

Committee: Special Political and Decolonization Committee

Issue: Deescalating the crises caused by proxy warfare in the Middle East

Student Officer: Mouzouraki Nefeli

Position: Co-Chair

PERSONAL INTRODUCTION

Dear delegates,

My name is Nefeli Mouzouraki and I am currently attending the 11th grade at A' Arsakeio Tositseio Ekalis. At this year's ACGMUN session, I will have the honor to serve as the Co-Chair of the Special Political and Decolonization Committee. My MUN journey began two years ago and frankly, it has obtained a major role in my life ever since. This will be my first experience as a Student Officer and, thus, I am both excited and anxious. I will truly make my best effort to help you prepare yourselves adequately for our conference and make this an enjoyable, unforgettable experience, despite the current circumstances.

In the following study guide, you will find fundamental, crucial information regarding the proxy warfare in the Middle East. This, however, should only constitute the basis of your own research, which I expect that you conduct, in order to thoroughly understand the issue as well as your country's view upon it. Hopefully, you will find the study guide helpful and sufficient. If, in any way, you find yourself having questions or facing difficulties and need further clarifications, please don't hesitate to contact me at nefelimouzourakis@gmail.com.

Looking forward to meeting you all in March!

Best Regards,

Nefeli Mouzouraki

TOPIC INTRODUCTION

It is an undeniable fact that the Middle East has long been a region of constant antagonism, political instability and ongoing conflicts, mainly due to its resources and location. However, the pre-existing conditions of insecurity and uncertainty have worsened the last 40 years, by an intense feud between two countries, the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Although the aforementioned countries have not declared direct war to each other, they have provided varying degrees of support to opposing sides -a strategy that is known as a “proxy war”- in both nearby conflicts, such as the civil wars in Syria and Yemen, and disputes in other states far away from the region.

Over the years, the proxy warfare has branched in numerous levels with its root cause being influence in the Middle East and surrounding regions. The rivalry is also intensified due to religious antagonism between the two countries. So, with competitive interests in numerous sections -politics, economy, religion and ideologies- Iran and Saudi Arabia view each other as an enemy, which they must fight with great hostility.

However, they choose to do so indirectly, by joining and amplifying opposing sides in pre-existing militant disputes, and forcing innocent people, whose countries are corrupted and at war, to pay the price.



Figure 1: Geographic map of the Middle East [1]

As one can easily conclude from the above, the contribution of the Iran-Saudi Arabia proxy warfare to the violent and inhuman conditions that have been agonizing the Middle East for years now, is of great concern. In respect of the millions of civilians who have lost their lives, bid farewell to their beloved ones, their homes and possessions, measures to avert Iran’s and Saudi’s involvement in future disputes must be taken, so that peace, security and stability can prevail in the region.

DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

Proxy warfare

A war put in motion by two major powers that do not themselves become involved. Instead they fight each other indirectly, by providing their support to opposing sides and constantly re-enforcing the war.

Cold War

“A state of political hostility between countries characterized by threats, propaganda, and other measures short of open warfare. “The Cold War” is the state of hostility that existed between the Soviet bloc countries and the Western powers from 1945 to 1990.”¹

Shah

The official title that was given to any former monarch of Iran.

Coup

A sudden, often times violent, and illegal seizure of power from a government, either through its removal or displacement. Usually, it is conducted with the contribution of the army.

Clergyman

“A male member of the clergy; priest, minister, or religious leader, especially a Christian one.”²

Militia

A military force that consists of non-professional soldiers, who provide military service and engage in rebel or terrorist activities in opposition to a regular army.

Shia

One of the two main branches of Islam, followed by a part of the Muslim population, especially in Iran, that considers Ali, the fourth caliph, as Muhammad's first true successor.

¹ “Cold War: Definition of Cold War by Oxford Dictionary on Lexico.com Also Meaning of Cold War.” Lexico Dictionaries | English, Lexico Dictionaries, www.lexico.com/definition/cold_war.

² Clergyman: Definition of Clergyman by Oxford Dictionary on Lexico.com Also Meaning of Clergyman. www.lexico.com/en/definition/clergyman.

Sunni

“The larger of the two main branches of Islam, which differs from Shia in its understanding of the Sunna, its conception of religious leadership, and its acceptance of the first three caliphs.”³

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Saudi Arabia and Iran once shared good diplomatic ties and enjoyed a beneficent to both countries relation. However, in the course of events, their numerous differences and competitive ambitions came onto the surface. They developed an antagonistic policy towards one another and allied with opposing sides in a great number of conflicts. The wars in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Bahrain, Lebanon, Qatar, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nigeria, are just a few to name. International interferences and the underlying goal of this war -which in the long-term, is the pursuit of a regional hegemony- have been widely compared to those of the Cold War, between the United States and Russia, leading to this being the “Middle Eastern Cold War”. In order to understand how the tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia led to this crisis that does not only affect the region, but the whole international community, one needs to carefully study the events that took place the last forty years.⁴

Saudi Arabia was created in 1932, after World War I and the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Soon after, oil reserves were discovered within its borders, resulting to the country becoming a part of the oil industry and market. This has played a major role in Saudi Arabia’s constant increase of wealth. Due to its advanced economic status, Saudi Arabia drew the attention of the foreign countries, creating important alliances, such as the one with the United States.



Figure 2: Map of Saudi Arabia [2]

³ Sunni: Definition of Sunni by Oxford Dictionary on Lexico.com Also Meaning of Sunni. www.lexico.com/definition/sunni.

⁴ “Saudi Arabia - Clinician View.” *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/clinician/none/saudi-arabia.

At the same time, Iran, a neighboring country, was also emerging. Despite its rich oil resources and great potential of becoming a powerful state, constant foreign interventions were blocking its way to stability. Both Russia and the UK had invaded the area multiple times since the 18th century. However, the one country that seemed to intervene the most in Iran's political affairs was the United States. In 1953, the US removed Iran's Prime Minister Mohammed Mosaddegh, by secretly organizing a coup. In his place, they proposed Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi as Iran's monarch. Shah Pahlavi's pursuit was to reform Iran into a westernized country. However, his policies had severe consequences. He formed a greatly corrupted government and terrorized citizens with a police unit, the Savak. Iran's Muslims felt suppressed by the Shah's acts. Eventually, they were left with no choice but to fight back. And so, in 1978 the Iranian Revolution began.⁵



Figure 3: Map of Iran [3]

Iran's Islamic Revolution was led by Ayatollah Khomeini, a Muslim clergyman who fought against monarchies backed by western countries, and his supporters. He was an advocate of an Islamic government, which was led by the clergy. One year later, the Revolution had already succeeded its aim and managed to overthrow the Shah and his powerful regime.

Factors that contributed to the proxy warfare

The factors that led to the intense rivalry between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia can be condensed in three key points: political antagonism, economic benefits and religious differences.

Political

What triggered the first sign of feud between the two countries, was the desire of the Shah of Iran to receive appreciation, respect and praise by his people, just as Saudi's monarch did by his own. However, that was hardly possible, since, as mentioned before, the hatred the Shah received from its people was mainly

⁵ "Iran - Traveler View." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/traveler/none/iran.

emanating from his own violent actions, which caused intense public reactions causing the Iranian Revolution.

Iran’s Islamic Revolution radically obtained massive dimensions and prompted numerous reactions all over the world, especially in Saudi Arabia. Its government felt threatened, as they believed that Ayatollah Khomeini and the movement he had started, would inspire their own population to protest against them. Experiencing fear and insecurity, the tensions between the two states escalated dramatically and reached its peak.

The Iranian Revolution’s aftermath obtained a significant role in the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, particularly given the immediate inauguration that Ayatollah Khomeini, a rebellious figure, would have in a neighboring state and the rivalry that would soon occur between the two most dominant Islamic powers.

After 1979, Saudi Arabia’s expectations came to reality. Iran started providing its support to other Muslim populations, mostly Shia, in their effort to overthrow governments in other countries including Afghanistan, Iraq and, finally, Saudi Arabia. This action encouraged Saudi Arabia, within other countries, to reinforce its fight against Iran. It strengthened its alliance with the US and formed the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), an alliance between gulf monarchies. Thus, once the necessary precautions were taken, the region was transformed into a field waiting for war.

Economic

The Middle East obtains a catalytic role in the global oil industry, ever since the early 20th century, and has become one of the most prosperous regions in the world. Iran and Saudi Arabia are contributing greatly in the economic growth of the area, advancing their domestic income as well. In order to fully understand the key role of natural resources for the Saudi-Iran rivalry, one needs to delve into the international context, at the very center of which, is the United States.⁶

Saudi vs Iranian oil production

Oil production (thousands of barrels per day)



Figure 4: Graph showing the Saudi and Iranian oil production [4]

Before the Iranian Revolution, both Saudi Arabia and Iran shared close ties with the United States. After 1945, the United States successfully tried to obtain influence on Middle Eastern oil industry and domestic politics, leading to the establishment of close alliances with both Iran and Saudi Arabia. Those political

⁶ Sukru Cildir PhD Candidate. “How Saudi-Iranian Oil Rivalry Has Been Shaped by American Power.” *The Conversation*, 25 Jan. 2021, www.theconversation.com/how-saudi-iranian-oil-rivalry-has-been-shaped-by-american-power-124123.

relations benefited the latter two states economically as well as politically. Due to these alliances, the United States offered them protection from foreign attacks, while it imposed to their political enemies several types of sanctions or limiting measures.

The political stability of the region was threatened in 1979 as the aforementioned relations faced great obstacles. The Islamic revolution was not opposed just to the Pahlavi regime, but also to its Western civilization and its ideologies. Ever since the commencement of the movement, and even more after its aims were accomplished and the Shah was overthrown, Iran adopted a rebellious, “anti-western policy”. It withdrew from its beneficial position as an ally of the United States, and was internationally isolated. During the years that followed, its oil industry was subjected to a range of embargoes and financial sanctions by the United States. As a result, Iranian oil productions dropped, while Saudi’s increased dramatically. This advantage of Saudi really discommoded Iran, since it actuates a threat to the latter’s vision.

Religious

Except from the aforementioned factors, the feud also extends to a religious aspect as well. Up until 1979, the Saudis were considered to be the leaders of the Muslim world, since two of the holiest sites of Islam, Mecca and Medina, are within their borders. However, when Khomeini obtained power in Iran, he claimed that his revolution had made Iran the legitimate Muslim state. Moreover, the rivalry was intensified by another religious divide: Saudi Arabia’s population is mostly Sunni Muslims, while Iran’s majority is Shia Muslims.

Although the Shia-Sunni split has not acted as a cause of the rivalry, it surely is a crucial difference between the two ethnicities. In several places around the world, Shia and Sunni Muslims co-exist peacefully, without any signs of hatred or feud. Their religious beliefs are not entirely opposite as in reality, the reason that led to their conflict doesn’t even concern religion: it’s all about power.

At first all Muslims were united under the leadership of the prophet Muhammad. However, when Muhammad died, they split into two groups: the Shias, who believed that it would be best if the leadership remained in the prophet’s family and the Sunnis, who thought it was best for Muhammad’s successor to be chosen by the Muslim community by vote.

Conflict in Iraq

In September 1980, Iraq, led by the dictator Saddam Hussein, made an invasion in Iran, aiming to end the Iranian Revolution, gain more power and even take advantage of Iran’s natural resources. Despite his efforts, Hussein failed to accomplish his aim, as the attack was proven ineffective and there was an overwhelming number

of Iraqi casualties. This turn of events prompted the Saudis to come to Iraq's rescue, by providing weapons, financial and logistical aid. The initial aim behind Saudi Arabia's aid, was for Iraq to function as a wall between Iran and its own land.

With Saudi Arabia as its ally, Iraq managed to fight against Iran until 1988, until approximately a million citizens had died. Iranians strongly blamed the Saudis for the devastating consequences of the conflict, escalating once again the tensions between the two states.

Fifteen years later, Iraq became a battlefield of Iran' and Saudi's conflict once again. In 2003 the United States invaded Iraq overthrowing its dictator Saddam Hussein. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia perceived this event as negative for their countries' agendas, since Iraq had been acting as a "protective wall", or else a "buffer", between them. After its invasion, the United States faced great difficulty in replacing Hussein, and being unable to finish what it had just started, it acted without conscience. Its arbitrage led to Iraq becoming a failed state, while a civil war began in the area. As the government was not organized to protect itself from foreign interventions, Sunni and Shia militias gained power in the region, committing all kinds of crimes without facing any consequences. The majority of those militias were Islamic extremist groups from neighboring states, taking advantage of Iraq's instability to gain more power.

These militias were potentially endorsed by the Saudis and Iranians. Saudi provided its assistance to the Sunni militias, by supplying them with weapons and financial aid, while Iran, supported the Shia extremist groups. As a result, Iraq was all of a sudden the battleground of the Middle Eastern Cold War.

Conflict in Syria

A similar situation with reversed roles prevails in Syria. There, the Iranian military is helping local militia groups, some of which are extremists and support the dictator Bashar al-Assad, to fight against Sunni rebel groups, backed by Saudi Arabia.

Conflict in Yemen

The conflict in Yemen had forced the two countries to move their rivalry a step further: to make use of their own militaries. Saudi's military was helping the central government, which is fighting the Houthis, a rebel group backed by Iran.

MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED

United States

As evident from all the above mentioned, the United States has become a majorly involved country in the Saudi Arabia-Iran conflict. Its 70-year alliance with Saudi Arabia roots back to 1933, when Saudi granted the American company Standard exclusive rights, that included research for oil in the country's eastern province. The US-Saudi alliance deepened as the US's direct role in the Saudi oil sector declined over the time as both countries perceived the Soviet influence in the region as a dominant threat of that time. Ever since, the US has played a crucial role in Saudi's affairs. In 2017 the U.S. President Donald Trump signed a \$110B arms deal with Saudi Arabia, which included close cooperation with the Saudi Arabian military. Moreover, it is estimated that in Yemen, more than 100,000 civilians were killed by American weapons.

Turkey

Turkey's involvement in this conflict can be summarized in exploiting the difficulties of each country for its own benefit, since its president, Erdogan, hopes to reinstate neo-Ottomanism. Turkey has always perceived Iran's expansive disposition as a threat and has also engaged itself in a proxy war with it, due to their quarrel over core interests in Iraq and Syria. On the other hand, Turkey's views on Saudi Arabia's influence are of the same competitive nature. Their relationship fluctuates between antagonism and cooperation. Although Russia forces Turkey and Saudi Arabia to have a level of compromise, mutual distrust has always been present. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia fear Turkey's further involvement in their dispute.

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)

The Gulf Cooperation Council is a political and economic alliance of six Middle Eastern monarchies: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain and Oman. Its official goals are to promote economic growth and ensure regional security -or in other words, to contain Iran from becoming a regional hegemony. Iran's and Saudi Arabia's involvement in Yemen's conflict however, prompted GCC members to start questioning whether they are powerful enough to fully achieve their goal. Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran has launched ideological, strategic and security challenges against Kuwait, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. In 2003, relations between Iran and the aforementioned Gulf states worsened significantly due to the war in Iraq. Now, almost forty years after the Islamic Revolution, Iran's quest for influence faces more obstacles in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait than elsewhere in the Middle East.

European Union (EU)

Although the majority of European countries, including the European Union, have largely remained neutral, numerous European nations, such as Germany and Lithuania view Iran in a rather antagonistic perspective. The interest of Europe lies in advocating a regional dialogue between Iran and the Gulf monarchies, an approach that could potentially lead to lasting peace and stability. The European Union could support this process by reinforcing its own security position and confronting the geopolitical tensions that have risen the last years, directly at the very center of the regional rivalries.

Russia

Russia’s involvement in the proxy war in the Middle East hasn’t been limited. It firstly provided its support to the Iranian forces in Syria, but years later, it gradually started to break away from Iran, due to the latter’s desire for dominance in the Middle East. Thus, Russia’s ties with Saudi Arabia became increasingly close since the 2010s, despite their numerous differences, and their cooperation grew significantly.

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

Date	Description of event
July 28, 1914 – November 11, 1918	World War I
1922	Fall of Ottoman Empire
September 23, 1932	Creation of Saudi Arabia
1948-1949	Iranian Revolution, Iranian leader forced to resign
1953	Iran’s PM, Mohammed Mosaddegh, is removed
January 1978 – February 1979	Iranian Revolution, Iranian leader forced to resign
September 1980	Iraq invades Iran
March 20, 2003 – May 1, 2003	The US invades Iraq and overthrows its dictator, Saddam Hussein
March 15, 2011 – present	Syria’s Civil War

2011	A wave of anti-monarchy and pro-democracy protests spread rapidly through the Middle Eastern world.
March 22, 2015 – present	Yemen’s Civil War started
2016	Attack on Saudi embassy in Tehran, Iran’s Capital
2017	U.S. President Donald Trump signs a \$110B arms deal with Saudi Arabia

RELEVANT RESOLUTIONS, TREATIES AND EVENTS

Geneva Conventions of 1949

The Geneva Conventions are four treaties, with three additional protocols. “They enumerate certain rules, aiming to protect citizens that are not serving in the military -civilians, aid workers, medics- and others that are forced to abstain from fighting -wounded or sick, prisoners of war.”⁷ Iran and Saudi Arabia have both been accused of allegedly choosing to overlook some of the rules enlisted in the Geneva Conventions, and to jeopardize even a greater number of human lives. An example would be Iran’s actions against Iraq. They mostly violate the Third Geneva Convention, according to which delegates of the International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC), a humanitarian organization, shall be allowed to visit camps, where prisoners of war are being held and even interview the prisoners with no other witnesses present. Iran has been denying to comply with the aforementioned rule, and consequently, numerous places of internment have yet to be revealed and ICRC delegates have yet to evaluate the conditions to which a significant number of prisoners are exposed⁸.

Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) of 2003

The Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) is an international treaty adopted in 2003 by the General Assembly. It enumerates criteria for international trades of weapons and aims to lessen human suffering by decreasing the number of illicitly traded or irresponsibly transferred arms, as well as to encourage transparency of conventional weapons trades.⁹ Despite ATT’s approval by the General Assembly, both Iran and Saudi Arabia,

⁷ “The Geneva Conventions of 1949 and Their Additional Protocols.” International Committee of the Red Cross, 30 Nov. 2020, www.icrc.org/en/document/geneva-conventions-1949-additional-protocols.

⁸ Marcus, Jonathan. “Why Saudi Arabia and Iran Are Bitter Rivals.” BBC News, BBC, 16 Sept. 2019, www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42008809

⁹ “Fact Sheets & Briefs.” The Arms Trade Treaty At a Glance | Arms Control Association, www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/arms_trade_treaty.

as well as their allies, have disregarded its terms, and re-enforced conflicts by illicitly supplying the countries involved with weapons.

Hormuz Peace Endeavor (HOPE) of 2019

The Hormuz Peace Endeavor (HOPE) is a plan of action proposed at the 2019 U.N. General Assembly by the Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani. HOPE is based on the principle that all regional powers hold responsibility for regional peace, stability and prosperity and seeks to initiate dialogue concerning security and cooperation issues between Gulf monarchies and Iran. Oman, Qatar, Kuwait and the UAE have shown interest in similar proposals regarding regional dialogue. However, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain still lack diplomatic will to support a proposition presented by Iran.¹⁰

PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE THE ISSUE

The UN's Security Council has tried multiple times to impose sanctions to Middle Eastern countries, who violate the laws of armed conflict, or even stop third parties from supplying the perpetrators with weapons, through measures such as embargoes. However, many of the SC's attempts have been blocked by the P5 and their veto power and thus failed.

Iran has proposed several multilateral regional security pacts to de-escalate tensions, which Saudi Arabia has ignored, since it demands to see a change in Iran's antagonistic actions first, but Iran does not intend to alter its regional behavior.

Organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, in cooperation with local organizations, have managed to trace conflict armaments that were used in the conflict in Yemen. This prompted the United Kingdom to demand a court order, which would mandate a review of any decision to sell weapons to the parties involved in the conflict. However, this is the largest action any organization has ever achieved. Besides, NGOs do not have the necessary resources or the political influence to be expected to take the risk and succeed in trying to solve every conflict in the Middle East.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

One of the UN's primary responsibilities, also included in the Sustainable Development Goals, is to secure international peace and security. However, its progress in the Middle East has been facing great obstacles since the region has been the center of war and violence. In order to draw its way to peace and stability, drastic and effective measures must be taken so that the conflicts in the region gradually start

¹⁰ Marcus, Jonathan. "Why Saudi Arabia and Iran Are Bitter Rivals." *BBC News*, BBC, 16 Sept. 2019, www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42008809.

to de-escalate and all civilians affected by the crises find shelter or a safe and legal way to flee their countries.

Regional Dialogue

The U.N. should act as a moderator of negotiations and diplomatic dialogues, between the countries involved in the conflict. It is critical that The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and The Islamic Republic of Iran vindicate their own rights and interests peacefully, in a manner that will not undermine or endanger human lives, and produce an equally beneficial to both countries outcome. Therefore, regional dialogue in the pursuit of propitiation of the tensions, and the beginning of a long-term, peaceful and stable situation in the Middle East, should be encouraged.

Assistance of post-conflict countries in the Middle East

A crucial measure that would significantly prevent the emergence of new conflicts, and thus the creation of new opportunities for Saudi Arabia and Iran to fight against one other, is for the U.N. to carefully monitor and assist post-conflict countries in the region. The prevention of a power vacuum, a smooth transition to power and a legal configuration of an organized government has to be ensured. This can only be achieved if all democratic processes, including elections, are held lawfully and religious militias, extremist groups or dictators are incapable of seizing power and causing further human suffering.

Prevention of illicit weapons

A primary move would be the adoption of measures aiming to prevent weapon deals, weapons supply by third parties and especially illegal weapon deliveries to Islamic extremist groups that oftentimes act as proxies for Iran and Saudi Arabia. The U.N. Register of Conventional Arms (UNROCA) is a voluntary, annual-reporting mechanism established by the U.N., through which countries can share information on weapons transfers, and investigate possible -legal and illegal- sources and use of weapons. Its contribution to the Middle Eastern crisis until now has not been as significant: states constantly submit incomplete or inaccurate information, or even fail to submit altogether. It is crucial that UNROCA is upgraded in every way possible, so that its efficiency can improve as well.

Humanitarian Aid

Finally, a safe place for civilians should exist in other countries as well. Member states in cooperation with humanitarian organizations or any other relevant partner, should be urged to uphold refugee camps and settlements, where asylum seekers, refugees and other people of concern would receive the appropriate assistance and aftercare. These facilities should also include infiltration of armed elements, so that any such armed elements could be identified and separated from the refugee populations.

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