regulation & Political Opponents/Outgroups	• Militias actively oppose Sunni - Sunni extremists typically. • Iran fights on the same side as Christians and Assyrians. However conservative Shia militias can be somewhat hostile to all religious groups that are not Shia.
Secular-Religious Competition Perspective	• All groups able to be identified as supported by Iran directly had a Religious-Fundamentalist Index Rating of 9 - so highly conservative and religious in keeping with Iran's position.
Selectorate Theory	• The vast majority of groups supported by Iran are in keeping with the sect and religious fundamentalism of Iran's domestic *winning coalition* i.e. theocratic Shia.
Identity Hegemony Theory	• Iran predominantly supported Conservative Shia Muslim Militias, but also a small number of Palestinian Sunni Militias
Regional Security Complex	• Iran sponsors Shia groups that are supportive of Iran's efforts to revise the regional arrangements; i.e. groups that resist US and often also Sunni power in the region.

(Sources: see Appendix 9, *Citation List A.* on pages 333-334, Source Description: see Appendix 10, *Description of the Sources used for Syrian Militia Data*, pages 335-335).

It is evident by comparing the two tables that Iran's domestic survival strategies relative to the theoretical pillars are largely matched by the political and theological positions of the militias they sponsor. Therefore, it is likely that Iran moves its domestic survival strategies into the regional sphere – specifically through its sponsorship of Shia militias.

Iran: Domestic Survival versus Regional Security Complex Motivations in Syria

First of all, the patterns of alliance and competition in the MENA regional security complex broadly corresponds to the Sunni states versus Iran's "axis of resistance"[76]. Given this it is not unexpected that Iran supports the survival of the Alawite dominated regime in Syria. However, although Iran is on the side of the Assad regime, who are supported by a range of secularists, minority sect groups, and Shia Islamists, the Iranian regime appears to directly support only the conservative Shia militias that match the domestic ideology of the Iranian regime; i.e. Shia religious conservatism. Therefore, it is likely that the religious authoritarian survival strategies that Iran uses domestically (i.e. the privileging of Shia and in particular religiously conservative Shia) are also employed in the regional sphere given that the regime supports the most conservative Shia groups from amongst the Assad loyalist militias. This domestic pattern corresponds with Iran's alliances in the region which are significantly based on Shia led groups and regimes. The similarity between sectarian privileging patterns domestically, and Iran's militia sponsorship choices in Syria, supports the idea that domestic regime survival and the realities of the regional system have both impacted on Iran's decision making when it comes to selecting which loyalist groups to directly support in the Syrian civil war. However, both religious strategies, the use of society's ongoing secular-religious contest and sectarianism, are first and foremost political tools, and as such religious ideology is trumped by geo-political concerns. For instance, the Iranian and Syrian regimes arguably indirectly supported the expansion of Daesh into Eastern and North Eastern Syria (Read, 2018); (Behravesh, 2018), stoking insecurity and fear amongst religiously moderate Sunni and minorities that they faced suppression by an extremist opposition, thus strengthening the legitimacy of the regimes' narrative that they are battling takfirist extremists, not a popular uprising.

[76] The "Axis of Resistance" consists of Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, previously and possibly Hamas. Some analysts also include the Shia militias in Iraq and the Houthis in Yemen.

Secular-Fundamentalist Ratings of Opposition Militias in Sample

Figure 5.13 displays the secular to fundamentalist ratings of the all the militias in the sample that oppose the Assad regime. Of all the militias assessed, 97.5% were Sunni or included more than 90% of Sunni fighters in their units. The militia's position on the scale from secularism to fundamentalism typically ranged from religious secularism to religious extremism.

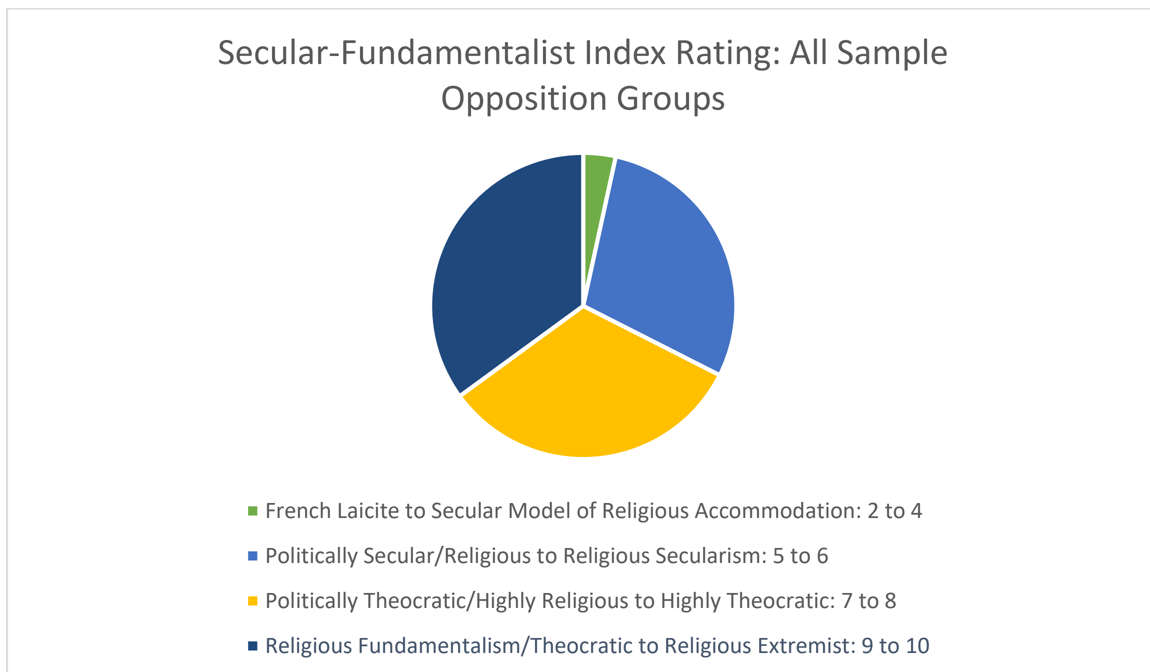

Figure 5.13. Secular-Fundamentalist Index Rating: All Sample Opposition Groups (Sources: see Appendix 9, *Citation List A.* on pages 333-334, Source Description: see Appendix 10, *Description of the Sources used for Syrian Militia Data*, pages 335-336).

Patterns of Saudi Arabian Militia Sponsorship in the Syrian Civil War

Figure 5.14 displays the Secular-Fundamentalist Index Ratings of the sample of militias sponsored by Saudi Arabia individually combined with militias that were supported by the Military Operation Centers (MOCs) with which Saudi Arabia was involved. Figure 5.15 separates out the militias that Saudi Arabia reportedly sponsored directly; i.e. separately from the Military Operation Centers.

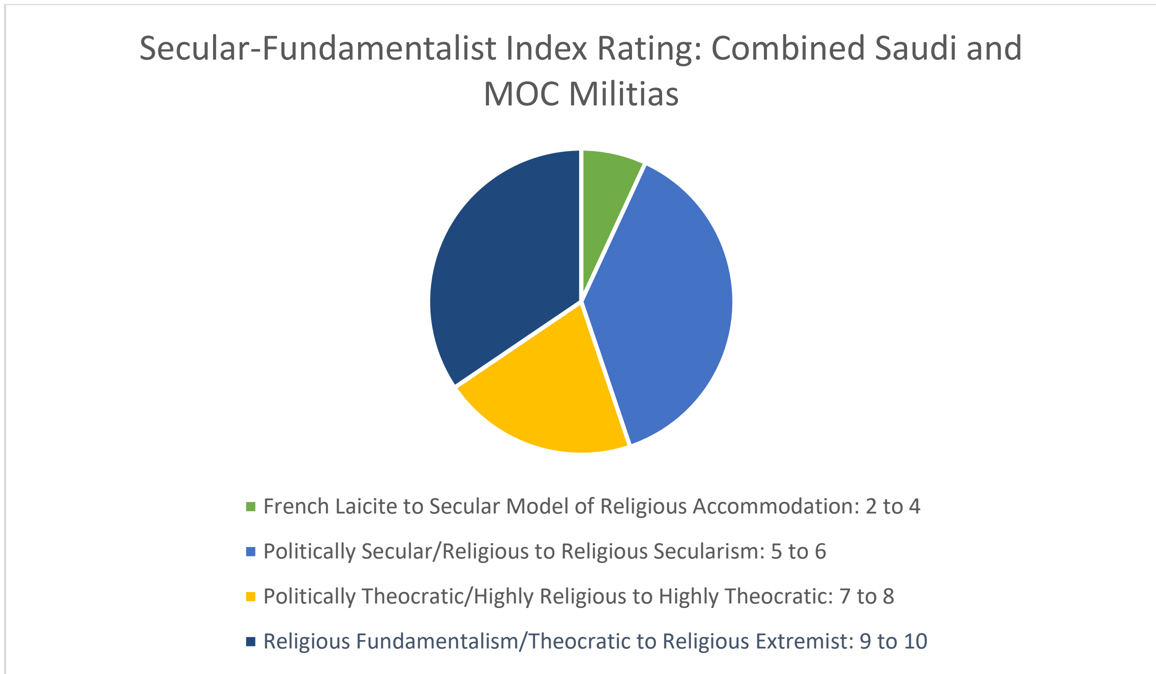

Figure 5.14. Patterns of Militia Support: Saudi Arabia and MOCs (Sources: see Appendix 9, *Citation List A.* on pages 333-334, Source Description: see Appendix 10, *Description of the Sources used for Syrian Militia Data*, pages 335-336).

All the groups that Saudi Arabia supported, including both directly and indirectly through the MOCs, predominantly ranged from religious secularism to fundamentalist.

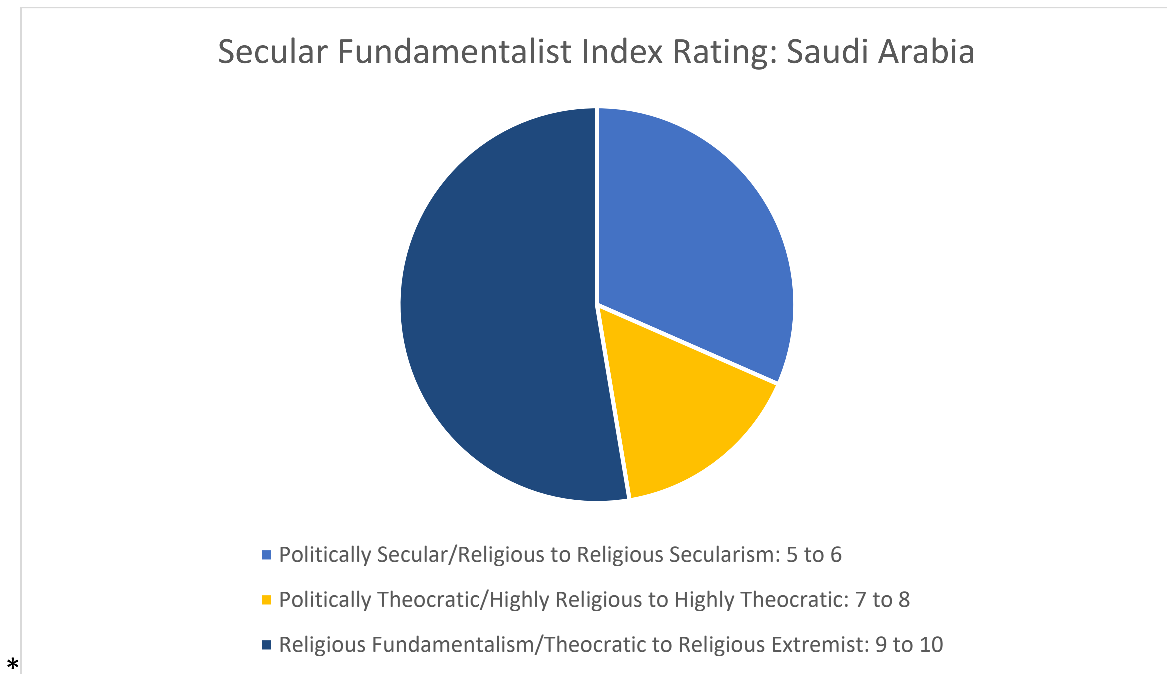

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Figure 5.15. Patterns of Militia Support: Saudi Arabia (Sources: see Appendix 9, *Citation List A.* on pages 333-334, Source Description: see Appendix 10, *Description of the Sources used for Syrian Militia Data*, pages 335-336).

However, after removing the MOC's militia groups from the data, it is evident that Saudi Arabia typically directly supported Sunni Salafi groups that were/are highly fundamentalist with theocratic ideologies that scored 9 on the Secular-Fundamentalist Index. This is in keeping with Saudi Arabia's domestic legitimacy needs. The militias that Saudi Arabia directly supported are compared against Saudi Arabia's domestic survival strategies in the two tables below.

Table 5.16 The Stance of the Saudi Arabia Relative to the Theoretical Pillars.

Theoretical Framework	**Saudi Arabia's Position relative to the Theoretical Pillars**
Idea of the State	• Authoritarian monarchical Salafi Islamism.
Religion Regulation & Political Opponents/Outgroups	• Opposes both moderate Islamist opposition and Islamic extremists who oppose the state. • Supresses' minority sects such as the Shia. Works to discredit political secularists. • Actively oppresses the Muslim Brotherhood's brand of "populist Islamism rooted in the democratic process" (with little emphasis on civil liberties) (Wittes, On Jamal Khashoggi, the Muslim Brotherhood and Saudi Arabia, 2018), seeking with the Trump administration's help to rebrand them as extremists.
Secular-Religious Competition Perspective	• Highly conservative and theocratic regime. • Scored 8 on Secular-Fundamentalist Index. • Police enforce the regime's Islamist ideology.
Selectorate Theory	• Al Saud Family and the Religious Establishment: the royal family and the religious elites are the cornerstone of the essential support for the regime.

Identity Hegemony Theory	• Conservative Islamism
Regional Security Complex	• Part of anti-Islamist quartet. • Opposes Iranian influence. • Contests with Iran and Turkey for hegemony.

(Table created by author from assessments based on the research).

Table 5.17 The Saudi Arabia's Support of Specific Militias Explained through the Theoretical Framework

Theoretical Framework	Saudi Patterns of Militia Support in Syria
Idea of the State	• Looking at Figure 15.5, outside of the groups it supported as part of MOCs, Saudi Arabia supported militias whose position would not challenge its authoritarian monarchical Salafi Islamism.
Religion Regulation & Political Opponents/Outgroups	• Opposes both moderate Islamist opposition and Islamic extremists such as ISIL. • Does not support Shia militias. • Does not support the Muslim Brotherhood. • These positions are in keeping with its domestic stances.
Secular-Religious Competition Perspective	• Predominantly supportive of groups that sought the Islamization of society, and predominantly supported groups with a rating of 9 but also highly supportive of groups with a rating of 8 which is the same rating as the regime – so highly Salafi groups.
Selectorate Theory	• With the possible exception of some of the more extremist groups that Saudi Arabia has sponsored, most of the groups are in keeping with the sect and ideology of Saudi Arabia's *winning coalition.*

Identity Hegemony Theory	• All groups that Saudi Arabia supports outside of the MOC's have the same identity proposal as the regime, i.e. Conservative Islamism.
Regional Security Complex	• None of the groups that Saudi Arabia supports are Islamic populists or connected to the Muslim Brotherhood, this includes within the MOCs. • All the groups supported specifically by Saudi Arabia promote Sunni Islamism with probable sectarian stances on Shia and other minorities therefore side against the Iran within the contest between Sunni states and Iran in the region.

(Sources: see Appendix 9, *Citation List A.* on pages 333-334, Source Description: see Appendix 10, *Description of the Sources used for Syrian Militia Data*, pages 335-336).

Saudi Arabia: Domestic Survival versus Regional Security Complex Motivations in Syria

Saudi Arabia predominantly supports Sunni groups that oppose the Alawite regime in Syria. Furthermore, reflecting the rifts within the Sunni camp, the findings showed that Saudi Arabia did not provide aid to the Muslim Brotherhood which is perceived as an enemy of the anti-Islamist quartet. Nor was it found to directly support the more secular actors in the conflict. However, Saudi Arabia does not oppose the secular or religious secularist rebel groups given it indirectly provides them with aid through its participation in the Military Operation Centers.

Both of these positions, although reflecting rifts and alliances in the MENA region, are also indicative of the domestic survival needs of the regime. The regime is a highly conservative Wahhabi regime: it supports Salafi militias that share its predominantly sectarian world view, its position within the ongoing societal contest between secularism and religion, and thus the justifications for its continued rule. It is clear that the domestic concerns of Saudi Arabia are strongly reflected in its sponsorship of rebel groups in the Syrian civil war. Therefore, Selectorate Theory's observations in the domestic sphere - that regimes are first and foremost preoccupied with political survival - is evident in these findings.

Patterns of United Arab Emirates Militia Sponsorship in the Syrian Civil War

The UAE appears to have not sponsored any individual militias, preferring to support groups through the MOC framework. The groups supported by the MOCs typically range from secular to conservative, but not extremist. This is in keeping with the UAE's religious secularism and moderate Islamism.

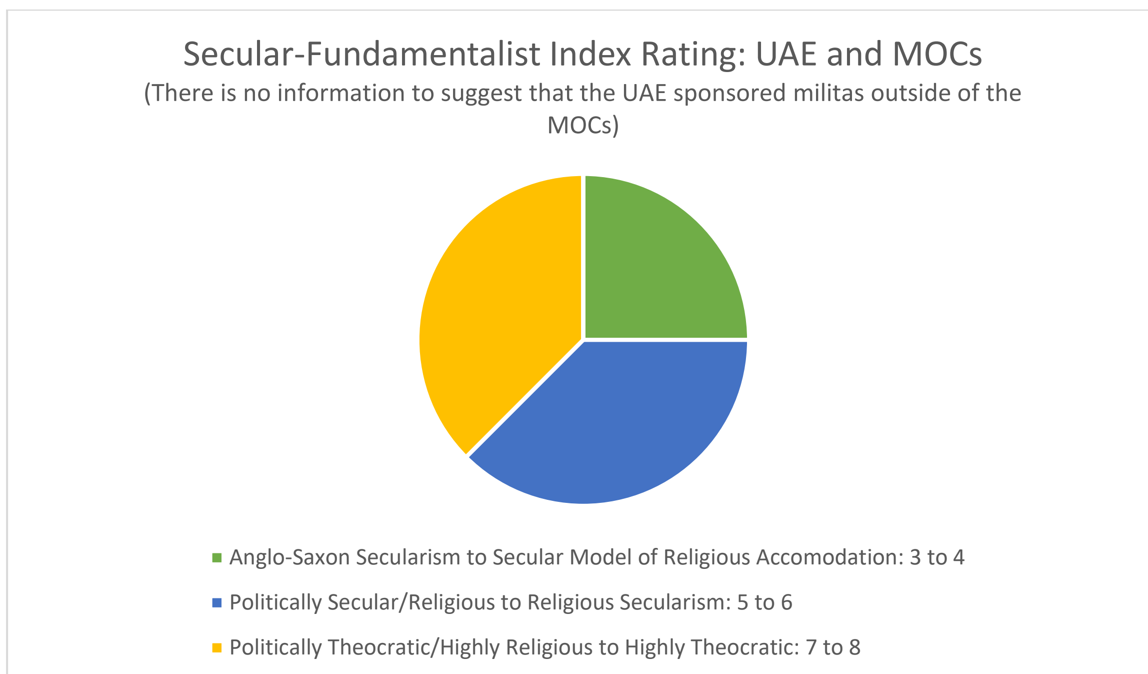

Figure 5.18. Patterns of Militia Support: UAE and MOCs (Sources: see Appendix 9, *Citation List A.* on pages 333-334, Source Description: see Appendix 10, *Description of the Sources used for Syrian Militia Data*, pages 335-336).

Because no information was found on any groups individually supported by the UAE, additional research was undertaken into the groups that the UAE actively opposed in Syria to provide a deeper insight beyond the regime's involvement in the Southern MOC. The UAE has released an entire list of the groups it has designated as terrorist organisations. Of the groups on this list that operate in Syria (and where adequate open source information was available), the UAE identified following groups as terrorists: Shia, Sunni jihadi extremists, or Muslim Brotherhood affiliated groups such as the Al Ka'kaa' Brigade and the Al Tawheed Brigade, who were reportedly supported by Qatar (The National, 2014) (Oweis, 2013). This fits with the general trends of the UAE's domestic strategies in relation to Shia groups, Sunni extremists and the Muslim Brotherhood.

The tables below compare the domestic survival strategies of the UAE regime with the ideological and policy positions of the militias that the UAE indirectly sponsored through its involvement with the MOCs.

Table 5.19. The UAE's Domestic Stance Relative to the Theoretical Pillars.

Theoretical Framework	UAE's Position relative to the Theoretical Pillars
Idea of the State	• Authoritarian monarchical moderate Islamism, religious secularism, modernity and progress.
Religion Regulation & Political Opponents/Outgroups	• Opposes both moderate Islamist opposition and Islamic extremists. Supresses' minority sects such as the Shia. • Works to discredit political secularists. • Actively oppresses the Muslim Brotherhood's brand of "populist Islamism rooted in the democratic process" (but with little emphasis on civil liberties) (Wittes, On Jamal Khashoggi, the Muslim Brotherhood and Saudi Arabia, 2018), seeks with the Trump administration's help to rebrand the Muslim Brotherhood as extremists.
Secular-Religious Competition Perspective	• Islam is the preferred religion and identity, this is protected and promoted by the state. • Religious-Fundamentalist Index Rating 6.
Selectorate Theory	• Essential support: wealthy connected Sunni particularly those linked to the royal family's tribal bloc.
Identity Hegemony Theory	• Modern Sunni Religious Secularity.
Regional Security Complex	• Anti-Islamist populism Quartet. • Opposes Iranian influence.

(Table created by author from assessments based on the research).

Table 5.20. The UAE's Support of Specific Militias Explained through the Theoretical Framework

Theoretical Framework	Emirati Patterns of Militia Support in Syria
Idea of the State	• The Emirates mostly provided support through the US backed MOC's. • The MOCs typically provided support for secularists through to moderate Islamists. • This is in keeping with the UAE's idea of the state which is based around religious secularity.
Religion Regulation & Political Opponents/Outgroups	• Opposes both moderate Islamist opposition and Islamic extremists such as ISIL. • Does not support Shia militias. • Does not support the Muslim Brotherhood. • These positions are in keeping with its domestic stances.
Secular-Religious Competition Perspective	• Typically, the MOCs support militias that are secular to moderate, with Religious-Fundamentalist Index Ratings of between 1-8.
Selectorate Theory	• Supports militias that do not seek democracy or conservative Islamism. This matches the regime's domestic stance and the religious stance of its *winning coalition*.
Identity Hegemony Theory	• Supports Sunni groups that broadly speaking link to its position on religious secularity. This is in keeping with its key identity; moderate comparatively tolerant Islamism.
Regional Security Complex	• None of the groups that the UAE supports are Islamic populists or connected to the Muslim Brotherhood, this includes within the MOCs. • All the groups supported by the MOCs would be likely to side with Sunni states against Iranian influence.

(Sources: see Appendix 9, *Citation List A.* on pages 333-334, Source Description: see Appendix 10, *Description of the Sources used for Syrian Militia Data*, pages 335-336).

The United Arab Emirates: Domestic Survival versus Regional Security Complex Motivations in Syria

Like Saudi Arabia, the UAE's foreign policy in Syria reflects its strong opposition to Iran and its influence across the region as it supports no Shia groups. Additionally, the UAE only supports those groups that do not oppose its domestic identity and idea of the state; namely, militias that range from religious secularist to Islamist (not extremist) in religiosity. This research was unable to verify that the UAE directly sponsored any militias in Syria as all it's support appeared to be through the MOCs. The UAE is actively contesting within two rifts in the region: opposing the moderate Islamists and Qatar, and religious extremism. Both of these groups were not supported in Syria by the UAE, and the extremist ISIL was actively opposed. This is indicative of domestic concerns regarding the stability of their autocratic, religious secularist and nominally pluralist regime within the wider Middle Eastern and North African context.

Patterns of Qatari Militia Sponsorship in the Syrian Civil War

By comparing Figure 5.21 to Figure 5.22 below, it becomes evident that Qatar, separate from its involvement with the MOCs, tends to support moderate Islamist and Salafi groups.

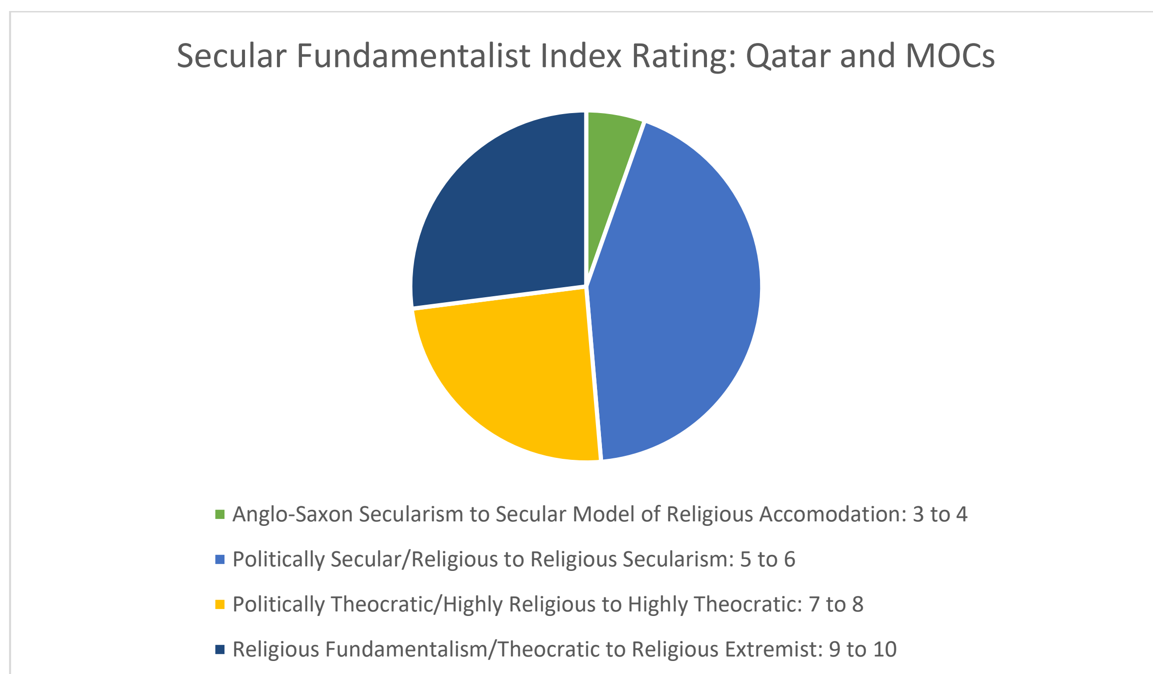

Figure 5.21. Patterns of Militia Support: Qatar and the MOCs (Sources: see Appendix 9, *Citation List A.* on pages 333-334, Source Description: see Appendix 10, *Description of the Sources used for Syrian Militia Data*, pages 335-336).

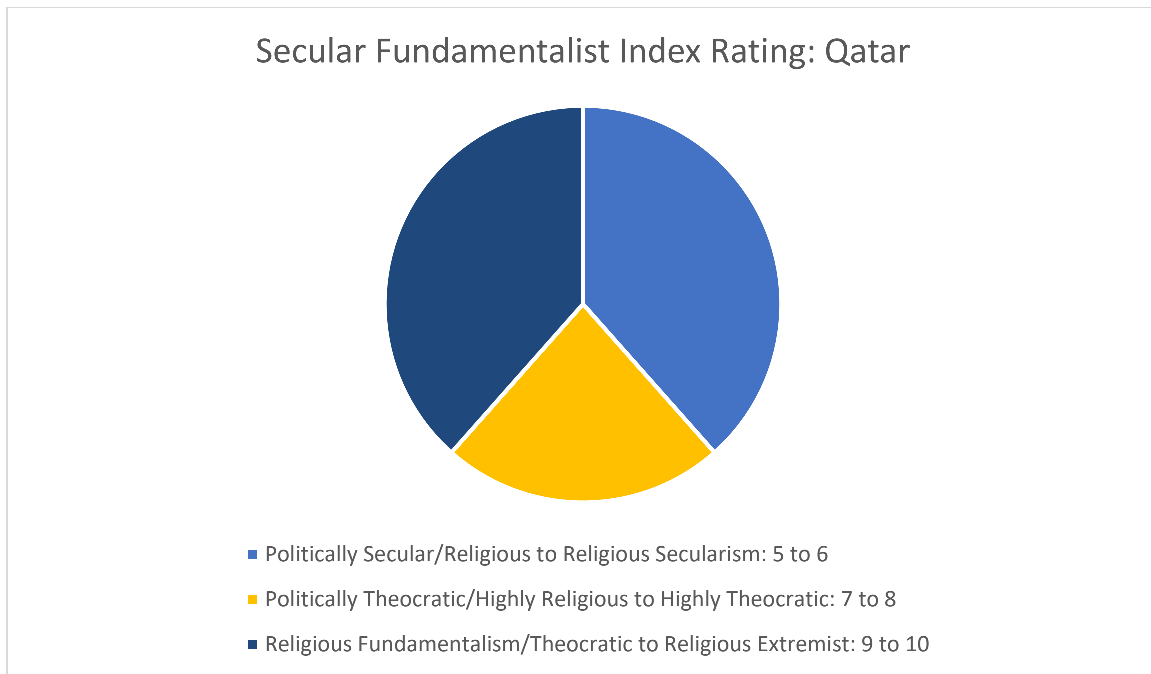

Figure 5.22. Qatar: Patterns of Militia Support (Sources: see Appendix 9, *Citation List A.* on pages 334-335, Source Description: see Appendix 10, *Description of the Sources used for Syrian Militia Data*, pages 336-337).

This contrasts with Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia supported a greater proportion of Salafi groups, and less moderate Islamist militias, and none of the Muslim Brotherhood affiliated moderate Islamist groups that Qatar sponsored in Syria.

Tables 5.23 and 5.24 below compare Qatar's domestic survival strategies that involve religion, with the rebel groups they support.

Table 5.23. Qatar’s Domestic Stance Relative to the Theoretical Pillars.

Theoretical Framework	Qatar’s Position relative to the Theoretical Pillars
Idea of the State	• Qatar supports a range of Islamist actors which matches with its idea of the state: which is moderate Wahhabi Islamism and religious secularism.
Religion Regulation & Political Opponents/Outgroups	• Has co-opted moderate Islamists and the religious establishment. • Monitors minority sects such as the Shia but also monitors Sunni activism. • Actively supports the Muslim Brotherhood’s brand of “populist Islamism rooted in the democratic process” (but with little emphasis on civil liberties) (Wittes, On Jamal Khashoggi, the Muslim Brotherhood and Saudi Arabia, 2018).
Secular-Religious Competition Perspective	• Islam is the preferred religion and identity, this is protected and promoted by the state. • Co-opted prominent Muslim Brotherhood and moderate Islamists such as Yusuf Qaradawi and Tariq Ramadan. • Religious-Fundamentalist Index Rating 6
Selectorate Theory	• Essential support: wealthy connected Sunni. Al Thani tribal bloc.
Identity Hegemony Theory	• Wahhabi Religious Secularity.
Regional Security Complex	• Resistant to Saudi hegemony of Sunni camp. • Opposes Iranian influence but is less hostile to the Iranian regime than Saudi Arabia and the UAE. • Supportive of the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamic populism around the region.

(Table created by author from assessments based on the research).

Table 5.24. Qatar's Support of Specific Militias Explained through the Theoretical Framework

Theoretical Framework	**Qatari Patterns of Militia Support in Syria**
Idea of the State	• Qatar promoted a wide range of groups with differing ideologies and Islamic identities.
Religion Regulation & Political Opponents/Outgroups	• Actively supports the Muslim Brotherhood's brand of "populist Islamism rooted in the democratic process" with little emphasis on civil liberties) (Wittes, On Jamal Khashoggi, the Muslim Brotherhood and Saudi Arabia, 2018) within Syria. However, domestically, activism by this group is very effectively suppressed. This move does not match with domestic survival considerations in a clear way, excepting if Qatar fears domination by Saudi Arabia and the UAE (see section conclusion below).
Secular-Religious Competition Perspective	• Typically supports militias that are secular to conservative, with a Religious-Fundamentalist Index Rating of between 5-10. This matches either with the moderate Islamism of the regime, or with the conservatism of many of its Wahhabi citizens.
Selectorate Theory	• Again a complicated position in Syria. Most likely reflects that the political authority of the regime relative to its religious establishment and the strength of its domestic legitimacy, enabling Qatar to support a wider range of actors.
Identity Hegemony Theory	• Supports groups that align both with its stance on religious secularity and with its conservative Wahhabi faith. • The Wahhabi faith in Qatar is not as powerful in politics as it is in Saudi Arabia.
Regional Security Complex	• Actively supports Muslim populism across the region, particularly if linked to its Muslim Brotherhood networks. • Is possible it promotes the Muslim Brotherhood and is aligned with Turkey as a means of balancing against Saudi Arabia and UAE in the region. • Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have appeared to insist that Qatar align its foreign policy with their own.

(Sources: see Appendix 9, *Citation List A.* on pages 333-334, Source Description: see Appendix 10, *Description of the Sources used for Syrian Militia Data*, pages 335-336).

Qatar: Domestic Survival versus Regional Security Complex Motivations in Syria

Qatar was the only one of the three Arab states examined to support the Muslim Brotherhood affiliated groups. Qatar supported Islamists and Salafi militias, reflecting the prominence of Islam in Qatari society and across the region. Qatar faces very little threat from religious pressure given the lack of a domestic clerical leadership class and the political secularism of its governance structure. However, given the religious secularism of Qatar, its support of Salafi groups is a surprise. Additionally, given Qatar is an autocratic monarchy, its support of the Muslim Brotherhood and Muslim Brotherhood affiliated groups also appears to be somewhat risky in terms of regime survival. Both groups have the potential to disrupt the Qatar regime's domestic legitimacy. So either the regime is more interested in Islamism than its own survival, which is unlikely, or it perceives it faces a greater threat than if certain actors, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, emerge victorious in Syria. By supporting the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, Qatar risked its alliance with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. However, given past and present animosity between the current ruling branch of the Al Thani family and Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, allowing these two states too much influence in Qatar could provide them with the opportunity to promote another Al Thani branch into power. Indeed, in 2017, the UAE asserted that Sheikh Abdullah bin Ali al-Thani and then Sheikh Sultan bin Suhaim al-Thani had 'rightful' claims to greater power in Qatari political landscape. This was an attempt to damage the legitimacy of the past and present Emirs, Hamad and Tamim Al Thani (Ulrichsen, 2018, p. 16). Furthermore, the strengthening of Saudi Arabia's hegemonic bid for regional leadership would also be likely to give Saudi Arabia additional means to meddle in Qatar. Therefore, the Qatari ruling elites potentially risked sacrificing their alliances within the Gulf Cooperation Council for domestic distance from Saudi Arabia and the Emirates. However, Qatar's regional power is based in the 'Arab Street', and by backing down to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, this regional soft power would have been reduced. Qatar sought to promote a form of Islamism that weakened Saudi Arabia's ability to lead the region, and this created a rift with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The resultant 'blockade' of Qatar by Saudi Arabia and the UAE has increased Qatari distrust of both regimes, and created a "newfound nationalism" (Ulrichsen, 2018, p. 18) and thereby provided some protection to the current ruling family from interference. However, had the Muslim Brotherhood succeeding in gaining power in Syria, this would have protected the Qatari ruling elite from Saudi and Emirati

interference, increased nationalism and national pride at home, *and* increased Qatar's regional influence. This is in keeping with Selectorate Theory which stresses that politicians are ultimately concerned with their own political survival. Hal Brands assertion that "much of what the Russian and Chinese governments do in foreign affairs is related to securing their domestic power" (Brands, 2018, p. 72) also applies to Qatar.

In contrast to the Qatari position, Saudi Arabia and the UAE reject democratic Islamist actors on the basis that they challenge authoritarianism and consequently have been actively opposing them across the region since the 'Arab Spring'. As Tamara Cofman Wites states, "After Brotherhood political parties won elections in Egypt and Tunisia (pluralities, not majorities, in both places), these governments came to understand the Brotherhood as an existential threat: a model of governance that challenged their own authoritarian, monarchical Islamism with populist Islamism rooted in the democratic process (not civil liberties, but the monarchies don't care much about civil liberties either)" (Wittes, 2018). On the other hand, Turkey, another potential hegemon in the region, and Qatar have supported the emergence of these groups in the post-'Arab Spring' environment. The emergence of a Sunni democratic Islamist government in Syria would likely side with other Sunni States against Iran. However, as a democratically elected Islamist government it would also be likely to face some reticence from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, so this government would be likely to resist Saudi leadership of the Sunni camp, in line with Qatar and Turkey's aims. Given this it is reasonable to assume that Qatar wants a Sunni government in Syria that restrains or balances against Saudi hegemony. The quartet have become firm enemies of the Qatari regime, and it appears, if attempted coup rumours are to be credited (Emmons, 2018), behind the scenes this branch of the Al Thani family have faced hostility from the Emiratis and Saudis ever since Emir Tamim al Thani's father, Hamad al Thani, succeeded to power after staging a peaceful coup against his father, Khalifa al Thani in 1996. Unlike his father, Hamad al Thani did not marry into the Attiyah family. "Saudi influence in Qatar has long been through prominent families, most notably that of the Attiyahs, who are their blood relations" (Ramesh, 2017). Furthermore Khalifa al Thani was also generally understood to be supportive of Saudi interests in the region. In contrast Tamim and Hamad al Thani have stressed foreign policy independence and have behaved as mavericks amongst the Sunni camp, resisting Saudi

pressure and instead pursuing an activist foreign policy and an assertive Qatari identity. As such, Saudi dominance of the Sunni camp is not in Qatar's best interests.

Analysis: The Domestic Survival Strategies of Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar in the Syrian Civil War

This section analyses the findings outlined above in relation to the following theoretical pillars: the Selectorate Theory and sectarian alliances, Secular-Religious Competition Perspective, the patterns of religious regulation and political opponents, the idea of the state and Identity Hegemony Theory. The findings establish that there is a connection between the religious domestic survival strategies and the militias sponsored in the Syrian civil war and show that the sect of the ruling elites strongly matched the militias they chose to sponsor. The connection between the Secular-Fundamentalist rating of the regimes and the militias they sponsor is not as pronounced, but there is still a clear preference towards sponsoring those militias that share the same rating. The same rating tends to indicate a similar ideology relative to religion and secularism, as well as a similar religious identity. It follows from this, that the willingness of various militias to accept sponsorship from a certain state can be an indication of their beliefs and vision for Syria.

All the regimes sponsored rebels or militia groups that were predominantly the same sect as their ruling elites. For instance, in all the states studied, 99% of the militias sponsored were the same sect as the regimes. In Chapter 3 it was established that all the regimes had a preferred religion; the militias sponsored by the studied states were of the same religion and sect as this preferred religion, with Iran sponsoring Shia Muslim militias 99% of the time, and Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar sponsoring Sunni Muslim militias. This links to the domestic survival strategy of distributing dividends to a select sectarian group, i.e. the same sect as the ruling elites. This was established by applying the Selectorate Theory against the regimes in Chapter 3. However, given that this sectarian dynamic of Sunni versus Shia rivalry is also present in the regional sphere, it is difficult to establish whether or not the motivation behind sponsoring same-sect militias comes from the need to pursue regional or domestic objectives. Indeed, it is likely that the strategy of supporting militias of the same sect as the regime supports both objectives: that of working to strengthen the sectarian alliance that the regime

belongs to within the region, and working to ensure the continued support of the ruling elite's sectarian group at home.

It is not just Islamism, but also its opposite – secularism - that features as a key pattern in militia sponsorship. Fox proposed in his Secular-Religious Competitive Perspective Theory that the contest between secularism and religion is an ongoing feature in society. Within the Middle East this research suggests that this contest is used as a domestic survival tactic with the regimes promoting a secular or religious ideology against which they criticise or contrast with their main domestic opposition groups, and through which they secure domestic support. In order to see if this domestic survival tactic is also used in the regional sphere, the Religious-Fundamentalist Index rating of the regimes was compared against that of the militias they support/supported in Syria. Generally speaking, the regimes backed militias with a similar rating to their own. This was particularly evident with Iran and Saudi Arabia, both of whom preferred to sponsor militias that shared the conservative Islamism that they use to secure their domestic legitimacy – albeit Saudi Arabia supports Sunni Salafi groups and Iran supports Shia. Both regimes tended to avoid supporting extremist groups, such as ISIL, who oppose and directly challenge existing regimes. The UAE, who was the least active state of the case studies in the Syrian civil war, also tended to sponsor groups whose position on religious secularism and Islamism was similar to their own. The MOCs predominantly supported groups that ranged from religious secularism to Islamism in keeping with the UAE's domestic narratives in support of its Muslim identity and religious secularism. These narratives are also used to contrast the regime against such groups as the Muslim Brotherhood and ISIL, framing both groups as extremist. Qatar is more complicated. It supported the widest range of actors, ranging from religious secularist through to Salafi groups. Additionally, it supported the Muslim Brotherhood affiliated groups which both Saudi Arabia and the UAE opposed. It is likely that given its Wahhabi conservative citizens combined with the regime's moderate religious secularism, Qatar can domestically afford to sponsor quite a wide range of actors without generating significant domestic opposition. Furthermore, given Saudi Arabia and the UAE want Qatar to follow their lead within regards to counter revolutionary strategies across the Middle East, whereas Qatar seeks to maintain its foreign policy independence, Qatar may wish to use the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Brotherhood's other supporter Turkey, to balance against Saudi dominance of the Sunni regional alliance. Qatar tends to be seen as a

maverick actor in the region, and clearly aims to continue to exercise its sovereignty in this manner. However, given instability in Iraq and the post-'Arab Spring' chaos in Egypt and Libya, the other large Middle Eastern Sunni states are too weak to exert significance influence across the region leaving Saudi Arabia room to dominate the Sunni camp. With long standing friction between Saudi Arabia and the current ruling branch of the Al Thani family, this is not in the interests of the Qatari regime.

The evidence shows that groups and sects suppressed domestically in the case studies states are the same groups they seek to suppress within the Syrian civil war and across the region. The domestic sectarian divide in Saudi Arabia, Iran, the UAE and Qatar exists across the region so it follows these sectarian cleavages would be leveraged as states support allied sects regionally, in their domestic and regional policies. Furthermore, many opposition movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, operate both within states and transnationally; therefore, in order to weaken these sources of domestic opposition, states aim to weaken the larger groups and movements across the region as well. Qatar is able to support the Muslim Brotherhood as the group is present, but largely inactive in Qatar. This is indicated in Figure 5.25 below. Saudi Arabia and the UAE share their animosity towards the Muslim Brotherhood with the Syrian regime. As such, the Muslim Brotherhood is indicated as banned in the UAE, Egypt, Syria and Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, Figure 5.25 demonstrates that the quartet (Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, UAE) has cut ties with Qatar over its regional support of the group. Given that the Muslim Brotherhood is inactive in Qatar, it is likely that Qatar views the threat to its independence from Saudi Arabia and the UAE as more concerning than any potential threat from the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood across the region. From the perspective of Saudi Arabia and the UAE it is clear that, with "legal Brotherhood offshoots participating in parliamentary politics" across the region (Oxford Analytica Daily Brief, 2017), electoral Islamism emerging as a force following the 'Arab Spring' would be considered a serious threat.

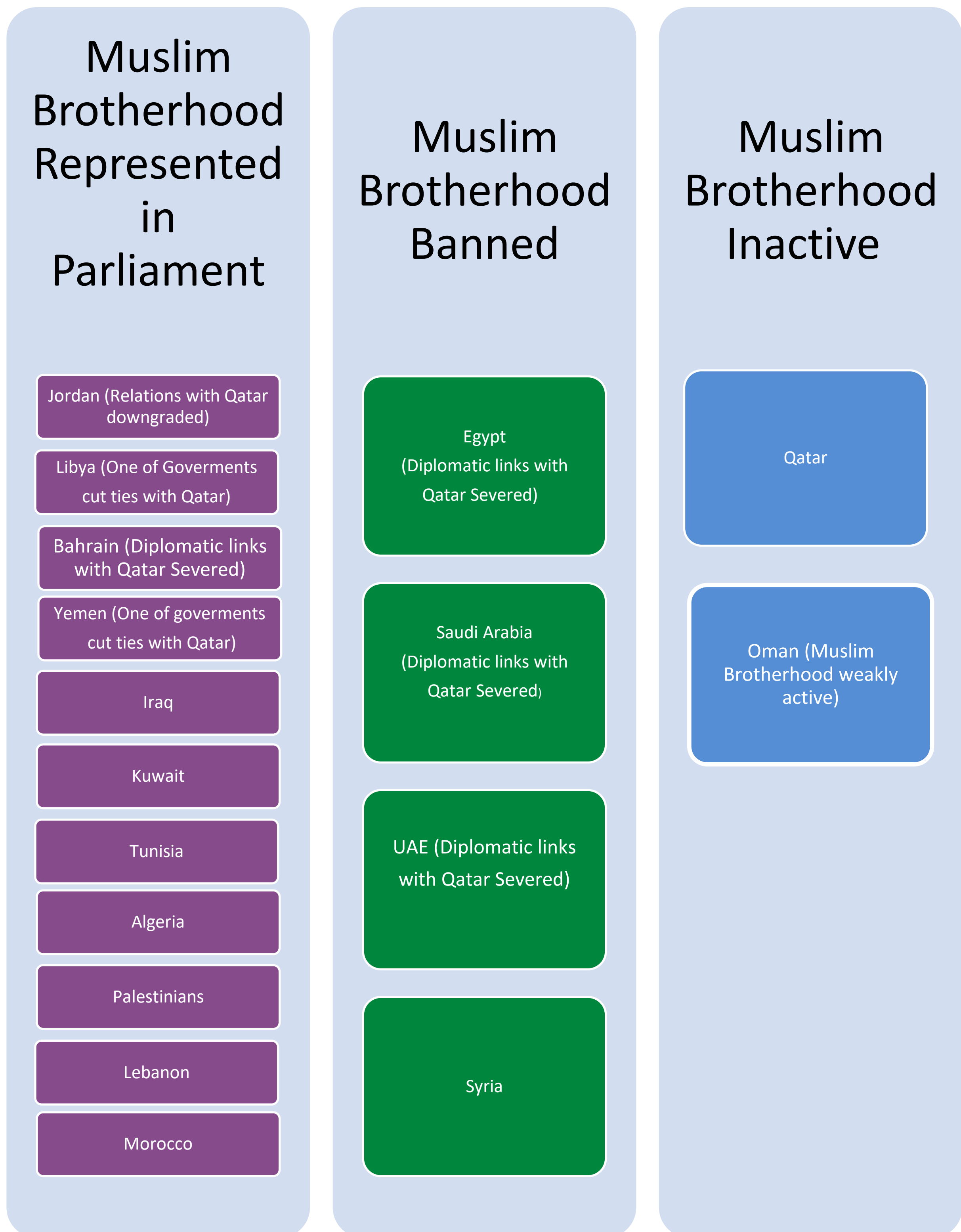

Figure 5.25. The Muslim Brotherhood in the MENA Region. The information presented in Figure 5.25 was sourced from the Oxford Analytica Daily Brief (Oxford Analytica Daily Brief, 2017).

All the states tended to support groups that shared the same idea as the regime. Generally speaking, Saudi Arabia supported fellow Salafis, Iran supported conservative Shia Islamists who resisted Western and Sunni dominance, the UAE supported moderate Islamists who did not mention democracy, and Qatar supported Islamists. Given that transnational dynamics, particularly those that relate to religion and sect, impact domestic politics in the MENA region, these states are particularly concerned with ideas, identities and ideologies that are gaining strength within the regional security complex. With the Muslim Brotherhood winning elections in Egypt and Tunisia following the 'Arab Spring' the UAE became increasingly hostile towards the movement. Despite the Emirati regime's efforts to suppress it, the Muslim Brotherhood retains a reasonable amount of support in the Emirates. With its efforts against the movement seemingly stalled at home, the UAE appears to have moved this political and identity contest into the regional sphere where it has more room to manoeuvre against the movement. This is in keeping with Hintz's Identity Hegemony Theory which posits that identity contests that are blocked at home are often contested regionally instead.

As Hintz notes, both states and transnational civil society use foreign policy to extend their influence. Civil society makes use of transnational networks because activists and opposition movements are disadvantaged in their domestic settings by their lack of institutional access (Hintz, 2016, p. 341). The Muslim Brotherhood is a prime example of this, utilising its transnational networks in order to overcome the repression it is often subject to within states. It is not surprising, therefore, that states attempt to compete with the Brotherhood where they seek to advance their influence: through the Muslim Umma.

In sum, where it matches with or does not disrupt regional policy, the case study regimes extend domestic survival strategies that use religion as a tool into the regional sphere. As such, patterns of support and opposition within the domestic sphere has a causal relationship in terms of which militias are supported regionally. The patterns analysed relate to sectarianism and the ongoing contests between political ideologies that propose either a form of secularism or a form of Islamism. In the conclusion that follows these patterns will be analysed against the theories used in this research, leading to some new assumptions.

Discussion: The Theoretical Implications of Domestic Survival Strategies that use Religion as a Tool in the Regional Sphere

First of all the findings show that domestic survival strategies that use religion as a tool are also used in the regional sphere, specifically in terms of militia sponsorship in the Syrian civil war. This supports the premise that Selectorate Theory has relevance beyond the domestic sphere and is, in fact, also relevant in the regional sphere: regime elites seek to secure their own political survival through domestic and regional policies. As Hintz points out in relation to her position that states move domestic identity contests into the regional sphere, this is at odds with Structural Realism which posits that states are black boxes whose international actions are determined by their hierarchical position within the regional and international systems. Whereas Structural Realism dismisses the domestic environment or ruling elites of states, claiming that interests dominate, the operation of Selectorate Theory in the regional sphere conversely reveals that ruling elites and the strategies they use to survive have an impact on international decision making. Hintz's work supports this finding in that she states that foreign policy is a mechanism through which states can "compete against their domestic rivals as much as their international counterparts" in contests over domestic identity (Hintz, 2016, p. 340). Hintz's identity argument is relevant to domestic survival strategies as identity proposals establish who the in- and out-groups are within a state (Hintz, 2016, p. 341). The in-group/out-group pattern makes up a state's *real selectorate* and *winning coalition* as per Selectorate Theory.

Furthermore, Hintz points out that her theory challenges rational IR understandings because she contends that state interests are not fixed, and that foreign policy is not immune to the politics of identity nor to domestic stimuli (Hintz, 2016, p. 340). Therefore, foreign policy can be used to realise the interests of ruling elites as well as state interests. This has been largely borne out by this chapter's analysis. For instance, all states supported militias aligned with the same sect as their source of essential support at home, or as Smith and de Mesquito state, their *winning coalition*. Additionally, the militias the states supported were closely aligned with the ruling elite's idea of the state and their position within the secularist-fundamentalist contest. This means that the states' domestic authoritarian survival strategies are supported by their choices regarding militia sponsorship in the region.

However, despite this focus on the domestic origins of foreign policy choices, far from rejecting Structural Realism this research accepts that structural considerations act as a restraint on the projection of authoritarian survival strategies into the regional sphere. This goes further than Neoclassical Realism which includes domestic considerations such as "public opinion, the legislature and privileged interest groups" in its analysis of foreign policy (Ripsman, 2009, p. 170). Instead, the conclusion reached here is in line with Hal Brands' observations regarding China and Russia's increasingly assertive foreign policies: that "Russia and China are employing strategies more specifically tailored to making the international environment safe for their regimes" (Brands, 2018, p. 73). This research supports the proposition that Iran, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are working to create a regional sphere "in which autocracy [continues] to be privileged and protected" (Brands, 2018, p. 75), a strategy Brands outlines in relation to China and Russia. Thus, ruling elites will act in the interests of their own political survival - except where state interests by urgent necessity trump this internationally. Iran's relationship with Syria is an example of this. Iran's idea of the state and state legitimacy is firmly based in *velayat e faqih* and conservative Iranian theology. This contrasts with the legitimacy and idea of its key State ally, Syria. Iran has non-state allies such as Hezbollah and Hamas. The Syrian regime promotes religious secularism and Islamic moderation, a stance on which the Assad regime's support from minorities is based. However, Syria is the only other Middle Eastern state led by an authoritarian government that is not dominated by Sunni, and regionally Iran needs allies to resist pressure from hostile Sunni states such as Saudi Arabia. Therefore, although in terms of sect Syria is a match with Iran's authoritarian survival strategies, which are based on privileging the Shia sect, in terms of religiosity the Syrian regime is at odds with Iran's domestic promotion of conservative Shia Islamism. However, due to regional considerations this is overlooked in the interests of developing a regional network of Shia allies. This research contends that a more secure ruling elite group will work more strongly in the interests of the state, except if this interferes with their domestic political survival. Where they are able to pursue regional policies that work in the ruling elite's favour domestically, they will do so. Additionally, whilst domestic survival concerns of ruling elites and the intervening state's interests are projected into the Syrian conflict, it is evident that little consideration is given to potential outcomes in terms of the Syrian domestic scene; outcomes appear to be selected based on how well they match the aims of the intervening state. Thus, in the MENA region international state behaviour is

impacted by ruling elite's political survival concerns, and de Mesquito and Smith's theory that elites seek to stay in power above all, is also evident in foreign policy.

This chapter, however, has revealed an issue with assessing the sponsorship of militias in the civil wars: the need to further separate the two motivational criteria – (1) state interests as per Structural Realism and (2) the regional survival strategies of the ruling elite as assessed through an extended understanding of Selectorate Theory. Structural Realism treats states as "black boxes" wherein a state's place in the international or regional system's hierarchical structure, rather than internal factors or governance regime, is prioritised in analysis. A state's place in the international hierarchy is largely dependent on a state's material capabilities, thus Structural Realism describes power as "based on the material capabilities that a state controls" and on latent power; i.e. "the socio-economic ingredients that go into building military power" (Mearsheimer J. J., 2010, p. 72). This materialist explanation can also be applied to hierarchical relationships between states within regional security complexes. A state's capabilities are typically assessed according to five criteria: its natural resources, its demographics, economic, military and technological capacity. Using Structural Realism as a guideline for assessing state interests in order to differentiate them from domestic survival strategies leads to a question: can research separate out the interests of the state from the interests of the ruling elites in terms of their own political survival?

Overall, this chapter takes a step towards answering this research's questions in the affirmative, establishing firstly that Selectorate Theory relates to the regional sphere and that states are not just 'black boxes'. Therefore, we can expect to see the features of religion as a ruling elite survival tool in the regional sphere, and that this is discoverable in terms of militia sponsorship in the Syrian and Yemeni civil wars. This has been borne out given that the militias sponsored matched with both the sectarian strategies the regimes used domestically and, to a lesser extent, with the degree of religiosity the states supported as part of the idea of the state. The presence of militia sponsorship patterns that reflected the states domestic contests between religion and secularism established that Fox's Secular-Religious Competition Perspective also has relevance in the regional sphere. It is evident that efforts to promote a certain degree of fundamentalism or secularism domestically were reflected in regional militia sponsorship patterns with the theocratic Iranian regime supporting the more conservative militias in the Syrian civil war, for example. This reflects Hintz's Identity

Hegemony Theory whereby identity and ideological contests blocked domestically are moved by regimes into the regional sphere where the regime may have more room to manoeuvre. The state's domestic relationship between religious regulation and opposition groups extends into the regional sphere as well. For example, Saudi Arabia and the Emirates both work to suppress the Muslim Brotherhood domestically, and their regional policies following the 'Arab Spring' reflected a similar drive to curtail the political power of the Muslim Brotherhood within the states which fell or were openly contested as a result of the 'Arab Spring'. MENA politics is a mixture of Realism and Selectorate Theory – we can see domestic elite group competition played out regionally set within the constraints and opportunities of state interests within the regional security complex.

Beyond Selectorate Theory, this research investigates beyond the understanding that religion in politics in the MENA region is driven solely by sectarianism. It has been clear with the emergence of ISIL that another significant religious cleavage in the region is between religion and secularism. There is an additional rift emerging between democratic Islamism and autocratic Islamism. The cleavage between religion and secularism is multifaceted. It is not a black and white 'fundamentalism versus political secularism' dynamic, but about degrees along the scale from one extreme to the other. States and the non-state religio-political leaders compete to take over the region. Both sectarianism and the competition between secularism and religion are tools used by actors to compete for power and to impose contrasting political and religious agendas. It is important to note that Iran also supports groups with which they do not share a religious connection; namely, Hamas in the Gaza Bank and Christian groups in Lebanon. Whilst these groups are still sectarian in their makeup, and place an emphasis on religions role in governance, neither are Shia. This is an example of Iran pragmatically pursuing geopolitical aims through different sectarian groups where an alliance is able to be made.

This research seeks to contribute to filling the gap in the international relations literature on how regimes use religion in foreign policy as a mechanism for domestic political survival. The research looks at the projection of domestic regime survival tactics through the contestation of issues that involve religion such as secular-religious competition, Selectorate Theory and sectarianism, the idea of the state, religious regulation and political opponents and Hintz's Identity Hegemony Theory. These issues have been addressed through the analysis of the

case study states patterns of support for militias in the Syrian civil war. The findings indicate that all these strategies are present in the regional sphere through testing patterns of militia sponsorship against the theoretical framework. All the states support, where they can, militias whose stance on sectarianism, secularism and fundamentalism best supports the legitimacy of their own political survival at home.

The next chapter looks to make explicit the difference between regional authoritarian survival strategies and regional aspirations. In order to do this, the following chapter applies the same tests to the Yemeni civil war. The chaotic nature of the Yemeni state, both prior to and during the current civil war, is important in terms of this research. The Yemeni case reveals a greater difference between the domestic survival strategies and the states regional interests, allowing these to be more firmly established than the case in Syria where the two are harder to separate. In Yemen, politics reflects a constant drive for political survival in a chaotic political scene. The interests of the Yemeni state have been, and are, neglected by a dysfunctional ruling elite. The assumption is that disruptive contests over political power dominate the domestic political scene. In this environment, the intervening states behaviour is more blatant and less nuanced than in the Syrian example. Furthermore, due to the difficulties in getting information for all militia groups, and therefore having selected a sample group of militia's based on access to enough information, the findings in this chapter need to be tested further. Testing the Syrian civil war findings against the Yemeni civil war thus strengthens the case that regime's project domestic survival strategies that use religion as a tool into foreign policy.

Chapter Six: Intervening in the Yemeni Civil War: Religion, Sectarianism and Religious Secularism as Externalised Authoritarian Survival Strategies

Introduction: Militia Sponsorship Patterns in the Yemeni Civil War

The previous chapter investigated the sectarian and secular/religious patterns of militia sponsorship in the Syrian civil war, and related this to the domestic survival tactics of the four regimes examined in this thesis. This chapter carries out a similar investigation, but focuses on the Yemeni civil war. As such, the patterns of militia and group sponsorship in Yemen by Saudi Arabia, Iran, the UAE and Qatar are analysed and then related to the theoretical pillars. Specifically, this chapter looks for religiously-derived authoritarian stabilisation and survival tactics that are utilised in the regional sphere.

The Yemeni case is more complicated than the Syrian example as the sectarian divide between domestic actors is less pronounced, and politics in Yemen is typically pragmatic being based on relationships to tribal leadership rather than ideological affiliation between groups. This blurs the religious/secular boundaries between foreign actors and militias. However, divisions are still evident and, as such, Yemen provides an additional environment in which to analyse these dynamics. In contrast to Syria, where the regime leadership features elites that are frequently Alawite and linked to the Assad family, and is aligned with Iran, prior to the confusion of the 'Arab Spring' Yemen's government contained politicians of different sects and the uprising against it comes from multiple fronts including the Zaydi Shia Houthis seeking to establish political dominance in the North and a predominantly Sunni group from the South pursuing secessionism. Thus the Yemeni civil war offers the opportunity to apply the tests from the previous chapter in another political environment thereby deepening the findings. In doing so, the research's findings are tested to see if they relate just to the Syrian example, or whether they have broader regional relevance.

The first half of the chapter outlines the dynamics of the Yemeni environment and the Yemeni civil war beginning with the legacy of President Saleh and moving onto the secular and religious dynamics of the current civil war. The second half of the chapter analyses the research's findings regarding militia sponsorship by Saudi Arabia, Iran, the UAE and Qatar in

Yemen. These findings are related to the theoretical pillars. Strategies that are found to be present in both the domestic and regional spheres are tested against regional strategies in order to assess the motivation for them: regional aspirations or domestic survival strategies. The conclusion then considers whether Selectorate Theory, secular/fundamentalist competition, or a state-based material explanation is the better explanation for sectarian, and religion based militia sponsorship in Yemen.

Part I: Yemen and the Yemeni Civil War

The Legacy of President Saleh

Ginny Hill, a journalist and policy advisor on Yemen, summarised the complexity of Yemen in 2017 when she stated that "in Yemen the truth is especially fluid. It is often elaborate, sometimes unbelievable and always many layered. Yemen is a world of relationships, not institutions, and each version of events that is revealed to you depends on the speaker's assessment of your connections and suspected affiliations" (Hill G. , 2017, p. xi).

She goes on to explain Yemeni politics under President Saleh as follows:

> For more than three decades, during the long running presidency of Ali Abdullah Saleh, Yemenis learned to function in a system of power that thrived on speculation, denial and false allegations. Saleh's decision making was highly personalized and chaotic, and he deliberately fostered confusion (Hill G. , 2017, p. xi).

Lisa Wedeen explains this further,

> "[The Yemeni case suggests] that regimes can rely on spaces of disorder as a model of reproducing their rule. Maintaining domains of disorder as a way of exercising control may not be a self –conscious or optimal strategy, but it has its own logic and efficacies for regime survival (Wedeen, 2008, p. 151).

The current state of affairs in Yemen still strongly reflects the legacy of President Saleh's rule. The state does not consistently act in its own interests; instead, the state operates according to the elite's tactics for securing their own political survival. Thus, in keeping with Selectorate Theory, the Yemeni state operated not in the interests of the state, but in the interests of the political and tribal elite and the strategies that they used to remain in power. This has meant that the political scene in Yemen continues to consist of confused "multiple realities" (Hill G. ,

2017, p. xiv). As Ginny Hill adds, “Since the outbreak of civil war in March 2015, [President Abdrabbuh Mansour] Hadi’s flight from Yemen to Saudi Arabia, and the start of the Saudi-led air campaign in Yemen, the culture of feint and slander continues to be stoked by factional politics and a highly partisan media” (Hill G. , 2017, p. xii).

A preoccupation with political survival has also marred the rest of Yemen’s political groups. Applying the findings to the theoretical framework revealed a key flaw in Yemen’s political groups. Looking at the ‘idea of the state’ section within Tables 6.11, 6.14, 6.17, 6.20 of this chapter, it is evident that the ideas and stances of the opposition are ill defined. They are based around procuring political allies and establishing distribution channels to provide political dividends. As a result, their plans for the country are murky and ideologically flexible and are failing to deliver a unifying and inspiring vision of the future. The Yemeni political scene is thus likely to remain divided for the foreseeable future. Owing to this complex picture, it is essential to understand Yemen’s domestic sectarian and political dynamics before the case study states strategies in Yemen are considered.

The Sectarian Dynamics of Yemen and the Yemeni Civil War

Yemen’s population is primarily divided across two sects. The largest group comes under the Sunni umbrella, the Shafi`i sect. There are also small numbers of the Maliki branch of Sunni Islam. Sunni are approximately 56% of the population and Shia, of the Zaydi denomination, approximately 44% (Zady, 2000). Historically, Sunni and Shia have had good relations in the country. This is likely attributable to the moderate version of Islam in Yemen and its Sufi element (Kabir Helminski, 2017). Sunni Islam in Yemen comes under the Shafi`i school, which is relatively tolerant. Zaydism, the Shia sect in Yemen, is similar to Sunni Islam on matters of theology and is closest to the Shafi’i school in matters of Islamic law.

Zaydi Islam is a moderate version of Shia Islam. Theologically the sect is closer to Sunni Islam than the mainstream Twelver Shia Islam followed by Iran. Partially as a result of this sectarianism has not been a strong feature of Yemeni politics and society. The Zaydis hold particular views on the political leadership of the Muslim community, which differ from the Shafi’i school. These include (a) an affirmation of Ali’s appointment as the successor to Muhammad, (b) the theoretical right of a Sayyid to the Imamate, and (c) support for Zayd ibn Ali’s revolt against the Umayyads in 740.

In order to understand leadership within the Houthis and Zaydis as a whole, we need to look at the Zaydi doctrine of the Imamate. The Zaydi Imamate existed in Northern Yemen from 893 until the revolt in 1962. Zaydi political and social hierarchies are built on the Sayyid's cultural right to leadership. "The crux of Zaydism' rests on legitimacy through this line of descent. True claims to the Zaydi Imamate, however, do not rely exclusively on the bloodline; rather – in theory – they also rest on the principle of *khuruj* or 'coming out' against oppression, during periods of poor governance or control by unjust authority" (Hill G. , 2017, p. 10). The Sayyid leader must enforce Islamic legal rulings and interpret revealed texts whilst possessing political qualities such as "military prowess, courage, tactical intelligence, political acumen, fiscal responsibility and a commitment to justice. In addition to Sayyid descent, religious knowledge and political skill, a candidate for the imamate must lead a military uprising against an unjust ruler preceded by a period of missionary work" (Haider, 2010). Due to these principles, Zaydis had a strong preference for an activitist Imam. However, as 'Sunnification' accelerated and the influence of Wahhabism grew in the 18th and 19th centuries, Zaydis scholars moved away from political activism. A clash grew within the Zaydi Imamate between the 'Sunnified' scholars who supported rulers unconditionally and traditional Zaydism which endorsed rebellion. Haider describes how "the consequences of this conflict between a Sunnified Zaydism resembling Shafi'ism[77] and a traditional Zaydism rooted in the traditional theological tenets and political activism of the community's early history continue to reverberate in contemporary Yemen" (Haider, 2010).

The last Zaydi monarchy, the Mutawakkilite dynasty, held spiritual and temporal power in Northern Yemen between 1918 and 1962. The monarchy was headed by Imam Yahya Muhammed (Notholt, 2008, p. 4.07). Zaydism's central tenet was that the spiritual leader of the Muslim community should also be the supreme ruler (Imam) of the Muslim state. Political and legal authority belonged to "the people of the (Prophets) house" (Weir, 2007, pp. 230-232). A coup, backed by Egypt, overthrew the Zaydi dynasty in 1962 and a civil war erupted lasting from 1962 to 1970. In 1990 the Yemen Arab Republic and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen unified under the President of Northern Yemen, Ali Abdullah Saleh (Notholt, 2008, p. 4.07).

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[77] A moderate branch of Sunni Islam that is prominent amongst Sunni in Yemen.

In the current era, Najam Haider describes Zaydism as in crisis between two fault lines: one religious and the other lineal. The first fault line centres on 'Sunnification', with the government under Saleh favouring an educational curriculum that strongly leaned towards Shafi'i Islam. For instance, Saleh's government made moves towards restricting the influence of traditional Zaydism, as despite being Zaydi, Saleh is not religiously motivated. This included closing religious schools run by Zaydi scholars who preached "the political activism characteristic of traditional Zaydism and restricting the activities of cultural organisations run by those that follow traditional Zaydism. This has caused a decline in their influence in major urban centers" (Haider, 2010).

The second fault line is between the Sayyid and non-Sayyid Zaydis. The authority of the Sayyid families has, over time, led to systematic social discrimination and disempowerment amongst non-Sayyids. From the 1980s, Wahhabi scholars (who focused their missionary efforts on the non-Sayyid) exploited this rift. This also aggravated a long-standing contest for influence between Zaydi scholars, who were predominantly Sayyid, and the largely non-Sayyid tribal leaders. Faced with the spread of 'Sunnification', non-Sayyid scholars began working to defend Zaydism against Wahhabism. The 'Believing Youth' movement was one of the grassroots organisations that sprung up in the traditional Zaydi stronghold of Saa'da. This group stressed religious study based on the non-Sunnified form of Zaydi Islam. By the early 2000s, Hussein al Houthi, a junior member of a prominent clerical family, led this group in open revolt against the Yemen government (Haider, 2010). The suppression of Zaydi clerical establishments by the Saleh government and the instability and disruption of the 'Arab Spring' prompted the Houthi's to rise against the government.

Alongside dissatisfaction with President Saleh, the Houthi rebellion, which began in 2004, was also driven by the rise in Salafi – especially Wahhabi – Sunni Islam in Yemen. Salafi Islam has made inroads into Yemen in the last few decades, mostly due to transnational proselytising and a shift in religious identities (Bonnefoy, 2009). However, it is important to separate Yemeni Salafi into two branches. The core branch emerged in the 1980s and stems from the teachings of the prominent Yemini Salafi cleric, Muqbil al-Wadi'i who was exiled in 1979 from Saudi Arabia prior to the Ikhwan uprising in Mecca.

Salafism has grown over the last three decades to compete with the traditional political and religious identities in Yemen, such as Sufis, Zaydis and to an extent the Muslim Brotherhood. One of the doctrines of Al-Wadi'i's thought, and hence the core branch of Yemeni Salafism, is the rejection of partisanship, or hizbiyyah, due to the belief that it divides the Muslim community. As such, the theological stance of the main Yemeni Salafi branch rejects party politics, democracy and voting on principle, thus resulting in a reduced participation by Yemeni Salafis in the country's politics, and a stress on loyalty to existing rulers whilst eschewing uprisings. These apolitical Salafis have been very active during the current era, stigmatising other groups, particularly the Socialists, but also the revivalist Zaydis (Houthis) and the Sufis. In an illustration of this branch's attitudes, the main heir to Al-Wadi'is position as leading cleric of the quietist Salafis, Yahya al Hajuri, was quoted from a conference recording by analyst Laurent Bonnefoy as having described the "Arab Spring is a plague due to Masonic doctrine orchestrated by Jews who have exploited the Muslims" (Hill, 2012, pp. 3-5).

In the 1990s, another Salafi branch emerged - the Salafiya Harakiya - which is politically active. The Houthi narrative is that this activist Salafi community, and indeed the wider Salafi community, is heavily involved with the Saudi regime. There is a Yemen wide narrative that Salafi Islam is a Saudi import and that, given this, the Saudis are able to meddle in Yemeni politics through their links with the Salafiya Harakiya (Hill, 2012, p. 11). This narrative is overlaid with the fact that Yemen is a highly conservative country; as such, Salafi extremism is not dramatically different from the religious social rules and values that already exist in Yemen, particularly in rural areas (Hill, 2012, p. 18).

The Secular-Religious Dynamics of Yemen and the Yemeni Civil War

Secularism and the Yemeni civil war

Secularism in Yemen is rooted most deeply in Southern Yemen, largely due to its socialist past. The socialist republic was formed in 1970, uniting with the North in 1990. However, Southerners have felt marginalised under this new arrangement and are unhappy with the extraction of southern resources by the North. Therefore, in 2007 the Southern Movement

(STC) or al Hirak al-Janoubi was formed calling for secession and the return of the South Yemen Republic (Alsaafin, 2019).

The Southern Movement has taken an active role in the current Yemen civil war, fighting against extremist groups and the Houthis on the side of the nominal government led by President Hadi. However, there are reports of fighting between the STC groups and pro-government forces, with a clash described in April 2017 between the two over control of Aden's airport (Ardemagni E., 2019). President Hadi is supported by the Saudi Arabian government whilst the STC is supported by the UAE. The STC contains multiple actors but due to its socialist membership, it is considered secular. The General People's Congress (GPC), now led by President Hadi, is also generally considered moderately secular, at least by Middle Eastern standards. The characteristics of the STC and the Hadi government are outlined below.

The Southern Secessionists

The STC's focus is not secularism, but separation from the North which they see as exploiting the South. However, there are socialist party members in its ranks and amongst its leadership. For instance, the current leader of the movement is Ali Salem Al-Beidh who was the Former General Secretary of the Yemeni Socialist party and a former President of South Yemen (Southern Hirak, 2019). Therefore, it is likely that the STC at least supports religious secularism.

However, fighting within the Southern Movement are units such as the Shabwani Elite Forces, Hadhrami Elite Forces and the Security Belt Forces who are essentially tribal secessionist movements who frequently focus on protecting tribal interests. As Eleonora Ardemagni states " these military groups include armed Salafis, socialists, and sympathizers of the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), all of whom share secessionist beliefs" (Ardemagni E., 2019). As such, to claim that the Southern Movement contains exclusively secular actors would be inaccurate. The group largely represents a drive to secede from the North. This complicates, but doesn't negate, claims that the UAE's foreign policy in Yemen is strictly focused on efforts to "strengthen secular forces in the country at the expense of Islamist factions backed by Saudi Arabia" (Salacanin, 2019). However, the STC do not so much as promote secularism as oppose domination by Northern Islamists and Northern elites. As such, their position on religion and secularism is unclear, excepting the Marxist groups within the secessionist camp.

The Hadi Government

The legacy of Saleh's presidency sets much of the scene for Yemeni politics. Ginny Hill describes this aptly.

> Under Saleh's protracted leadership, competing tribal, regional, religious and political interest agreed to hold themselves in check by a tacit acceptance of balance. This implicit system of power sharing bound itself together through a dense network of personal relationships, which – in effect – formed the foundation of the regime. Access to, or exclusion from, this system was defined by marriage, military stipends, business contracts and political pay-offs. Personal interests trumped the authority of formal institutions in almost every instance (Hill G. , 2017, p. 2).

This balancing is seen clearly in Hadi's government (who replaced Saleh as President in 2012). Hadi's coalition against the Houthis, which contains both the Yemeni socialist party and the Muslim Brotherhood linked Al Islah party, is a testament to this. Therefore, although the Hadi Government opposes extremist Islamist groups and the Houthi, given they contain Al-Islah as a coalition partner it is likely they are not opposed to moderate Islamism. Hadi's fight against Islamic extremists, such as al Qaeda, points to the Hadi government as being uninterested in Islamist arguments for governing but not secularist. Hadi's party, the GPC, is generally considered to be comparatively non-ideological, instead being viewed as pragmatic and representative of certain interest groups.

Islamism in Yemen

In the North, the toppling of the Zaydi imam's monarchy in 1962 saw a move towards political secularism with the establishment of a republican regime. However, the strong influence of religious actors remained. Despite this, prior to the outbreak of the civil war which toppled President Saleh, sectarian groups in Yemen were tolerant of each other; with Sunni at times praying in Zaydi mosques and vice versa (Bonnefoy, 2009). Thus, the most notable feature of Islamism in Yemen is how well integrated it has been within the state and its institutions. Unlike states such as Syria which chose to repress political Islam, Yemen sought to integrate and co-opt its Islamist actors, from the Muslim Brothers, Salafist, jihadists, Sufis to the Zaydi revivalists. Although this system reduced political violence and increased political stability, as a political formula it has come under increased pressure in recent times.

The Yemeni 'Arab Spring' protests were mainly led by those disgruntled with the regime. The Islamist Houthis in Saada were among those calling for the removal of the regime having dropped their demands for independence. The Muslim Brotherhood party, Al Islah, also joined calls for Saleh to step down. As a result, activists became concerned that the international community would see the uprising as Islamist, with Tawakkol Karmn, a member of Islah's Shoura Council stating: "Our party needs the youth but the youth also need the parties to help them organize. Neither will succeed in overthrowing this regime without the other. We don't want the international community to label our revolution an Islamic one" (Hill G. , 2017, p. 207). The regime used Al Islah and the Houthis involvement in the 'Arab Spring' protests to further the narrative that any transition of power would result in an Islamist government in Yemen (Hill G. , 2017, p. 213). Al Islah's attempts to downplay the role of Islam was met with some scepticism by Western journalists working in Yemen. It was reported by journalists that: "The protesters keep telling me that Saleh and his family have been neglecting Islam in the way they rule Yemen, and they don't respect the principles of Islam" (Hill G. , 2017, p. 225).

Muslim Brothers

Groups that follow the teachings of the Muslim Brotherhood are the most prominent within Yemeni Islamism. From the 1940s, these groups were involved in opposition to the Zaydi monarchy and the 1962 overthrow of the Zaydi imamate was achieved by a coalition of nationalists, Nasserists, Muslim Brothers, and modernists. A founding principle of the resultant republic was the integration of all parties. Therefore, the Muslim Brothers were bought into the state system, particularly within the education system and the security forces. The early group of Brothers' ideals were carried on through the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood branch; the Al Islah (Reform) party which was created in 1990 (Bonnefoy, 2009). It is important to note that Al Islah does not advertise its affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood and although the Muslim Brotherhood members are the backbone of the party it also includes merchants, Salafi and tribal leaders such as General Ali Mohsen Al-Ahmar. The Muslim Brotherhood had been part of the state's regime and military for the last two decades and has since emerged as the main political competitor to the remnants of the regime (Alles, 2014, p. 45 & 48). Yemeni politics revolves around what Robert Burrowes called the 'tribal-military-commercial' complex. Post-1977, the military became the prominent vehicle through which

the tribes sought to secure political influence and 'dividends' from the government in terms of preferential advantages for their own tribes. General Ali Mohsen, long considered second in command of Yemen after President Saleh, is a prominent Sheikh in the politically dominant and largest Hashid tribe (Knights, 2013) which is based in the predominantly Zaydi North.

Zaydi Islamists

Zaydism has been challenged by the growth of Salafi Islam, at times supported by the Saleh government with the help of Saudi Arabia (Bulos, 2018), in Northern Yemen. As Haider describes,

> Zaydism was challenged by a gradual Sunnification that began in the 9th/15th century and the intensification of Wahhabi missionary activities in the 14th/20th century. These tensions persist into the modern period and have given rise to a new wave of political activism reflected in (a) the armed resistance of the 'Youthful believers' led by the Al Huthi[78] family and (b) the emergence of a new generation of Zaydi scholars such as Muhamad Yahya Salim Izzan who do not trace their descendants to Ali and Fatima (Haider, 2010).

There was a civil war between a Zaydi Islamist group, the Believing Youth (al-Shabab al-Mummin), and the regime from 2004 – 2010. The group shifted to violent resistance under the leadership of Hassein bin Badr al-Din al-Houthi. "The complicated role of the state in relation to the expansion and (lack of) supervision of Salafi religious schools in Saada was at the heart of the early grievances by a Zaydi revivalist movement under the leadership of Husayn al Houthi" (Yadav, 2017, p. 283). The Al-Houthi spearheaded efforts to promote Zaydism and thwart attacks from Salafists. The issue is not a clear-cut case of sectarianism as President Saleh was also Zaydi; however, he represented tribal interests as opposed to religious interests. The Zaydi Believing Youth's opposition to the regime was despite the fact that the regime elites were predominantly from the Zaydi sect (Alles, 2014, p. 44). In fact, despite the South becoming Marxist following the removal of the British and being predominantly Sunni, in the unified Yemen its leaders have typically come from the Zaydi North, which did not come under British colonisation. However, the regime Zaydi were not under any particular Zaydi influence and are opposed by the Houthi (Alles, 2014, p. 44). Instead, the regime Zaydi were part of the tribal patronage system that existed, and typically

[78] The Al Houthi or Huthi family claims to be descendants of the Prophet Muhammad.

aligned with tribal interests and networks. However, the conclusions drawn have both religious and historical foundations.

The 'Arab Spring' disrupted the unstable Yemeni political scene resulting in a power vacuum that allowed the Houthis to gain control of most of the area around Saada. There has been no evidence that the group has tried to reinstate Zaydi religious rules in this area (Alles, 2014, p. 46) and, despite most Houthi members focusing their opposition to the regime on calls for more "inclusive governance and accountability", there were some amongst them who called for the revival of the Zaydi theocracy (Yadav, 2017, p. 383). In UN-led negotiations following the fall of the regime, representatives from the Houthi were recognised as a political group. An argument erupted within the negotiations over the role of Sharia in the constitution. During the negotiations fighting on the ground continued with Houthi coming up against a group of Salafi in Dammaj, where a prominent Salafi centre is located. Both sides claim they have been subject to the proselytising actions of the other with the Houthis making the additional claim that Saudi Arabia has supported anti-Zaydi Salafi expansion in the region. This degree of sectarian infighting is new to Yemen (Alles, 2014, pp. 47-48).

Jihadist Groups

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) was founded in 2009 following the merger of the Saudi and Yemen branches in an effort to resist a Saudi crackdown. Ansar al Sharia emerged in 2011. The group has ties to AQAP. There is some speculation that it is in fact a rebranding of Al Qaeda; for instance, Shiekh Abu Zubayr Adil bin Adbullah al-Abab, a leader within AQAP, stated that Ansar al Sharia is the name that they use when introducing themselves to local populations (Alles, 2014, p. 45).

In 2011 the Arab protests swept the Middle East. The resultant Yemeni uprising provided Ansar al Sharia with the opportunity to seize the southern towns of Zinjibar and Jaar. They kept control of Zinjibar and its surrounds following the withdrawal of the Yemeni army who retreated in order to counter the uprising in the 'change squares' of the main cities. Ansar al Sharia implemented religious rule until pushed back by the Yemeni army, with US support, in May 2012 (Alles, 2014, p. 46). AQAP and Ansar al-Sharia are still active in Southern Yemen (Alles, 2014, p. 48).

In areas such as Bayda where fears remain that the Houthi seek to reinstate the Zaydi theocracy overthrown in 1962 and the Houthis have been accused of atrocities, the tribes, who had previously sought to block AQAP's influence, at times seek to work with them against the Houthis and vice versa. This is not an ideological, religious or political alliance however and it is therefore tenuous as a result. Unlike the Houthis, the AQAP has avoided antagonising the tribes. However, the mainstream narrative, which states that AQAP is embedded within the Yemeni tribes, is inaccurate. The tribes are largely resistant to AQAP, but those tribes faced with the Houthis have joined with AQAP in the face of their common enemy. These alignments are temporary and is not as sectarian as it first appears; it is ultimately a strategic alliance. However, the longer the war continues the harder it will be for the tribes to push out either group (Nada & Rowan, 2018).

Both prior to and after the 'Arab Spring' the secular-religious contest in Yemen has been fractured between multiple domestic actors, most of whom demonstrate varying degrees of ideological insincerity. Thus, the contest between secularism and religion is blurred in Yemen due to the political parties and actors tending to be more pragmatic than ideological. Generally speaking, the Southern movement is considered the most secular, followed by Hadi's government although both of these groups contain Islamists and Salafi groups so secularism is not a clear-cut objective for either group. It is more accurate to classify the Hadi government as representing certain interest groups and seeking power, and the Southern movement as being the most secular actor in the conflict, though its key focus is secessionism.

Yemen and the MENA Regional Security Complex

Regional security complexes are vulnerable to 'contagion effects'. Civil wars frequently reflect the dynamics in their regional neighbourhood. Evidence has been found for a spatial clustering of civil wars; where one civil war breaks out, neighbouring states are destabilised and so more likely to fall into civil war as well (O'Loughlin & Raleigh, 2008). Civil wars often develop a transnational dynamic due to shared grievances across borders by sects or ethnic groups in neighbouring countries, their shared sympathies or fears and participation in the war economy by regional actors seeking to project their influence into these conflicts. Given that the Middle East and North African regions' political alliances, both domestically and regionally, tend to reflect sectarian favouritism, the combination of weak borders with cross-

border sectarian groups with shared goals and grievances brings a sectarian dynamic into the security complex. The rapid spread of the 'Arab Spring' across the Middle East regional security complex is indicative of the fact that the region's states share an authoritarian regime type and this has meant that the region's populations have shared grievances in relation to this. Thus, the Middle Eastern protest movements of 2011 gathered a regional momentum. The structural dynamics within regional security also impact on civil wars. Regional states compete for hegemony, over the dominant ideology, for resources and alliances and this encourages states to participate in civil wars to ensure the outcome results in a regime that is sympathetic to the participating state's own regional aspirations and, this research posits, its domestic survival strategies. If we consider the Yemeni civil war it can be observed that all the states studied have a high level of investment in the outcome of the conflict (see Table 6.1).

Table 6.1. Case Study State Involvement in Yemeni Civil War.

State/Involvement	Iran	Qatar	Saudi Arabia	UAE
Neutrality or Non-intervention	N	N	N	N
Political involvement (expressions of approval by government officials)	Y	Y	Y	Y
Economic involvement (financial aid)	Y	Y	Y	Y
Propaganda involvement (through state media)	Y	Y	Y	Y
Covert involvement	Y	Y	Y	Y

Semi military involvement (military aid or advisors without participation in fighting)	Possibly, hard to confirm	Possibly, hard to confirm	Y	Y
Direct military intervention	N	N	Y	Y
Support for Muslim Brotherhood	N	Y	N	N

(Figure created by author from assessments based on the research into favoured militias in the Yemeni civil war and on the regional security complex dynamics).

The Middle East and North African security complex has no hegemon, but rather a number of competing regional powers: Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Israel. In recent years, the large non-Arab states, Turkey and Iran, have opted to challenge the Saudi and Israeli influence in the region. The patterns of amity and enmity in the region cluster around two key conflicts: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Saudi-Iranian hegemonic competition in the Persian Gulf. There are also lesser regional conflicts: the contest between Qatar and Saudi Arabia (Schmidt, 2019) and the UAE. As such, the outcome of both the Syrian and Yemeni civil wars, one in which Iran stands to lose an ally (Syria), and the second where it stands to gain an ally (Yemen), will have a marked influence on the hegemonic Islamic identity of the security complex and impact on the power arrangements between the states. Saudi Arabia and the UAE largely seek to maintain the status quo in the region, although given the 'Arab Spring' establishing a new arrangement between power and religion appears to be the aim of Prince Muhammad bin Salman and the UAE. Iran wants a revolutionary revision in that it both seeks to advance its power and position within the regional hierarchy, and wants to change the regional structure and hegemonic Islamic identity to reinforce its own survival at home. Qatar, for its part, is a radical revisionist state: it does not seek dramatic change in the regional structure but it does seek to alter its position within it, or perhaps more accurately, to be able to continue its independent and frequently maverick foreign policy that at times runs against the policies of the GCC. The domestic actors in the Yemeni conflict all have preferred

arrangements with regards to regional politics, and their positions affect whether or not intervening states will support them. The militias' respective views on both Yemeni domestic politics and regional politics affect the foreign policy decisions of the intervening states. Therefore the stances of the Yemeni actors on religion and secularism, the idea of the state and their preferences regarding regional arrangements impact on the sponsorship patterns of the intervening states. The positions of the major Yemeni actors are outlined in Table 6.2 below.

Table 6.2. Stances of Major Domestic Actors in Yemeni Conflict.

Position/Actor	**Relationship to President Hadi's Government's *winning coalition***	**Secular-Fundamentalist Index**	**Idea of the State**	**Revisionist aims within the State**	**Revisionist aims within the Region**
Hadi Government	*Winning coalition*	Secular/Mild Islamism 3-5	Religious Secularity, politics based on patronage	N	N
Al Islah	Crucial for coalition	Islamism 5-7	Moderate Islamism, Tribal/Salafi members, ideologically pragmatic, politics based on patronage	Y	N
Salafi Militas	Needed for Coalition support	Conservative Islamism, 8	Conservative Islamism, Tribal culture, politics based on patronage	Y	N

Sunni Sect	Real Selectorate for Coalition	Broad range 5-8	Predominantly Religious Secularism to Islamism	Mostly Y	N
Southern Transition Council	Opposed to Hadi Government, occasionally cooperates against Sunni extremists & Houthi militias	Broad range: political element often secular, allied tribal militias often Islamist 5-8	Secularist to Conservative Islamism, tribal culture, politics based on patronage & secessionism	Y	N
Jihadists	Threatening to *winning coalition*	Fundamentalist and autocratic, Salafi/Jihadist 9-10	Extreme Sunni Islamism, autocratic theocracy	Y	Y
Southern Political Council: Houthi	Threatening to *winning coalition*	Islamism: 8	Probably Zaydi Islamism and pragmatic politically	Y	Y
Southern Political Council: Pro Saleh (now deceased: faction split)	Threatening to *winning coalition*	Political or religious secularism, predominantly 5-6	Pragmatic politically, politics based on patronage, clientalism,	N	N

(Table created by author from assessments based on the research into favoured militias in the Yemeni civil war and on the regional security complex dynamics).

Given the regional and domestic aims of the Yemeni domestic actors, the intervening states have preferred and least preferred outcomes. These are demonstrated for each state in Figures 6.3, 6.4, 6.5 and 6.6 below.

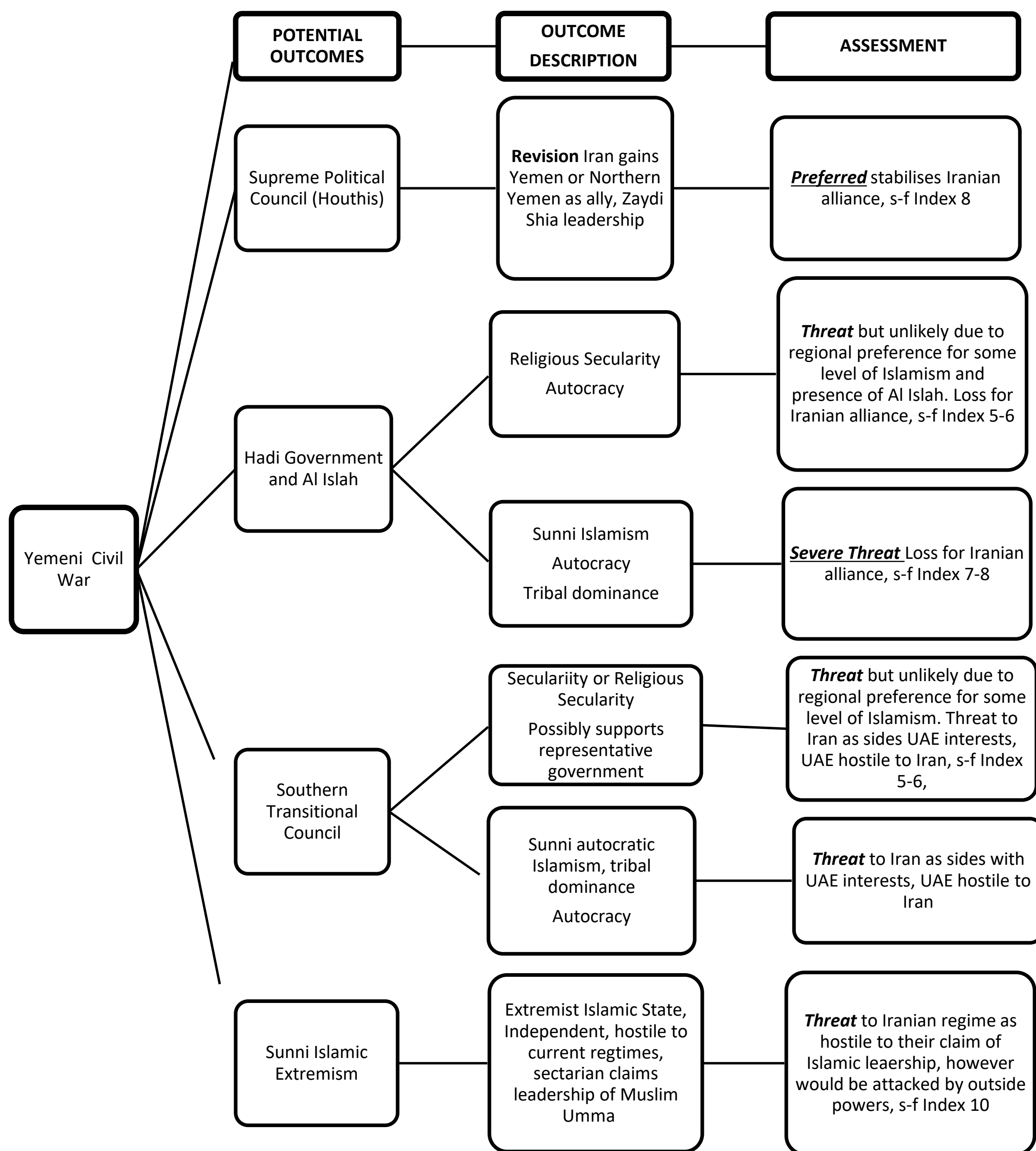

Figure 6.3. Potential Outcomes of Yemeni Civil War: Iranian Perspective. (Figure created by author from assessments based on the research into favoured militias in the Yemeni civil war and on the regional security complex dynamics).

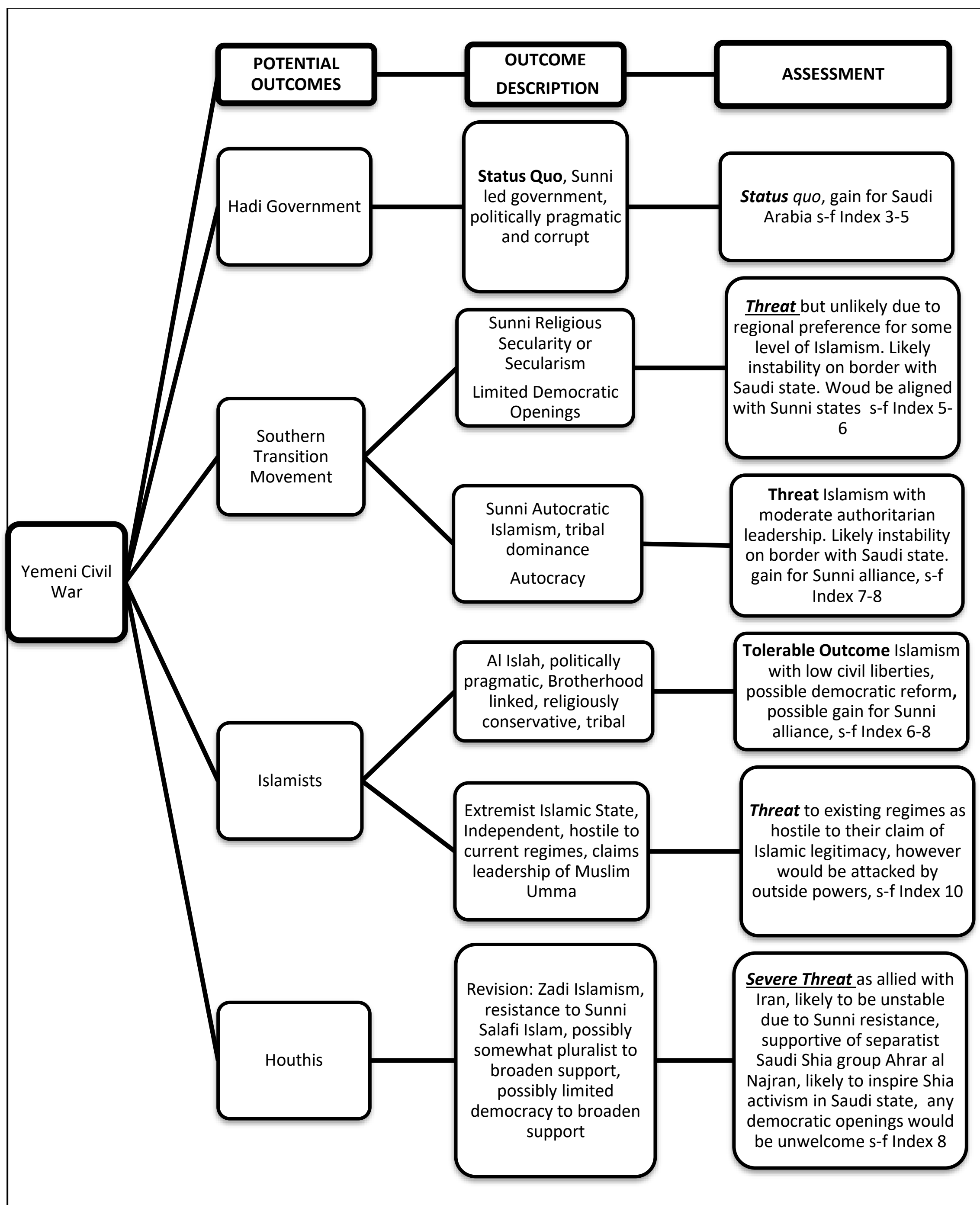

Figure 6.4. Potential Outcomes of the Yemeni Civil War: Saudi Arabian Perspective. (Figure created by author from assessments based on the research into favoured militias in the Yemeni civil war and on the regional security complex dynamics).

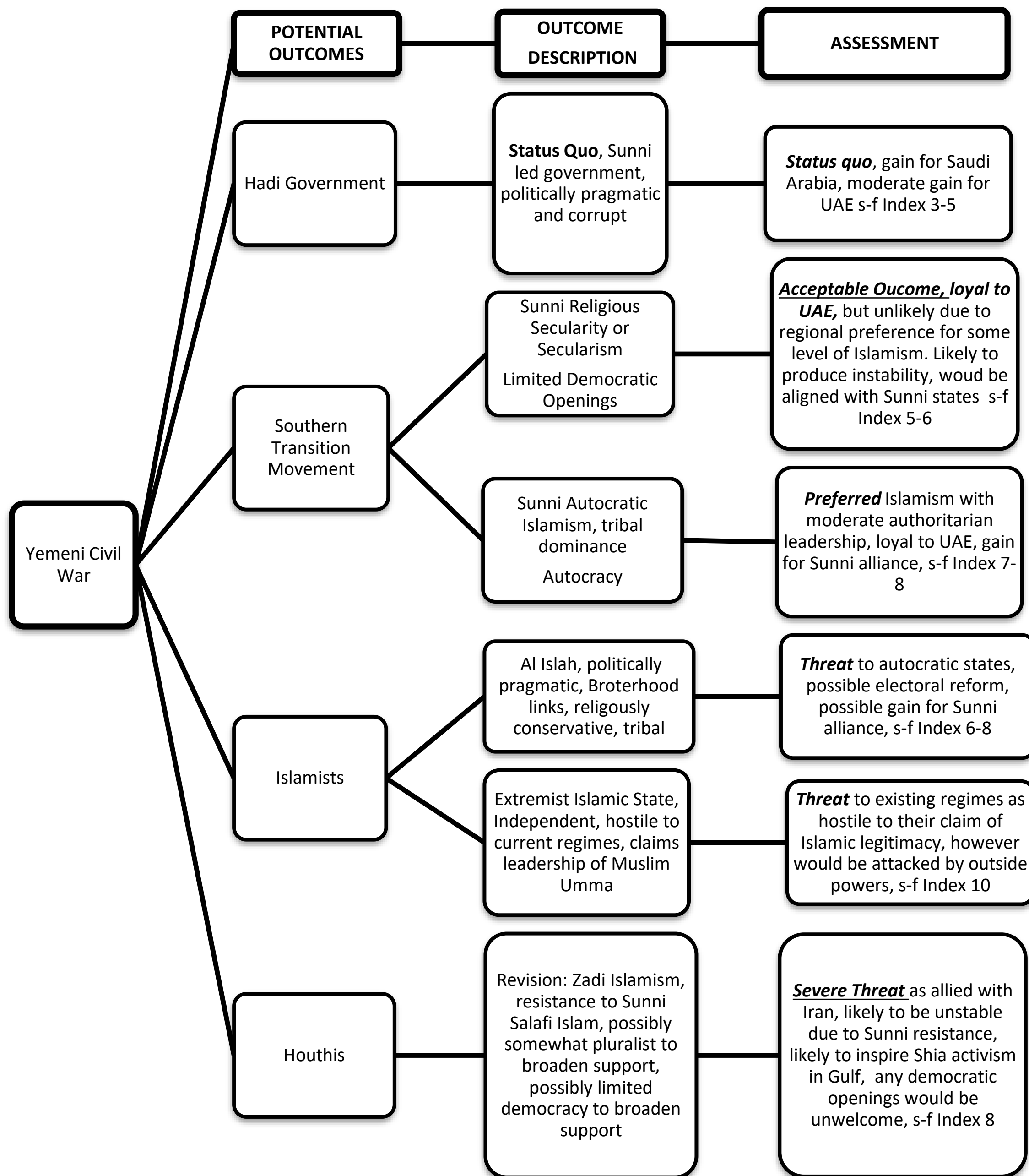

Figure 6.5. Potential Outcomes of the Yemeni Civil War: the Emirati Perspective. (Figure created by author from assessments based on the research into favoured militias in the Yemeni civil war and on the regional security complex dynamics).

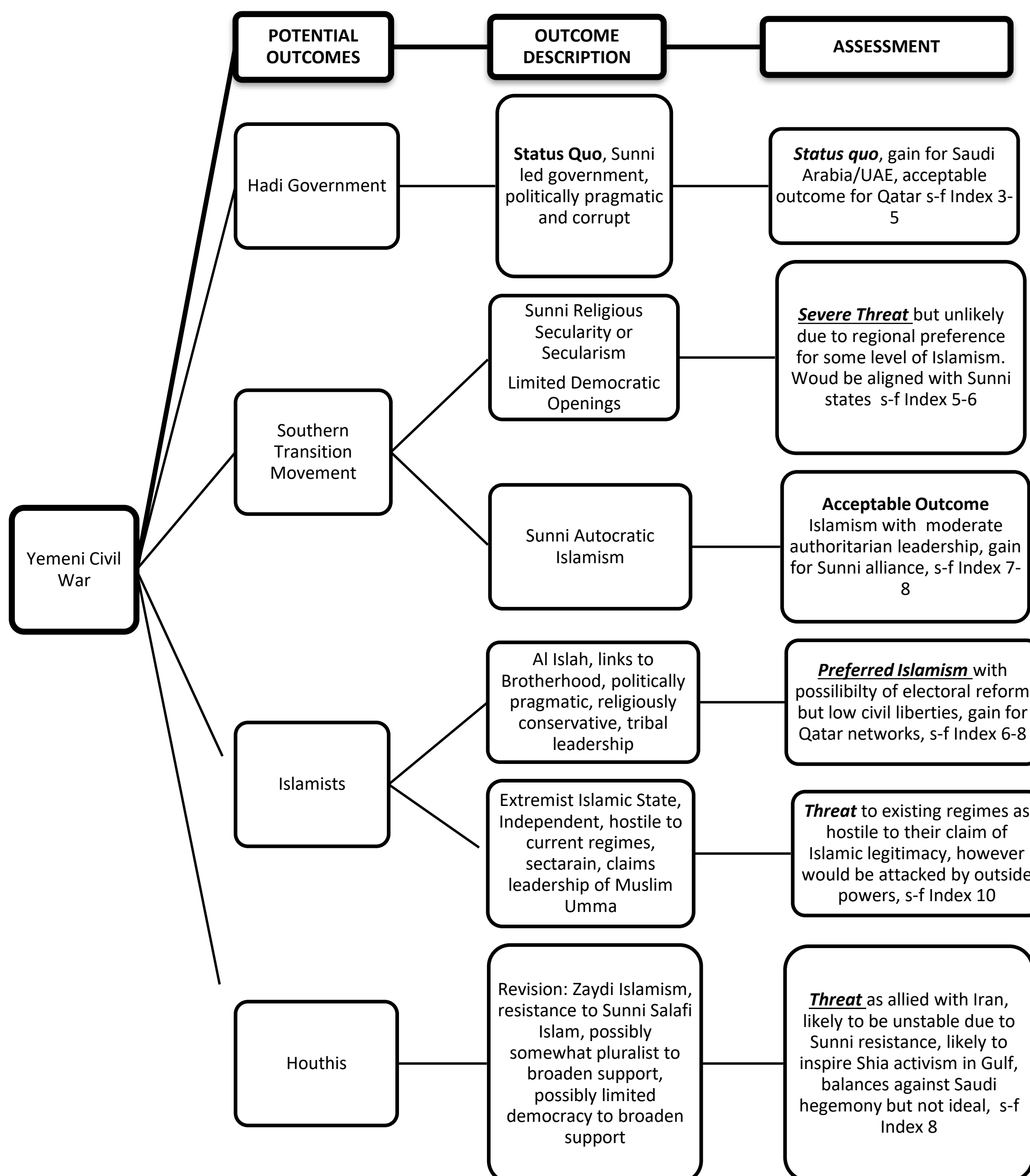

Figure 6.6. Potential Outcomes of the Yemeni Civil War: Qatari Perspective. (Figure created by author from assessments based on the research into favoured militias in the Yemeni civil war and on the regional security complex dynamics).

Figures 6.3-6.6 have demonstrated the likely preferred and least preferred outcomes of the Yemeni civil war for the case study states. Prior to this, the section outlined whether the intervening states were status quo or revisionist with regards to the regional order. The

characteristics of the domestic actors were outlined, including whether or not they are likely to prefer a revision of the region's political structure or the status quo. Finally, the outcomes of the Yemeni conflict from the point of view of the intervening states was outlined, predominantly considering the outcomes for the point of view of their regional goals.

Having considered these aspects, Part Two extends this analysis by looking at how the domestic actors in the Yemeni civil war support or undermine the domestic survival strategies of the intervening states and how this relates to patterns of militia sponsorship. The first section considers the characteristics of the militias backed by Iran and the other states in Yemen.

Part II: Sectarianism and 'Secularism versus Islamism' as Regime Survival Strategies in the Regional Sphere: Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar

Militia Support and Sectarianism in the Yemeni Civil War

Tribal dynamics play a greater role in the Yemeni crisis than sectarian dynamics. Despite this, however, an analysis of rebel sponsorship by the case study states still reveals a largely sectarian basis to state choices regarding which militias to support in the conflict. Unfortunately, in comparison to Syria, there is scant information on specific militias in Yemen and therefore this research has had to rely on information regarding the larger umbrella groups such as the Southern Movement. In Syria, articles on individual militias within larger umbrella groups can often be found, however, in Yemen, this information is difficult to access or non-existent in English language sources. Although this means that the data is not as detailed as was available for Syria, the main trends are still apparent. With regards to Iran, the IRGC supports the Shia Houthi in the Yemeni conflict despite their theological differences. Saudi Arabia and the UAE work mainly with Sunni groups, but their geopolitical concerns regarding the spread of Iranian influence appear to trump their Sunni favouritism. They will support groups that oppose the Iranian aligned Houthis, including groups that contain Zaydi heritage politicians such as Mohsen al Ahmar, whose leadership is based on his tribal connections. Looking at sectarianism and militia sponsorship, this correlates with two features: the patterns of domestic sectarian inclusion and marginalisation as demonstrated within the Selectorate Theory derived diagrams for each state as outlined in Chapter 2, and

with the patterns of amity and enmity within the Middle Eastern and North African regional security complexes.

In this instance, given the lack of a distinct divide between Sunni and Shia politicians in Yemen, (except within the Muslim Brotherhood faction of Al Islah, in Salafi groups and the Houthi Movement) the UAE and Saudi Arabia have chosen to privilege geopolitical strategy that resists the spread of Iranian influence over strict adherence to sectarian favouritism. Therefore, the Sunni states support the groups that oppose the Houthi whether they include Zaydi politicians or not. However, it is important to point out that in this case, given the insurgency developing in Saudi Arabia's Najran region amongst the Shia, with the apparent involvement of the Houthis (Southfront, 2019); (Shay, 2019), Saudi Arabia's regional policy supports authoritarian stabilisation tactics as well. Qatar, although somewhat marginal in this conflict, has chosen to continue its support of Muslim Brotherhood affiliated groups across the region, supporting Al-Islah militias in the Yemeni civil war. Al-Islah's leadership includes members of the al Ahmar family who are Zaydi heritage tribal leaders of the prominent Hashid tribe. Although the Muslim Brotherhood is typically Sunni, in Yemen the picture is more nuanced. Stacey Philbrick Yadav explains,

> Resistance to the Houthi advance did not come from "Sunni tribesmen," as so many reporters suggest, but from sons of Zaydi tribesmen who, when they joined the neo-conservative Islah, adopted or converted to a "Sunni" identity inspired by Saudi Wahhabism and/or the Egyptian Society of Muslim Brothers. The al-Ahmar clan, paramount sheikhs of the historically Zaydi Hashid tribal confederation clustered between Sa'ada and Sanaa, and who detest the Houthis, are Zaydi by parentage and Sunni by denominational conversion via partisan affiliation with Islah (Yadav, 2014).

Al Islah was created by President Saleh to bring Islamists into politics in support of his General Peoples Congress party. It has three factions: the Muslim Brotherhood, tribal leaders from the Hashid tribe (predominately Zaydi or Zaydi heritage) and Sunni Salafis such as Abdul Majeed Al Zindani. Yadav describes the Hashid tribal leaders who have joined Al-Islah as converting to Sunni Islam due to their affiliation with Al-Islah (Yadav, 2014). Given how fluid the situation is in Yemen, including regarding sectarian loyalty as is seen in this instance, it has been difficult to place the Hadi and Al-Islah aligned Zaydi heritage politicians into a sectarian category in terms of their political impact. However, in Figure 6.7 below the Hadi

aligned Zaydis are counted as Zaydi by denomination, whilst the Al-Islah Zaydi heritage members are recorded below as Sunni converts. Although the results are less distinct than in the Syrian example, it is still clear that sectarian favouritism, specifically towards the same sect as the sponsoring states' *winning coalitions*, is a key factor in militia/group sponsorship.

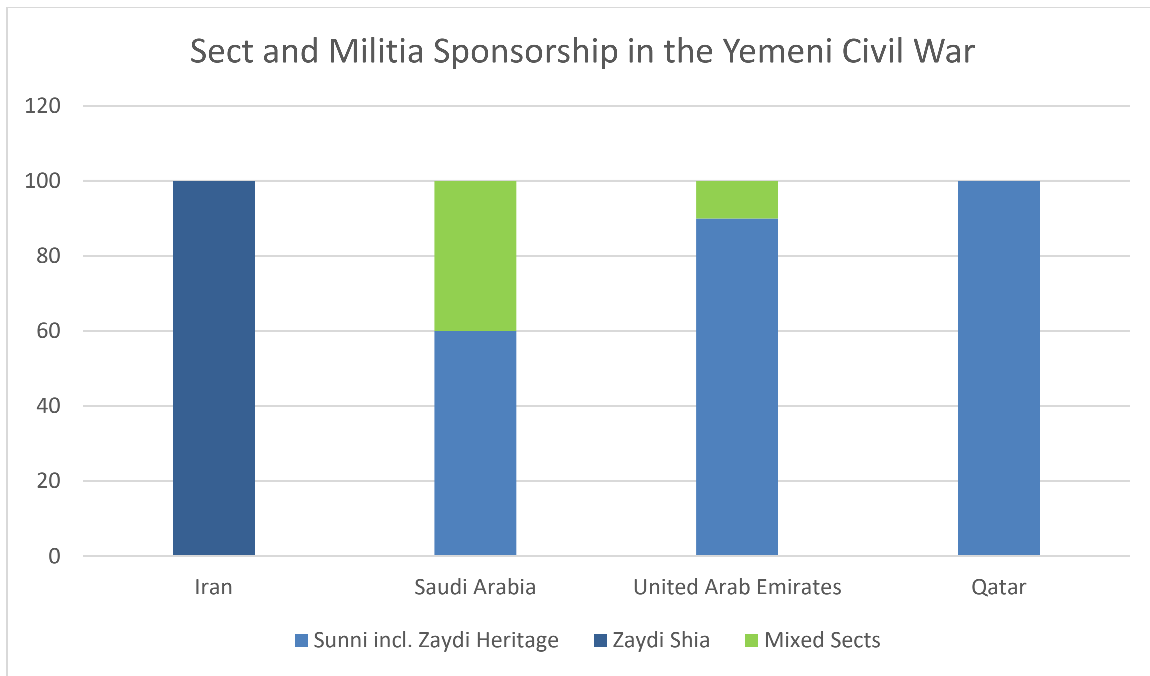

Figure 6.7. Militia Sponsorship and Secular-Religious Competition, (Sources: see Appendix 12, *Citation List B.* on page 338, Source Description: see Appendix 13, *Description of the Sources used for Yemeni Militia Data*, page 339).

Militia Sponsorship and Secular-Religious Competition

Patterns of Iran's Militia Sponsorship in the Yemeni Civil War

As shown in Figure 6.8, the secular-religious range of most of the militias in the Supreme Political Council, which included President Saleh before his assassination on the 4th December 2017 and the subsequent split of his bloc, and the Houthis, ranges from religious secularism to fundamentalism. President Saleh's faction tended towards supporting religious secularism, whilst the Houthis represent a range from religious secularism to fundamentalist in this sample.

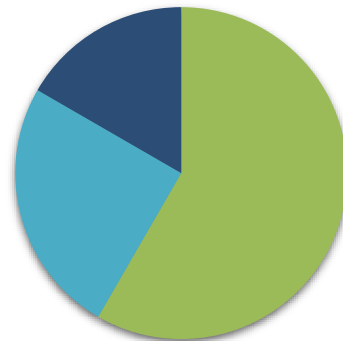

Figure 6.8. Secular-Fundamentalist Index Ratings for the Supreme Political Council (Sources: see Appendix 12, *Citation List B.* on page 338, Source Description: see Appendix 13, *Description of the Sources used for Yemeni Militia Data*, page 339).

When this is broken down further, to reveal the groups specially sponsored by Iran in this political alliance, Iran only directly sponsored the Houthis – who are typically Zaydi and Islamist. However, in keeping with the pragmatic approach to ideology that is present in the Yemeni political scene, the Houthi have demonstrated a range of political stances. Since 2011, the Houthi have broadcast narratives that are designed to appeal to nationalist and populist opinions, focusing on elite corruption (Glenn, 2018). The group has advocated for a democratic non-sectarian republic in Yemen, but their opposition accuse them of seeking to re-establish the Zaydi theocracy. The truth is probably that different factions represent different ideologies and that, like other political groups in Yemen, if they were in a position to govern they would likely pragmatically position their ideology in accordance with their best chances of political survival. The group does, however, have a consistent position, and this is Zaydi revivalism - therefore they are very likely to support some form of Islamism. Additionally, the Houthi leadership would work to reduce the influence of Sunni fundamentalism and Saudi connections with Sunni Salafi groups. They would also work to promote the Zaydi identity and interests in Northern Yemen. In sum, the Houthis are a Zaydi

revivalist movement and opposed to Sunni Salafism which typically labels other sects as non-believers.

With regards to Iran's Shia theology and *velayat e-fatiq*, aside from occasional overtures towards Twelver Shiism, the Houthis are unlikely to move away from local Shi'ism as they need the support of the Zaydis. Looking at the section on the 'Idea of the State' in Tables 6.10 and 6.11, it is evident that although the Houthis are Islamists, they are not as closely aligned with Iranian fundamentalism as were many of the Syrian Shia militias sponsored by Iran. Furthermore the militias that rated 9-10 in Yemen were Liwa Fatemiyoun and Harakat Hezhobllah al Nujaba, both of whom are foreign militias, respectively Afghani and Iraqi. Both of these groups are heavily involved with the IRGC and profess to follow Khomeini's doctrine, *velayat e-fatih*. However, despite the shared enemies of Iran and the Houthis, the Iranian ideology is not deeply embedded in Northern Yemen. But if the Houthis become more desperate in face of Saudi and the Hadi coalition's attacks, they may move closer to Iran in order to secure additional support.

Many Houthis are concerned about Saudi hostility, so oppose Saudi hegemony in the regional system and thus seek to reduce Saudi and Emirati influence in Yemen. This is in keeping with Iran's regional aspirations. It is clear from Figure 6.9 below that the Houthis are less fundamentalist than the Iranians, with a secular-fundamentalist rating of 7-8 indicating high but not fundamentalist levels of religiosity. There are sources that claim the Houthis are fundamentalist (Teller, 2016); (Razaghi, Chavoshian, Chanzanagh, & Rabiei, 2020, p. 4), but also sources that claim they seek a less sectarian Yemen and that they oppose Sunni fundamentalism, not Sunni in general (Gordon & Parkinson, 2018); (Tharoor, 2015); (Boucek, 2010). However, they are a Zaydi revivalist group in opposition to Sunni fundamentalism. Sunni fundamentalism tends to be highly sectarian and anti-Shia, so opposition to Salafi Islam is a predictable stance for the Zaydi movement. Taking these factors into account, when scoring the Houthis on the secular-fundamentalist index below they have been cautiously scored a conservative, but not fundamentalist, rating of 7-8.

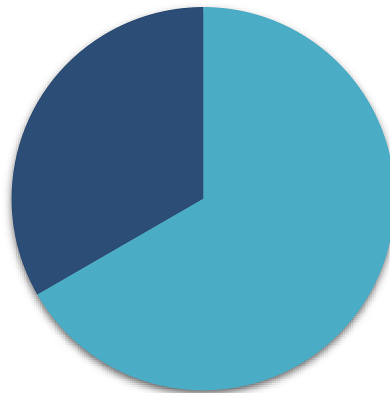

Figure 6.9.[79] Patterns of Militia Support: Iran (Sources: see Appendix 12, *Citation List B.* on page 338, Source Description: see Appendix 13, *Description of the Sources used for Yemeni Militia Data*, page 339).

Tables 6.10 & 6.11 below compare Iran's position relative to the theoretical pillars (Table 6.10) with the positions of the groups they sponsor (Table 6.11).

[79] The Houthi militias are grouped together in the sample due to difficulties finding information on the individual units. They are rated as 7 to 8 on the secular-fundamentalist index so appear as the yellow section in the pie chart. The sample size for the Yemeni civil war is much smaller than the sample of militias in the Syrian chapter due to limited information available for individual units, so the sample consists of the large umbrella organisations and broad coalitions that house respective militias. Therefore, rather than a cross section of Houthi allied militias, the Houthis militias are included as one force due to significant gaps in the information available for individual Houthi militias.

Table 6.10. Iran's Position Relative to the Theoretical Pillars

Iran's Position/Theoretical Framework	Iran's Position relative to the Theoretical Pillars
Idea of the State	*Velayat e-faqih*, conservative Shia Islamism, leader of the axis of resistance to Israel and the West.
Religion Regulation & Political Opponents/Outgroups	Represses both the moderate Islamist opposition and Islamic extremists who oppose the state. Suppresses sects such as Sunni, Bahai'i and other minority sects. Works to discredit secularists.
Secular-Religious Competition Perspective	Resistance to secularization through enforcement of conservative religious dictates such as the women wearing the hijab. Police enforce the regime's Islamist ideology. Rewards given to volunteers who join the Baij[80] and the religious institutions. The IRGC has a significant hold over the economy and thus politics. Religious-Fundamentalist Index Rating: 9.
Selectorate Theory	Religious authority: the Shia theocratic left and right are cornerstone of the winning coalition/essential support for the regime.
Identity Hegemony Theory	Conservative Shia Islam.
Regional Security Complex	Iran leads a largely Shia alliance that seeks to constrain Sunni hegemony, Israel and the US.

(Table created by author from assessments based on the research).

[80] The Sāzmān-e Basij-e Mostaz'afin, or Mobilisation Resistance Force is a paramilitary volunteer militia that is involved with internal security and religious ceremonies among other things. The volunteers get greater access to state provided resources.

Table 6.11. Iran's Support of Specific Militias Explained through the Theoretical Framework

Iran's Militia Support/Theoretical Framework	**Patterns of Militia Support in Yemen**
Idea of the State	Only 2 out of the 6 Iranian backed groups were able to be confirmed as supportive of *velayat e-faqih*, however all Iranian sponsored militia's ideologies are conservative Shia Islamism. The Houthis are not Twelver Shias like the Iranians, but Zaydi. The Zaydi theology is more similar to Sunni Islam than Twelver Shi'ism. The Houthi tend to be independent of Iranian leadership and regional goals to a significant extent.
Religion Regulation & Political Opponents/Outgroups	The Houthi also repress and target religious minorities suppressed in Iran such as the Baha'i (Farr, 2018) (Azizi, 2018). The Houthis are also resistant to the rise in Salafism in Yemen given Salafi Islam is hostile to Shia. The Houthis opposed Saleh's corrupt authoritarianism initially, then allied with him when it was expedient to do so. In addition, Saleh is also Zaydi, and his Zaydi relations controlled military and security units. Although the Houthis have a blurred political vision, it is unlikely they would govern in a fashion modelled after the Iranian theocracy.
Secular-Religious Competition Perspective	All groups able to be identified as supported by Iran directly have a Religious-Fundamentalist Index Rating of 8-10 - so highly conservative and religious in keeping with Iran's position.
Selectorate Theory	The groups supported by Iran are in keeping with the sect and religious fundamentalism of Iran's domestic *winning coalition* i.e. theocratic Shia. However, due to the Houthis needing broader support to govern then just the Zaydi sect, it is likely that they would be pragmatic politically if in government.

Identity Hegemony Theory	Iran predominantly supports Shia Muslim Militias. However, in contrast to Syria, the Shia militias in Yemen are not closely supportive of Iranian Shi'ism. Shia groups tend to side with Iran geopolitically as they get financial, ideological and sometimes military support.
Regional Security Complex	Iran sponsors Shia groups that are supportive of Iran's efforts to revise the regional arrangements; i.e. groups that resist US and Sunni power in the region. The Houthis are anti-Israel and anti-US.

(Sources: see Appendix 12, *Citation List B.* on page 338, Source Description: see Appendix 13, *Description of the Sources used for Yemeni Militia Data*, page 339).

The firmest match between the Houthis and Iran, looking at the tables above, is their mutual revisionist stance within the Middle Eastern and North African regional security complex. Both resent Israel and the US presence in the region. If the Houthis controlled Yemen, they would be very likely to side with the Iranian alliance, thus strengthening Iran's quest for regional hegemony to the detriment of Turkey and Saudi Arabia's hegemonic aspirations.

Transnational Shia communities and movements across the Middle East are predominantly focused on domestic concerns. This is despite the foreign policy aim of Iran to unite Shia across the region and thus strengthen the Shia political presence. However, this is not to say that Iran is not an important part of Shia groups' strategic calculations. In order to assert their position, whether politically or militarily, the support of Iran is invaluable. Thus, the Shia groups play a line between enough support for Iran's aims to secure support and funding, whilst enough distance to be able to place their domestic goals and considerations first (Louer, 2012, pp. 125-126).

Iran's efforts to influence the Yemeni civil war are exaggerated by Saudi Arabia – however, there does appear to be links between Iran and the Houthis (Mandaville & Hamid, 2017, p. 17). If Shi'ism is strengthened, then its political power strengthens as well. In order to project political power, Iran must work through the region's political factions, and many political groupings in the Middle East have a significant sectarian component. Therefore, by seeking to strengthen Shia religious communities, Iran potentially strengthens the political power of its political allies. A former Iranian security official confirmed this view of Iranian regional

politics, telling Reuters that Iran planned to empower the Houthi uprising in order to "strengthen their hand in the region" (Saul, Hafezi, & Georgy, 2017).

Iran tends to ally with fellow religious identity groups. With Lebanon's Hezbollah operating closely with Iran's military, particularly in Syria, the effectiveness of this strategy is clear. This raises fears amongst Sunni that Iran is hoping to expand its military allies by supporting Houthis in Yemen. Reuters quoted a Western diplomat in the Middle East:

> Iran has long been trying to cultivate portions of the Houthi militias as a disruptive force in Yemen. This is not to say that the Houthis are Hezbollah, but they do not need to be to achieve Iran's goals, which is to encircle the Saudis, expand its influence and power projection in the region and develop levers of unconventional pressure (Saul, Hafezi, & Georgy, 2017).

Iran's support for the Houthis is a combination of hard power and religious soft power efforts to cultivate a strategically useful militant group (Mandaville & Hamid, 2017, p. 17).

Iran: Domestic Survival versus Regional Security Complex Motivations in Yemen

From a security complex perspective, it makes sense that Iran would support the Houthis. It also makes sense from a strategic domestic perspective. The Houthis are Shia and in keeping with Iran's *real selectorate* and *winning coalition,* despite theological differences, they share a Shia identity. The Houthi are unlikely to be supportive of secularism, in keeping with Iranian theocratic governance, and both Iran and the Houthis oppose select minorities such as the Baha'i and the spread of Salafi Sunni Islam. Although the Houthi's Zaydism is closer to Shafi Sunni Islam than Shiism, both seek to advance the Shia identity to protect their interests from Sunni Salafi or Sunni regimes. It is clear that both regional and domestic concerns have motivated Iranian support for the Houthis. This is particularly relevant as Iran is moving from its largely failed 'spread the revolution' strategy through Khomeini's *valayet e-faqih*, to a strategy based on military and political support for opposition or revisionist movements that oppose the Sunni states, Israel and the US.

Secular-Fundamentalist Ratings of Opposition Militias in Sample

Patterns of Saudi Arabia's Militia Sponsorship in the Yemeni civil war

Saudi Arabia is very wary of an increased Iranian influence in its backyard, particularly given tensions with its Shia citizens and unrest in the Najran province.As Khaled Fattah describes, Saudi Arabia sees Yemen as the "the weakest link in the chain of security of the Arabian Peninsula, and thus easy prey for Tehran to penetrate and manipulate" (Esfandiary & Tabatabai, 2016).

In contrast to Syria, where Saudi Arabia typically backed Salafi militias, in Yemen, Saudi Arabia is more pragmatic backing those politicians most likely to side against Iranian influence there. The Saudi backing of the Hadi faction in the Yemeni civil war is indicative of their pragmatic approach as this alliance includes politicians of Zaydi heritage. However, the Hadi government shares the Saudi resentment of the Houthis and Iran and is dominated by leaders that are either Sunni or more loyal to tribe than sectarian identity group. The al Saud's have shown little enthusiasm for the Southern Transitional Council, whose leadership is significantly more secular than Saudi Arabia's. This is despite the Southern Transitional Council's militias including many Salafi Sunni militias who fight against Al Qaeda and Daesh. It is likely that Saudi Arabia's objection to the secessionist movement is based on the instability that is likely to result should Yemen split again. Such instability across the border from Saudi Arabia would provide opportunity to both Iran and Sunni extremists such as Daesh and Al Qaeda.

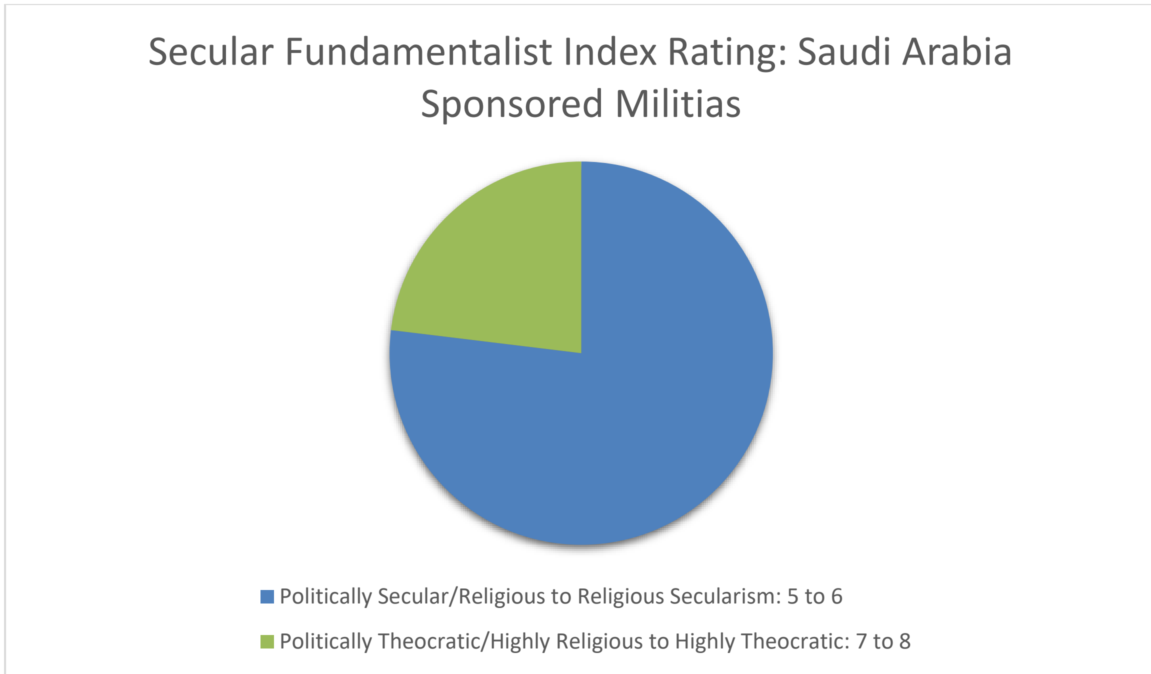

Figure 6.12. Patterns of Militia Support: Saudi Arabia (Sources: see Appendix 12, *Citation List B.* on page 338, Source Description: see Appendix 13, *Description of the Sources used for Yemeni Militia Data*, page 339).

Figure 6.12 demonstrates that Saudi Arabia has typically provided support to groups that fall into the religious secularism category in Yemen. This does not fit with Saudi Arabia's fundamentalist Sunni idea of the state, although it is in line with Prince Muhammad bin Salman's statements recently regarding the need to moderate Islam. However, given the fact that this does not match with Saudi Arabia's theocratic tendencies, it does raise the likelihood that Saudi Arabia is more concerned about the spread of Iranian influence, and/or the rise of Shia led states around the region, than the societal contest between secularism and fundamentalism in this instance. Therefore, it is clear that the contest between secularism and religion as outlined by Fox is used primarily as a geopolitical tool in the regional context by Saudi Arabia, given that in Yemen this is a secondary focus.

Table 6.13. Saudi Arabia's Positive Relative to the Theoretical Pillars.

Saudi Arabia's Position/Theoretical Framework	**Saudi Arabia's Position relative to the Theoretical Pillars**
Idea of the State	Authoritarian monarchical Salafi Islamism.
Religion Regulation & Political Opponents/Outgroups	Opposes both moderate Islamist opposition and Islamic extremists who oppose the state. Supresses' minority sects such as the Shia. Works to discredit political secularists. Actively oppresses the Muslim Brotherhood's brand of "populist Islamism rooted in the democratic process" with little emphasis on civil liberties) (Wittes, On Jamal Khashoggi, the Muslim Brotherhood and Saudi Arabia, 2018), seeking with the Trump administration's help to rebrand them as extremists.
Secular-Religious Competition Perspective	Highly conservative and theocratic regime. Scored 8 on Secular-Fundamentalist Index. Police enforce the regime's Islamist ideology.
Selectorate Theory	Al Saud Family and the Religious Establishment: the royal family and the religious elites are the cornerstone of the essential support for the regime.
Identity Hegemony Theory	Conservative Islamism.
Regional Security Complex	Part of anti-Islamist quartet. Opposes Iranian influence. Contests with Iran and Turkey for hegemony.

(Table created by author from assessments based on the research).

Table 6.14. Saudi Arabia's Support of Specific Militias Explained through the Theoretical Framework.

Saudi Militia Support/Theoretical Framework	**Saudi Patterns of Militia Support in Yemen**
Idea of the State	Saudi Arabia supports militias whose position would not challenge its authoritarian monarchical Salafi Islamism. However, the Hadi government is more pragmatic than Islamist.
Religion Regulation & Political Opponents/Outgroups	Saudi Arabia supports the status quo in Yemen – i.e. a Sunni dominated largely autocratic government. The Saudi regime opposes the Shia Houthi militias in keeping with its repressive of domestic Shia. In contrast to its position in Syria, the Saudis has support the alliance to which the Muslim Brotherhood connected Al Islah belongs: this is likely a reflection of its lack of opportunities in Yemeni politics, particularly given Yemeni politics is more about patronage then ideology. Al Islah has denounced links with the Muslim Brotherhood but this is likely to be a more political than ideological shift.
Secular-Religious Competition Perspective	Predominantly supportive of groups that sided against Iran. Saudi Arabia's patterns of rebel sponsorship in Yemen do not appear to strongly reflect the workings of the Competition Perspective.
Selectorate Theory	Most of the groups sponsored are not opposed to the sect and ideology of Saudi Arabia's winning coalition. However, there is a moderate (not strong) correlation between these factors.
Identity Hegemony Theory	All groups that Saudi Arabia supports have a similar identity proposal as the regime, i.e. contain elements of support for Sunni Islamism but the Yemeni actors are more pragmatic than committed to an ideology. The groups are not necessarily in support of the conservative Islamism

	(with the exception of Al Islah) that the Saudi regime promotes but would not oppose it either.
Regional Security Complex	Saudi Arabia supports the Sunni dominated groups in the Yemeni civil war. Due to the muddied scene, this includes Al Islah. Saudi Arabia appears to view the threat of an Iranian aligned regime in Yemen as more pressing than a Muslim Brotherhood affiliated government, possibly given the Shia separatist activism against the regime along its border with the Houthi held territory that was historically part of the Zaydi theocracy.

(Sources: see Appendix 12, *Citation List B.* on page 338, Source Description: see Appendix 13, *Description of the Sources used for Yemeni Militia Data*, page 339).

In comparing Tables 6.13 and 6.14, it is clear that the most defining characteristic that is similar between Saudi Arabia and the groups it supports relative to the theoretical pillars is that they are not aligned with the Houthis. The actors Saudi Arabia supports are more pragmatic than ideological, even the Muslim Brotherhood aligned Al-Islah. Therefore, they do not match closely with Saudi Arabia patterns of domestic regime survival strategies, aside from being largely the same sectarian group as the Saudi regime elites. The al Saud's leadership is strongly linked to the Wahhabi identity and its *real selectorate* consists of Sunni families and clergy. As such, it is heavily invested in maintaining the dominance of the Sunni identity hegemony, both domestically and regionally. The al Saud family's leadership is dependent on distributing dividends to its Sunni supporters such as Sunni social dominance and state support for the Wahhabi faith; as such, its foreign policy reflects its domestic aims. This follows the theoretical framework of this thesis which outlines that identity and hegemonic issues are pursued regionally in order to advance or maintain them domestically. As Razvan Munteanu points out:

> Moreover, a potential Houthi success in Yemen could lead to the so-called "Shiite awakening", destabilizing both Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, countries which were confronted with massive protests of the Shiite communities (Munteanu, 2017).

This clearly places Saudi Arabia's foreign policy in Yemen within Hinz's Identity Hegemony Theory. Saudi Arabia needs to keep its Shia population subdued, and a powerful Shia

government next door will inspire Shia aspirations if not directly support and encourage them. As such, Saudi Arabia is attempting to use foreign policy to put a government into power in a neighbouring state that is largely from the desired identity, i.e. Sunni (or Zaydi heritage but not active in promoting the interests of the Zaydis as a sect), in part in order to help manage the Shia minority at home.

Religion has provided Saudi Arabia – and Iran – the means to pursue its foreign policy objectives in this instance. As so often happens in the Middle East, Yemeni men that travelled to other states to pursue their religious motivations bought back social, religious and political ideas with which to enact change. In the 1970s-1980s Yemeni men who had travelled to Saudi Arabia to study religion and those who had fought against Russia in Afghanistan bought back the puritanical Muslim faith Wahhabism to the Sa'dah region and Razih. Both places are deep within the territory that for a thousand years, up until 1962, had been a Zaydi theocracy. Not only was the Wahhabi theology emerging within the region where the Zaydis were the majority, but the new Wahhabi scholars directly positioned Wahhabism in confrontation with Zaydism (Weir, 2007, p. 296). This is in keeping with Wahhabi doctrine, as one of the key ideas of the faith is the rejection of different Muslim sects as takfir if they do not practise Islam according to the theological understandings of the Wahhabiyya (Firro, 2013, pp. 711-773).

Wahhabi activities in Yemen were funded by the Wahhabi controlled Ministry of Religious Guidance, Yemeni/Saudi merchants, and by al Islah. Together these groups constituted a coalition of tribal, religious and mercantile interests. The growth of Wahhabism in the center of Zaydi country was largely due to its ability to tap into previously dormant resentment at Zaydi doctrines and Zaydi elites. Many were resentful of the Zaydi Sayyid elites' insistence that they had religious authority and social superiority; this clashed with Wahhabi ideals regarding equality (Weir, 2007, p. 296). To counter the Wahhabi challenge, the Zaydi have accused Yemeni followers of promoting a foreign Islam for monetary gain. Given these tensions, intra-religious competition has served as the gateway to both Saudi and Salafi influence in Yemen, and the Zaydi backlash has provided, through sectarian channels, an opportunity for Iran to enter the conflict as well.

Saudi Arabia: Domestic Survival versus Regional Security Complex Motivations in Yemen

Saudi Arabia supports the Hadi government which opposes Iranian influence in Yemen. However, Saudi Arabia has avoided supporting the other prominent anti-Houthi faction, the Southern Transition Council, either because of the instability of secessionism or its more secular stance. If the Southern Transition Council succeeds in its aims and Yemen splits in two, it is possible that in the ensuing chaos the Houthis could secure Northern Yemen through appealing to the Zaydi majority, leaving Sunni to dominate Southern Yemen. The Saudi state does not want predominantly dormant tensions with Shia in its border provinces with Yemen to intensify and as such will not want a Shia Houthi government in Northern Yemen. This would encourage the irredentist ambitions of such groups as the Shia Ahrar al Najran in the Najran region, which borders Zaydi dominated Northern Yemen. In terms of the ongoing societal competition between secularism and religion, given Saudi Arabia is a Sunni Wahhabi state it supports a generally Sunni or Sunni aligned faction that is unlikely to attempt to alter the conservative religiosity of Yemeni society. In regards to the Southern Transition Council, in terms of self-preservation, the Saudi regime is unlikely to support the ideologically more secular Southern Movement. Additionally Saudi Arabia wants to avoid a Shia Islamist leadership, or an Islamic extremist's regime led by the likes of Al Qaeda, who challenge the Saudi state's religious legitimacy.

Furthermore, an often overlooked point relevant to understanding the sectarian hostility between the Saud family and the Houthis is that the Houthis are Sayyid, and emphasise this as a pillar of their religious legitimacy. In contrast, the Saudi royal family are a tribal dynasty, albeit the early Saud state leaders went by the clerical title of Imam, as did the Zaydi theocracy's rulers (Hill G. , 2017, p. 286). Additionally, the Zaydi tradition of Kuruj, whereby uprisings against oppression are accepted, contrasts with the Saudi Salafi notion of absolute loyalty and obedience to leaders. Clearly a religion that promotes obedience to political leadership is of greater utility in terms of regime survival and this theological stance therefore helps support the rule of the al Saud family in Saudi Arabia. Moreover the Houthis pose a territorial threat to the Saudis, given the Houthis have rhetorically laid claim to the Saudi areas previously part of Greater Yemen, which predates the 1934 Treaty of Ta'if and the 2000 border agreement between the two states. This region stretches into the Saudi border

provinces of Jizan, Azir and Najran and resonates with the deeper history of Arabia (Hill G. , 2017, p. 286).

The Saudi Arabian regions that contain the highest concentrations of Shia are either on the Yemeni border or within Qatif Saudi Arabia's largest oil resource region. However, Shia are not part of Saudi Arabia's *nominal selectorate* nor do they need the support of Shia support to govern. What they do need is Shia compliance. This is largely secured through repression alongside some recent attempts to appease the Shia minority (Kalin, 2019), and the hegemony of the Wahhabi Sunni religious identity that is hostile to non-Salafi and non-Sunni sects (Alrebh, 2017, p. 279).

Patterns of the United Arab Emirates' Militia Sponsorship in the Yemeni civil war

The Emirati regime's idea of the state is based on religious secularism. This aligns with the political goals of the more secular Southern Transitional Council that has a rating of 5-6 on the secular-fundamentalist scale and has been actively (and, at times, militarily) assisted by the Emirates. Only pragmatism and a lack of other options explains both the Council's and the Emirati regime's alliance with the Salafi Sunni militias that fight within this alliance. Much of the fighting is against Sunni extremist groups like Ansar al Sharia and the Houthis. It appears likely that these mostly tribal Salafi militias are interested in secession and tribal security, rather than pursuing a Salafi political ideal in Yemen.

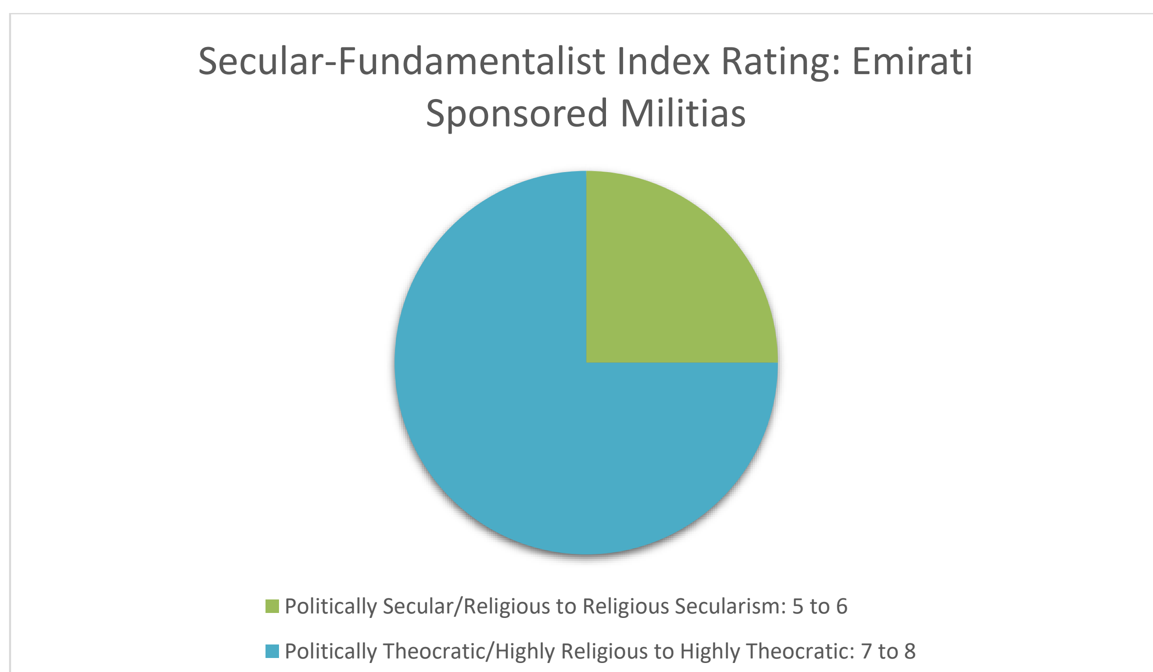

Figure 6.15. Patterns of Militia Support: UAE (Sources: see Appendix 12, *Citation List B.* on page 338, Source Description: see Appendix 13, *Description of the Sources used for Yemeni Militia Data*, page 339).

Table 6.16. UAE's Position Relative to the Theoretical Pillars.

UAE's Position/Theoretical Framework	**UAE's Position relative to the Theoretical Pillars**
Idea of the State	Authoritarian monarchical moderate Islamism, religious secularity, modernity and progress.
Religion Regulation & Political Opponents/Outgroups	Opposes both moderate Islamist opposition and Islamic extremists. Supresses minority sects such as the Shia. Works to discredit political secularists. Actively oppresses the Muslim Brotherhood's brand of "populist Islamism rooted in the democratic process" with little emphasis on civil liberties) (Wittes, On Jamal Khashoggi, the Muslim Brotherhood and Saudi Arabia, 2018), seeking with the Trump administration's help to rebrand them as extremists.
Secular-Religious Competition Perspective	Islam is the preferred religion and identity; this is protected and promoted by the state. Religious-Fundamentalist Index Rating 6.
Selectorate Theory	Essential support: wealthy connected Sunni particularly those linked to the royal family's tribal bloc.
Identity Hegemony Theory	Modern Sunni Religious Secularity.
Regional Security Complex	Part of Anti-Islamist populism Quartet. Opposes Iranian influence.

(Table created by author from assessments based on the research).

Table 6.17. The UAE's Support of Specific Militias Explained through the Theoretical Framework

Emirati Militia Support/Theoretical Framework	**Emirati Patterns of Militia Support in Yemen**
Idea of the State	The UAE supports the group that supports both its religious secularist idea of the state, and opposes the groups that challenge its domestic stance. The Southern Transition Council resists the Islamic extremists, the Houthis and more recently has ousted the Hadi government and its ally Al Islah from Aden.
Religion Regulation & Political Opponents/Outgroups	The Emirates typically sides with groups that oppose its domestic enemies: the Muslim Brotherhood, Sunni extremists and Shia political activism. Al-Islah was put on the UAE's terrorism list for example. The Emirates backed Zaydi President Ahmed Abdullah Saleh initially, as he focused on opposing Islah and Sunni extremists (Sabbour, 2018).
Secular-Religious Competition Perspective	The Emirates has chosen to support the political group that represents the more secular outlook, i.e. the Southern Transition Council. However, the Salafi tribal militias that fight on the side of the Council complicate this position due to their support for the conservative Islam of traditional tribal culture.
Selectorate Theory	Supports groups that do not strongly discuss representative government or conservative Islamism as policy. Supports the more secular Southern movement (despite allied Salafi militias). This matches the stance of its *winning coalition*.
Identity Hegemony Theory	Supports Sunni groups that broadly link to its position on religious secularity. This is in keeping with its key identity; moderate, comparatively tolerant Islamism. It would be difficult for the Emirates

	to find a group to support that strongly stood for a specific stance given that Yemeni politics is more about loyalty and patronage then ideology.
Regional Security Complex	The UAE sides with the Sunni political movements as predicted, but picked the Sunni grouping that did not include Al Islah, - i.e. the Southern Transition Council. All the groups supported would side with Sunni states against Iranian influence in the region.

(Sources: see Appendix 12, *Citation List B.* on page 338, Source Description: see Appendix 13, *Description of the Sources used for Yemeni Militia Data*, page 339).

Considering Tables 6.16 and 6.17, the Emirati regime supports groups that align with its suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood domestically, albeit the Emirates has shown some signs of accepting Al-Islah's role in Yemeni politics given a lack of other options. The Emirates has typically avoided supporting the Hadi government, the assumption being because Al Islah is an important part of Hadi's coalition and a lack of faith in Hadi's ability to govern. The UAE has been moving away from Islam as the idea of the state and towards nationalism to strengthen the regime against the moderate Islamist forces that capitalised on the 'Arab Spring'.

The United Arab Emirates: Domestic Survival versus Regional Security Complex Motivations in Yemen

The UAE appears to frame the conflict in Yemen as a three-way contest between Islamists, secularists and the Iranian aligned Houthis. The UAE's response to the 'Arab Spring' seems to be a combination of supporting nationalism, religious secularism, authoritarianism, resisting the expansion of Iranian influence and opposing Islamists. Thus, in keeping with the regime's strategy for emphasising religious secularism as a means of ensuring its domestic survival against the regionally emergent Islamists, the UAE is backing the secularist Southern Transnational Council in Yemen. The Emirati presence has caused some concern in Yemen. For instance, animosity towards the UAE rose in Aden following the ongoing assassination of Aden based clerics. Many of the targeted clerics are/were aligned with Al-Islah and have since fled their mosques as a result (The Associated Press & Haaretz, 2018).

As Saudi Arabia doubles down on support for Hadi in Yemen, the Emirates is showing signs of acquiescing to geopolitical concerns over domestic survival strategies; clearly, a coalition that includes Al Islah is preferable to the Iranian aligned Houthis. The Emirates is focused on preserving the regional status quo and as such is resisting both Iranian and Sunni extremist attempts to seize power in Yemen. The Emirates has worked hard in Yemen to establish tribal militias that resist Sunni extremists who clash with the Emirates' more moderate and somewhat pluralist 'idea of the state'. Recent developments, both the partial withdrawal of Emirati troops and the seizure of the Hadi government's base in Aden by Emirati trained militias with the Southern Transition Council, are yet to unfold at the time of writing.

The anti-regime and nearly region wide protests of the 'Arab Spring', appear to have intensified the Emirates' understanding that regional developments can be very threatening to its domestic survival. Thus mirroring the regionally activist shift within Qatar under the previous Emir Hamad al Thani, the UAE, under the leadership of the Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayed, has developed an increasingly activist foreign policy, earning itself the title of "the Arab World's most interventionist regime" (The Economist, 2017). To support this new foreign policy assertiveness, the Emirates has expanded its military capabilities (The Economist, 2017) and worked to generate a shift in identity. The 'Arab Spring' intensified internal tensions between those citizens and opposition groups that are outside the regimes' *real selectorates*, with the increased visibility of transnational religious groups such as ISIS and the Muslim Brotherhood challenging the established relationships between ruler and ruled and the existing relationship between Islam and governance. Islamists forces are typically part of the opposition movements in the region and frequently attempt to discredit the existing regimes by labelling them 'Un-Islamic'. As such, Eleanora Ardemagni believes that as it does not possess the strong Islamic credentials of Saudi Arabia, the UAE has sought "through military service […] to promote nationalism above Islamism, the Muslim Brotherhood, and jihadism" (Ardemagni E. , 2016). Ardemagni goes on to state that "In recently-unified states, conscription has often helped central institutions to build a national political discourse. National identity, as a dynamic set of shared beliefs and historical legacies, is a theoretical concept, but at the same time it is an incessant social construction" (Ardemagni E. , 2016, pp. 6-9). Given the shift towards nationalism, there is a greater emphasis on the military (Fromkin,

2015) with the Ruler of Dubai, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum thanking them specifically in the 46th National Day speech, this excerpt is below,

> I also extend my sincere greetings to our brave soldiers in the UAE Armed Forces - the shields of this nation who keep our national flag flying high in pride and dignity amongst world nations so that the UAE will continue to remain an oasis of security and stability, and maintain its sovereignty and safety (Wam, 2017).

An additional prong of the new nationalist identity in the UAE is religious secularism. Without religious secularism, the Emirates' nationalism would lack sufficient appeal to its religious citizens. The incorporation of religion, but as a moderate and non-political doctrine, strengthens the Emirati drive towards a new national identity that potentially protects it from challenges from moderate Islamists such as the Muslim Brotherhood. As such, religion is still a significant part of the Emirati identity, but the regime is working to change its relationship with the state. This new approach contrasts sharply with the attitude of the Prince's late father who declared, "Be obedient to Allah, and use your intelligence instead of resorting to arms". However, the Prince might argue that the new security situation following the 'Arab Spring', and the increased militarization of internal conflicts, requires a different approach (The Economist, 2017). Not only has the Emirates worked to oppose the revisionism in the region, but the regime has also attempted to insulate its domestic politics against dominant revisionist groups such as the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood.

Patterns of Qatar's Militia Sponsorship in the Yemeni Civil War

Qatar's support for moderate Islamists is clearly demonstrated in Yemen. Qatar has only supported the Al Islah branch of the al Hadi government. This group generally matches with Qatar's support for moderate Islamism and religious secularity despite Al Islah being made up of three main factions: the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafi politicians and tribal leaders led by the Al Ahmar family. The Muslim Brotherhood faction currently dominates the party. Figure 6.18 below places the secularism-fundamentalism rating for Al-Islah as a whole broadly ranging from 6-8. The Muslim Brotherhood members are likely to be at the lower end of that range. Although it is likely that Qatar mostly supports the Muslim Brotherhood faction within Al Islah, given its support of Salafi militias in Syria it is likely that Qatar is not opposed to its de facto

support of the Salafi faction. This does not clash significantly with the Qatari regime's religious secularity, and its Wahhabi citizens' religious conservatism.

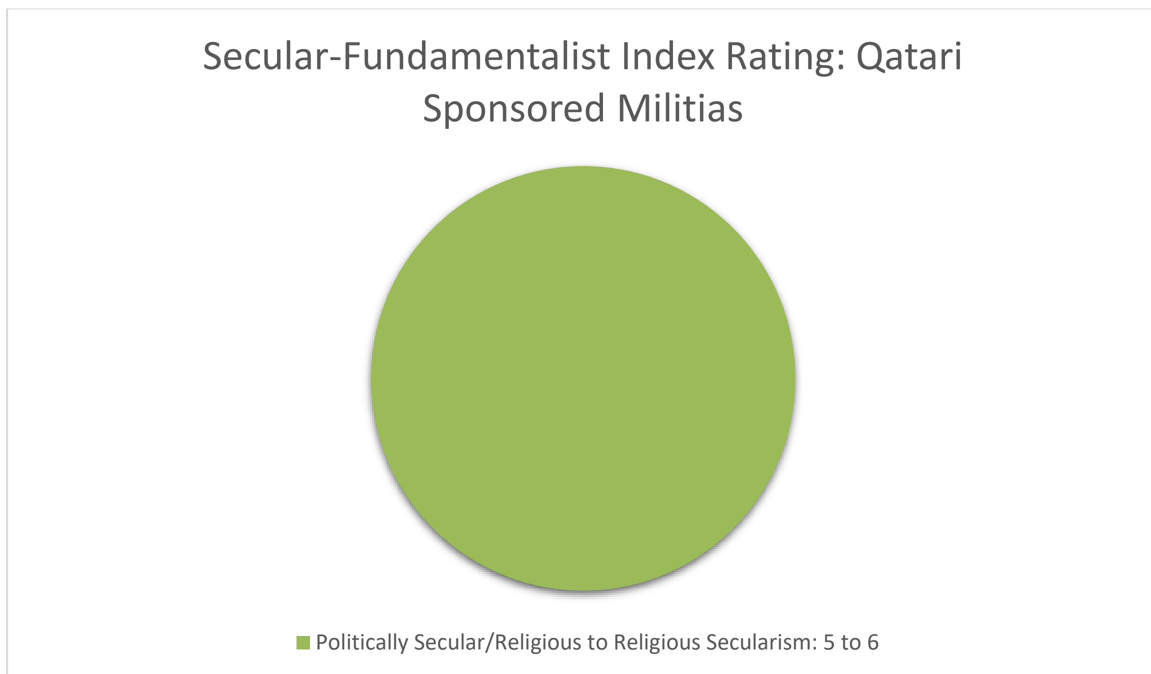

Figure 6.18. Patterns of Militia Support: Qatar (Sources: see Appendix 12, *Citation List B.* on page 338, Source Description: see Appendix 13, *Description of the Sources used for Yemeni Militia Data*, page 339).

Table 6.19. Qatar's Position Relative to the Theoretical Framework

Qatar's Position/Theoretical Framework	**Qatar's Position relative to the Theoretical Pillars**
Idea of the State	Qatar supports a range of Islamist actors which matches with its idea of the state: which is moderate Wahhabi Islamism and religious secularism.
Religion Regulation & Political Opponents/Outgroups	Has co-opted moderate Islamists and the religious establishment. Monitors minority sects such as the Shia but also monitors Sunni activism. Actively supports the Muslim Brotherhood's brand of "populist Islamism rooted in the democratic process" with little

	emphasis on civil liberties) (Wittes, On Jamal Khashoggi, the Muslim Brotherhood and Saudi Arabia, 2018).
Secular-Religious Competition Perspective	Islam is the preferred religion and identity, this is protected and promoted by the state. Has co-opted prominent Muslim Brotherhood and moderate Islamists such as Yusuf Qaradawi and Tariq Ramadan. Religious-Fundamentalist Index Rating 6.
Selectorate Theory	Essential support: wealthy connected Sunni. Al Thani tribal bloc.
Identity Hegemony Theory	Wahhabi Religious Secularity.
Regional Security Complex	Resistant to Saudi hegemony of Sunni camp. Opposes Iranian influence but is less hostile to the Iranian regime than Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Supportive of the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamic populism around the region.

(Table created by author from assessments based on the research).

Table 6.20. Qatar's Support of Specific Militias Explained through the Theoretical Framework

Qatari Militia Support/Theoretical Framework	**Qatari Patterns of Militia Support in Yemen**
Idea of the State	Qatar supported Al Islah predominantly which is in keeping with its policy of supporting moderate, representative Islamists around the region. This clashes with Qatar's autocratic monarchy system, but is supportive of its moderate Islamism and religious secularity.

Religion Regulation & Political Opponents/Outgroups	Actively supports the Muslim Brotherhood's brand of "populist Islamism rooted in the democratic process" combined little emphasis on civil liberties (Wittes, On Jamal Khashoggi, the Muslim Brotherhood and Saudi Arabia, 2018) within Yemen. However, domestic activism by this group in Qatar is very effectively suppressed so this move does not match with domestic survival considerations in a clear way, excepting if Qatar fears domination by Saudi Arabia and the UAE.
Secular-Religious Competition Perspective	Typically supports militias that range from religious secularism to conservative with a typical Religious-Fundamentalist Index Rating of between 5-6. This matches with the moderate Islamism of the Qatari regime. Qatar does not support the Southern secessionist movement which is politically a largely secular organisation.
Selectorate Theory	Al Islah is a predominantly Sunni party that is ideologically similar to Qatar's *winning coalition's* stance on religious secularism and moderate Islamism.
Identity Hegemony Theory	Qatar supports a moderate Sunni faction – the Muslim Brotherhood affliliated Al Islah. This is in keeping with Qatar's reliance on the religious credentials of such regional figures as the prominent Muslim Brotherhood linked cleric Yusuf al Qaradawi who lives in Qatar and is generally supportive of moderate Islamism.
Regional Security Complex	Actively supports Islamic populism across the region, particularly when it is linked to the Muslim Brotherhood networks. Is possible it promotes the Muslim Brotherhood and is aligned with Turkey as a means of balancing against Saudi Arabia and UAE in the region. Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have insisted that Qatar align its maverick foreign policy with their own.

(Sources: see Appendix 12, *Citation List B.* on page 338, Source Description: see Appendix 13, *Description of the Sources used for Yemeni Militia Data*, page 339).

Comparing Tables 6.19 & 6.20 it is clear that the Muslim Brotherhood closely resembles Qatar's domestic stances on religious secularity and Islamism but not on democracy. Religion is a key identity for both entities but neither seek the fundamentalist Islam endorsed by extremist groups or theocratic states like Saudi Arabia and Iran. However, the Muslim Brotherhood, and by extension Al Islah, represent a calculated risk to Qatar. Like the UAE, the Qatari elite appears to accept that democracy would result in the election of Islamist governments. Qatar appears to have decided this is both inevitable and an opportunity to expand its political networks beyond the existing Middle Eastern political leadership. Whilst it is highly unlikely that Qatar actively supports democracy, it appears likely that Qatar does not seek to oppose forces it sees as beyond its control as a small, albeit very wealthy, state. Furthermore, the Muslim Brotherhood is likely to lead a move towards religious moderation and away from Salafi forces which may be seen by Qatar as reducing the risk of Islamic extremism. Both Islamic extremism and democracy are domestic threats to the existing regimes. Qatar appears to have made peace with one, whilst resisting the other.

Qatar: Domestic Survival versus Regional Security Complex Motivations in Syria

As described above, in terms of self-preservation, supporting Muslim Brotherhood groups carries an element of risk for Qatar, particularly given the Brotherhood's recent move towards Islamist democracy. However, the previous Emir, Hamad al Thani, stated in an interview with Charlie Rose that he thought that Islamist democracy was inevitable in the Middle East, that elections would result in the election of Islamists, and that the regimes needed to adapt to that reality (Al-Thani, 2005). Moreover, it appears likely that Qatar seeks to support alternative sources of Sunni hegemony around the region rather than Saudi/Emirati leadership of the Sunni alliance. With the instability in Iraq, the weakening of Egypt and Libya following revolutions and the attempted coup in Turkey in 2016, the weakening of Saudi Arabia's Sunni rivals since the 'Arab Spring' has strengthened the Saudi drive for hegemony. If the region had more governments like Tunisia, which share Qatar's religious secularity and moderate Islamism, then this would be a bulwark against Saudi dominance of the Sunni bloc. Furthermore, as discussed in the previous chapter, there is evidence that Saudi Arabia has long been hostile to the current ruling branch of the Al Thani family.

Qatar's acceptance of Islamism and transnational groups that seek to install it, coupled with its mediation efforts, has provided it with links to powerful activist figures across the region and within Yemen. This has given it considerable leverage following the 2011 Arab uprisings. However, given its small size as a nation, and the lack of other states that whole-heartedly support its stance, these linkages have been difficult to leverage into long-term benefits for Qatar particularly given the resentment and push back from the other Sunni states in the region.

Analysis: The Regional Strategies of Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar in the Yemeni Civil War: Domestic Survival or Regional Interests?

States' Militia Sponsorship Choices: Best Explained by Regional or Domestic Explanations?

This chapter aimed to further the findings regarding militia sponsorship, but also sought to further differentiate between regional and domestic explanations for militia sponsorship patterns. Establishing a clear separation between regional and domestic explanations for militia sponsorship patterns has been difficult as can be shown by looking at an adapted version of Jack S. Levy's list of causal mechanisms relating to why states chose to intervene in the internal wars of other states with regards to the 'scapegoat hypothesis' (which is not considered here). This adapted list is as follows:

1. The internalization of external conflict. A shift or potential shift in power in the region (Levy, 1989, p. 271), i.e. if Iran loses Syria as an ally then this will strengthen Saudi Arabia's influence within the region.
2. The externalization of internal conflict through the intervening mechanisms of (a) a shift in the dyadic balance of power, or (b) external intervention in another state (Levy, 1989, p. 271), i.e. the fall of the existing government or the outbreak of civil war in a neighbouring state, with or without another state seeking to promote new leadership that best suits their own interests.
3. The internalization and externalization of a conflict that has an impact both within and without the intervening state (Levy, 1989, p. 271), i.e. region-wide and domestic protests that signal less acquiesce to authoritarian rule such as the 'Arab Spring'.

The difficulty with separating the explanations for choices regarding militia sponsorship from domestic or regional explanations is revealed above. Option (3.) best represents the current

situation in the MENA region. As a result, explanations could potentially be both regionally and domestically derived. However, we can logically infer that given that region-wide protests have resulted in the overthrow of some of the region's authoritarian regimes, the remaining states will thus be highly concerned with their own domestic political survival. Therefore, domestic politics is likely to be a key consideration concerning the choices of ruling elites regarding militia sponsorship in both the Yemeni and Syrian conflicts. Alastair Smith makes a supporting observation regarding the projection of domestic survival concerns into foreign policy, outlining that there are conditions under which a democratic government may make foreign policy choices aimed at "maximising the government's chance of re-election", as opposed to "maximising the nation's welfare" (Smith, 1996, p. 133) such as when a government is under pressure regarding re-election at the end of an electoral cycle (Smith, 1996, p. 133). This is similar to the situation that the Middle Eastern states, excluding Qatar, found themselves in during the 'Arab Spring' given that, although they are authoritarian states, they faced domestic pressure to either reform or relinquish control of government. As Smith identifies, the electorate or (*nominal selectorate*) "care about economic and foreign policy outcomes. The government cares about foreign policy but it also cares about retaining office" (Smith, 1996, pp. 135-136). Therefore, when under domestic strain, states are more "likely to use foreign policy for political gains, rather than the good of the nation" (Smith, 1996, p. 134). Thus, under the insecure conditions of the post 'Arab Spring', it is highly likely that foreign policies in the region strongly reflect externalized domestic survival strategies designed to shore up the ruling elite.

Islamism as an electoral force has emerged from the 'Arab Spring' as a significant focus of Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE, with Qatar in support and the other two opposed. The Muslim Brotherhood has strengthened its position as the prominent electoral Islamist group following the 'Arab Spring'. The promotion of religious secularism by the UAE potentially negates this form of Sunni driven revisionism that has strengthened across the region following 2011. Sunni revisionism tends to present itself in terms of ideologies that significantly feature religion and as such the UAE's religious secularism targets both electoral Islamism by contesting religion's participation in politics, and extremism by positioning fundamentalism as the cause of the region's conflicts. The projection of regime survival strategies into the regional arena affords another advantage: there are fewer and weaker

means of enforcing norms and rules in the international arena as compared to the domestic, enabling regimes to strike against the regional counterparts of domestic opposition groups with greater impunity than they are able to domestically. For instance, whilst the Emirates is able to provide troops to oppose groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Yemen, the UAE would be likely to suffer catastrophic domestic consequences if it attempted to be this heavy handed at home.

All four case study regimes are seeking to steer events in the region in their favour after the 2011 'Arab Spring' protests. The outcome of resulting civil wars will significantly affect the viability of the regimes, and potentially also the regional alliances between states which are structured around sectarian patterns of amity and enmity. As a result, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar have supported (often different) groups in Libya and Syria, financially backed General Sisi or the Muslim Brotherhood Government in Egypt, sent ground forces or sponsored groups in Yemen to block Houthi or the Muslim Brotherhood control of the state and sent security forces to Bahrain to quell the protest movement which was portrayed by the government as Shia-led, however in reality this reflects the demographics in Bahrain where Shia are the majority sect. Iran has been equally active, particularly in Syria and Iraq but also in Yemen. Iran has been less active in Libya and Egypt given the lack of influence it has within these states overwhelmingly Sunni populations. The Sunni states, despite differences over Islamism, all primarily want to prevent a Shia-affiliated state in Yemen as they are concerned about the increased opportunity for influence this offers Iran. Warbner and Cafiero state that the Emirates is also working to suppress the Houthi uprising as it is concerned that a Shia state in the Gulf will intensify the tensions between the Gulf states and local Shia movements (Wagner & Cafiero, 2016). Additionally both the Emirates and Saudi Arabia perceive the Houthis' advance as an Iranian-orchestrated plot to destabilise the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Geopolitically Yemen is important because the security of the Bab-el- Mandab strait, a globally significant oil and gas shipping lane. The security of this strait directly affects oil and gas shipments in the Red Sea and the Suez Canal, enabling trade with Europe and North America.

In face of the instability and threat to the existing regimes that the 'Arab Spring' represented, the autocratic states are seeking means to prevent another rash of uprisings. The 'Arab Spring' showed how quickly the contagion effect works when the region's citizens share similar

concerns against their governments. The patterns of militia sponsorship from within the sample, which show a strong pattern of states' selecting militias that share same sect and the same level of religiosity/secularism as their domestic position, strengthens the premise that the regimes are interested in more than just regional politics. They are involved in the region's civil wars to ensure that the outcomes support the survival of their respective regimes, as well as ensure their continued or increased regional influence.

Conclusion: Domestic Survival Strategies that use Religion as a Tool in the Regional Sphere

Looking at states as Structural Realism's 'black boxes' is insufficient in terms of assessing the impact of religion, secularism and sect on patterns of militia sponsorship in the Yemeni civil war. The strategies of the intervening states tie more closely with regime survival than with solely regional motivations.

In order to ensure their own survival the regimes need to create a new arrangement between themselves and their citizens. In the Middle East, given opposition to the regimes is frequently framed through Islamism, and where so many of the regimes base their legitimacy on their position relative to Islam, this has given the struggle between fundamentalism and secularism added political weight in this context. This has provided an opportunity for both status quo and revisionist actors to utilise this dynamic to their advantage. Therefore, authoritarian survival strategies studied in this research involved both sectarianism and the contest between religion and secularism. Moreover, it was found that there was a pattern to militia sponsorship in the Yemeni civil war reflected both secular-religious competition and sectarian divides, albeit that both dynamics appeared to influence militia sponsorship choices to a lesser extent than the Syrian situation, probably given the lack of clear choices in these regards in Yemen. The sponsorship of specific militias represented attempts to manage the civil war's outcome in the best interests of the survival of the region's existing regimes. The militia sponsorship patterns typically reflected the intervening regimes' legitimising narratives and identities as these related to sect and religiosity. The regimes calculated this differently: Qatar, the UAE and Saudi Arabia all supported predominantly Sunni militias or tribal Zaydi actors disengaged from Yemen's sectarian politics, Iran primarily Shia. Relating to Fox's Competition Perspective, Qatar worked with the new electoral Islamism, the UAE in

pursuit of authoritarian religious secularism, Saudi Arabia in support of Sunni militias that supported the regional status quo. Iran also sought to maintain the regional status quo concerning autocracy, but worked to increase the likelihood of a Shia led state in Yemen emerging.

The post-Arab spring environment provides ample opportunity to study the use of religion, secularism and sectarianism as survival strategies that are deployed in regional politics. The 'Arab Spring' represented a political and social shift of epic and unforeseen proportions. As such, religion, secularism and sectarian divides in the region are being altered, preserved or abandoned to better support the survival of the region's remaining regimes.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

Religion in Regional Politics: Regional Aspirations or Political Survival Strategies of Ruling Elites?

Part I: Discussion

Introduction

Authoritarian regimes in the Middle East have long used foreign policy strategies that utilise and harness links between religion and politics. A key example is Iran's harnessing of sectarian politics. As a Shia theocratic regime, Iran has capitalised on Sunni regimes' marginalisation of Shia in their countries, offering aid to Shia movements and thereby spreading its regional influence. The growth in influence of its client actor in Lebanon, Hezbollah, and Hezbollah's assistance in Syria on behalf of Iran, shows that this strategy can produce dividends. However, Iran is not the only Middle Eastern state to use religion as both an instrument and a purpose. Furthermore, as the US draws down its involvement in the Middle East, these local dynamics have become more prevalent, freed from the overlay of a heavily involved and militarily active superpower.

This research argues that the study of religion has relevance for understanding regional dynamics. However, the findings do not support religion as an "interest versus values" confrontation that states must resolve in the regional sphere. Instead, this research finds that religion is present in regional systems as an extension of the domestic survival strategies of political elites. As such, this finding adds an important expansion to Selectorate Theory. Selectorate Theory establishes that the primary goal of leaders is their own political survival and it provides an explanation for regional foreign policy choices. Structural Realism holds that it is the state's position in the international hierarchy that is the predominant restraint on how a state chooses to behave, that it will behave in its own best interests and that these interests will be both rational and based on material interests. Within the region, the elites in the case studies are acting in ways consistent with Structural Realism and their domestic survival strategies. Furthermore, Buzan's Regional Security Complex Theory analyses state behaviour through patterns of amity and enmity, and theorises that these structural features

are reflected in states' regional policies. However, this research's findings demonstrate that these interests are balanced against, and considered alongside, the domestic survival needs of the ruling elites. In fact, during times of regime insecurity, as has existed in the Middle East following the Arab Spring, it is likely that political elites' regional calculations are primarily focused on their own political survival. Given the threat to their political survival during the 'Arab Spring' from the contagion effect of the protest movements in other states, attempts to alter or maintain regional characteristics under these conditions seems rational. Therefore, this research proposes the incorporation of an additional causal variable into Structural Realism and RSC's explanations for international state behaviour: the desire of elites to stay in power and the subsequent regional externalisation of the domestic strategies they use to secure their rule.

Selectorate Theory identifies that regimes survive through the co-option and exclusion of sectors of the population. This research found that in the Middle East, the regime's in-out group patterns were broadly decided on sectarian identity and to a lesser extent, on a group's stance between secularism/fundamentalism. Lasse Røbæk has presented descriptive statistics which support this finding. Røbæk concluded that the "Middle East is the only region in the world where religious (including sectarian) affiliation is the predominant identity marker determining group membership and, second, that people in the Middle East, on average, are twice as likely as people in other developing nations to belong to identity groups excluded from legitimate political representation" (Røbæk, 2019, p. 23). There has been a large focus on the repression of sectarian out-groups as a regime survival mechanism in the Middle East. There is not a corresponding amount of research on the use of political mobilisation and support as an authoritarian maintenance strategy. Ultimately, as Bruce de Mesquito and Smith point out in *The Dictators Handbook*, *2011,* a dictator's power lies in the maintenance of coalitions of support. Selectorate Theory demonstrates that it is the ability of regimes to maintain the support of a small group, the *winning coalition,* that helps secure authoritarian survival. For example, the Syrian regime maintains significant support within its *real selectorate* and *winning coalition* through successful strategies of political mobilisation around sectarian insecurity and fear, alongside other seemingly contradicatory strategies that seek to promote cross sectarian support for the regime (Matar, 2019, p. 2411). Iran also uses strategies to politically mobilise their base of support through religious legitimacy,

distributing dividends according to support for Shia theocratic politics. In the Middle East, both regionally and domestically, political support and alliances are largely structured around sectarian favouritism and shared positions on degrees of secularism/fundamentalism. This research investigated the connections authoritarian survival strategies and regional politics.

International Authoritarian Survival Strategies: Inside Out or Outside In?

Authoritarian survival strategies can be motivated by either external goals focused on state interests, or by internal concerns such as regime survival and stability. Gerschewski analysed domestic authoritarianism, identifying the three pillars of authoritarian stability as "legitimation, repression and co-optation" (Gerschewski, 2013, p. 13). Selectorate Theory asserts that the co-optation mechanism through different selectorates is the most important aspect of authoritarian regime survival. Co-optation is linked to domestic legitimacy which, in turn, is connected to a specific identity proposal created by political elites that represents a position on sect and religiosity. The impact of this on regional policy is a key focus of this research. As Sandal et al. identify, politicians avoid foreign policies that undermine their domestic support base and this is a consideration against which alternative foreign policies are assessed (Sandal, Zhang, James, & James, 2011, p. 28). However, this research extends this, finding that in the context of the instability of the post 'Arab Spring' environment, the political survival of the ruling elites is not what potential foreign policies are tested against, but the key focus and goal of such decisions.

Recent research by academics such as Del Sordi and Dalmasso investigates authoritarian regimes' use of the international sphere to boost their domestic legitimacy. In keeping with this, Lisel Hintz's Hegemonic Identity Theory posits that regimes move identity contests that are blocked at home into the international arena. For instance, the UAE and Saudi Arabia have increasingly driven their Islamic identity initiatives (anti-extremism, anti-electoral Islam, anti-Shia) through their foreign policies in Yemen and Syria where they oppose groups that either represent Shia interests and/or advocate for either electoral or extremist Islamism. Given the prominence of Islam, any new Gulf strategy aimed at neutralising the forces that drove the protests will need an Islamic identity; one which negates political Islam, extremism and avoids association with Western style secularisation. One of the UAE's responses to the 'Arab Spring' is to promote religious secularism, an ideology that supports moderate and pluralist Islam.

Religious secularism is less amenable to instrumentalisation by Islamists and terrorists against the existing regimes while, at the same time, potentially weakening the legitimacy of the conservative Iranian theocracy.

There has certainly been an uptick in foreign policy activism by Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar states following the 'Arab Spring'. However, these regimes are not the only authoritarian regimes that are increasingly active in their regions. Elizabeth Taussig Torrey also describes Russia and China as "reasserting influence in their regions and are progressing from consolidating power within their borders to projecting power beyond them" (Torrey, 2018, Dissertation). Torrey explains that for Russia and China, "internal consolidations of power and assertive foreign policy strategies are needed to achieve stability at home" (Torrey, 2018, Dissertation). The argument could be made that this increased foreign policy activism could also stem from China and Russia's respective global hegemonic projects rather than efforts to maintain authoritarian stability domestically. The same argument could be made regarding Iran and Saudi Arabia's increased regional foreign policy activism. However, for the small states of Qatar and the UAE, given they cannot aspire to hegemon status, this foreign policy activism is more likely to directly reflect efforts to manage the challenges of globalisation and the dynamics released by the 'Arab Spring'.

Globalisation has affected the pillars of autocratic regimes such that it is difficult to shield populations from external influences due to the internet and greater mobility (Gerschewski, 2013, p. 10). The transnational environment therefore now has an amplified impact on authoritarian survival. Does this explain the increased activism of some of the Gulf States in question? Are they increasing their regional involvement because managing autocracy strategies at home through "legitimation, repression and co-optation" (Gerschewski, 2013, p. 1) is now much harder? Given that globalisation has increased the risk of regional contagion from destabilising international events, do authoritarian regimes have an increased need to manage regional dissent and ward off potential shifts in regional governance styles? For instance, for an authoritarian Sunni Middle Eastern state, a neighbouring democracy would allow for greater Shia political participation, potentially inspiring their own Shia. This would be likely to threaten the effectiveness of their Selectorate management strategies which secure power through the repression of certain groups, namely Shia, whilst concentrating dividends and power in the hands of a favoured group, the Sunni. Additionally, legitimation is

more difficult in the globalised world. For instance, Iran and Saudi Arabia have both built their authoritarian projects on religion and religious legitimacy. However, with increased connectivity between peoples across state borders, how does a regime continue to justify its own version of religion when its populations have access to alternative theologies and approaches? The ability of authoritarian regimes to prevent exposure to alternative ideas is considerably weakened. As such, the Middle Eastern states have worked to increase their control over information via the internet since the 'Arab Spring' where much of the opposition coordination was conducted online (or through mosques). Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar have also sought to install governments that support the most favourable conditions for their own survival. It makes sense that they would given that the 'Arab Spring' showed that autocracies are not just vulnerable to internal opposition, but are highly vulnerable to the contagion effect from the success of opposition movements in other states.

Regional and Foreign Policy Decision Making: State interests or Elite Survival Strategies

Hintz describes how Hegemonic Identity Theory "extends to state and non-state actors", "aiding understanding of how identity struggles spill over into foreign policy" (Hintz, 2018, p. 28). As such, the case study states attempt to use their religious credentials and wealth to advance the sectarian solidarity that serves their own leadership or interests. They also generally seek to advance the form of Islam that matches their legitimacy in terms of the secular-fundamentalist scale in order to strengthen approval from citizens at home and pacify or repress select Islamists forces. To illustrate this, Table 7.1 below demonstrates the identity proposals, which all have a sectarian and secular-fundamentalist position, of Saudi Arabia, Iran, the UAE and Qatar.

Table 7.1. Identity Proposals of Saudi Arabia, Iran, the UAE and Qatar.

State/Identity Proposal Factors	**Saudi Arabia**: Wahabbi Islamism	**Iran**: Velayat-e Fiqah	**UAE**: Religious Secularity	**Qatar**: Secular Islamism
Constitutive Norms of membership (in-group boundary criteria), prescribed and proscribed behaviours	Ethnic/Cultural Arab membership; Sunni Muslim faith, piety, deference of women, absolute authority	Shia Membership; Shia Muslim faith, piety, deference of women, absolute authority	Ethnic/Cultural Arab membership; Sunni Muslim faith	Ethnic/Cultural Arab membership; Sunni Muslim faith
Social Purpose (interests of group)	Spread Wahhabi Islam in region and globe, provide religious aid and deepen ties with Muslim peoples, protect Muslim/Arab culture	Spread Islam in region and globe, regain Muslim glory, protect Muslim culture, regain Muslim glory, encourage Shia political solidarity across states	Protect Arab/Muslim Culture against Westernization, promote religious secularism and tolerant Islam, promote some rights, modernization, spread and support Islam around the globe	Protect Arab/Muslim Culture against Westernization, promote some rights, modernization, spread and support Islam around the globe
Relational Meaning (view of relations vis-à-vis various out-groups	Natural brotherhood with Salafis, some cultural hostility to Western values	Natural brotherhood with Shia against oppressive Sunni and West, hostile	Both Middle Eastern and global market orientation, invests in West	Both Middle Eastern and global market orientation, invests in West,

		towards West, enmity towards Israel as Palestinian oppressor		
Cognitive Worldview (general role, belief about position in space and time, including Relationship between Regime and Islam)	Power; Saudi Arabia as legitimate leader of Muslim Umma	Power; Iran as only Muslim theocracy is the legitimate leader of the Muslim Umma, saviour of Shia minorities, Palestinian protector	Secular promoter of moderate, tolerant Islam, religious secularity, guard of modern lifestyle development in the region	Religious secularity, supporter of civil Islamism and moderate to fundamentalist Islamism
Secular-Fundamentalist Index	**8**	**9**	**6**	**6**

The format of this table is derived from Lisel Hintz's *Table of Identity Proposals* (Hintz, 2018, p. 37) but contains different content which has been created by the author.

The ongoing societal movement along the secular-fundamentalist scale represents a reference point for regime's to use as they see to frame their narratives. This relates to Sarah Feuer's idea that "an authoritarian regime's ideology of legitimation influences the religious establishment because the regime's discursive justification for its right to rule creates a framework within which the leadership can manoeuvre" (Feuer S. , 2014). It also relates to the *selectorate.* The religious/secular scale is crafted in a manner which excludes opponents as too secular or too religious in order to legitimise rule with co-religionists. Dr Abdelmajid Sghiar states that when a regime's opponents summon the moral authority to mount a challenge, Middle Eastern regimes use both Islamic and secular values to counter their

arguments; if the opponents use an Islamic argument they are labelled as Islamic terrorists/extremist and the regime counters them in the name of religious secularism for example. If the opposition uses the language of international human rights, the regimes emphasise the risk of Westernization. Thus, both secular and Islamic moral positions are used to shield the regimes against moral criticisms: the regimes use each position to manage the other (Sghiar, 2018). As Gutkowski outlines, "values such as religious moderation can be used instrumentally, as 'discursive markers used by actors to build alliances, send political signals to their constituencies and elide normally and politically problematic actions'" (Sordi & Dalmasso, 2018, p. 99). Thus authoritarian regimes' legitimation frames feature stances regarding identity and a specific degree of secularism-fundamentalism. These provide positions from which they can legitimise their rule as well as pursue and select international and domestic partners. As such, this research found that patterns of militia sponsorship in the Syrian and Yemeni civil wars were strongly reflective of religiously based patterns of inclusion and exclusion used for authoritarian survival domestically. Therefore militia sponsorship is an example in this case of states extending the secular/religious competition dynamic as an authoritarian survival strategy into regional politics.

Existing structures of selectorate management are complicated by the need to readdress the bargain between ruler and ruled in the Middle East following the 'Arab Spring'. Given the rise of Islamist movements within the 'Arab Spring', the religio-political ideology of emerging governments/political parties has become a key focus for Iran and the Gulf. Qatar and the UAE emerged from the 'Arab Spring' largely unscathed leaving them stronger than their less stable regional counterparts. This explains their willingness to get involved in redirecting politics in the region. In the case of the Qatar, the UAE and increasingly, Saudi Arabia, this entails ensuring that religion is defanged as a political force. For Qatar, the 'inevitable and inescapable' political power of religion and Islamism is minimised and controlled at home, and instrumentalised abroad. Iran aims to ensure that religion retains its political power thereby maintaining the Iranian theocracy's legitimacy.

When considering foreign policy choices in the post-'Arab Spring' context, it is clear that the criteria involved in decision-making shifts when it is considered from the point of view of the state or from the point of view of the interests of the ruling elite. It is possible that different militias would be provided support from the respective viewpoints. This is illustrated by

Figure 7.2 below which shows the post-'Arab Spring' alliance decision making process as it relates to militia sponsorship in the Syrian and Yemeni civil wars.

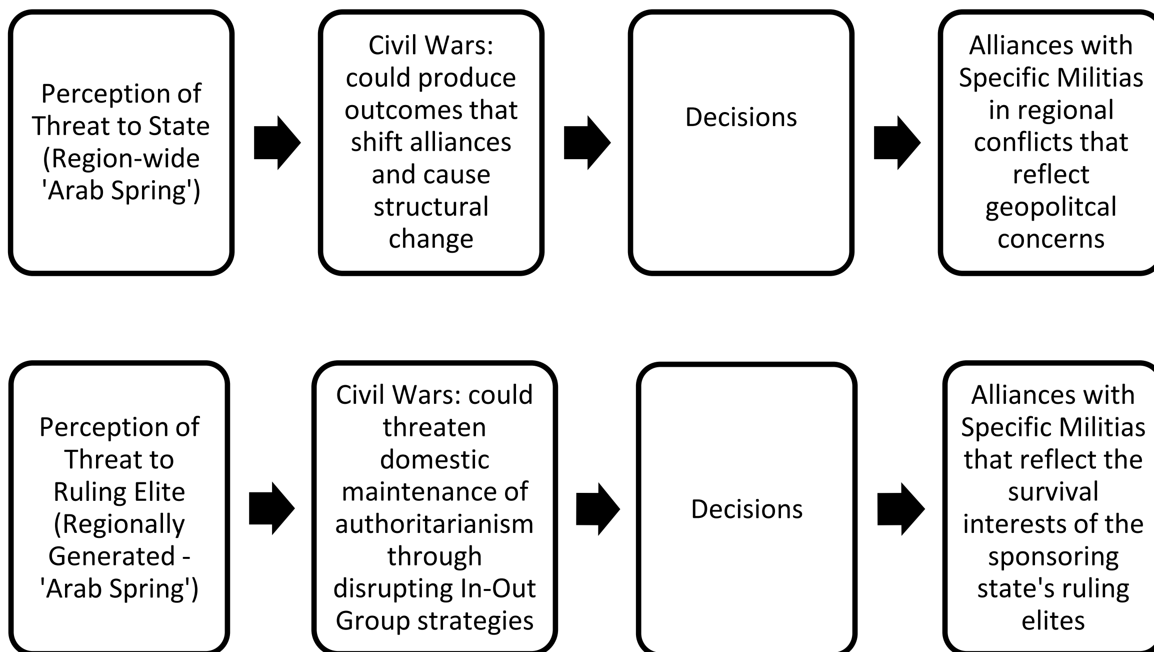

Figure 7.2. Decision Making Process (Arab Spring). Figure 7.2 is adapted from Lars-Erik Cederman's diagram titled *The Extended Simulation Loop with Alliance Formation* (Cederman, 1994, p. 516).

However, although this research makes a case to consider the externalisation of authoritarian maintenance strategies when seeking to explain interventions in civil wars, there are other possible causes. For instance, scholars such as Rosecrance and Mayer have established that there is a link between internal instability and external war (Mayer, 1969). In such cases, engagement in external war is considered a diversionary tactic to distract from internal instability and to bind the country together against a common foe. This explanation has a long history with Ibn Khaldun positing that strong group bonds are reinforced in war (Khaldun, 2005/1377, p. 101), and Mayer identifying "Aristotle, Machiavelli, Bodin, Montaigne, Treitschke and Simmel" as having discussed the use of war to consolidate unstable societies (Mayer, 1969, p. 296).

Arno J. Mayer believed it was unified sets of elites who attempted to hold onto power through the diversionary use of force in other states. However, Jack S. Levy argues that "a more pluralistic political model" is more convincing "in which one faction may seek a foreign

confrontation to advance its own interests in the intra-elite competition for power" (Levy, 1988, p. 668) in the domestic sphere. Levy's point relates to Mesquito and Smith's work in that Selectorate Theory establishes that ruling elites use societal groups to shore up their domestic power. These key groups (and out-groups) were identified in this research's case studies. For instance, Saudi Arabia relies heavily on the continued support of Wahhabi Sunni citizens and Wahhabi clerics. Saudi Arabia also seeks to repress competing sources for power from out-groups, for example executing prominent Shia clerical leader Sheikh Nir al-Nimr in 2016 (BBC, 2016), and at least 33 of the 37 executed on April 23 2019 were Shia (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Of the Shia that were executed, 14 were from the Qatif Shia majority region which has seen unrest against the Saudi regime since the outbreak of the 'Arab Spring' (BBC, 2017). These executions were a sign of intra-elite competition for power in which one faction, the Sunni elite, has executed potential leaders from within the Shia identity group. Importantly for this research, Saudi Arabia opposes the Shia militias' drive for political power in both Yemen and Syria as well. Therefore, this research argues that religion is present in militia sponsorship as a sign of domestic intra-elite competition (which is played out both domestically and regionally in the Middle East). This research essentially argues that rather than solely using intervention in external wars as a diversionary tactic or to pursue state interests, the ruling elites in question are using interventions in Syria and Yemen to shore up domestic support and to weaken the potential power of those groups excluded from power domestically. Intervention does this by supporting like-groups and suppressing out-groups in overseas conflicts in ways that reflect patterns of inclusion/exclusion domestically. So although this research accepts the point from diversionary war scholarship that involvement in external conflicts is more likely if ruling elites are under threat at home, which applies to Middle Eastern states' elites as a result of the 'Arab Spring', it provides an additional explanation for their behaviour other than the use of intervention to divert attention from internal strife. Rather, it seeks to explain that the tactics are frequently a regional extension of the authoritarian survival strategies these states deploy domestically.

This research accepts Structural Realism's assertion that structural concerns and rational state interests influence international relations. However, it also asserts that state elites are focused on their own political survival. Therefore, in order to understand this process and

predict foreign policy decisions rational state interests need to be considered against the political survival strategies of ruling elites.

PART II: Conclusion

Key Findings

Middle Eastern regimes move domestic survival strategies that use religion, sectarianism and religious secularism as authoritarian stabilization tools into the regional sphere.

Given the similarity between domestic regime survival strategies and the patterns of militia sponsorship in the Yemeni and Syrian civil wars, it is clear that these strategies extend into the regional sphere. Sponsorship patterns strongly reflected the sectarian and religiosity preferences of the regimes and their support base. Additionally, the militias they opposed strongly reflected the groups whose sectarian identity and/or religiosity challenged the idea of the intervening state and the regime's relationship with domestic religious authority. Although secular-fundamentalist positions impacted on militia sponsorship, this was trumped by sectarian considerations when no militia clearly represented both the sectarian and religiosity stances of the sponsoring regime. Sect and secular-fundamentalist positions were both trumped by geopolitical considerations, or it is more likely, were a function of geopolitical considerations. The Middle East's authoritarian survival strategies frequently feature religion given that religious identity is based on politics, rather than theology. If you are a certain religious identity, you support certain ruling elites – whether for the regime, or against. Potential or actual ruling elites will typically be of the same sectarian group, and same level of religiosity as supportive citizens. For instance, a moderate Sunni citizen who is critical of their regime, might support the moderate Sunni Muslim Brotherhood. A key factor is the match between sect and religiosity. The calculation extends towards militias/groups as well; their willingness to accept support from certain sponsors is also a function of their beliefs and vision for the contested state.

Selectorate Theory, which asserts that the key focus of politicians is their own political survival, has relevance when predicting and explaining regional policy choices.

Given the similarity of domestic survival strategies and regional political divides, further research is required to establish which held greater weight: regional or domestic

explanations for state choices. This research found that domestic survival strategies that involved religion were projected into the regional sphere. However, it is likely that the extent to which authoritarian survival strategies are externalised shifts under different circumstances; i.e. given the regional threat from the 'Arab Spring' it is likely that the key focus of the region's states is currently on domestic survival. This research points to Selectorate Theory (i.e. politicians key focus is on their own political survival) extending into the regional sphere given the links between domestic survival strategies that involve religion and militia sponsorship choices. Structural realism has established the importance of systemic structure and systemic challenges in terms of states' international choices. Structural concerns are likely to dictate under what conditions and constraints domestic survival strategies are pursued internationally. This research was unable to firmly establish which explanation held more weight in terms of militia sponsorship given the similarity of domestic and regional aspirations and the effect of the 'Arab Spring'. As such, whilst it cannot be claimed based on this research that domestic survival strategies are the key focus of regional policies, it is likely that they impact on international strategies.

Autocratic states project authoritarian survival strategies into their regional political decisions.

Given the similarity between militia sponsorship partners and the domestic strategies used to maintain authoritarianism domestically, it is clear that these strategies are extended, where possible, into regional politics. Additionally, with the threat from regional protest movements and the increasing external threats to authoritarianism from globalisation, it is predictable that authoritarian states will need to increasingly manage external threats to maintain their domestic power.

Regional hegemonic contests are linked, in the cases of Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar, to domestic survival strategies that focus on maintaining political dominance over potential communal contenders.

Regional hegemonic contests are linked, in the cases of Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar, to domestic survival strategies that focus on maintaining political dominance over potential communal contenders such as other religious sects or groups with a different understanding of Islam's role in governance. Different understandings of secularism and/or Islamism can

represent a significant risk to elites, as it can consist of the most threatening case, internal opponents from within the same group. With regards to maintaining political domestic dominance over different religious sects, the Gulf States need to contain Iranian influence in the region and prevent the emergence of more regimes that contain a significant number of members belonging to a sect that is linked to Shia, and is also aligned with Shia-Iran. This is particularly evident in the contest by Saudi Arabia, the Emirates and Qatar to remove the Assad regime from power in Syria, and the efforts to prevent the Houthi (given their, albeit not that strong, connections with Iran) from gaining power in Yemen. Generally, these strategies are assumed to be about regional dominance, however, in this instance there is a clear similarity between domestic survival strategies and strategies that support the hegemonic contest. The Selectorate Models of the respective regimes clearly showed that support from the *real selectorate* and *winning coalition* reflect sectarian, and to a lesser extent religiosity, favouritism. This sectarian favouritism illustrates the underlying sectarian character of the support bases of these Middle Eastern regimes; however this sectarian platform is established alongside other considerations such as material co-optation and tribal connections for example. Within these support bases are more defined structures of support, frequently linked to tribe, patronage networks, class, co-opted groups and rentier social contracts. Most, but not all, of these sub-structures contain a significant number of members of the same sect and religiosity as the regimes. These dynamics are uniquely strong in the Middle East. Again this means that due to the exceptional character of Middle Eastern sectarianism the prevalence of religion in foreign policy is likely to be more marked in this region. Therefore, the results need to be tested in a less religious region to test the presence of religion in regional politics further.

Regime security is tightly linked to regional dynamics in the Middle East, and the studied strategies (patterns of religion/secularism and militia sponsorship in civil wars) are likely to be unusually prominent in this volatile and authoritarian region given it is overlaid with the transnational force of Islam.

This test has been conducted in a largely autocratic region that has recently faced threats from region-wide protest movements. Testing these findings against other regions where elites have a set term in power such as Western democracies, and where governance is stable and not facing a regionally generated threat, may reveal a different result. Given this

research's focus on intervention aimed at steering internal dynamics relating to religion and secularism in unstable states, the outcomes reflect the dynamics of the Middle Eastern security complex. The security complex level of analysis "provides an insight into the regional level security dynamics that shape and mediate [..] intervention" (Buzan, 2007, pp. 163-164). The Middle East has a strong interconnecting element that is arguably not as strongly present in other regional security complexes: the existence of the "transnational political force of Islam" (Buzan, 2007, pp. 163-164). The transnational force of Islam means the Middle Eastern security complex contains "an unusually high degree of security interpenetration" (Buzan, 2007, p. 164). Security interconnectedness between the states intensified following the 'Arab Spring', with the threat from electoral Islamism and citizen protests further heightening the risk to regimes. This was also intensified by the lessening of US involvement in parts of the Middle East, first under President Barack Obama and then under President Donald Trump, which has resulted in a freer rein for states and, in some instances, non-state actors, to conduct local challenges and pursue their rivalries. This combined with the increased regional interventions and political manoeuvrings following the 'Arab Spring', makes the Middle East the ideal region for studying the use of competition between religion and secularism in interventionist foreign policies - a highly prevalent phenomenon in the region. However, it also creates a unique example where the dynamics may be exaggerated in comparison to other regions given politics is overlaid by the prominence of transnational Islam. Additionally, statistics presented by Røbæk confirm that "religious (including sectarian) affiliation is the predominant identity marker determining group membership" (Røbæk, 2019) in the Middle East. Given this is specific to the Middle East and relates directly to this research, this again suggests that the findings may only apply in this region. This study demonstrated that regime security is tightly linked to regional dynamics in this instance, and that the studied strategies (religion and militia sponsorship in civil wars) are likely to be unusually prominent in this volatile and authoritarian region. Therefore, this research needs to be explored in a stable and democratic region to test the findings further.

Ongoing societal competition between secularism and religion is used as an authoritarian survival strategy in regional conflicts.

Fox's Competitive Perspective posits that religious and secular actors compete over policy, and that this dynamic is ongoing. Given this is a persistent societal rift, this competition is

exploited by authoritarian regimes to maintain power domestically. Narratives are developed that frame the fundamentalist or more secular opposition movements as either extremists, or as anti-religion according to the regime's legitimation strategy as it relates to religion/secularism. In this research, the stance regimes' used domestically to legitimise their rule in relation to religiosity was reflected in their choices regarding militia sponsorship in the Syrian and Yemeni civil wars.

The sponsorship of militias in civil wars reflects both domestic and regional politics.

The sponsorship of militias was shown to be linked to both regional aspirations, and domestic survival strategies. However, regional political decisions ultimately reflect elites objectives to survive politically, especially considering that regional power and influence strengthens elite standing domestically, thereby reinforcing authoritarian stability. In sum, Realism is right, states seek power. However, in the regional sphere, they do not necessarily just seek power relative to other states, but additionally seek to implement strategies that help maintain their power at home.

Militia Sponsorship: Inside Out or Outside In?

Although it was established that there is a clear link between domestic survival strategies and militia sponsorship, the divide between regional and domestic motivations is still unclear. Further research is required to separate these two possible explanations. This difficulty is due to the similarity of regional and domestic strategies in these cases. Whilst this establishes there is a link, it makes it difficult to separate out the two motivations.

Figures 7.3-7.10 demonstrate the similarity between potential regional and domestic explanations for militia sponsorship patterns by comparing domestic survival strategies with the strategies that relate to rebel sponsorship in the Syrian and Yemeni civil wars.

Iranian domestic strategies compared to its regional policies relating to militia sponsorship

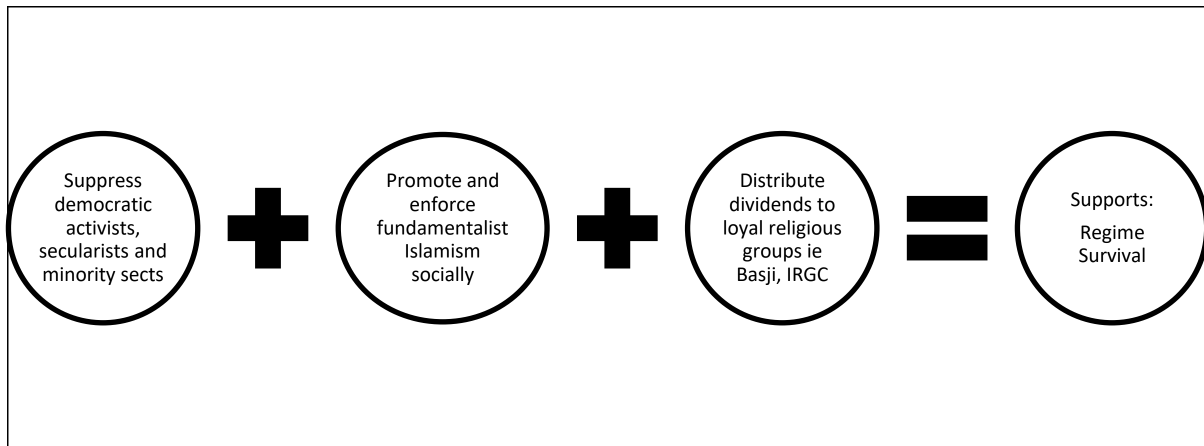

Figure 7.3. Iran: Domestic Survival Strategies that involve Religion/Secularism

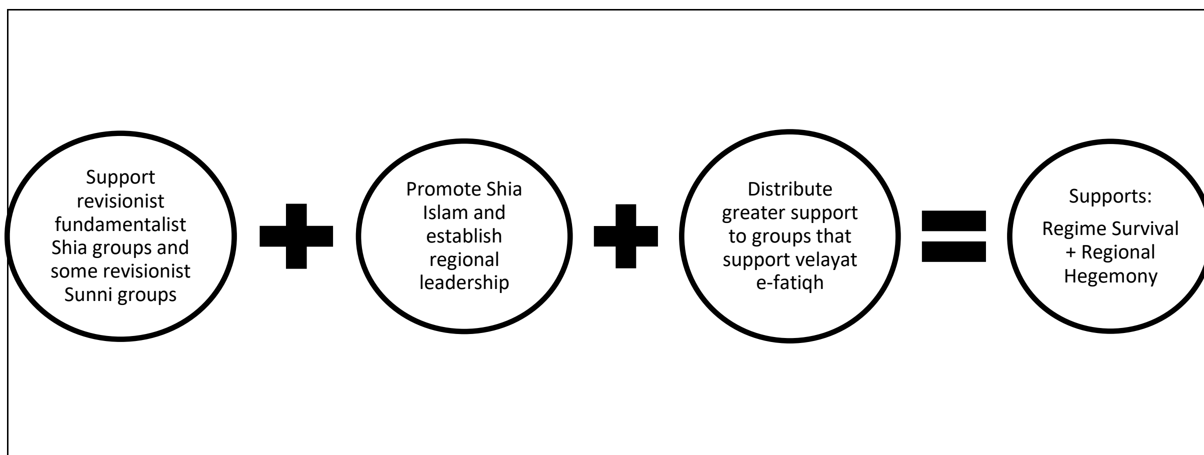

Figure 7.4. Iran: Regional Strategies that involve Religion/Secularism

Saudi Arabian domestic strategies compared to its regional policies relating to militia sponsorship

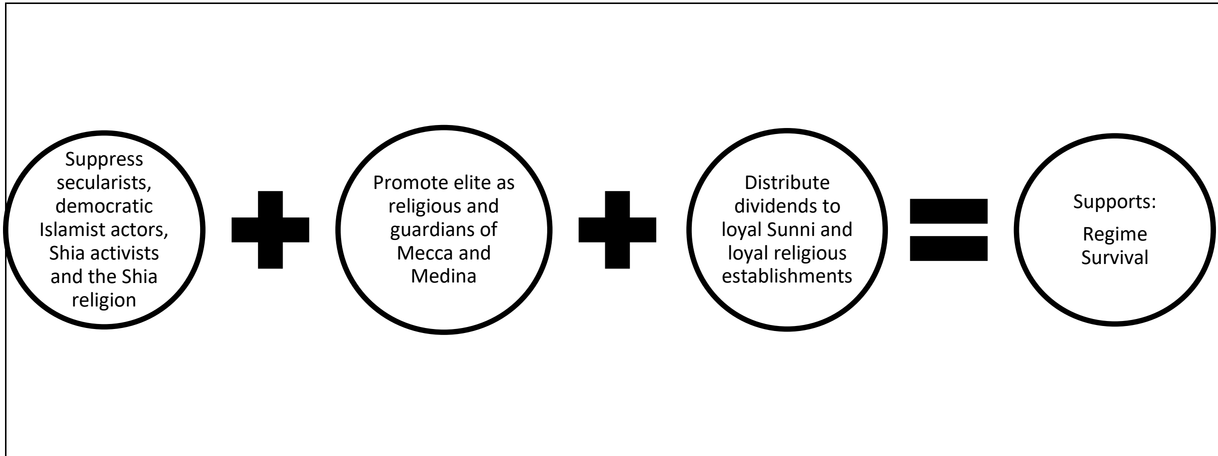

Figure 7.5. Saudi Arabia: Domestic Survival Strategies that involve Religion/Secularism

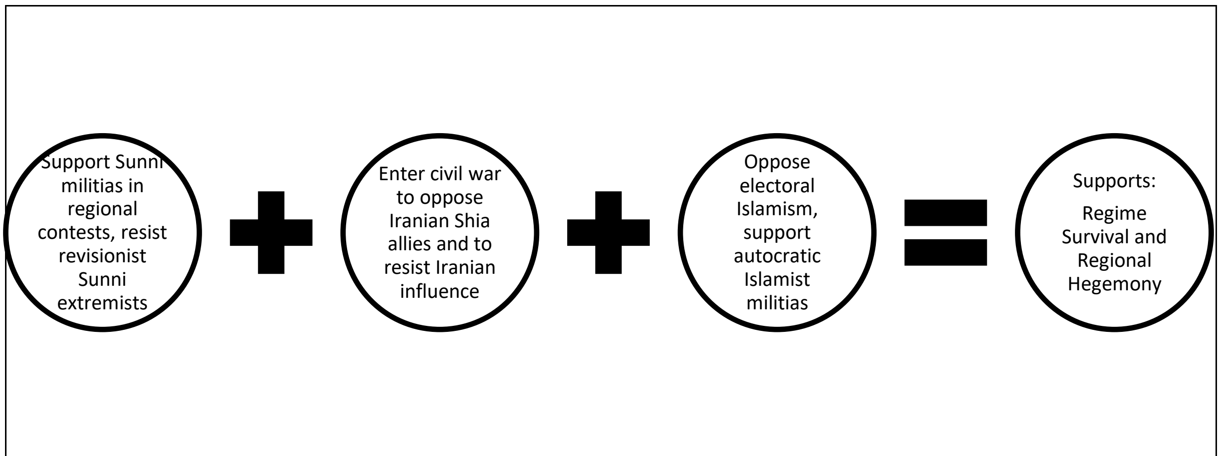

Figure 7.6. Saudi Arabia: Regional Strategies that Involve Religion/Secularism

UAE domestic strategies compared to its regional policies relating to militia sponsorship

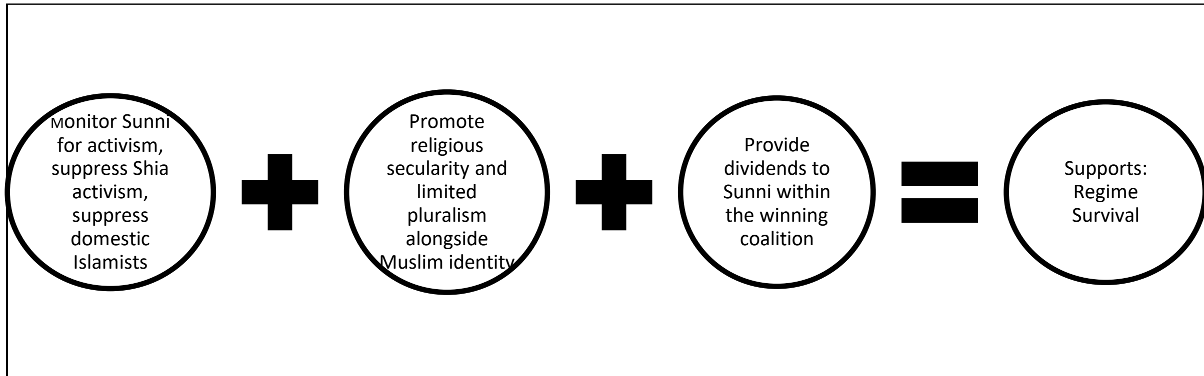

Figure 7.7. United Arab Emirates: Domestic Strategies that Involve Religion/Secularism

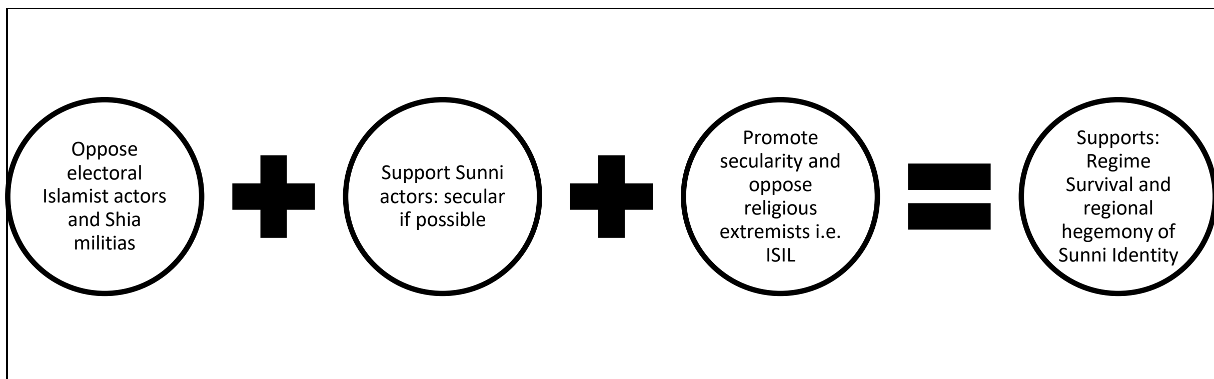

Figure 7.8. United Arab Emirates: Regional Strategies that Involve Religion/Secularism

Qatari domestic strategies compared to its regional policies relating to militia sponsorship

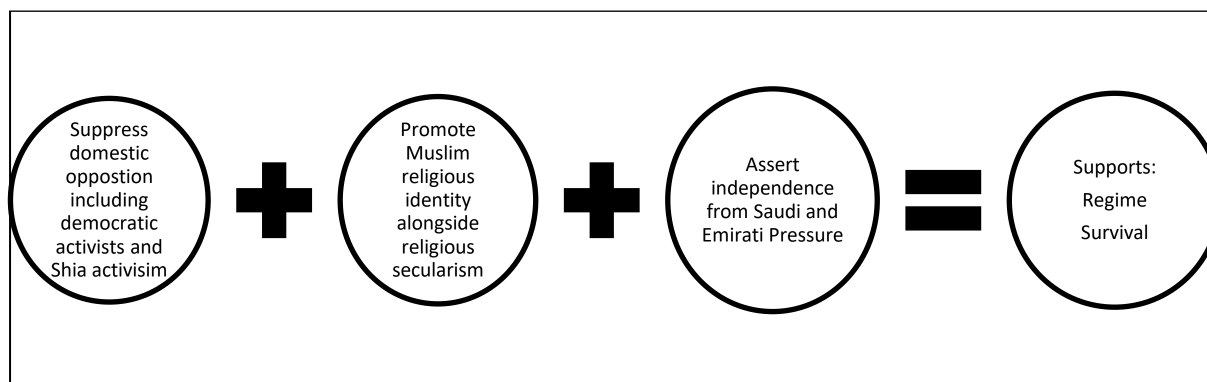

Figure 7.9. Qatar: Domestic Strategies that Involve Religion and Secularism

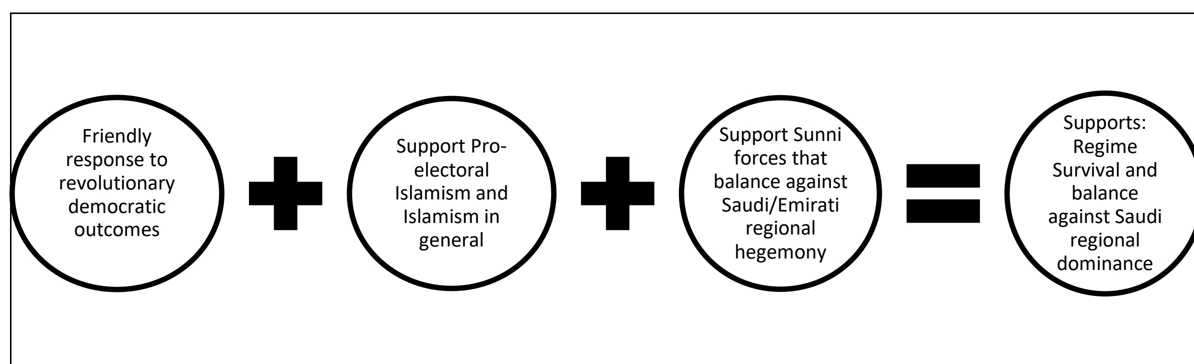

Figure 7.10. Qatar: Regional Strategies that Involve Religion and Politics

Excluding Qatar, this strong similarity between strategies indicates that regime survival, particularly in the aftermath of the 'Arab Spring', is a top priority of the regimes. It also shows that autocratic regimes extend their regime survival tactics into populations outside of their domestic sphere where proximity and/or religious identity links are relevant and that regional contests are also about regime survival – particularly given the more powerful a state is within its region, the more likely the regime is to endure. Regional and international success is in the interests of the ruling elite and is an effective authoritarian survival strategy. However, Qatar's regional strategies do not reflect their domestic survival strategies as strongly as the other case studies. It is not in the interests of Qatar domestically to support electoral Islamism

regionally for example. The difference between Qatar's regional and domestic survival strategies is due to the following factors:

- Qatar was the only state unaffected by the 'Arab Spring'. This gave Qatar greater freedom of action in the post 'Arab Spring' environment. The Emirates was also relatively unaffected by the unrest but not as thoroughly as Qatar.
- Qatar has co-opted regional electoral Islamism. Many Muslim Brotherhood exiles reside in Qatar on the proviso that the Brotherhood is not active in Qatar.
- Due to the above factors and the animosity between the current ruling branch of the Al Thani family and the Saudi and Emirati regimes, it is possible that Qatar's elite see the Saudi and Emirati regimes as the main threat to their continued rule and, as such, seek to balance against the potential regional hegemony of the Saudi regime.

Therefore, it is likely that stronger regime stability results in a reduced externalisation of domestic survival strategies into the regional sphere as such states pursue regional aspirations to a greater extent and are less constrained by domestic survival concerns.

Predicting Patterns of Militia Sponsorship and other Foreign Policy Decisions

The Middle East was chosen for this research on a pattern-based case selection bias, whereby the cases with highly evident patterns that relate to religion and the regional sphere were selected. Looking for the dynamics that explained the patterns required investigating the domestic politics of the case studies. The process patterns regarding militia sponsorship revealed a potential structure for understanding and predicting militia sponsorship patterns (and other foreign policy choices) through considering the impact of elites' political survival strategies against the regional aspirations of states. This structure is represented by Figure 7.11 below.

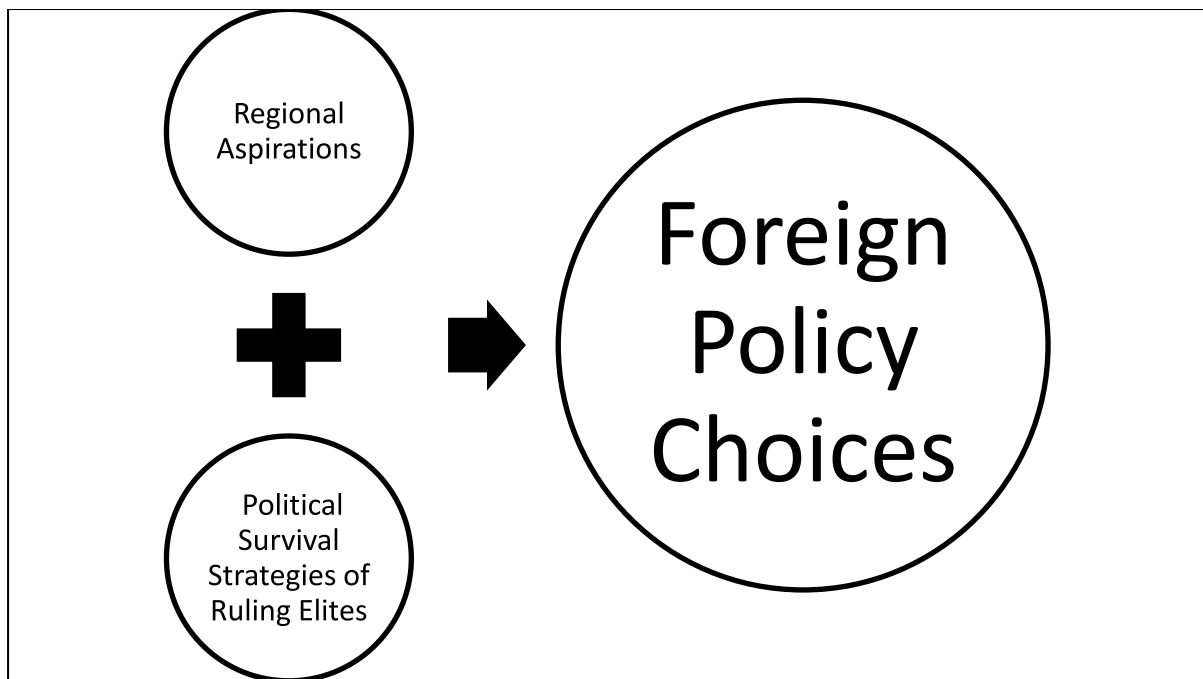

Figure 7.11. Determining Foreign Policy Choices

Limitations and Further Research

Regional Politics, Authoritarian Survival Strategies and Religion

The relationship between structural politics and externalised regime survival strategies needs further explanation. The question of whether or not domestic politics involving religion extends into the regional sphere has been borne out by the findings. There is a clear match between the secular/fundamentalist ideologies and the sect of militias and the states that sponsor them. The clearest example is in the Syrian civil war where Iran supports the Assad regime which is frequently described as a secular regime; although, upon closer examination Syria upholds religious secularism not political secularism: the use of Islamic symbols and vocabulary by the Assad regime despite maintaining rule independently of the religious establishment (Pinto, 2011, p. 203) for example. However, although Iran supports the Assad regime, they typically avoid giving direct aid to the secular militias and instead extend aid, and at times instructions, directly to the Shia Islamist actors fighting for Assad, in common with their theocratic domestic legitimacy. However, in order to establish the balance between authoritarian survival strategies, structural concerns and other approaches a comprehensive comparison between the different rationales is necessary. Furthermore, it is possible though that the militia sponsorship patterns reflect domestic authoritarian survival strategies only

within Middle Eastern cases – i.e. this similarity between domestic survival strategies and regional strategies only exists in the volatile Middle East where "regional and domestic theatres are linked by supra-state identities" (Valbjørn, 2020, p. 260), and where there is arguably a willingness to pursue cross border strategies that is unparalleled in the non-European (Valbjørn, 2020, p. 257) or European world.

It is likely that regional conditions have a significant impact on the extension of domestic survival strategies into the regional sphere. After a region wide challenge to autocracy, such as the 'Arab Spring', whereby protests and dissent spread across the region, states are very aware of how dynamics in one state can embolden political opponents and activists of a similar ilk in their own state. Therefore, following an unstable period such as the 'Arab Spring', a strong emphasis on domestic stability and regime survival in regional policies is to be expected. The extension of domestic authoritarian survival strategies into the regional sphere needs to be tested further under more stable conditions in order to gauge whether authoritarian survival strategies are employed regionally across all cases or whether this only applies when domestic and regional conditions are unstable and threatening to regime survival.

A compelling explanation for the presence of religion in foreign policy is as an authoritarian regime survival strategy. This research demonstrates what to expect when religion, sectarianism and secularism are employed as an instrument of policy during interventions in civil wars. However, the predictive power of these findings needs to be strengthened by further testing of domestic authoritarian survival strategies beyond civil wars and in other regions, as well as more comprehensive testing in the MENA region. It is difficult to establish the extent to which religious piety and dedication to a religious cause is driving the states' choices regarding the sponsorship of rebels. However, Iran's readiness to support the more secular Assad regime in Syria, and Saudi Arabia's support of political groups that contain Zaydi heritage politicians in Yemen indicates that this is a not a strong explanation for sectarian sponsorship patterns. As such, it is more likely that the patterns reflected the domestic use of religion as a political tool, not religion as an interest or set of values in and of itself.

Testing the Research's Conceptual Architecture in Europe

Together with a strong anti-establishment message, the far right, notably France's French National Front, has stressed secularism alongside Christianity as a "matter of identity, not a matter of faith or religious observance" in the face of rising fears over the cultural impact of the large numbers of Muslim refugees, predominantly Syrians, that surged into Europe in 2015-2016. This represents a "disconnect between Christianity as faith and Christianity as culture" (Roy, 2016, p. 91) that in a secular society provides a political opportunity which the far right has seized. Merijn Oudenampsen of Tilburg University argues that Europe's far right has followed the lead of Pim Fortuyn (who was assassinated in 2002) of the Dutch Pim Fortuyn List party, who discovered that the winning argument for the far right was not to support religious conservative values in the manner of the US right, but to position themselves as "defending secular, progressive culture from the threat of immigration" (Polakow-Suransky, 2016) and this culture can be represented in the form of a post-religious but Christian identity. Fortuyn's party's 2002 manifesto "expressed the view that all citizens had equal rights and duties, irrespective of race, gender, faith or sexual orientation", (Kessel, 2016, pp. 96-97) therefore avoiding a clash with European ideals of pluralism, whilst at the same time mobilising Christianity as an identity as opposed to a faith, through stating that immigrant minorities were untouched by the 'century-long Jewish-Christian-Humanist developments' of the European continent (Kessel, 2016, p. 65). Habermas describes the instrumentalisation of this dynamic in his outline of Post Secular Theory, stating that "multiculturalists fight against enforced assimilation", and argue that minorities should not be subjected to the "imperatives of the majority culture" (Habermas, 2008, p. 24). However, secularists, in line with the far right to a significant extent, "fight for a colorblind inclusion of all citizens" and warn against going "too far in adapting the legal system to the claims of preserving the intrinsic characteristics of minority cultures. From this laicistic viewpoint, religion must remain an exclusively private matter" (Habermas, 2008, p. 25). In this argument "The Enlightenment has become attractive specifically because its values are not just universal, but because they are 'our' i.e., European, Western values" (Habermas, 2008, p. 26). As such "Religious citizens and communities must not only superficially adjust to the constitutional order. They are expected to appropriate the secular legitimation of the constitutional principles under the premises of their own faith" (Habermas, 2008, p. 27). The conceptual architecture developed in this

research could be advanced to analyse this instrumentalisation and politicization of religion in the West, particularly by these right wing populist movements. Some seminal work had been done by Marzouki, N., McDonnel, D., & Roy, O. (Marzouki, McDonnel, & Roy, 2016); this is a growing area of research in which the conceptual framework used in this thesis could make an important future contribution.

The Impact of Globalisation on Authoritarian Survival Strategies

Further research also needs to be done on the impact of globalisation on regime survival strategies given it is increasingly difficult to shield populations from external influences due to the internet and greater mobility (Gerschewski, 2013, p. 10/48). As such, the transnational environment has become more important in terms of authoritarian survival. Does this explain the increased activism of some of the Gulf States, China and Russia? Has this led to more authoritarian survival strategies being conducted in the international sphere? In order to test this, future research could compare the regional and domestic regime survival strategies for different eras: the colonial/industrial revolution and pre-colonial eras compared to the globalised present for instance. Additionally, this research, as evidence of the relevance of regime survival mechanisms being extended into international politics, only focuses on militia sponsorship. Further research needs to test beyond religiously based regime survival strategies to see whether or not other authoritarian strategies are also extended into the regional sphere.

The Incorporation of Domestic Political Survival Strategies into Regional Policy

Jack Levy stated that a “greater recognition of the role of domestic factors by political scientists would increase the explanatory power of their theories and provide more useful conceptual frameworks for the historical analysis of individual wars” (Levy, 1988, p. 653). This research has explored the role of religious domestic factors as explanations for militia sponsorship patterns. As such, this research is a point of departure for further investigation into the externalisation of authoritarian survival strategies and the use of religion, sectarianism and secularism in regional politics to maintain political power domestically. This research establishes that when analysing the foreign policy of autocratic regimes, the regimes’ domestic survival mechanisms should be considered as a potential explanation for regional

policy choices. The links between secularism, fundamentalism and sectarianism and the patterns of militia sponsorship appear strong; a point which emphasises the potential regional significance of research which identified the statistical prevalence of sectarian identity as the predominant marker of political group membership in the Middle East (Røbæk, 2019, p. 23). The correlation between the patterns of militia sponsorship and the statistics presented by Røbæk relating to sectarianism and the prevalence of religious considerations as drivers of alliance choices, strongly supports the idea that a religious mechanism, alongside other crucial factors, is driving the militia sponsorship choices of Iran, Saudi Arabia, the Emirates and Qatar in the Yemeni and Syrian civil wars.

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Appendices

Pew Research Center’s Government Restrictions Index and the Social Hostilities Index

Appendixes 1-8 show select results for Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar from the 20 questions that comprise the Pew Research Center’s Government Restrictions Index (GRI) and the 13 questions that comprise the Social Hostilities Index (SHI). Although each question is weighted equally, many of the questions can contain gradations, allowing partial scores depending on intensity or severity. For example, on SHI Question No. 2 – “Was there mob violence related to religion?” – a country that had no religion-related mob violence would receive zero points, a country that had mob violence in which no deaths were reported would receive 1/2 point (0.50), and a country that had mob violence in which deaths were reported would receive a full point (1.00). The scores are presented for three years: the latest year, ending Dec. 31, 2016; the previous year, ending Dec. 31, 2015; and the baseline year, ending in mid-2007 (July 1, 2006 through June 30, 2007). Scores for the years ending in mid-2008, mid-2009, mid-2010 and December 2011 are not presented due to space constraints (Pew Research Center, 2018).

Appendix 1. Pew Research Centre's Questions on Government Restriction Index: Iran

GRI Q.5. Is public preaching by religious groups limited by any level of government?

Yes for some religious groups 0.5

GRI.Q.7. Is converting from one religion to another limited by any level of government?

Yes 1.0

GRI Q.8. Is religious literature of broadcasting limited by any level of government?

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.10. Is the wearing of religious symbols, such as head covering for women and facial fair for men, regulated by law or by any level of government?

No 0.0

GRI.Q.11. Was there harassment or intimidation of religious groups by any level of government?

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.14. Does the national government have an established organisation to regulate or manage religious affairs?

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.20. Do some religious groups receive government support or favours, such as funding, official recognition or special access?

Yes, Islamic religious education is required in public schools by the local government or the national government 0.87

GRI.Q.20.1. Does the country's constitution or basic law recognise a favoured religion or religions?

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.20.2. Do all religious groups receive the same level of government access and privileges?

One religious group has privileges or government access unavailable to other religious groups, and it is recognised by the national government as the official religion. Islam is recognised by the Iranian Constitution as the official religion (World Intellectual Property Organisation, 2019). Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.20.3. Does any level of government provide funds or other resources to religious groups?

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.20.3a. Does any level of government provide funds or other resources for religious education programs and/or religious schools?

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.20.3b. Does any level of government provide funds or other resources for religious activities other than education or property (e.g. Buildings, upkeep, repair or land)?

No 0.0

GRI.Q.20.3.c. Does any level of government provide funds or other resources for religious activities other than education or property?

No 0.0

GRI.Q.20.4. Is religious education required in public schools?

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.20.5. Does the national government deter in some way to religious authorities, texts, doctrines on legal issues?

Yes 1.0 (Pew Research Center, 2018)

Appendix 2. Pew Research Centers Questions on Government Restriction of Religion: Saudi Arabia

GRI Q.5. Is public preaching by religious groups limited by any level of government?

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.7. Is converting from one religion to another limited by any level of government?

Yes 1.0

GRI Q.8. Is religious literature of broadcasting limited by any level of government?

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.10. Is the wearing of religious symbols, such as head covering for women and facial fair for men, regulated by law or by any level of government?

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.11. Was there harassment or intimidation of religious groups by any level of government?

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.14. Does the national government have an established organisation to regulate or manage religious affairs?

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.20. Do some religious groups receive government support or favours, such as funding, official recognition or special access?

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.20.1. Does the country's constitution or basic law recognise a favoured religion or religions?

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.20.2. Do all religious groups receive the same level of government access and privileges?

One religious group has privileges or government access unavailable to other religious groups, and it is recognised by the national government as the official religion (Islam is recognised by the Saudi Arabian Constitution as the official religion (US Department of State, 2016)

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.20.3. Does any level of government provide funds or other resources to religious groups?

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.20.3a. Does any level of government provide funds or other resources for religious education programs and/or religious schools?

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.20.3b. Does any level of government provide funds or other resources for religious activities other than education or property (e.g. Buildings, upkeep, repair or land)?

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.20.3.c. Does any level of government provide funds or other resources for religious activities other than education or property?

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.20.4. Is religious education required in public schools?

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.20.5. Does the national government deter in some way to religious authorities, texts, doctrines on legal issues?

Yes 1.0 (Pew Research Center, 2018)

Appendix 3. Pew Research Centres Questions on Government Restrictions of Religion: UAE

GRI Q.5. Is public preaching by religious groups limited by any level of government?

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.7. Is converting from one religion to another limited by any level of government?

Yes 1.0

GRI Q.8. Is religious literature of broadcasting limited by any level of government?

Yes 1.0

GRI.q.10. Is the wearing of religious symbols, such as head covering for women and facial fair for men, regulated by law or by any level of government?

No 0.0

GRI.Q11. Was there harassment or intimidation of religious groups by any level of government?

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.14. Does the national government have an established organisation to regulate or manage religious affairs?

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.20. Do some religious groups receive government support or favours, such as funding, official recognition or special access?

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.20.1. Does the country's constitution or basic law recognise a favoured religion or religions?

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.20.2. Do all religious groups receive the same level of government access and privileges?

One religious group has privileges or government access unavailable to other religious groups, and it is recognised by the national government as the official religion (Islam is recognised by the United Arab Emirates Constitution as the official religion (US Department of State, 2019)).

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.20.3. Does any level of government provide funds or other resour ces to religious groups?

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.20.3a. Does any level of government provide funds or other resources for religious education programs and/or religious schools?

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.20.3b. Does any level of government provide funds or other resources for religious activities other than education or property (e.g. Buildings, upkeep, repair or land)?

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.20.3.c. Does any level of government provide funds or other resources for religious activities other than education or property?

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.20.4. Is religious education required in public schools?

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.20.5. Does the national government deter in some way to religious authorities, texts, doctrines on legal issues?

Yes 1.0 (Pew Research Center, 2018)

Appendix 4. Pew Research Centres Questions on Government Restrictions of Religion Qatar

GRI Q.5. Is public preaching by religious groups limited by any level of government?

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.7. Is converting from one religion to another limited by any level of government?

Yes 1.0

GRI Q.8. Is religious literature of broadcasting limited by any level of government?

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.10. Is the wearing of religious symbols, such as head covering for women and facial fair for men, regulated by law or by any level of government?

No 0.0

GRI.Q11. Was there harassment or intimidation of religious groups by any level of government?

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.14. Does the national government have an established organisation to regulate or manage religious affairs?

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.20. Do some religious groups receive government support or favours, such as funding, official recognition or special access?

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.20.1. Does the country's constitution or basic law recognise a favoured religion or religions?

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.20.2. Do all religious groups receive the same level of government access and privileges?

One religious group has privileges or government access unavailable to other religious groups, and it is recognised by the national government as the official religion (Islam is recognised by the Qatari Constitution as the official religion (World Intellectual Property Organisation, 2019)

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.20.3. Does any level of government provide funds or other resources to religious groups?

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.20.3a. Does any level of government provide funds or other resources for religious education programs and/or religious schools?

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.20.3b. Does any level of government provide funds or other resources for religious activities other than education or property (e.g. Buildings, upkeep, repair or land)?

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.20.3.c. Does any level of government provide funds or other resources for religious activities other than education or property?

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.20.4. Is religious education required in public schools?

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.20.5. Does the national government deter in some way to religious authorities, texts, doctrines on legal issues?

Yes 1.0 (Pew Research Center, 2018)

Appendix 5. Questions that relate to hostility towards religious out-groups: Iran

GRI.Q.12. Did the national government display hostility involving physical violence toward minority or non-approved religious groups?

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.18. Does any level of government ask religious groups to register for any reason, including to be eligible for benefits such as tax exemption?

Yes, and the process clearly discriminates against some religious groups 1.0

GRI.Q.19. Did any level of government use force towards religious groups that resulted in individuals being killed, physically abused, imprisoned, detained or displaced from their home, or having their personal or religious properties damaged or destroyed?

Yes, 1,001-9,999 cases of government force

Questions from Social Hostilities Index. These questions do not necessarily relate to state bias against religious groups, but it does indicate a level of discrimination. Discrimination at its core is attempts to preserve privileges for status of a particular identity group in society. If a state has a *real selectorate* that is based on dividends to an identity group, then it makes sense that this identity group will work to keep other lesser groups marginalised so as to preserve the benefits of their identity group's status with the regime - including greater safety from state persecution.

SHI.Q.1a. Did individuals face harassment or intimidation motivated by religious hatred or bias?

Yes, 1.0

SHI.Q.1c. Were there detentions or abductions motivated by religious hatred or bias?

No, 0.0

SHI.Q.8. Did religious groups themselves attempt to prevent other religious groups from being able to operate?

No, 0.0 (Pew Research Center, 2018)

Appendix 6. Questions that relate to hostility towards religious out-groups: Saudi Arabia

GRI.Q.12. Did the national government display hostility involving physical violence toward minority or non-approved religious groups?

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.18. Does any level of government ask religious groups to register for any reason, including to be eligible for benefits such as tax exemption?

No 0.0

GRI.Q.19. Did any level of government use force towards religious groups that resulted in individuals being killed, physically abused, imprisoned, detained or displaced from their home, or having their personal or religious properties damaged or destroyed?

Yes, 201-1.000 cases of government force

Questions from Social Hostilities Index. These questions do not necessarily relate to state bias against religious groups, but it does indicate a level of discrimination. Discrimination at its core is attempts to preserve privileges for status of a particular identity group in society. If a state has a *real selectorate* that is based on dividends to an identity group, then it makes sense that this identity group will work to keep other lesser groups marginalised so as to preserve the benefits of their identity group's status with the regime - including greater safety from state persecution.

SHI.Q.1a. Did individuals face harassment or intimidation motivated by religious hatred or bias?

Yes, 1.0

SHI.Q.1c. Were there detentions or abductions motivated by religious hatred or bias?

Yes, 1.0

SHI.Q.8. Did religious groups themselves attempt to prevent other religious groups from being able to operate? Yes, 1.0 (Pew Research Center, 2018)

Appendix 7. Questions that relate to hostility towards religious out-groups: UAE

GRI.Q.12. Did the national government display hostility involving physical violence toward minority or non-approved religious groups?

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.18. Does any level of government ask religious groups to register for any reason, including to be eligible for benefits such as tax exemption?

Yes, and the process clearly discriminates against some religious groups, 1.0

GRI.Q.19. Did any level of government use force towards religious groups that resulted in individuals being killed, physically abused, imprisoned, detained or displaced from their home, or having their personal or religious properties damaged or destroyed?

Yes, 0.4 10-200 cases of government force

Questions from Social Hostilities Index. These questions do not necessarily relate to state bias against religious groups, but it does indicate a level of discrimination. Discrimination at its core is attempts to preserve privileges for status of a particular identity group in society. If a state has a *real selectorate* that is based on dividends to an identity group, then it makes sense that this identity group will work to keep other lesser groups marginalised so as to preserve the benefits of their identity group's status with the regime - including greater safety from state persecution.

SHI.Q.1a. Did individuals face harassment or intimidation motivated by religious hatred or bias?

Yes, 1.0

SHI.Q.1c. Were there detentions or abductions motivated by religious hatred or bias?

No, 0.0

SHI.Q.8. Did religious groups themselves attempt to prevent other religious groups from being able to operate?

No, 0.0 (Pew Research Center, 2018)

Appendix 8. Questions that relate to hostility towards religious out-groups: Qatar

GRI.Q.12. Did the national government display hostility involving physical violence toward minority or non-approved religious groups?

Yes 1.0

GRI.Q.18. Does any level of government ask religious groups to register for any reason, including to be eligible for benefits such as tax exemption?

Yes, and the process clearly discriminates against some religious groups 1.0

GRI.Q.19. Did any level of government use force towards religious groups that resulted in individuals being killed, physically abused, imprisoned, detained or displaced from their home, or having their personal or religious properties damaged or destroyed?

No, 0.0

Questions from Social Hostilities Index. These questions do not necessarily relate to state bias against religious groups, but it does indicate a level of discrimination. Discrimination at its core is attempts to preserve privileges for status of a particular identity group in society. If a state has a *real selectorate* that is based on dividends to an i9dentity group, then it makes sense that this identity group will work to keep other lesser groups marginalised so as to preserve the benefits of their identity group's status with the regime - including greater safety from state persecution.

SHI.Q.1a. Did individuals face harassment or intimidation motivated by religious hatred or bias?

Yes, 1.0

SHI.Q.1c. Were there detentions or abductions motivated by religious hatred or bias?

No, 0.0

SHI.Q.8. *Did religious groups themselves attempt to prevent other religious groups from being able to operate?*

No, 0.0 (Pew Research Center, 2018)

Appendix 9. Citation List A

The following are the sources from which information was collated for the findings in Figures/Tables 5.8 – 5.24

(Aboufadel, 2016; Adesnick, 2018; AFP, 2015; Agence France-Presse, 2012; Agence France Presse, 2015; al-Salhy, 2013; Alsouria Net (Opposition Website), 2017; Al-Tamimi, 2013; al-Tamimi, 2013; al-Tamimi, 2013; Al-Tamimi A. J., The National Ideological Resistance in Syria: A 'Syrian Hezbollah' Brand, 2014; Al-Tamimi A. J., Interview with Sayyid Hashim Muhammad Ali: Commander of the National Ideological Resistance in Syria, 2014; Al-Tamimi A. J., Quwat al-Jalil: A Pro-Assad Palestinian Syrian Militia, 2015; Al-Tamimi A. J., Overview of some pro-Assad Militias, 2015; Al-Tamimi A. J., 2015; Al-Tamimi A. J., 2015; Al-Tamimi A. J., Jabhat al-Nusra and the Druze of Idlib Province, 2015; Al-Tamimi A. J., Shi'i Militias in Iraq and Syria, 2015; Al-Tamimi A. J., Liwa al-Imam al-Mahdi: A Syrian Hezbollah Formation, 2016; Al-Tamimi A. J., Syrian Hezbollah Militias of Nubl and Zahara', 2016; Al-Tamimi A. J., The Fifth Legion: A New Auxiliary Force, 2016; Al-Tamimi A. J., The Situation in al-Fu'a and Kafariya, 2016; Al-Tamimi A. J., The Dir' al-Watan Brand: Liwa Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi, 2016; Al-Tamimi A. J., Liwa Usud al-Hussein: A New Pro-Assad Militia in Latakia, 2016; Al-Tamimi A. J., Saraya al-Areen: An Alawite Militia in Latakia, 2016; Al-Tamimi A. J., Liwa al-Mukhtar al-Thiqfi: Syrian IRGC Militia, 2017; Al-Tamimi, The U.S.-Iranian confrontation on the Syria-Iraq Borders: Interview with an Iraqi Militia Official, 2017; Al-Tamimi A. J, 2017; Al-Tamimi A. J., 2017; Al-Tamimi A. J., Quwat Muqatili al-Asha'ir: Tribal Auxiliary Forces of the Military Intelligence, 2017; Al-Tamimi A. J., Liwa Al-Jabal: A New Loyalist Militia Unity Initiative In Suwayda', 2017; Al-Tamimi A. J., Quwat Dir' Al-Qalamoun: Shifting Militia Links, 2017; Al-Tamimi A. J., The Suwayda' Attacks: Interview, 2018; Al-Tamimi A. J., Fursan Al-Din: Interview, 2018; Al-Tamimi A. J., The Think-Tanks Bark and the IRGC Moves On, 2018; ARA News, 2017; Beshara & Roche, 2016; Bulbajer, 2019; Cafarella & Casagrande, 2015; Cher-Leparrain, 2017; Civil War Al Sham, 2016; Clingendael Netherlands Institute, 2019; Daher, 2018; Deeb, 2013; Fakih, 2013; Halevi, 2015; Heras & O'Leary, 2013; Issa, 2012; Jaffal, 2014; Jerusalem Post Staff, 2013; Jihad Intel: Middle East Forum, 2019; Jihadology: Clearinghouse for Jihadi Primary Source Material, 2019; Joscelyn, 2016; Khaddour, 2018; Koca, 2017; Lefevre & El-Yassir, 2013; Levitt & Zelin, 2013; Lund, 2013; Lund, Holy Warriors, 2012; Lund, The Other Syrian Peace Process, 2014; McDonald, 2017; Mahmood & Chulov, 2013; Mustafa, The Moderate Rebels: A Growing List

of Vetted Groups Fielding BGM-71 TOW Anti-Tank Guided Missiles, 2015; Nofal & Adely, 2017; O'Bagy, 2012; Oweis, The Military Topography of Syria's South, 2016; Paraszczuk, 2015; Porter, 2015; Reuters, 2012; Roberts, 2017; Roche & O'Farrell, 2016**;** Sadjadpour, 2013; Samaha, The Eagles of the Whirlwind, 2016; Sengupta, 2015; Sherlock, 2012; Smyth, Breaking Badr: The New Season: Confirmation of the Badr Organisation's Involvement in Syria, 2013; Symth, 2014; Smyth, How Iran is Building its Syrian Hezbollah, 2016; Smyth, Iran is Outpacing Assad for Control of Syria's Shia Militias, 2018; Smyth, 2019; Stanford University: Center for International Security and Cooperation , 2012-2019; Syria Direct, 2015; Syrian Social Nationalist Party, 2019; Syrian War Daily , 2018-2019; Terrosism Research and Analysis Consortium, 2019; Tomson, 2016; Tomson, Syrian Army captures first village from Turkish-backed rebels on the outskirts of al-Bab, 2016; Toumaj, 2016; Toumaj, Array of pro-Syrian government forces advances in Aleppo, 2016; Toumaj & Weiss, Iran tests the US in Southeastern Syria, 2017; Toumaj, IRGC-controlled Iraqi militia forms 'Golan Liberation Brigade', 2017; Trade Arabia, 2015; Washington Institute, 2015-2019; Waters, 2019; Weiss, 2016; Weiss, Caucasus Emirate in Syria fighting in Aleppo, 2016; Yadav, 2014; Yassir, 2014; Zahid, 2016).

Appendix 10. Description of Sources used for Syrian Militia Data

Source Type	**Language**	**Example Source: used in Data**	**Methodology**
Open Source Intelligence Platform	English for end-users, Arabic and English sources	*Bellingcat*: 1000+ citations including Foreign Policy Journal, Washington Post, The Guardian, New York Times, CNN *Roche, Beshara and O'Farrell: work for Bellingcat* *Hasan Mustafa: Material used by Bellingcat* *Bulbajer: Material used by Bellingcat*	Open source intelligence: google maps, social media, YouTube, internet geolocation, digital forensics
Academic Research Project	English for end-users, Arabic and English sources	*Mapping Militant Organisations*: Stanford University Project	Open source intelligence, academic research
Clearinghouse	English for end-users, translates Arabic sources	*Jihadology*: Founder academic researcher *Jihad Intel*: Operated by Middle East Forum *Terrorism Research and Analysis Consortium*	Open source intelligence, academic research
Academic Institution and Academic Researchers	English, may use Arabic sources	*Stanford University, Combating Terrorism Center at US Military Academy*	Academic research
News Media Outlet	English for end-users, most use Arabic sources	*Reuters, The Guardian, Middle East Eye, Telegraph, Independent, Syria Deeply, Agence Frenace-Presse, Al Araby (Arabic and English), Fair Observer, Mercury News*	Journalism: Interviews primary sources, secondary sources
Non-Western News Outlet	English/Arabic, Arabic sources	*Syrian Direct, Al Masdar News, Jerusalem Post, Daily Star, ARA News*	Journalism: Interviews primary sources, secondary sources

Think Tank	English	*Washington Institute, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Middle East Forum, The Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Middle East Institute, Terrorism Monitor: Jamestown Foundation, Institute for the Study of War, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, Foundation for the Defense of Democracies*	Intelligence Analysis, research
Political Foundation/Non-Governmental Organisation	English, may use Arabic sources	*Fair Observer*	Research, Interviews primary sources, secondary sources, open source intelligence
Aymen Al-Tamimi Doctoral Candidate Swansea, fellow at the Center for Global Policy, Middle East Institute	English/Arabic	*Aymen Al-Tamimi Blog, Rubin Center, Middle East Institute, Syria Comment (Joshua Landis)*	Open source intelligence: social media (communication with primary sources), primary source contacts in Middle East, YouTube,
Journal	English	*Foreign Policy, Middle East Journal,*	Research, analysis
Political Website	English/Arabic	*Syrian National Party, Chechans in Syria, Alsouria Net, Syrian Untold, Civil War al Sham*	Propaganda, news

Appendix 11. Secular–Fundamentalist Ratings for Case Studies

Separatist Secularism ←→ Religious Extremism

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

State	Secular-Fundamentalist Rating
Iran	9 (Iran has a higher rating than Saudi Arabia due to the direct rule of the clerics)
Saudi Arabia	8
United Arab Emirates	6
Qatar	6

Appendix 12. Citations List B

The following were the sources from which information was collated for the findings in Tables/Figures 6.7-6.20

(Abdul-Ahad, 2018; Aboudi, 2015; Al Bawaba, 2017; Al-Dhahab, 2016; Al-Dhahab, 2016; Al-Hamdani, 2019; Al Arabiya, 2017; Ali, 2016; Al Jazeera, 2019; Al-Zindawi, 2014; Al-Ashwal, 2018; Al-Yemeni, 2003; Amnesty International, 2019; ARA News, 2015; Ardemagni E. , Yemen's Military: From the Tribal Army to the Warlords, 2018; Ardemagni E. , 2018; Bayoumy & Stewart, 2016; Bayoumy & Stewart, 2016; Browne, 2018; Campbell, 2015; Caris, 2015; Critical Review, 2017; Counter Extremism Project, 2019; Dorsey J. , 2019; Elbagir, Abdelaziz, El-Gheit, & Smith-Spark, 2019; Emirates News Agency, 2018; Faizi & Mashal, 2017; Faizi & Mashal, Iran Sent them to Syria. Now Afghan Fighters are a Worry at Home, 2017; Forum, 2016; Gaub, 2015; Gulf News, 2018; Haaretz and Reuters, 2014; Haaretz & The Associated Press, 2017; Hearst, 2017; Horton, 2011; Human Rights Watch, 2017; Javaid, 2018; Jihad Intel: Middle East Forum, 2019; Kalin & Ghantous, 2019; Kube, 2016; Landry, 2015; Mello & Knights, 2016; MEMO Middle East Monitor, 2017; Middle East Eye, 2017; Mukhashaf, 2015; Partrick, The UAE's War Aims in Yemen, 2017; Patton, McDonnell, & Cataldi, 2016; Pestano, 2016; Rafi, 2015; Ramani, 2018; Reuters, 2015; (Reuters, 2016); Riedel, 2017; Riedel, Advancing Separatists could restore South Yemen, 2018; Roggio, 2010; Robertson & Almasmari, 2015; Roy, 2018; Saul, Hafezi, & Georgy, Exclusive: Iran Steps up Support for Houthis in Yemen's War - Sources, 2017; Saba, 2017; Sabbour, 2018; Salisbury, 2018; Segall, 2017; Shahine & Carey, 2014; Shi'ite News, 2018; Taleblu & Toumaj, 2016; Trew, 2019; Ulrichsen, 2018; US Army, 2010; Usher, 2014; Zimmerman, 2015).

Appendix 13. Description of Sources used for Yemeni Militia Data

Source Type	**Language**	**Example Source: used in Data**	**Methodology**
Clearinghouse	English for end-users, translates Arabic sources	*Jihad Intel*: Operated by Middle East Forum	Open source intelligence, academic research
News Media Outlet	English for end-users, most use Arabic sources	*Reuters, The Guardian, Middle East Eye, CNN, New York Times*	Journalism: Interviews primary sources, secondary sources
Non-Western News Outlet	English/Arabic, Arabic sources	*Al Bawaba, The National, Al Jazeera, Gulf News, Haaretz*	Journalism: Interviews primary sources, secondary sources
Think Tank	English	*Middle East Institute, Critical Threats, Wilson Center, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington Institute, Middle East Forum, European Union Institute for Security Studies, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs*	Intelligence Analysis, research
Political Foundation/Non-Governmental Organisation	English, may use Arabic sources	*Amnesty International, Counter Extremism Project,*	Research, Interviews primary sources, secondary sources, open source intelligence
Academic Institution and Academic Researchers	English, may use Arabic sources	*Georgetown University, Rice University, Combating Terrorism Center at the United States Military Academy in West Point, Project on Middle East Political Science, American University in Cairo*	Academic research