

**A STUDY OF WEST ASIA THROUGH THE PRISM OF SHIA-SUNNI
CONFLICT: IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA**

**A Dissertation submitted to the Panjab University, Chandigarh in partial
fulfilment of the requirement for the award of Master of Philosophy in
Social Sciences**

By

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CERTIFICATE

I have the pleasure to certify that Brig Rakesh Manocha, SM, VSM has pursued his research work and prepared the present dissertation titled '**A Study of West Asia through the Prism of Shia-Sunni Conflict: Implications for India**' under my guidance and supervision. The dissertation is the result of his own research and to the best of my knowledge, no part of it has earlier comprised any other monograph, dissertation or book. This is being submitted to the Panjab University, Chandigarh, in partial fulfilment of award of **Master of Philosophy in Social Sciences** based on curriculum of **Advance Professional Programme in Public Administration (APPPA)** at **Indian Institute of Public Administration (IIPA)**, New Delhi.

I recommend that the dissertation of **Brig Rakesh Manocha, SM, VSM** is worthy of consideration for the award of **M.Phil degree of Panjab University, Chandigarh.**

Dr Sachin Chowdhry
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A Study of West Asia through the Prism of Shia-Sunni Conflict:

Implications for India

CHAPTER-I

“Just as Islam literally means peace, none of the 99 names of Allah mean violence. Similarly, every religion in the world stands for peace, compassion & brotherhood...India has always embraced and found it easy to embrace pluralism since it is embedded in the oldest Sanskrit religious text “The Rig Veda” and I quote “एकं सद्विप्रा बहुधा वदन्ति”, which means “God is One but learned men describe Him in many ways”

*Ms Sushma Swaraj, Minister of External Affairs, Govt of India
while addressing delegates at OIC Summit on 01 Mar 2019*

1.1 Introduction

1.1.1 Historical Background

The modern Middle East which lies at the juncture of Eurasia and Africa and

Figure 1.1: Map of Middle East



Source: CIA World Fact Book

of the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean, is the birthplace and spiritual centre of major religions of Islam, Judaism and Christianity. The history of the

region is therefore steeped in politics of religion and throughout its history the Middle East has been a major centre of world affairs; a strategically, economically, politically, culturally, and religiously sensitive area. The world powers have, over the years, always endeavoured to have a say in the politics of the region, which has specially become more pronounced post discovery of oil in the region.

Islam is a monotheistic, Abrahamic religion which originated with the teachings of the Islamic Prophet Muhammad, in the 7th century. Today, there are approx 1.8 billion (Pew Research Center, Apr 2017) Muslims worldwide, making Islam the second-largest religion in the world, after Christianity. Alongside the growth of Islam, the major political / religious development within Islam has been the sectarian split between Sunni and Shia Muslims. This had its roots in a dispute over the succession of the Caliphate. Sunni Muslims believed the Caliphate was elective, and any member of the Prophet's tribe, Quraysh, might serve as one. Shia, on the other hand, believed the Caliphate should be hereditary in the line of the Prophet, and thus all the Caliphs, with the exception of Ali, were usurpers. However, the Sunni sect emerged as triumphant in most of the Muslim world and thus most modern Islamic political movements / dispensations (with the exception of Iran) are founded in Sunni thought. Shiaism thus remains an anathema within Islam sometimes shunned and sometimes feared (Akbar, 2002).

Iran occupies a special place in the Middle East and the Islamic world being the largest Shia dominated country. Its linkages run deep into history as

analysed by *Vali Nasr* in his book “*The Shia Revival*”. He traces Iran’s history to Shahrbanou, daughter of the last Sassanid king of Persia Yazdgerd II and wife of Imam Husayn – the fourth Imam¹. Iran with its abundant land mass, geo-strategic location and abundant natural resources has all the ingredients to be a key player in the Middle East region and the Islamic world. As analysed by *Dr George Friedman* in his article “*The Geopolitics of Iran*” in Stratfor (16 Dec 2011), Iran geographical location provides it the strength to dominate the area as also ensures its security against attack by its enemies. However, it has historically remained isolated being a Shia nation and is viewed as a Persian power and its role in the Arab world has been restricted. Post the 1979 Revolution and the American Embassy Crisis² this isolation has been greatly exacerbated, partly fuelled by American antipathy towards Iran and conveniently encouraged by Saudi Arabia. *Vali Nasr* (2006, p. 20) also argues that Sunni-Shia relations can be described as “a great war of competing theologies and conceptions of sacred history”. He provides a historical perspective of the divide with focus on Persian Iran shift from Sunnism to Shiasm in his seminal work “*The Shia Revival*”.

¹ *Nasr Vali* ,*The Shia Revival*, Chapter 2- “*The Making of Shia Politics*” , *W W Norton & Company Inc* 2006

² *Refers to the diplomatic standoff between Iran and USA when 52 American diplomats and civilians were held hostage for 444 days from 04 Nov 1979 to 20 Jan 1981 after a group of Iranian students who supported the Iranian Revolution took over the USA embassy in Tehran*

1.1.2 USA Policy in Middle East

The foundation for American policy in the Middle East was laid post the end of World War II by President Truman. While the initial period saw the unfolding of contours of the “Great Game” and reflected the Cold War sentiments, the years also saw America change its allies and coalition as the situation demanded. However, over the years American policies in the region have been in sync with its two all-weather allies i.e. Saudi Arabia and Israel. That the Americans could balance out two such significantly divergent players is a testimony to their diplomatic skills.

Post Sep 2001 attacks³, the American policy has undergone significant change more than once. The initial years saw the policy of democratisation of the area being pursued even at the cost of isolating its key ally - Saudi Arabia. However, the quagmire of Iraq and Afghanistan forced a review and post 2006, Saudi Arabia again returned as a key figure guiding the American policy in the region. Iran has been a “*persona non grata*” for USA, since 1979, and has always been at the receiving end of American wrath either militarily (Iran-Iraq war) or economically (sanctions). This isolation of Iran has suited and has been encouraged by the Sunni dominated Arab world led by Saudi Arabia.

³ Refers to the 11 Sep 2001 incidents wherein four coordinated terrorist strikes were carried out by Al-Qaeda on US Soil. Four passenger aircrafts were hijacked by 19 terrorists of which three were crashed into Twin Towers of World Trade Centre, New York, and the Pentagon building in Arlington County Virginia. A fourth aircraft initially headed for Washington DC crashed based on heroic action of the passengers onboard. A total of 2,996 people were killed and the incidents are colloquially referred to as September 11 or 9/11 attacks.

Vali Nasr further analyses in “*The Rise of Iran*” (2006 Chapter 8), the American invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of Saddam’s Baathists, and how it inadvertently released the pressure on the 60% Shia population of Iraq. The linkages were sought to be exploited by neighbouring Iran. This resulted in providing Iran a foothold in the Arab world and increasing its influence in the area, thus bringing it into conflict with the Sunni dominated Arab World. *Dr Kayhan Barzegar* has also argued that historical views, strategic and state oriented issues; all have had deep impact on the Iranian foreign policy in post Iraq’s invasion era. In the words of the author, “*By shifting Iraq to a friendly state, Iran desires to discard the traditional designation of Iraq as Iran’s counter balance in the Persian Gulf and to turn the new relations into a “balance of interests.”*” (Barzegar, 2008)

The range of literature which emerges is immense especially commentaries which explore history of Islam and rise of Shia-Sunni rift. Similarly a large number of authors have explored the other two aspects of this study viz; effect of USA policies on Middle East and Impact of above developments on India. In his book *Empire of the Mind: A History of Iran*, *Axworthy Michael* covers the history of Iran from the advent of Zoroastrianism to the 1979 revolution. He brilliantly analyses the history from a perspective of artistic heritage as also volatile political history. The author clearly brings out the dichotomous vision with which Iran and Persia (both same countries) are viewed as Axis of Evil and Cradle of Civilisation in the western world in the same breath. Another author *Majd Hooman* in his work in 2010, *The Ayatollahs’ Democracy: An Iranian Challenge* offers a deep analytic look at the politics of the Islamic Republic of

Iran and the varying interpretations of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in the 21st century. The book also provides inputs on linkages of Iranian government with Hamas and Hezbollah but does not look at the greater Shia-Sunni divide and its repercussions.

1.1.3 **Significance of the Region for India**

India has had historical relations with all countries of Middle East. As home to nearly 190 million Muslim population (Pew Research Center, Apr 2017), it cannot be but isolated from the goings in Middle East. Post-independence, India having perused the policy of non-alignment brought itself into opposing corner with Middle East countries, which were staunchly anti-communist. The partition also saw a natural gravitating of Middle East bloc towards Pakistan, thus rendering India's relation with Middle East always through the prism of Pakistan, even though India was a most vocal supporter of Palestine and pan Arabian nationalism cause.

Post the cold war and economic crisis of 1990, India shed its ideological baggage to a large extent and developed relations on national interest oriented pragmatism. India ceased viewing West Asia through the prism of its issues with Pakistan, discontinued the use of strong rhetoric denouncing other countries' policies, and abandoned defensive, reactive policy approaches. India also started consciously courting the United States, now the lone global superpower. Importantly, India began to reach out to all West Asian countries without picking and choosing between them, and on the basis of mutual benefit (Gupta, 2017).

As analysed by various authors in collection “*West Asia in Transition*” edited by *Sanjay Singh*, 1992 saw two major policy shifts in that India first established formal relations with Israel against strong domestic pressures. Simultaneously it also reached out to Iran. A growing convergence of Indian and Iranian strategic interests in Afghanistan during the 1990’s also laid the foundation for a broad-based and mutually advantageous bilateral relationship in the future, while common threats of insurgency and technological coordination upped the India-Israel relations in ensuing decades.

Over the new millennium, the Middle East countries have become India’s preeminent oil and gas supplier and leading trade partners. Indians are the largest expatriate group in each of the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. 31,04,586⁴ Indians live and work in UAE constituting the largest number of Indian passport holders abroad, followed by 28,14,568 in the Saudi Arabia⁵.

No major power has the kind of people-to-people socio-cultural compatibility and socio-economic interdependence with countries of the Middle East, in particular with GCC countries that India has. Except for continuing Organisation of Islamic Countries activism relating to Kashmir in particular, there are no bilaterally contentious political issues between India and the GCC countries. As India grows and rises towards its quest for economic and regional

⁴ *Population of Overseas Indians (Compiled in December, 2018)*. Retrieved from [mea.gov.in: http://mea.gov.in/images/attach/NRIs-and-PIOs_1.pdf](http://mea.gov.in/images/attach/NRIs-and-PIOs_1.pdf)

⁵ *ibid*

power, a stable Middle East cannot but be a driver for both for its economic as well as social stability.

Towards analysing the implications for India a number of authors have written on the subject. *Meena Singh Roy* in her two works *International and Regional Security Dynamics: Indian and Iranian Perspectives (2009)* and *Emerging Trends in West Asia: Regional and Global Implications (2014)* has covered the entire spectrum of the India-Iran relations covering cooperative endeavours in energy sector to common concerns in Afghanistan, Pakistan and developments in Central and West Asia. The author has also explored options for India to enhance existing relations with the West Asian region in a much more meaningful manner. Similarly *Prasanta Kumar Pradhan* has edited the work *Geopolitical Shifts in West Asia: Trends and Implications in 2018*. Critical issues such as geopolitics, regional security, sectarianism, extremism, energy security and India's relationship with the region have been discussed by the scholars in this edited volume. In light of the evolving geopolitical and security situation in the region, this book presents opinions and analyses of scholars from different parts of the world on the evolving political, security and strategic dimensions of the turmoil in West Asia and needs to be analysed during course of this study.

1.2 **Critical Issues**

Several issues emerge from the above mentioned developments. From this study's point of view, the following critical issues are significant:-

- Shiaism remains an anathema within Islam sometimes shunned and sometimes feared. Iran occupies a special place in the Islamic world being the largest Shia dominated country. Its abundant land mass, geo-strategic location on the mouth of Gulf of Aden and surplus natural resource (Oil and Natural Gas) provides it with all ingredients to be a key player in the region and the Islamic world. It however remains isolated in the Islamic World being a Shia nation. As a result Iran runs its own strategic agenda to create its comfort zone in a Sunni dominated Islamic world. The Saudis on the hand, as the perceived custodian of Islam, always feared a Shia Revival and its capability of dividing the entire Muslim world and acting as a threat to its supremacy.
- The term ‘Shia Crescent’ was thus first coined by King Abdullah of Jordan in 2004, post the American invasion of Iraq and subsequent ‘democratisation’ and rise of a majority Shia country in the Arab world. It highlights this nexus between Iran, the new Shia dominated Iraq, the Alawite-ruled Syria, Lebanon's Hezbollah, and the Syrian branch of the Hamas. It was used to describe the potential for cooperation among these areas in Middle Eastern politics and the revolutionary nature of Islamic Revolution of 1979 was used to paint a picture of the coalition being radical in nature. Opponents of the theory, however feel that this was just an attempt by the Saudi led Arab world to strangulate a rising Iran by presenting to the world a dangerous scenario of a revolutionary Islam (Haji-Yousefi, 2009). Either way the American Global War on Terror in specific invasion of Iraq gave new legitimacy to the Iran-Iraq connection in

particular and the “Shia Revival” in general. The rise of Shia Iran thus added a new dimension to US policy in Arab world which post 1979 had been biased in its dealings with the Sunni dominated Arab world.

- India is intrinsically linked to Middle East both on account of its growing economic needs as also historical social construct. Today it has good relations with Sunni dominated Saudi Arabia led coalition on account of its trade and human resource. Simultaneously it courts Iran for its reliable oil supplies as also a strategic partnership to gain access to Central Asian Region and Afghanistan.
- The effect of Shia-Sunni divide has had its repercussions on India on regular basis through the ages. In the nineteenth century Awadh emerged as India’s preeminent seat of Shia culture, art and religious study. Lucknow also emerged as a showcase of Shia art and architecture and some feel is second only to Isfahan in Iran in that respect. To India’s Sunni Muslim, the Shia ascendancy was a result of Britain’s growing commercial and political influence. Radicalisation of Sunni was therefore a result which was to emerge as manifested most prominently in teachings of Sayyid Ahmed of Rae Bareli (d.1831), best known for his jihad against British. He pursued a more radical and agenda which required outright rejection of Shiaism as part of belief to restore Islam to its original glory. (Nasr, 2006). *Vali Nasr* further analyses the initial rise of Sunni extremism in Pakistan as a counter to rise of Shia’s sentiments in the world, post the Iranian revolution of 1979. That it was to manifest itself in Kashmir and Afghanistan is part of the larger expanding agenda. Closer to modern times in August 2013, while

carrying oil in the Persian Gulf, Iran detained India's largest ocean liner Shipping Corporation (SCI)'s vessel MT Dosh Shanti carrying crude oil from Iraq. Iran was resolute, and insisted the detention of the tanker was "a technical and non-political issue" even as it continued to have good relation with India⁶. India thus has its agenda cut out, even as it rides the proverbial twin boats of Shia-Sunni schism in Middle East. Any future developments in the Middle East will thus have deep impact on both foreign policy and domestic front.

1.3 **Rationale / Justification**

Middle East region draws its strategic significance from its economic (oil) power as also the social construct (birthplace of three main monotheistic religions of the world). Its history is seeped in conflict; both inter (Crusades) and intra religion (Shia-Sunni divide). As home to many historical and religious sites of second largest religion in the world, it has always been the magnet which has pulled the Muslim population around the world into its politics.

India with the third largest Muslim population in the world cannot but be affected by the going on in the Middle East on its domestic social front. Coupled with its growing economic might and subsequent dependence on the region for oil imports, the cycle of effect of Middle East politics on India is more or less complete. It is therefore important to undertake a study which aims

⁶ Accessed at <https://www.thehindu.com/business/Industry/indian-tanker-detained-after-oil-spill-alarm-says-iran/article5025621.ece> on 27 Oct 2018

to examine a facet of this whole conundrum viz; the Shia-Sunni split in the religion, its history and effect of USA policies on same and its effect on India.

1.4 **Research Objectives**

The objectives of the study are

- (i) To examine effect of USA policy between 2001-2015 in West Asia with focus on Shia–Sunni fault lines.
- (ii) To assess the effect of changing scenario in West Asia on India’s socio – economic landscape.

1.5 **Research Questions**

- (i) How / did the USA invasion of Iraq exacerbate the rise of Shia- Sunni fault lines in West Asia?
- (ii) What has been the change in the role of Iran in West Asia politics?
- (iii) What have been the game changers in West Asia politics?
- (iv) What are the repercussions of Shia-Sunni divide in West Asia on India?
- (v) What steps does India need to take to secure its future role in West Asia?

1.6 **Methodology**

The study is exploratory in nature. The research has been undertaken primarily using secondary data and understanding events which are documented in modern and medieval history. Hence exploratory research design has been adopted to understand the causal relation of events which have shaped the Middle East and their impact on India. Accordingly the treatment of the subject

to be studied is based on qualitative strategy enunciated towards research in Public Administration (McNabb, 2012).

Access to secondary data is primarily through the libraries at Indian Institute for Public Administration, Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), United Services Institute (USI), Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS) and Indian Council for World Affairs. In addition discussion / interviews with subject matter experts at above institutes were held to get understanding of the issues involved. .

1.7 **Limitations of the Study**

The fluid situation and changing dynamics of the region made task of the investigator a difficult one. Therefore study was limited to happening in the region from 2001 to 2015 and avoided too much crystal gazing.

Also, in view of the limited time available for research, the scope was restricted to detailed study of Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Israel and USA in above context. All other countries have been dealt with based on restricted mandate and on required basis in context of their role in various events studied

1.8 **Chapterisation Scheme**

Chapter II presents a brief history of birth of Islam, evolution of Shia culture in Persia and its spread and evolution and manifestation of Shia-Sunni divide. The chapter concludes with a look at modern Muslim world including facets of demography, modern concept of Political Islam, Wahhabism, Governance in Islamic world and leadership of Muslim world.

The Geo strategic importance of Iran and rise of the Shia Crescent is analysed in Chapter III. The growth of each participant countries is seen through a historical perspective as well as current relation with Iran.

Chapter IV looks at Iran relationship in the Middle East especially with Saudi Arabia and Egypt. It also analyses the rise of Sunni extremism as also a counter view to rise of Shia Crescent.

Next Chapter V takes a close look at America's Middle East policies and its relations with key players over the ages. Three timelines viz; 1953-2001, post 26/11 events and Post 2011 have been taken into account while studying this aspect.

Chapter VI looks into the perspective of issues from the Indian context and its repercussions.

Key findings are summarised in Chapter VII.

CHAPTER – II

HISTORY OF ISLAM AND RISE OF SHIA-SUNNI DIVIDE

lā `ilāha `illā llāh muḥammadun rasūlu llāh (There is no god but Allah. Muhammad is the messenger of Allah.)

Shahada

2.1 History of Islam

2.1.1 Birth of Islam

Muhammad (c. 570 – June 8, 632) was an Arab religious, political, and military leader who founded the religion of Islam as a historical phenomenon. Muslims view him not as the creator of a new religion, but as the restorer of the original, uncorrupted monotheistic faith of Adam, Abraham and others. In Muslim tradition, Muhammad is viewed as the last and the greatest in a series of prophets — as the man closest to perfection, the possessor of all virtues. For the last 23 years of his life, beginning at age 40, Muhammad reported receiving revelations from God. The content of these revelations, known as the *Quran*, was memorized and recorded by his companions.

During this time, Muhammad preached to the people of Mecca, imploring them to abandon polytheism. Although some converted to Islam, Muhammad and his followers were persecuted by the leading Meccan authorities. After 13 years of preaching, Muhammad and the Muslims performed the *Hijra* ("emigration") to the city of Medina (formerly known as Yathrib) in 622. There, with the converts from Medina (*Ansar*) and the migrants from Mecca

(*Muhajirun*), Muhammad established his **political and religious authority**. Within years, two battles had been fought against Meccan forces: the Battle of Badr in 624, which was a Muslim victory, and the Battle of Uhud in 625, which ended inconclusively. **Conflict with Jewish clans from Medina** who opposed the Muslims led to their exile, enslavement or death, and the Jewish enclave of Khaybar was subdued. At the same time, Meccan trade routes were cut off as Muhammad brought surrounding desert tribes under his control. By 629 Muhammad was victorious in the nearly bloodless conquest of Mecca, and by the time of his death in 632 he ruled over the Arabian Peninsula. (Akbar, 2002).

2.1.2 **Tenets of Islam**

Islam was founded and developed as a religion which professed it as a way of life. Since inception it didn't differentiate between political and religious head. Quran provides rulings on ideal conduct on all walks of life and hence the inseparability of religion from personal and public life of an individual. It is based on the following five tenets⁷ of *Shahadah*, *Salah*, *Zakat*, *Sawm* and *The Hajj*.

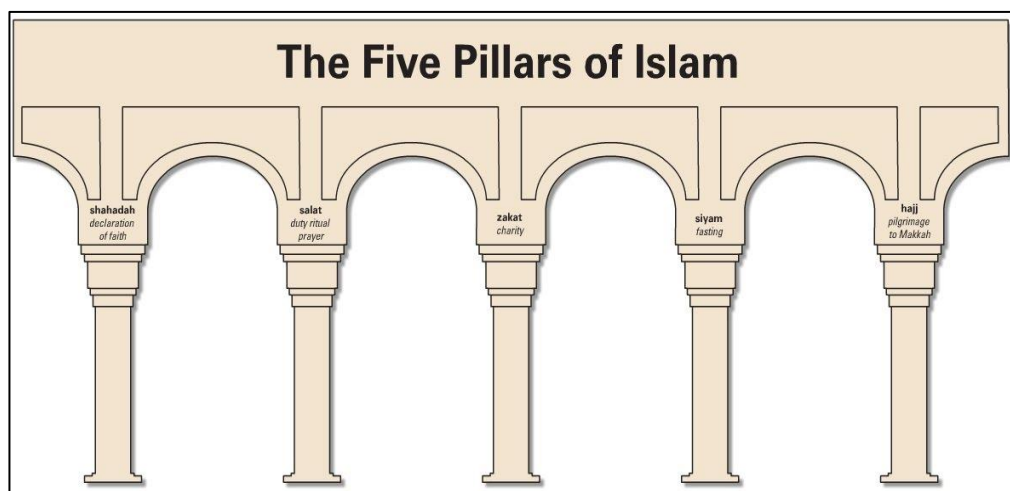
- The *Shahadah*, ('ašhadu 'al-lā ilāha illā-llāhu wa 'ašhadu 'anna muḥammadan rasūlu-llāh") is the basic tenet of Islam. Loosely translated as "*I testify that there is none worthy of worship except God and I testify that Muhammad is the Messenger of God*", this testament professes allegiance to Muhammad

⁷ Derived from readings of article titled 'Islam' by Rahma Fazlur; Schimme Annemarie; Mahdi l Muhsin. accessed at <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Islam#ref69149>,

only and draws it monotheist identity. **Any devotion to other individual or object is classified as heretic and is a foundation for opposition to all other beliefs and practices within (Shia practices dwelled later) or outside Islam.**

- ***Salah***, or ritual prayer, which must be performed five times a day. Each *salah* is done facing towards the Kaaba in Mecca and call to prayers of *Adhan* is the most visible symbol of Muslim identity. The prayers are recited in the Arabic language, and consist of verses from the Qur'an. **Strict adherence to Arabic language is the connect which establishes the supremacy of Arabic countries primarily Saudi Arabia - as custodian of holy sites - over the Muslim community in the world.**
- ***Zakat*** is the practice of giving based on accumulated wealth, and is

Figure 2.1: Five Pillars of Islam



Source: <http://musliminc.com/5-pillars-of-islam-5760>

obligatory for all Muslims who can afford it. A fixed portion is to be spent to help the poor or needy, and also to assist the spread of Islam. The zakat is

considered a religious obligation (as opposed to voluntary charity) that the well-off owe to the needy because their wealth is seen as a "trust from God's bounty". **The practice is the backbone which sees fund raising as a vibrant practice in the Muslim world, even as its utilization remains suspect in some cases.**

- *Sawm*, refers to fasting during the month of Ramadan. The fast is another visible symbol and aims to encourage a feeling of nearness to God, and during it Muslims should express their gratitude for and dependence on him, atone for their past sins, and think of the needy. The religion provides flexibility in its adherence under various circumstances, but the fact is often not propagated enough by religious heads, especially where radicalization has taken roots.
- The *Hajj*, is the pilgrimage during the Islamic month of *Dhu al-Hijjah* to the city of Mecca. Every able-bodied Muslim who can afford it must make the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in his or her lifetime. The same involves dressing in *Ihram* clothing, walking seven times around the Kaaba, touching the Black Stone, running seven times between Mount Safa and Mount Marwah, and symbolically stoning the Devil in Mina. **As custodian of holy sites Saudi Arabia possesses great amount of leverage in conduct of this activity and draws its supremacy over the Muslim world.**

Besides above *The Sharia* is the Islamic Law which governs the Muslim belief. This covers all aspects of life, from matters of state, like governance and foreign relations, to issues of daily living. The Qur'an and Sunnah (actions and sayings

of Muhammad), also contain laws of inheritance, marriage, and restitution for injuries and murder, as well as rules for fasting, charity, and prayer. However, these prescriptions and prohibitions are broad based and their application in practice varies based on their interpretation by Islamic scholars (known as *ulema*). **According to Islamic legal theory, law has four fundamental roots, which are given precedence in this order: the Qur'an, the Sunnah the consensus of the Muslim jurists (*ijma*), and analogical reasoning (*qiyas*).**

2.1.3 **Expansion of Islam**⁸

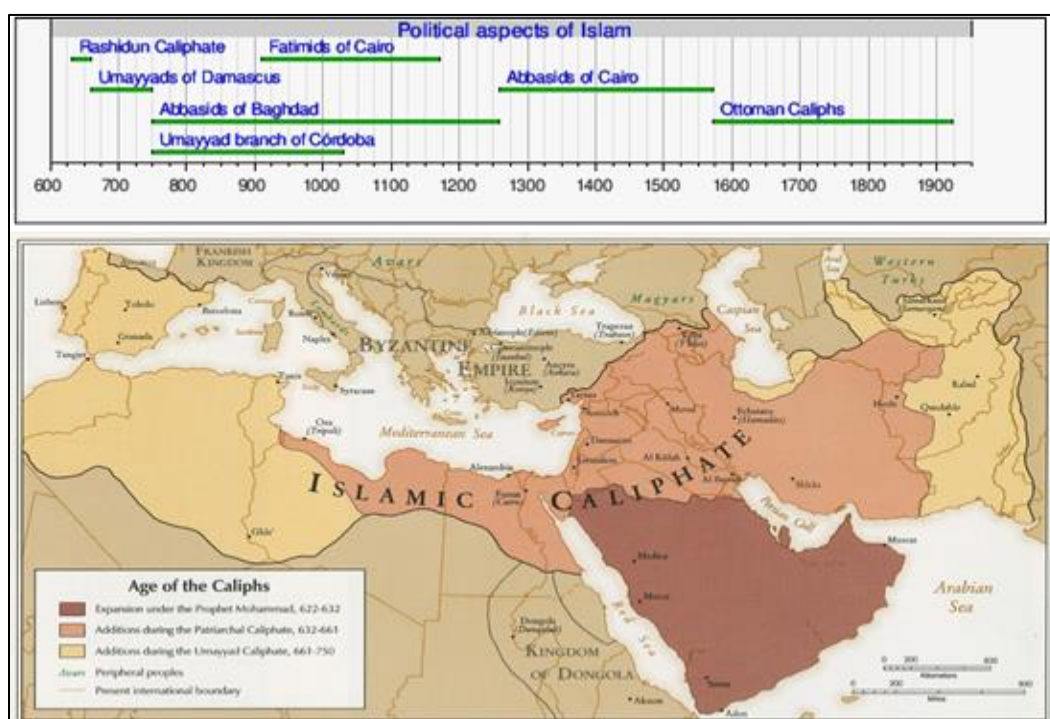
With Muhammad's death in 632, disagreement broke out over who would succeed him as leader of the Muslim community. Umar ibn al-Khattab, a prominent companion of Muhammad, nominated Abu Bakr, who was Muhammad's intimate friend and collaborator. Others added their support and Abu Bakr was made the first Caliph. **This choice was disputed by some of the other Muhammad's companions, who held that Ali ibnAbiTalib, his cousin and son-in-law, should have been designated his successor being of blood lineage.** Abu Bakr's death in 634 resulted in the succession of Umar as the Caliph, followed by Uthmanibn al-Affan and finally Ali ibnAbiTalib. After fighting off opposition in the first civil war (also termed as the "*First Fitna*"), Ali was assassinated by Kharijites in 661. These four are known as **Al-khulafā'**

⁸ *The sub section has been derived from readings of quoted works of MJ Akbar "The Shades of Sword", Roli Books, 2002 and Saeed Naqvi "Being the Other :The Muslims of India". All dates accessed and corroborated at <https://historyofislam.com/contents/chronology/chronology/> between Nov2018 and Feb 2019*

ar-rāshidūn ("Rightly Guided Caliphs"). Under them, the territory under Muslim rule expanded deeply into Persian and Byzantine territories.

Following this, Mu'awiyah, who was governor of the Levant, seized power and began the **Umayyad dynasty**. After Mu'awiyah's death in 680, conflict over succession broke out again in a civil war known as the "Second Fitna". Afterward, the Umayyad dynasty prevailed for seventy years, and was able to conquer the Maghrib and Al-Andalus (the Iberian Peninsula) and the Narbonnese Gaul in the west as well as expand Muslim territory into Sindh and

Figure 2.2: Spread of Islamic Caliphate



Source- http://christianworldviewpress.com/wp-content/2014/07/caliph_gif.jpg

the fringes of Central Asia.

For the Umayyad aristocracy, Islam was viewed as a religion for Arabs only. The economy of the Umayyad Empire was based on the assumption that a

majority of non-Muslims (*Dhimmis*) would pay taxes to the minority of Muslim Arabs. A non-Arab who wanted to convert to Islam was supposed to first become a client of an Arab tribe. Even after conversion, these new Muslims (*mawali*) did not achieve social and economic equality with the Arabs.

The descendants of Muhammad's uncle Abbas ibn Abd al-Muttalib rallied discontented *mawali*'s, poor Arabs, and some Shia against the Umayyads and overthrew them with the help of their propagandist and General Abu Muslim, inaugurating the **Abbasid Dynasty** in 750AD. Under the Abbasids, Islamic civilization flourished in the "Islamic Golden Age", with its capital at the cosmopolitan city of Baghdad.

By the late 9th century, the Abbasid Caliphate began to fracture as various regions gained increasing levels of autonomy. Across North Africa, Persia, and Central Asia emirates formed as provinces broke away. The monolithic Arab empire gave way to a more religiously homogenized Muslim world where the **Shia Fatimids** contested even the religious authority of the Caliphate.

By 1055, the **Seljuq Turks** had eliminated the Abbasids as a military power. Nevertheless they continued to respect the Caliph's titular authority. During this time expansion of the Muslim world continued, by both conquest and peaceful preaching, even as both Islam and Muslim trade networks were extending into sub-Saharan West Africa, Central Asia, Volga Bulgaria and the Malay Archipelago.

The spread of the Islamic dominion induced hostility among medieval ecclesiastical Christian authors who saw Islam as an adversary in the light of the

large numbers of new Muslim converts. This opposition resulted in polemical treatises which depicted Islam as the religion of the antichrist and of Muslims as libidinous and sub-human. Starting in the 9th century, Muslim conquests in the West began to be reversed. The **Reconquista** was launched against Muslim principalities in Iberia, and Muslim Italian possessions were lost to the Normans.

From the 11th century onwards alliances of European Christian kingdoms mobilized to launch a series of wars known as the **Crusades**, bringing the Muslim world into conflict with Christians. Initially successful in their goal of taking the Holy land, and establishing the Crusader states, Crusader gains in the Holy Land were later reversed by subsequent Muslim generals such as Saladin; who recaptured Jerusalem during the Second Crusade.

In the east, the **Mongol Empire** put an end to the Abbassid dynasty at the Battle of Baghdad in 1258, as they overran the Muslim lands in a series of invasions. Over the next century the Mongol Khanates converted to Islam and this religious and cultural absorption ushered in a new age of Mongol-Islamic synthesis that shaped the further spread of Islam in central Asia, Eastern Europe and the Indian subcontinent.

In the early 16th century, the **Shia Safavid dynasty assumed control in Persia (now Iran) and established Shia Islam as an official religion there.** Despite periodic setbacks, the Safavid's remained powerful for two centuries.

Meanwhile, Egypt fell to the **Ottomans** in 1517, which then launched a European campaign which reached as far as the gates of Vienna in 1529. By the

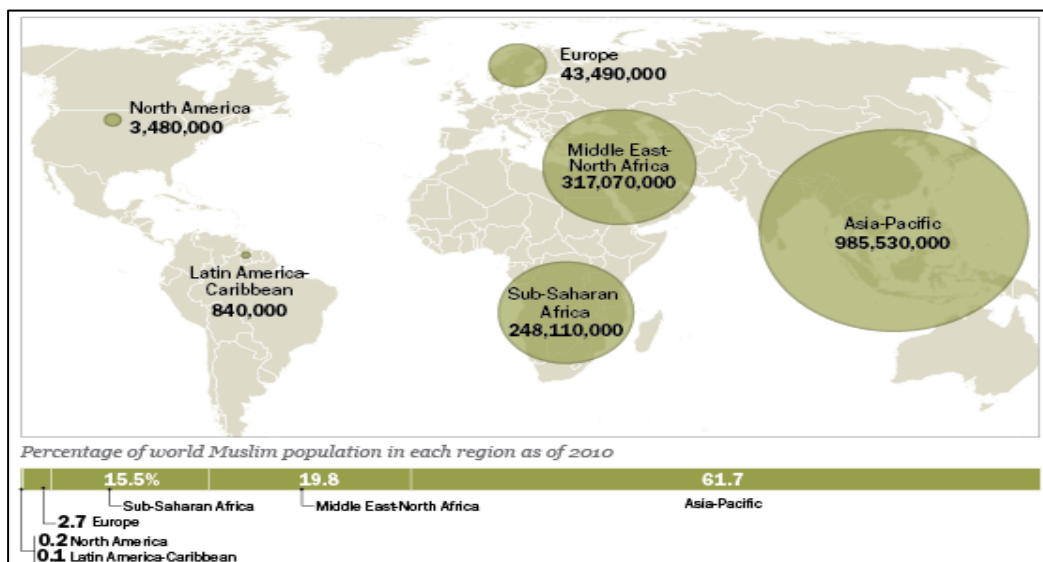
17th and 18th centuries, despite attempts at modernization, the Ottoman Empire had begun to feel threatened by European economic and military advantages. In the 19th century, the rise of nationalism resulted in Greece declaring and winning independence in 1829, with several Balkan states following suit after the Ottomans suffered defeat in the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878. By the early years of the 20th century, most of the Muslim world outside the Ottoman Empire had been absorbed into the empires of non-Islamic European powers. **The Ottoman era came to a close at the end of World War I and the Caliphate was abolished in 1924.**

After World War I losses, nearly all of the Ottoman Empire was also parcelled out as European protectorates or spheres of influence. **In the course of the 20th century, most of these European-ruled territories became independent and new issues such as oil wealth and relations with the State of Israel assumed prominence.**

As per 2015 estimates, the **Muslim population in the world stands at approx. 1.8 billion** and constitute 24% of the global population (Lipka, 2017). Islam is currently the world's second-largest religion after Christianity. However, it is the fastest-growing major religion, and, if current demographic trends continue, the number of Muslims is expected to exceed the number of Christians by the end of this century. **Although many countries in the Middle East-North Africa region, where the religion originated in the seventh century, are heavily Muslim, the region is home to only about 20% of the world's Muslims (See Figure 2.3).** A majority of the Muslims globally (62%)

live in the Asia-Pacific region, including large populations in Indonesia, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Iran and Turkey. Indonesia is currently the country with the world's largest Muslim population, but Pew Research Centre projects that

Figure 2.3: Regional Distribution of Muslim Population (2010 Census)



Source: Pew Research Centre's Forum on Religion & Public Life - Global Religious Landscape Dec 2012

India will have that distinction by the year 2050 (while remaining a majority-Hindu country), with more than 300 million Muslims.

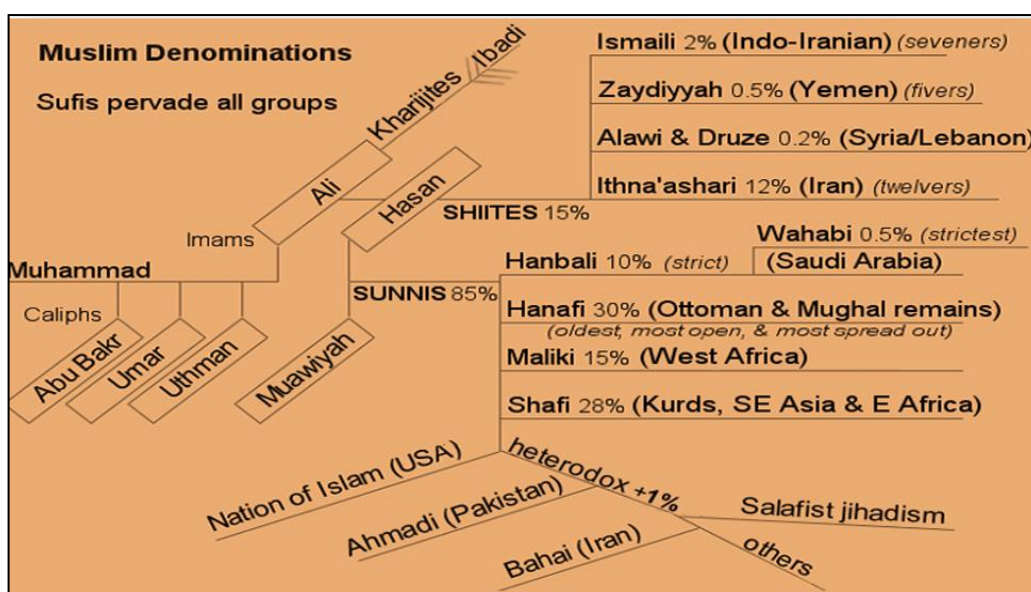
2.2 Rise of Shia Islam - Shia-Sunni Divide

In this entire midst, there are two theories about the emergence of Shia Islam. **The first one emphasizes on different interpretation of Islam which led to different understanding about the role of Caliphs and ulamas.** The Sunni, or followers of the way, followed the Caliphate and maintained the premise that any devout Muslim could potentially become the successor to Muhammad if accepted by his peers. The Shia's however, maintains that only the person

selected by God and announced by the Prophet could become his successor, thus Ali became the religious authority for the Shia people.

The second view taken is that it is a purely political separation, as at first there was very little religiously that separated these two groups. According to this theory, early in the history of Islam, the Shīa's were a political faction

Figure 2.4: Muslim Denominations showing Separation of Shia's and Sunni's



Source: <http://www.oprev.org/tag/denominations/>

(party of Ali) that supported Caliphate of 'AlībnAbīTālib and, later, of his descendants. However, once the Shia political aspirations were more or less denied and the Muslim community transformed a distinctly Arab empire, the Shia's slowly began to withdraw from the larger political implications of their movement.

However, it is generally agreed by majority of scholars **that post the events at Karbala in Iraq in 680AD**, in which the grandson of the Prophet Mohammed and the scion of Shia leadership was massacred by the Umayyad, Shia's who had begun to withdraw from society, particularly politically, **began to now become distinctly a religious sect (See Figure 2.4)** .

Until the year 1258, with the fall of Baghdad, the capital of the Abbasid dynasty, all of the caliphs of Islam for over six hundred years were from Muhammad's tribe, the tribe of Quraysh, but they were never the descendants of Ali. This situation placed Shia in continual opposition to the ruling regime and they became a harshly persecuted group throughout the history of Islam. **The struggle between the two groups has led to the development of great differences between the two in every area of religious life: religious laws are different, the theology is different, and even the basic scriptures are different.** The Shi'ites claim that the Sunnis omitted two chapters from the Qur'an where the leadership was promised to Ali and his descendants, while the Sunnis claim that these two chapters were fabricated by the Shia's. The oral law is also different, because each side invented stories about Muhammad to support their political position. In their prayers, the Shia's curse the first three Caliphs for stealing the rule from Ali, and they add passages that praise and exalt Ali. Therefore there are many among the Sunnis, especially the Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia, who consider Shias as a kind of fundamental heresy. The Saudi regime forbids the Shia minority in Saudi Arabia to recite the call to prayer aloud, because even in the muezzin's call to prayer there is an extra part praising Ali

Shia as a culture differed from the Sunni as it evolved. Apart from the stated difference on perception in nomination of the Caliph, Shias also developed a culture which was despised by the Sunnis as heretic. For example, the constant lamentation which Shias impose on themselves and making / parading of “*Tazias*⁹” during ‘Muharram’ is frowned upon as it eulogises an individual – which in eyes of Sunnis is against the tenets of Islam which prohibits idol worship in any sense.

As Islam began to spread beyond the Arab world, and as it began to spill into Central Asia and the Indian Subcontinent and into North Africa, Shia’ism became an opportunity for non-Arabs to become Muslim, to adopt the identity of Islam, and yet to maintain some sort of separation from what they saw as a domineering and sometimes oppressive state ideology of Arab Islam. **Either way right at start of Islamic history, many Sunni rulers perceived the Shia’s as a threat – both to their political and religious authority.** It is also called the non-state version of Islam.

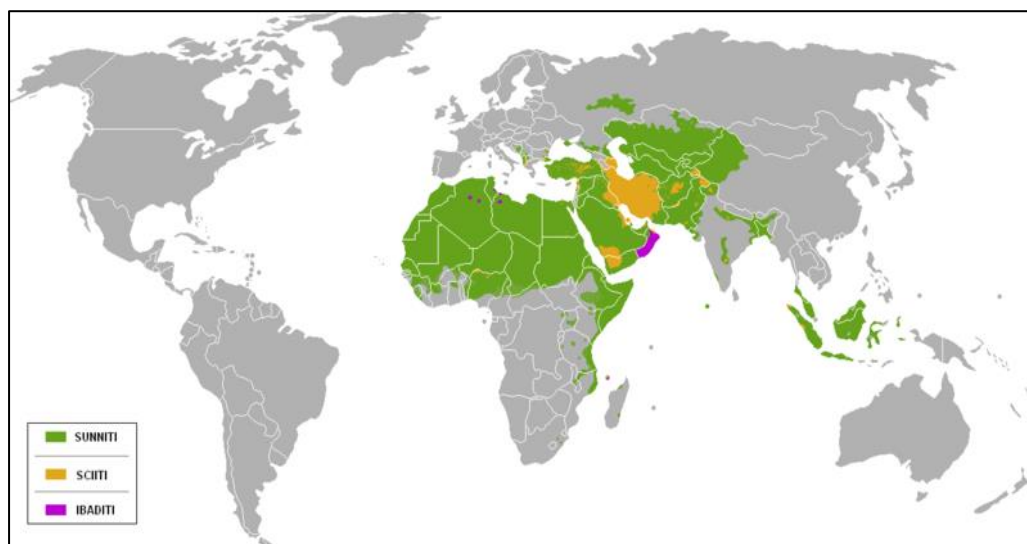
The Sunni rulers under the Umayyads sought to marginalize the Shia minority and later the Abbasids turned on their Shia allies and further imprisoned, persecuted, and killed Shia’s. Saudi Arabia in modern times has always attempted to isolate Iran (*a major Shia power*) during most of the 20th century. The persecution of Shia’s throughout history by Sunni co-religionists has often

⁹ *Tazia in Arabic means comfort, condolence or expression of grief. In this context it refers to the miniature imitation of Karbala mausoleums made of coloured paper and bamboo used in ritual procession during Muharram.*

been characterized by brutal and genocidal acts. Comprising only about 10-15% of the entire Muslim population, to this day, the Shia's remain a marginalized community in many Sunni Arab dominant countries.

Approximately 15% of the world's Muslims are Shia, which corresponds to about 270 million Shia Muslims worldwide. Shia Muslims, though a minority in the Muslim world, constitute the majority of the populations in Iran (erstwhile Persia), Azerbaijan, Bahrain and Iraq. In addition Shia Muslims also constitute over 35% of the population in Lebanon, over 45% of the population

Figure 2.5: Distribution of Muslims Based on Islamic Madhab (School of Law)



Source: https://www.reddit.com/r/islam/comments/5yafqf/map_of_madhabs_in_the_islamic_world

in Yemen, over 35% of the population in Kuwait, 20-25% of the population in Turkey, 20% of the population in Albania, 20% of the population in Pakistan and 18% of population in Afghanistan. They also make up at least 15% of the Muslim populations in India, the UAE, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Serbia/Montenegro & Kosovo (PewResearch, 2009).

2.3 Modern Islam

2.3.1 Demography

As mentioned earlier, 1.8 billion Muslims reside today across various countries in the world. Muslims are concentrated in the Asia-Pacific region, where approx. 62% of all Muslims reside. Many Muslims also live in the Middle East and North Africa (20%) and Sub-Saharan Africa (16%), while the remainder reside in Europe (3%), North America (less than 1%) and Latin America and the Caribbean (also less than 1%). Although a majority of the world's Muslims live in Asia and the Pacific, only about one-in-four people (24%) in that region are Muslims. By contrast, the Middle East-North Africa region has an overwhelmingly Muslim population of about 93%. **This combined with the presence of holy sites, emphasis of Arabic language in scriptures as also prayers, and wealth accrued out of oil plays a major part when aspect of leadership of Muslim community is to be decided.**

More than 300 million Muslims, or **one-fifth of the world's Muslim population, live in countries where Islam is not the majority religion.** These minority Muslim populations are often quite large. India, for example, has the third-largest population of Muslims worldwide. China has more Muslims than Syria, while Russia is home to more Muslims than Jordan and Libya combined. **However these voices are very limited in the Muslim world,** because of the overwhelming influence exerted by majority Muslim countries of Middle East in the ownership of religious affairs.

The number of Muslims around the world is projected to increase rapidly in the decades ahead, growing from about 1.6 billion in 2010 to nearly 2.9 billion

Figure 2.6: Size and projected Growth of Major Religious Groups 2015-60

Size and projected growth of major religious groups, 2015-2060					
	Projected 2015 population	% of world population in 2015	Projected 2060 population	% of world population in 2060	Population growth 2015-2060
Christians	2,276,250,000	31.2%	3,054,460,000	31.8	778,210,000
Muslims	1,752,620,000	24.1	2,987,390,000	31.1	1,234,770,000
Unaffiliated	1,165,020,000	16.0	1,202,300,000	12.5	37,280,000
Hindus	1,099,110,000	15.1	1,392,900,000	14.5	293,790,000
Buddhists	499,380,000	6.9	461,980,000	4.8	-37,400,000
Folk religions	418,280,000	5.7	440,950,000	4.6	22,670,000
Other religions	59,710,000	0.8	59,410,000	0.6	-290,000
Jews	14,270,000	0.2	16,370,000	0.2	2,100,000
World	7,284,640,000	100.0	9,615,760,000	100.0	2,331,120,000

Source: Pew Research Centre. 'The Changing Global Religious Landscape – Dec 2012

in 2060. Muslims are expected to grow twice as fast as the overall global population. Consequently, Muslims are projected to rise from 23% of the world's population in 2010 to 30% in 2050 (PewResearch, 2015). The research also shows that increasingly this population will migrate and move to more developed countries in search of opportunities or survival. This increasing number will have a **larger role to play in world politics** and as a population group cannot be ignored by a large number of nations.

2.3.2 Political Islam

At about 1400 years, Islam is one of the youngest religions of the world. It has seen violence since its inception and its history is seeped with gaining control and legitimacy in the predominant Christian world. Despite their common origins and beliefs, Islam has been in continuous confrontation with both

Christianity and Judaism. The struggle to control historically linked locations has seen continuous conflict in Middle East which serves as cradle for all these three religions. Politics of the region therefore has strong biases and draws both its motivation and legitimacy from religion.

As covered earlier, **political aspects of Islam are derived from the Quran, the Sunna and the Muslim history.** Traditional political concepts in Islam include leadership by successors to the Prophet known as *Caliphs*, (*Imamate* for Shia) and the importance of following Islamic law or *Sharia*. The eternal ethical code and moral code based on the Qur'an and Sunnah and the duty of rulers to seek *Shura* or consultation from their subjects are some of the other tenets of Political Islam. A sea change in the Islamic world was the abolition of the Ottoman caliphate in 1924, which some believed meant an end to the Islamic state both in "symbolic and practice terms". **Since falling under Western colonial rule, the Muslim world has developed a narrative of grievance.** There is no question that Western imperialism in the 19th and early 20th centuries was far from benign. It divided Muslims, denigrated them, and used modern technology to render a caricature of a once-preeminent civilization and the faith that rests at its heart. The current weakness of the Muslim world, however, is not entirely the fault of Western colonialism and postcolonial machinations, but also to do with the **inward looking attitude of Islamist.** **Islamists see the world as polarized between the *Ummah* (the community of believers, whom they describe as one nation) and the rest.** The rise of Western powers, rather than the decline of *Ummah's*, receives far greater attention from Islamist scholars and leaders.

The **phenomenon of outrage over insults to Islam and its final Prophet is a function of modern-era politics**. It started during Western colonial rule, with Muslim politicians seeking issues to mobilize their constituents. While secular leaders focused on opposing foreign domination, Islamists emerged to claim that Islam is not merely a religion but also a political ideology. Threats to the faith became a rallying cry for the Islamists, who sought wedge issues to define their political agenda. To this day, **Islamists are often the ones who draw attention to otherwise obscure attacks on Islam and then use those attacks to muster popular support**. The emergence of social media and the swiftness of international communications have made it easier to choreograph global campaigns, and in Muslim-majority countries, Islamists tend to be among those who are most effectively organized to take advantage of technology for political ends. The rise of ISIS and its yet unfinished journey is the result of this desire to re-establish the rule of Caliphate and supremacy of *Unmah*.

2.3.3 Wahhabism / Salafism

During the 18th century, *Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab* led a religious movement in Najd (central Arabia) that sought to purify Islam. Wahhab wanted to return Islam to what he thought were its original principles as taught by the *as-salaf as-saliheen* (the earliest converts to Islam) and rejected what he regarded as corruptions introduced by later rulers and Caliphs. He allied himself with the House of Saud, which eventually triumphed over the Rashidi's to control Central Arabia, and led several revolts against the Ottoman Empire. A series of battles and conflicts culminated in the creation of Saudi Arabia. Saudi

Arabia is considered as the biggest exporter of this thought process and has fuelled many Islamist thinkers in the Muslim world.

2.3.4 **Islam and Modern Concepts of Governance**

Islamic countries follow two models of democracy.

- A democratic state which recognizes Islam as state religion, such as Malaysia, Algeria or Bangladesh. Some religious values are incorporated into public life, but Islam is not the only source of law.
- A democratic state which endeavours to institute Sharia. It is also called as Islamist democracy. Islamist democracy offers more comprehensive inclusion of Islam into the affairs of the state. Islamist democracy is a highly controversial topic.

The democratic ideal of a "government by the people" is compatible with the notion of an Islamic democracy as per Sunni view point. In the early Islamic Caliphate, the head of state, the Caliph, had a position based on the notion of a successor to Muhammad's political authority, who, according to Sunnis, was ideally elected by the people or their representatives.

The Shia viewpoint – based on the largest group; Twelver's branch¹⁰ - recognizes a series of Twelve Imams, the last of which (Muhammad al-Mahdi, the Hidden Imam) is still alive and the Shia's are waiting for his reappearance.

¹⁰ Refers to the largest branch of Shia Islam, with about 85% of Shia as its followers. Differs from other sects of Shia Islam in different numbers of Imam as also their succession aspects. Twelvers share their belief of twelve imams with Alevis in Turkey and Albania, and Alawites in Syria and Lebanon but have differences over other theological doctrines

Since the revolution in Iran, Twelver Shia's political thought has been dominated by the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini who believed Muslims have not only the right, but also the obligation, to establish an "Islamic State".

2.3.5 **Leadership of the Muslim World**

Today, as it stands Middle East has approx. twenty countries where population of Muslim is more than 95% of the total population. Saudi Arabia as the **custodian of Holy Sites** has a fairly large influence in the Muslim world. Combined with the **economic might** which the oil brings to the region as a whole and Saudi Arabia in particular, the debate on the **leadership mantle is generally settled in favour of Saudi Arabia**. Its stability in regime – despite being ruled by House of Sauds – and staunch backing by USA makes it the prime mover of Middle East politics – specially the Sunni block of countries. Egypt and Iraq have at various stages in history, been in the forefront on account of great historical past and key role played in events - like Arab- Israel war, Iraq-Iran war – but have never been able to outlast Saudi Arabia.

On the other side of the schism stands Iran. A power in its own rights it was one of the earliest modern Muslim states with constitutional revolution in early 20th century ushering in democratic values. As a majority Shia state it was always an anathema in the Middle East and was considered as more Persian than Arabian. **The 1979 revolution brought it out of the closet as a declared leader of Shia world and in direct confrontation with Saudi Arabia**. Two

more simultaneous incidents viz; taking over the mosque at Mecca by Islamic Insurgents¹¹ and revolt of Shia's(15%) in Saudi Arabia¹²; brought the fear of *Velayat-e-Faqih* revolution being spread to its shores very real for Saudi Arabia and other powers in Middle East. The fear of their powers being usurped by the *mullahs* has been the bind, which led to Arab world uniting against Iran. Its continuous isolation has only raised the status of Iran in the Shia world. Iraq the other Shia majority country has been a part of the Arab world primarily on account of its Baathist leadership. That it is the site of many holy sites connected to Shiaism has added to its magnetism for Iran. **Post the downfall of Saddam and influx of democracy the Shia's of Iraq have also found their voice and now ride this divide with leaning towards Iran.** Syria and Lebanon are the other major powers which tilt towards this axis.

Looking outside Middle East, Pakistan has a fairly large footprint across the Muslim world. Notwithstanding its poor economic state, unstable regimes, military rulers etc, the distinction of being the sole nuclear power in the Muslim world provides it with this leverage. The unconditional backing of China combined with its geo-strategic location makes it a power hard to ignore.

¹¹ *The incident refers to the Seige of Grand Mosque in Mecca by insurgents from 20 Nov1979 to 10 Dec 1979. The insurgents owing allegiance to Mohammed Abdullah al-Qahtani of Najd were cleared in operations led by Saudi Arabian, Pakistani and French Special Forces elements. It also lead to subsequent hardening of religious policies in Saudi Arabia.*

¹² *Refers to the unrest of Shia's in Qatif province of Saudi Arabia from 25 Nov to 03 Dec 1979. The uprising drew inspiration from Shia Revolution in neighbouring Iran and was also fueled by discontent due to administrative neglect of the region by Saudi regime. The region has Shiite majority population and is important due to bulk of Saudi Oil reserve and major refinery being located here.*

Indonesia with the largest Muslim population in the world is another giant from Asia- Pacific region where almost 60% of Muslims live. Its outlook has however been more moderated and influenced by regional outlook. India with 161 million Muslims has the third largest Muslim population in the world, but it's Hindu majority country status does not provide it enough leverage in the Muslim world. The European and American Muslims are miniscule in numbers anyway to mount any serious challenge to the leadership in Muslim world.

2.3.6 **Organisation of Islamic Cooperation**

This is the largest body of Muslim countries established in 1969 after arson in Al-Asqa mosque (third holiest mosque in Islam is the site) in Jerusalem. It has **membership of 57 countries** cross four continents, with a **permanent secretariat** in Jeddah. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) has consultative and cooperative relations with the UN and other inter-governmental organizations to **protect the vital interests of the Muslims and to work for the settlement of** conflicts and disputes involving Member States.

OIC has continuously adopted fresh charters to align its goals with changing times, with the latest being adopted during the Eleventh Islamic Summit held in Dakar on 13-14 March 2008. The new programme OIC-2025 identifies 18 priority areas with 107 goals (OIC, 2019). The priority areas include issues of Peace and Security, Palestine and Al-Quds, Poverty Alleviation, Counter-terrorism, Investment and Finance, Food Security, Science and Technology, Climate Change and Sustainability, Moderation, Culture and Interfaith

Harmony, Empowerment of Women, Joint Islamic Humanitarian Action, Human Rights and Good Governance, among others.

OIC prides itself to be the singular body aimed to galvanize the *Ummah* into a unified body and have actively represented the Muslims by espousing all causes close to the hearts of over 1.8 billion Muslims of the world. Surprisingly for some, India with the third largest Muslim population in the world is not a member of this body. However, possibly in recognition of changing world order and despite opposition from Pakistan, UAE (host country) did extend an invitation as guest of honour to India for the summit in Mar 2019.

Its role as a voice of the Muslim world is recognised by the world community. India has no major issues with individual members but has always opposed the group's resolution on Kashmir which as per India's officially stated stance is a bilateral matter and requires no external mediation.

CHAPTER III

THE RISE OF SHIA IRAN

“If pro-Iran parties or politicians dominate the new Iraqi government, a new ‘crescent’ of dominant Shia movements or governments stretching from Iran into Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon could emerge, and alter the traditional balance of power between the two main Islamic sects and pose new challenges to U.S. interests and allies.”

King Abdullah –II of Jordan, 2004

3.1 Shia Crescent

The term has its history in post USA invasion of Iraq and the Lebanon bombings of Israel in 2006. The term, was first coined by King Abdullah II of

Figure 3.1: The Shia Crescent



Source: <http://www.karlremarks.com/2015/04/>

Jordan in 2004 (Jordan, 2004), during the course of an interview with Chris Matthews of NBC News, and refers to a new political-religious fault line which was developing in the Middle East. He was describing the "coalition" between

Iran, the Shia dominated Iraq, the Alawite-ruled Syria, Lebanon's Hezbollah, and the Syrian branch of the Hamas movement to counter Israel. The Shia Crescent as it stands today hinges on Iran for its stability and guidance. Hence a study of Iran's geo strategic importance, its economic might and its role in the region is of paramount importance for the study to be relevant.

3.2 Geostrategic Importance of Iran

3.2.1 Geography

Iran is defined largely by its mountains, which form its frontiers, enfold its

Figure 3.2: Relief Map of Iran



Source: <https://slideplayer.com/slide/10303206/>

cities and describe its historical heartland. Iran's most important mountains are the **Zagros**. They are a southern extension of the Caucasus, running about 900

miles from the north-western border of Iran, which adjoins Turkey and Armenia, southeast toward Bandar Abbas on the Strait of Hormuz along the Iraqi border. Iran has a mountainous border with Turkey, but mountains face a flat plain along the Iraq border. This is the historical frontier between Persia — the name of Iran until the early 20th century — and Mesopotamia (“land between two rivers”), as southern Iraq is called. Running east along the Caspian Sea are the **Elburz Mountains**, which serve as a mountain bridge between the Caucasus-Zagros range and Afghan mountains that eventually culminate in the Hindu Kush.

Iran has about 800 miles of coastline, roughly half along the eastern shore of the Persian Gulf, the rest along the Gulf of Oman. Its most important port, Bandar Abbas, is located on the Strait of Hormuz. However the Strait of Hormuz and the Persian Gulf are narrow and prone to interdiction. **Therefore, Iran is restricted in its quest for being a major maritime or naval power based on its geographical location itself. The development of Chabbar port at the mouth of Gulf of Oman is therefore of as great strategic value to Iran as it is to India – co-collaborator in its development – which looks to access the Central Asian Republic and Afghanistan from there.**

At its heart lie the **two desert plateaus** that are virtually uninhabited and uninhabitable. **Iran’s population is therefore concentrated in its mountains**, not in its lowlands, as with other countries. Iran is on the route connecting the Indian subcontinent to the Mediterranean Sea. But because of its size and

geography, Iran is not a country that can be easily traversed, much less conquered (Friedman D. G., 2011).

3.2.2 **Historical Perspective**¹³

Islam came to Persia at the middle of seventh century with the end of Sassanid Empire. However Iran's **first encompassing Shia Islamic state** was established under the Safavid Dynasty (1501–1722) by Shah Ismail I. The Islamic conquest of Persia led to the end of the Sassanid Empire and the eventual decline of the Zoroastrian religion in Persia (modern day Iran). **Iran was gradually Islamized after the collapse of the Sassanid Empire; however, it was not Arabised.** When Islam came through Iran, there **developed Iranian Islam** rather than the original Arab Islam, and this new Islam is sometimes referred to by scholars as *Islam-i-Ajam*¹⁴. Iranian culture re-emerged with a separate and distinctive character and made an immense contribution to the Islamic civilization.

In 1722 Pashtun rebels headed by the Hotakis of Kandahar defeated Shah Sultan Hossein and ended the Safavid Dynasty. In 1736, Nader Shah successfully drove out the Pashtuns from Isfahan and established the Afshar Dynasty. The Mashhad based Afshar Dynasty was succeeded by the Zand dynasty in 1750, The Zand dynasty lasted three generations, until Aga

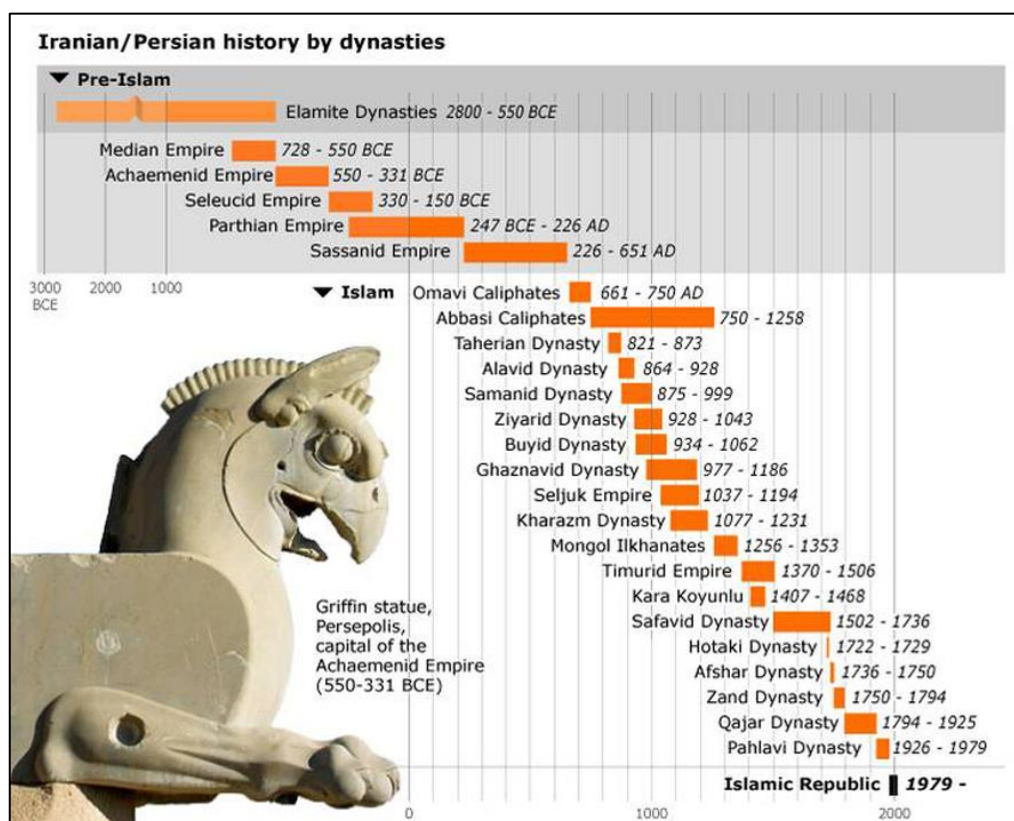
¹³ Derived from readings of article on Ancient Iran at www.britancia.com and timelines of Iranian history at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14542438>

¹⁴ *Ajam* is an Arabic word that refers to someone whose mother tongue is not Arabic. Colloquially it refers to non-Arab in general

Muhammad Khan executed Lotf Ali Khan, and founded his new capital in Tehran, marking the dawn of the Qajar Dynasty in 1794.

Repeated foreign intervention and a corrupt and weakened Qajar rule led to various protests, which by the end of the Qajar period resulted in **Iran's**

Figure 3.3: Iranian History by Dynasties



Source : <https://fanack.com/iran/history-past-to-present/>

constitutional revolution establishing the nation's first parliament in 1906, within a constitutional monarchy. In 1925, Reza Khan overthrew the weakening Qajar Dynasty and became Shah. Reza Shah initiated industrialization, railroad construction, and the establishment of a national education system. Reza Shah sought to balance Russian and British influence and despite '*The Great Game*', **Iran managed to maintain her sovereignty and was never colonized**, unlike

neighbouring states in the region. But when World War II started, Iran's nascent ties to Germany alarmed Britain and Russia. In **1941, Britain and the USSR invaded Iran to use Iranian railroad capacity during World War II and forced Reza Shah to abdicate in favour of his son Mohammad Reza Pahalvi.** Iran gained independence post the WWII and progressed under Reza Pahalvi as Shah of Iran.

In 1951, Dr Mohammad Mosaddegh was elected the Prime Minister by a parliamentary vote. He soon gained enormous popularity in Iran after he nationalized Iran's petroleum industry and oil reserves. In 1953 President Dwight D. Eisenhower authorized a successful **Operation Ajax** to overthrow the elected civil government in collaboration with the Shah of Iran. After Operation Ajax, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's rule became increasingly autocratic. This drew ire of common public against both the Iranian ruling elite as also the American, which was tapped by the Shia Islamic Jurist.

The Iranian Revolution, of Jan 1979 culminated with exile of Shah and installation of Ayatollah Khomeini as the Supreme Leader of **Islamic Republic of Iran** based on a **theocratic constitution**. Today, the political system of Iran, is based on the 1979 constitution, and combines elements of a parliamentary democracy with an Islamic theocracy run by the country's clergy. Called *Vilayat-e-Faqih*, it is a theory of Shia Islam which gives custodianship of people to a *Faqih* (Islamic Jurist). Within the religious clergy there exists a conflict over the interpretation of this custodianship. A school of thoughts limits it to non-litigious matters including religious

endowments, judiciary and property of the state, while another professes absolute guardianship of the Islamic Jurist. This includes all issues including governance of the country and was propagated by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in a series of lecture in 1970 and forms the basis of the Constitution of The Islamic Republic of Iran. The highest state authority today is the Ali Khamenei, who is not only the Supreme Leader but also leads the Assembly of Experts and the Council of Guardians.

Iran became the first state to endorse and follow the concept of *Vilayat-e-Faqih*. **It also professed to export this revolution to other Arab state.** This singular factor set it on a path of confrontation with biggest Arab state of Saudi Arabia – which was reigning monarchy – controlled by the House of Saud. Also, a beneficiary of the exploitation of Iran's oil reserves, the USA had always been a strong supporter of the Shah's regime. **Iranian relations with USA deteriorated after the above revolution and were further exacerbated by the American Embassy Hostage Crisis ² which followed and have not been normalised till date.** Saudi Arabia has turned this schism into a Shia-Sunni conflict to draw more support. In turn Saudi Arabia became USA ally and has exploited the fear of takeover of Islamic Jurist of other Arab states. The relation has seen through thick and thin and even survived the post 9/11 attacks³ retribution and more recent killing of Jamal Khashogi based on this fear only.

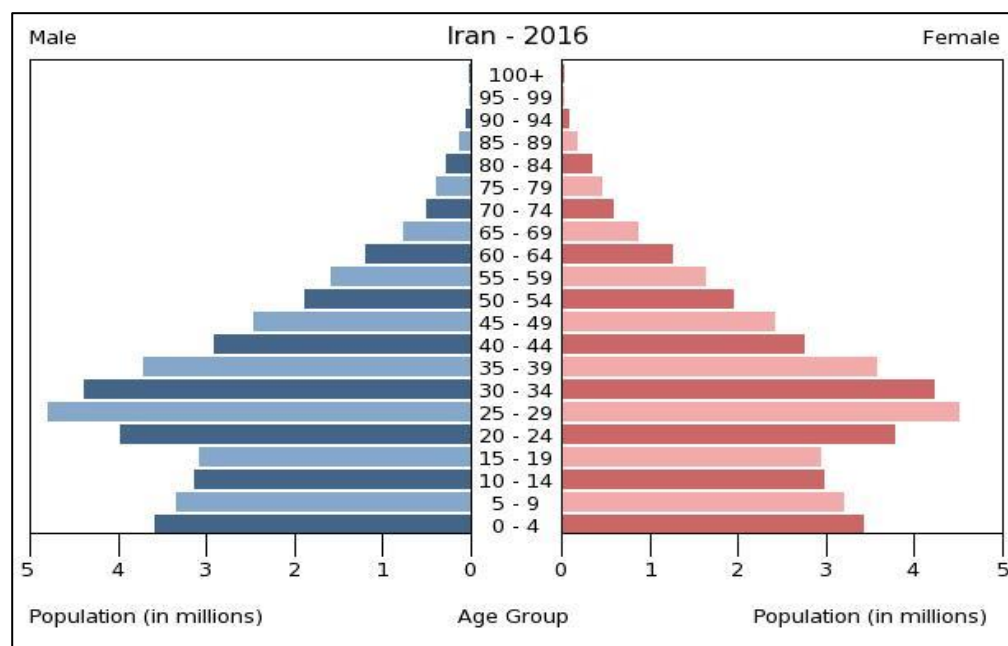
3.2.3 Demography

With an area of 1,648,195 km², Iran is the 19th largest country in world. Iran is also the 17th most populous country in the world, with about 82 million people.

As the largest Shia majority country (95%), its leadership in Shia world based on numbers itself is assured, however the availability of prominent Shia religious sites and clerics further accentuates the position.

The prominent tribes are Persian, Azeri, Kurd, Lur, Baloch, Arab, Turkmen

Figure 3.4: Iran Population Graph



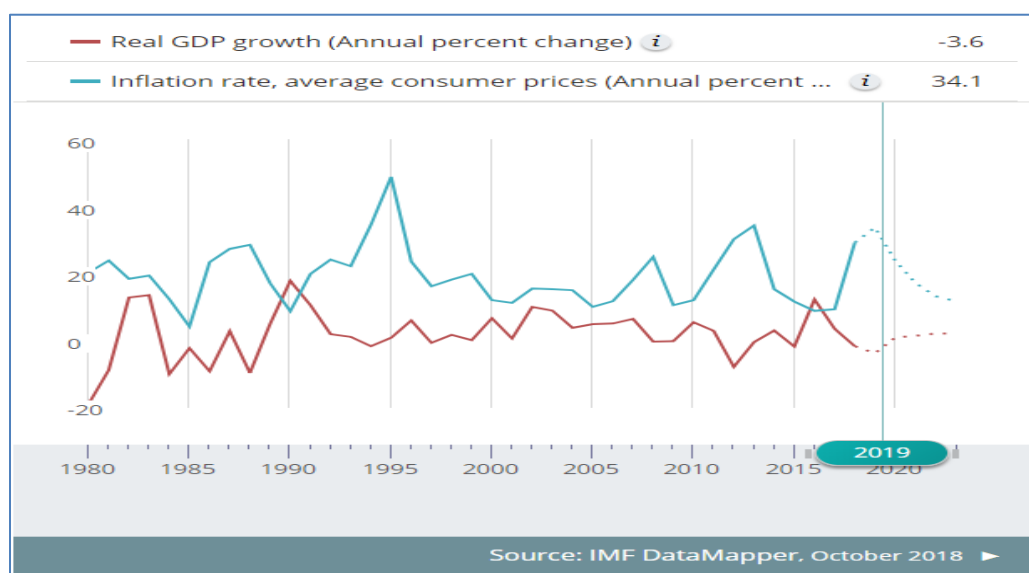
Source: CIA World Fact Book

and Turkic which make up the Iranian population. It has a median age of approx. 31 years with almost 75% population below the age of 50 years (See Figure 3.4). It has a population growth rate of less than 2% which is well below the average of 3.1% for Muslim world (PewResearch, 2015). The young profile of the population brings both positive and negative connotation when economic and social indicator are taken into account.

3.2.4 Economics

Iran has the third largest oil reserves in the world (See Figure 6.2) and is the world's fourth largest producer. However, the economy of Iran is only the 18th

Figure 3.5: Iran's Economic Growth



Source : International Monetary Fund

largest in the world by purchasing power parity (PPP) and 24th by nominal gross domestic product (IMF, 2018) and ranks 89th in terms of real growth (CIA World Book, 2017). The lifting of most nuclear-related sanctions under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in January 2016 sparked a restoration of Iran's oil production and revenue that drove rapid GDP growth, but economic growth declined in 2017 as oil production plateaued (See Figure 3.5). Apart from the sanctions which have come to bear on it, the location of Iran's oil fields is critical here, since oil remains its most important and most strategic export. Part of the reason is inefficiencies in the Iranian oil industry.

Mountainous regions are rarely prosperous as the cost of transportation makes the development of industry difficult. **Therefore Iran as a mountainous country is always looking for inhabitable plains.** There are none to the north, only more mountains and desert, or to the east, where Afghanistan's infrastructure is no more inviting. To the south there is only ocean. The plains which can be exploited lie to the west, in modern-day Iraq and historical Mesopotamia and Babylon. **If Iran could dominate these plains, and combine them with its own population, they would be the foundation of Iranian power** (Friedman D. G., 2011).

3.2.5 Internal Dynamics

Underlying the external problems of Iran is a severe internal problem. Iran has a huge population mostly located in rugged mountains. While mountains allow nations to protect themselves, but they also breed ethnicity of strong regional flavours. These groups resist absorption and annihilation. Although a Muslim state with a population that is 55 to 60 percent ethnically Persian, **Iran is divided into a large number of ethnic groups.** It is also divided between the vastly dominant Shia and the minority Sunni, who are clustered in three areas of the country — the northeast, the northwest and the southeast. Thus any Iranian government needs to maintain its internal integrity as its strategic imperative. It is inevitable, therefore, for Iran to have a highly centralized government with an extremely strong security apparatus. Therefore, the **Iranian central government whenever faced with the problem of internal cohesion uses its army and security forces for that purpose before any other.**

Post the 1979 revolution Ayatollah Khomeini laid the foundation of Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). IRGC initially comprised of the paramilitary soldiers loyal to Khomeini and were tasked to defend the country Islamic system as also act as a counter to the armed forces who had seen to be siding with the erstwhile government. Their strength and footprint has continuously grown and today it is responsible for internal and border security, law enforcement, and also Iran's missile forces. Starting with Iran-Iraq war where they played a lead role, the strength today stands at approx. 125,000 military personnel including ground, aerospace and naval forces. **Today ITRGC has footprints in all aspects of Iranian society**, with retired officers heading economic committee and active soldiers - including those of paramilitary Basij militia – monitoring civil society. Its increasing role post 2009 election as also Iraq where it supported the *Popular Mobilisation Forces* – a loose coalition of Shia militia allied to Government – fighting against ISIS, as also proximity to the supreme leader, has led many observer to argue that its power surpass that of the clerics also. The recent incident of 13 Feb 2019, wherein 20 IRGC soldiers were killed in close proximity of Pakistan Border, with Iran blaming *Jaish-al-Adil*, a Sunni extremist group based out of Pakistan shows the distrust with which it is treated in the Arab world. **The antipathy is such that IRGC has been declared as a terrorist organisation by Saudi Arabia and Bahrain** (Middle East Eye, 2019).

3.2.6 Relevance of Iraq

“The Persians originated in the Zagros Mountains as a warrior people. They built an empire by conquering the plains in the Tigris and Euphrates basin. They did this slowly, over an extended period at a time when there were no demarcated borders and they faced little resistance to the west. While it was difficult for a lowland people to attack through mountains, it was easier for a mountain-based people to descend to the plains. This combination of population and fertile plains allowed the Persians to expand” (Friedman D. G., 2011)

This piece of history defines the strategic ambitions of Iran vis-à-vis its neighbour Iraq and Caucus region limited by geography. It is however required to be tempered with modern realities. Iran’s expanding north or northwest into the Caucasus is impossible in force. Iran could expand northeast into Turkmenistan, but the land there is flat and brutal desert. The Iranians could move east into Afghanistan, but this would involve more fighting in the mountains for land of equally questionable value. **Attacking west, into the Tigris and Euphrates river basin, and then moving to the Mediterranean, would only seem doable.** The problem for Iran however is its mountains. They are as effective a container as they are a defensive bulwark. Supporting an attacking force requires logistics, and pushing supplies through the Zagros in any great numbers is impossible. Unless the Persians can occupy and exploit Iraq, further expansion is impossible (Friedman D. G., 2011).

These historical lessons are as relevant as they were in the past history. However in modern context, **in order to exploit Iraq, Iran needs a high degree of active cooperation from Iraqis.** Otherwise, rather than converting Iraq's wealth into political and military power, the Iranians would succeed only in being bogged down. **The invasion of Iraq and its subsequent democratisation leading to devolving power to majority Shia has only aided the Iranians,** and therein lies the significance of Iraq in Iranian design to counter the Sunni world.

3.2.7 Geo-Political Imperatives

For most countries, the first geographical imperative is to maintain internal cohesion. For Iran, it is to maintain secure borders, and then secure the country internally. Without secure borders, Iran would be vulnerable to foreign powers that would continually try to manipulate its internal dynamics, destabilize its ruling regime and then exploit the resulting openings. Iran must first define the container and then control what it contains. Therefore, Iran's geopolitical imperatives (Friedman D. G., 2011):

- Control the Zagros and Elburz Mountains thus guarding north and west borders. Protect Iran's eastern frontiers with Pakistan and Afghanistan. Secure a line on the Shatt al-Arab in order to protect the western coast of Iran on the Persian Gulf.
- Protect the frontiers against potential threats, particularly major powers from outside the region.

- Maintain an extremely powerful and repressive security capability to counter the moves of designs of powers in neighbourhood as also reign in own growing younger population profile.
- Manipulate ethnic and religious tensions in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan to undermine the American positions there and divert American attention to defensive rather than offensive goals.
- Move to create a nuclear force, very publicly, in order to deter attack in the long run and to give Iran a bargaining chip for negotiations in the short term.

3.2.8 **Summary**

In summary, Iran is therefore, a self-contained entity. It is relatively poor, but it has superbly defensible borders and a disciplined central government with an excellent intelligence and internal security apparatus. Iran is superb at low-cost, low-risk power projection using its covert capabilities, primarily through IRGC. Its role in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon is well documented and established. Iran uses these same strengths to destabilize the American position (or that of any extra regional power) around it. Internally, Iran is currently controlling the rebellion which economic sanctions is bound to bring, through a combination of religious feverishness as also strong internal security forces. So long as the mountains are in Iranian hands, and the internal situation is controlled, Iran is a stable state. Its capability to pose an external threat is based on its strong geostrategic location. Juxtaposed between both the American foothold in Middle East (Iraq) and South Asia (Afghanistan) it is capable of playing a spoil

sport. The withdrawal of USA from these theatres and Syria, as proposed by President Trump, will only raise its stock in both domestic and foreign (read Shia) community. **All this gives it the capability to lead the Shia block of countries against the hegemony which Saudi Arabia endeavours over the Muslim world.**

3.3 Geostrategic Importance of Iraq

3.3.1 Geography and History

Iraq is a country in Western Asia spanning most of the north-western end of the

Figure 3.6: Map of Iraq



Source: CIA World Fact Book

Zagros mountain range, the eastern part of the Syrian Desert and the northern part of the Arabian Desert. Iraq is bordered by Jordan to the west, Syria to the

northwest, Turkey to the north, Iran to the east, and Kuwait and Saudi Arabia to the south. Iraq has a narrow section of coastline measuring 58 km (35 miles) on the northern Persian Gulf. Historically, the territory comprising Iraq was known in Europe as 'Mesopotamia' (Land between the rivers).

Iraq has been home to continuous successive civilizations since the 6th millennium BC. The region between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers is identified as the cradle of civilization and the birthplace of writing and the wheel. Throughout its long history, Iraq has been the centre of the Akkadian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Hellenistic, Parthian, Sassanid and Abbasid empires, and part of the Achaemenid, Roman, Rashidun, Umayyad, Mongol, Safavid, Afsharid, Ottoman and British empires.

A large number of Shia sites like Karbala, Najaf, Qom etc are located in Iraq and provide common linkages for the majority Shia population of Iraq with Iran. A number of seminaries are also run here and Shia Islamic Jurist of repute have historical linkages to Iraq.

The Kingdom of Iraq was founded in 1932. An initial period of monarchy was succeeded by military coups and Arab Baathist Party till 1979, when Saddam Hussein took over. The American invasion of 2003 resulted in overthrow of Saddam Hussein and installation of an interim government in 2004 and subsequent installation of a federal parliamentary republic.

3.3.2 **Government and Foreign Policy**

Beginning with an invasion in 2003, Iraq came under military occupation by a multinational coalition of forces, mainly American and British. Sovereignty was transferred to the Iraqi Interim Government in June 2004. A new Constitution of Iraq was then approved by referendum and a new Government of Iraq was elected. The full withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq was mandated under the USA–Iraq Status of Forces Agreement by 31 December 2011, which was completed as per schedule. Iraq held elections for provincial councils in all governorates in January 2009 and April 2013. However the provincial elections, originally planned for April 2017 have been postponed until 2019. Iraq has held three national legislative elections since 2005, most recently in May 2018 when 329 legislators were elected to the Council of Representatives (COR). *Adil-Abdal-Mahdi* assumed the premiership in October 2018 - the first prime minister who is not an active member of a major political bloc and leads a cabinet which has been hailed as one of the most technocratic since 2005.

The period since withdrawal of US forces has seen the advent and establishment of democratic government in Iraq. The period of 2014-17 also saw Iraq fight successfully against the ISIS in the Western and Northern portion of the country. It continues to tread a fine line in its relation with Arab states and Iran, with the influence of Iran and its support to majority Shia population acting as bulwark to Arab interests in retaining control over its affairs. It however faces regional aspirations from both the Sunni community as also the Kurdish minority in its northern region. This finds support from regional Arab

powers and Kurdish minority in South Turkey which leaves a challenge for any government in Baghdad¹⁵.

3.3.3 **Relation with Iran**

In September 1980, Iraq under Saddam Hussein declared the previous settlement of border disputes with Iran null and void and on September 22 1980, invaded Iran. The Iran–Iraq War which was to last till 1988 killed over one million people and critically soured Arab-Iranian relations. In Iraq the conflict was continually presented in a historical context as Arab versus Persian (Farhang, Newton, & Miller, 2011). The **impact of the war was devastating to relations in the region**; general Arab support for Iraq and a fear of Shia Revival led to support for Iraq from bulk of the Arab countries. The Iranian government **officially viewed the conflict not as Arab versus Iranian but from a religious perspective of Shia versus Sunni**. The war was a primary cause for the rise of Anti-Arabism within Iran, which had until then been largely insignificant. The war ended with a UN sponsored cease-fire.

Since 2000 the situation has changed completely. The most **significant factor has been the American decision to attack Iraq in 2003** which led to the fall of Saddam, a Ba’athist leader with pan-Arab sympathies who was determined to balance Shia Iran’s regional influence. With the deposition of Saddam, Iran found a major obstacle to its expansion removed. **This gave Iran in**

¹⁵Accessed at <https://medium.com/@weareiguacu/the-four-main-challenges-for-iraq-ac4057c07458> on 09 Mar 2019

consonance with a like-minded Iraq, a good chance to emerge as a major player in the Middle East with Shia Islamic ideology. Iran has been a close ally to Iraq's new government and has established full diplomatic relations with Iraq. Its support to the majority Shia population has seen favourable government in place. Iran has also intervened in the Iraqi civil war through Shia militia in 2014 and helped to push out the ISIS from Iraq. In 2018 Iran was the largest trading partner of Iraq with a 12 billion dollar trade¹⁶.

3.3.4 **Role in Shia Crescent**

The American invasion has inadvertently removed the biggest hurdle in the expansionist design of Iran. As covered earlier Iraq to its west, remains the only way for Iran to fulfil its “*hegemonic desires*” and exert its influence in the Arab world. With the threat of Saddam gone and majority Shia population expressing itself, all that remained for Iran was to wait the American withdrawal to formulate a more favourable setup in its immediate west. Iraq today has emerged as the most viable player in the Iran’s diplomatic initiative to expand its role and influence in Middle East in particular and Islamic world in general. **The fear of a rising Iran-Iraq nexus was manifested in the reactions of Arab leaders and was echoed by the famous postulation of Shia Crescent / Shia Revival.**

¹⁶ *President Hassan Rouhani remarks during visit of Iraq's President Barham Salih in Tehran, Iran, November 17, 2018. Accessed at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-sanctions-iraq/rouhani-sees-iran-iraq-expanding-trade-despite-u-s-sanctions-idUSKCN1NM09L>*

3.4 Geostrategic Importance of Syria

3.4.1 Geography and History

Syria is a country in Western Asia, bordering Lebanon and the Mediterranean

Figure 3.7: Map of Syria



Source: CIA World Fact Book

Sea to the West, Turkey to the north, Iraq to the east, Jordan to the south, and Israel to the southwest. Modern Syria was created as a French mandate and attained independence in April 1946, as a parliamentary republic. The post-independence period was rocky, and a large number of military coups and coup attempts shook the country in the period 1949-1970. Syria has been under Emergency Law since 1962, effectively suspending most constitutional protections for citizens, and its system of government is considered non-democratic (CIA World Book, 2017).

The Arab spring movement found its echo in anti-government protests which broke out first in the southern province of Dar'a in March 2011, with protesters calling for the repeal of the restrictive Emergency Law allowing arrests without charge, the legalization of political parties, and the removal of corrupt local officials. The government initially responded to unrest with a mix of concessions - including the repeal of the Emergency Law, new laws permitting new political parties, and liberalizing local and national elections - and with military force and detentions. However the waters got muddled with rise of ISIS and Syrian National Coalition backed by the Arab nations. The direct and indirect intervention of USA and Russia and Iran further fanned the civil war which has been continuing since. According to an Apr 2016 UN estimate, the death toll among Syrian Government forces, opposition forces, and civilians was over 400,000. A Mar 2018 report talks of six million Syrian internally displaced, with an additional five million Syrians having fled the country. The UN also estimates 13 million Syrians in need of humanitarian assistance (United Nations, 2019).

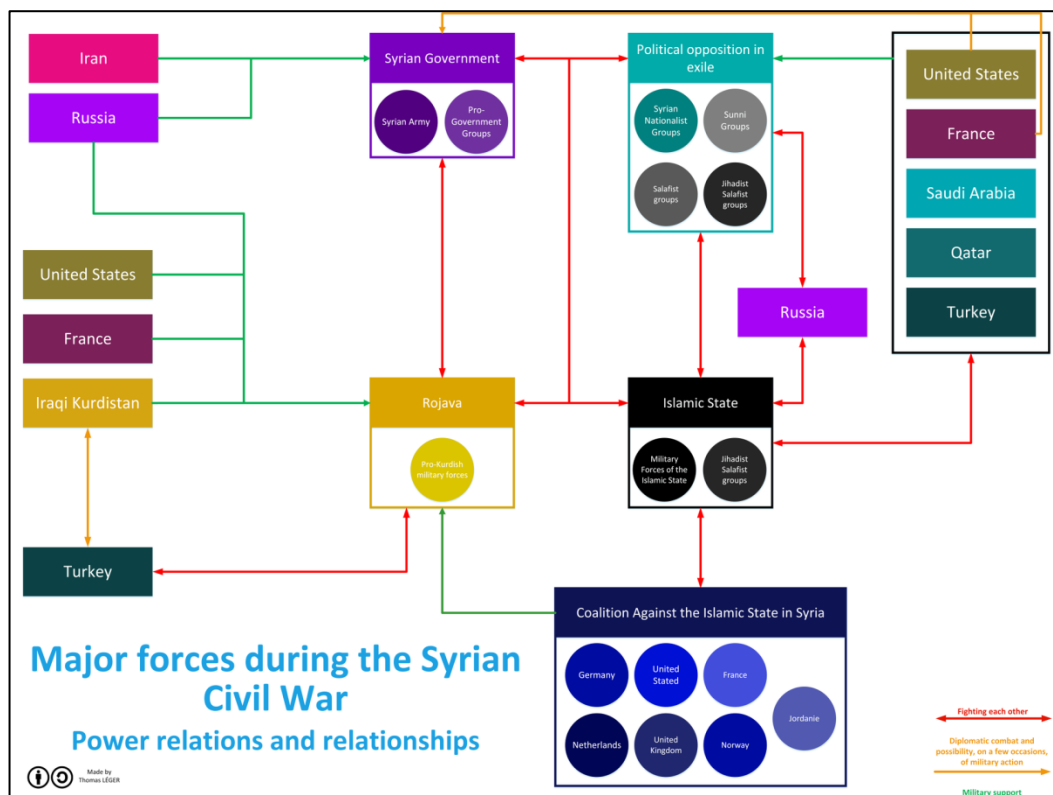
3.4.2 **Government and Foreign Policy**

The country has been governed by the Baath Party since 1963, although actual power is concentrated with the presidency and a narrow grouping of military and political strongmen. Syria's current president is Bashar al-Assad, who won a referendum on extending his presidency for second term, garnering 97.62 percent of votes in 2007 and is the son of Hafez al-Assad, who held office from 1970 until his death in 2000 (CIA World Book, 2017). Syria has played a major

regional role, particularly through its central role in the Arab conflict with Israel, which since 1967 has occupied the Golan Heights, and by active involvement in Lebanese and Palestinian affairs. The population is mainly Sunni Muslim, with a large Shia and Alawite population (15-20%) (PewResearch, 2009), and significant non-Muslim Christian and Druze minorities.

Ethnically, some 80% of the population is Arab, and the state is ruled by the Baath Party according to Arab nationalist principles. Since March 2011, Syria has been embroiled in civil war in the wake of uprisings against the Ba'athist government. An alternative government was formed by the opposition umbrella

Figure 3.8: Syrian War Factions



Source: Source: <https://politics.stackexchange.com/questions/18014/>

group, the Syrian National Coalition, in March 2012. Representatives of this government were subsequently invited to take up Syria's seat at the Arab League (The Guardian, 2013). The opposition coalition was recognised as the "sole representative of the Syrian people" by several nations including the United States, United Kingdom and France.

Iran on the other hand did not give recognition to the Syrian National Coalition and waded into the crisis in support of the Asaad government. Russia has stood by the Assad regime and along with China has blocked / diluted at least 12 UN resolutions from Oct 2011 till Apr 2018 against the Syrian Government. In May 2013, Russia also provided military aid to the Assad regime thus signalling its support to the beleaguered regime. Egypt under Mohammad Morsi has also attempted to broker a peace deal by involving Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey – all disparate nations. While Russia is motivated by its desire to retain Tartus, the Russian naval base on the Mediterranean and economic interests of its arms industry, Egypt is attempting to cement its place in the Middle East political space.

The USA has continued to back the Arab world and supported the Syrian Coalition Forces during the Syrian Civil war. It had vowed the overthrow of Assad regime as one of its goal in the region under President Obama. It has also backed covert training programmes for the rebels in 2014-15. However the Apr 2017 missile attacks on Shayarat Airbase were the first direct US intervention in the region after which air missions were flown in support of the rebels. Through 2018 President Trump continued with the policy of open ended military

presence in Syria, before suddenly ordering withdrawal of American troops by 2019 in Dec 2018. This has provided Russia and Iran a geopolitical win while giving breathing space to Asaad regime, while leaving the American allies in a lurch.

3.4.3 Relation with Iran

During the **Iran–Iraq War**, **Syria sided with Iran** and was isolated by the other Arab countries, with the exception of Libya. Iran and Syria have had a **strategic alliance ever since**, based partially on their common animosity towards Saddam Hussein. On June 16, 2006 the defence ministers of Iran and Syria signed an agreement for military cooperation against what they called the "common threats" presented by Israel and the United States (Saab, 2006). In addition to receiving military hardware, Iran has consistently invested billions of dollars into the Syrian economy. It is no coincidence that the **Syrian leadership**, including President Assad himself, **belongs predominantly to the Alawite branch of Shia Islam**.

3.4.4 Role in Shia Crescent

Syria has always had a strategic relation with Iran. Although it is a predominantly Sunni population but the ruling class has been an Alwaite Shia since 1967. In addition to that the tacit support provided to Hezbollah and the backing during the Syrian civil war since 2011 has firmed the ties. **It is however a mute question asked by many commentators, the veracity of a Shia Crescent extending and finding popular support in a predominant Sunni country** – a schism which can be exploited by the powers to be for

negating the Iranian agenda. The survival of Assad regime is therefore very important for Iran.

3.5 Other Players

Apart from the key players mentioned above, Iran finds support in certain other quarters in the Arab World for varying reasons. A quick summary of some of these areas is as under:-

3.5.1 Bahrain

Iran laid claim to Bahrain as its 14th province in 1957 while it was still under British rule. Bahrain however declared independence in 1971 after a United Nation monitored plebiscite ruled against the merger. A member of Arab league since independence it is also a member of Gulf Cooperation Council and a constitutional monarchy headed by the King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa; the head of government is the Prime Minister. It has a bicameral legislature with a lower house, the Chamber of Deputies, elected by universal suffrage and an upper house, the Shura Council, appointed by the king. The official religion of Bahrain is Islam with approximately 33% Sunni and 66% Shia.

After 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, Bahraini Shia fundamentalists in 1981 orchestrated a failed coup attempt under the auspices of a front organisation, the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain. The coup would have installed a Shia cleric exiled in Iran, Hojjatol-Eslam Hādī al-Mudarrisī, as supreme leader heading a theocratic government. **The Bahraini government unofficially regarded the coup as Iran attempting to overthrow their Sunni**

government. Iran denied all knowledge saying the fundamentalists were inspired by the Iranian revolution but had received no support from Iran. Fearful of a recurrence, the episode caused Bahrain to crack down on its Shia population putting thousands into jail and further **souring relations with Shia Iran.**

The Iran-Iraq war pushed business away from Bahrain due threat of subvert activities by Iran. However establishment of base for coalition forces in 2003 has provided it with a security umbrella. Another uprising in 2010 purportedly on delay in adoption of constitution and led Islamist parties. who had won the majority in 2010 elections, was put down by the support of Saudi troops. Although Bahrain is a forward looking country with sound democratic principles it has its share of restless elements as borne by the failed coup of 1981 and 2010 uprising (Sullivan, 2011).

The shared history as part of Great Persian Empire as also the geo strategic location will always be a motivation for the Iranian hierarchy to amalgamate the Shia population into its great game of creating and ushering a Shia Revival.

3.5.2 Palestine

During the era of the Iranian Monarchy (1948-1979) under the Pahlavi Dynasty, Iran enjoyed cordial relations with Israel. Israel regarded Iran, a non-Arab power on the periphery of the Arab world, as a natural ally and counterweight to Arab ambitions. The Islamic Republic regime of Iran (established after the 1979 Iranian Revolution) closed the Israeli embassy in

Tehran and replaced it with a Palestinian embassy. **Iran favours Palestinian national ambitions and officially endorses the replacement of Israel with a unitary Palestinian state.** Iran does not recognize the state of Israel and instead regards it as 'Palestine under occupation'.

3.5.3 Kuwait

After the Shia Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, Kuwaiti Prime Minister then Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah visited Iran and congratulated the Islamic Revolution leaders, yet the **Sunni led government of Kuwait became fearful of its large Shia population and of possible Iranian hegemonic designs in the Persian Gulf** and began to regard Iran with increasing suspicion. When the Iran–Iraq War broke out with Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran, Kuwait deeply supported the Iraqi move. It was an action that was bitterly resented by Iran. Throughout the war Kuwait provided Iraq with billions of dollars in military and social aid as well as logistical support by allowing Iraqi use of its ports. In 1990, following the Persian Gulf War, Iraqi-Kuwaiti relations suffered bitterly and consequently **Kuwaiti-Iranian relations began to improve.** Bilateral relations were gradually strengthened, with exchanges of Iranian and Kuwaiti political and economic delegations leading to the signing of several economic and trade agreements¹⁷.

¹⁷ Hassan Hanizadeh, *Iran, Kuwait: Persian Gulf's Axis of Stability*, *Tehran Times* Mar. 1 2008

3.5.4 **Jordan**

In 1980, Iran cut all ties with Jordan after the outbreak of Iran–Iraq War. Relations between the two nations resumed in 1991. Post the American war on Iraq King Jordan in 2004 did raise the bogey of Shia Crescent for the first time (Jordan, 2004); however Iran-Jordan relations have always been seen through a prism of Israel-Palestine relations. The speech by the Iranian ambassador on 12th Nov 2011 offering to supply Amman with 30 years of free oil supply and raising the bogey of a common enemy in Israel highlighted the drift towards mending relations in that period. However the blow hot- blow cold nature of Iran-Jordan relation can be ascertained from the fact that based on wiki leaks in the same period, Mosleh-Zadeh, Tehran’s ambassador to Jordan, raised the issue of the “Alternative Homeland,” a much-debated conspiracy theory that postulates a US-backed Israeli plot to create a Palestinian state in Jordan, around 70% of whose population are Palestinian refugees. Also Jordan is also worried over the growing influence of Shiites in its economy, as also the influence Iran has over the Hezbollah in its background. In the Syrian crises and post the Saudi Arabian Embassy burning in Tehran in 2016 it has sided with Arab powers. **Jordan is however the sane voice in the Arab peninsula and links with it provide, Iran a reliable spokesman for its cause¹⁸.**

¹⁸ *Derived from readings at Institute of Iranian Studies accessed at www.rasanah-iiis.org/english/centre-for-researche-and-studies*

CHAPTER – IV

THE SHIA CRESCENT AND THE ARAB MIDDLE EAST

“There is no distinction between modern and ancient history in the Middle East. No region is more obsessed with its own past. Islam began as a force to be reckoned with, and Muslims have longed to return to their former glory”

Richard Enge¹⁹,

4.1 History of Middle East Geo Politics

European geopolitics in the earlier half of the 20th century in the wider Middle East region contributed to a lot towards instability of the region with the British Empire playing a major role in the region. During World War I, in 1916, it convinced Arab leaders to revolt against the Ottoman Empire (which was allied with Germany). In return, the British government would support the establishment of an independent Arab state in the region, including Palestine. Yet, in contradiction to this, and to also get support of Jewish people, in 1917, Lord Arthur Balfour, then British Foreign Minister issued the Balfour Declaration²⁰ announcing support for the establishment of “a Jewish national home in Palestine.” The Ottoman Empire, which was allied with the Central Powers, was defeated, and partitioned it into a number of separate nations,

¹⁹ *Author of And Then All Hell Broke Loose: Two Decades in the Middle East. Published February 9th 2016 by Simon & Schuster, Inc*

²⁰ *The Balfour Declaration was a public statement issued by the British government in 1917 during World War I announcing support for the establishment of a "national home for the Jewish people" in Palestine, then an Ottoman region with a small minority Jewish population. The declaration was contained in a letter dated 2 November 1917 from the United Kingdom's Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour to Lord Rothschild, a leader of the British Jewish community, for transmission to the Zionist Federation of Great Britain and Ireland. The text of the declaration was published in the press on 9 November 1917*

initially under British and French Mandates. After World War II, the newly formed United Nations recommended the partition of Palestine into two states and the internationalization of Jerusalem. The minority Jewish people received the majority of the land. The State of Israel was proclaimed on May 14 1948, but the Arab states rejected the partition of Palestine and the existence of Israel. The armies of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Trans-Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Egypt attacked but were defeated by the Israeli army. **Israel has thereafter continued to be the rallying point for Middle East Politics.** The role of British Empire was taken up by USA & Russia initially during the Cold War era and thereafter by the USA as the sole superpower in the world.

The second major event which has played a major part in the geo politics of the region has been the discovery of oil. The region's significant stocks of crude oil gave it new strategic and economic importance. Mass production of oil began around 1945, with Saudi Arabia, Iran, Kuwait, Iraq, and the United Arab Emirates having large quantities of oil. Estimated oil reserves, especially in Saudi Arabia and Iran, are some of the highest in the world (See Figure 6.2 at Page 110), and the international oil cartel OPEC is dominated by Middle Eastern countries. The control of this energy reserve has influenced the policies of many nations which form the Middle East as also of the international community dealing with these states. The oil finds in the region in the late 1940's were to boost the economy of the region and provided the rulers with unbridled powers. The powers of the World – USA & Russia – in their own capacity have favoured regimes which are autocratic thus ensuring easier control over the oil resources

The third major factor dictating the history has been the religious fault lines which run through this region. As events analysed in earlier Chapters indicate the Islamic world has been historically divided along the Shia-Sunni fault lines. Saudi Arabia which is home to Mecca and Medina – holiest shrines of the faith – takes its leadership role in Arab world for granted. Egypt is the other power which stakes its claims for the mantle of leadership from time to time. That it shares a border with Israel and controls the Suez Canal has influenced its many attempts in the past to control events in the region. The Shia's – as covered earlier – have borne the brunt of Sunni supremacy and have practised their faith in quiet. Iran which has been home to the largest Shia population has borne the mantle of leadership for this community. It is however separated from the Arab world and is referred to as a “Persian Power”. Iraq with a Shia majority and home to the revered sites of Samarra, Kadhimiya, Najaf, Karbala and Kufa borders Iran, but is considered to be an integral part of Arab World. These religious dichotomies have dictated the shenanigans of the Middle East and interplay between the key players i.e. Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iran and Iraq. A study of their relations is the key to understanding the nuances of the region.

4.2 **Iranian Relation with the Arab World**

4.2.1 **Iran – Saudi Arabia: Manifestation of the Shia-Sunni Divide**

After the founding of the modern state of Saudi Arabia in 1932, Saudi-Iranian relations were initially colored by the lens of the ancient Shia-Sunni conflict. Riyadh and Tehran developed more cordial relations under the rule of King

Saud and King Faisal. Their relationship remained rooted within strategic and political arenas, and to a certain extent was pushed forward by the American agenda in the region. Both countries relations with America remained amiable until the Islamic Revolution in 1979. The geopolitical situation was based on a bipolar system where “*The Great Game*” came back to the Middle East under the muted form of the Cold War. Iran and Saudi Arabia, feared both the expansion of the Soviet Union (Communism) in the Persian/Arabian Gulf and Arab nationalism such as that of Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser and remained united under the tutelage of USA (Tristram, 2018).

Three events in 1979 changed the discourse of the region and caused fresh alignment of forces. The Iranian revolution brought the Shia clergy into limelight as head of government in Islamic principle of *Velayat-e-Faqih*²¹. The new Islamic regime denounced the corruption of the Saudis and accused them of serving American interests. A second event was the 14 days siege of Al-Masjid al-Haram in Mecca in Nov 1979, by Juhayman al-Otaybi a member of the Ikhwan (soldiers of Saudi Wahhabism) and his followers attempted to highlight the lax Islamic practices of House of Saud. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was another event which threatened the American hegemony in South Asia. All this lead to perceived threatening of leadership of Muslim world by Saudi Arabia and lead to hardening of its stand. Support for USA

²¹ *Vilayat-e-Faqih, it is a theory of Shia Islam which gives custodianship of people to a Faqih (Islamic Jurist)*

intervention in Afghanistan with Pakistan as front line state was a result of this policy.

The Islamic revolution was also seen as the first sign of a Shia revival that could threaten Saudi national stability and help expand Iranian influence. The Saudi government retaliated by declaring that its Iranian counterpart's aim was to export revolution. The Iran-Iraq War, in which Saudi Arabia and the United States helped Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, paved the way for further deterioration in Saudi-Iranian relations. This diplomatic and economic isolation intensified during the Iran-Iraq War in which almost all Arab states, except Syria, supported Iraq logistically and economically on moral grounds. According to some observers, Saddam Hussein fought on behalf of other Arab states that viewed the Islamic Republic of Iran as a potential threat to their stability. Relations between Tehran and Riyadh improved only after the 1991 war over Kuwait, although they remained constrained by past grievances²².

Since the Islamic revolution, Iran has been promoting itself as the only legitimate umbrella for all the Shia's of the region, while nurturing the ambition of being the greater representative of all Muslims. Iran, being officially a Shia state, safeguards Shia Islam and acts as a reference point to many Shia movements worldwide through funding programs or political support. This support has been provided to Shia groups in Iraq, to Hezbollah in

²² Accessed at <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/11/iran-saudi-arabia-troubled-affair-2013111961213978211.html>

Lebanon, and even to some Sunni groups, such as Hamas in the Palestinian territories. Iran has developed strong relations with popular Shia parties abroad, becoming politically more influential. Consequently, Iran is seen as a threat to Saudi Arabia, the symbol of Sunni ideology, and to Saudi influence in the Middle East. The Iraq war unintentionally paved the way for consolidation of this Iranian position and opened doors, for the first time, for Iran to have a direct influence in Iraq and in turn the Arab World. **The areas of conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran can thus be summarized as different vision of religious order, different political ideology, aspiration for a leadership role in the Middle East, and relations with America.** The nuclear ambitions of Iran and the Saudi opposition to same are but a small piece in the entire complex scenario (Nasr, 2006).

4.2.2 **Iran-Egypt: A Relationship in the Making**

Egypt, on the other hand, sees itself as a cradle of the civilisation and has desired to play a frontal role in politics of Middle East. Dr. Muqtedar Khan an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Delaware and Fellow of the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding while writing for South Asian Institute of Strategic Analysis (SAISA) in his article *“Change in Egypt will Change the Region”* in 2011, had contemplated that *“Egypt is the key to the Arab world. Its enduring authoritarian regime is the biggest hurdle to democracy and freedom in the region. Saudi Arabia has long been a rival to Egyptian hegemony in the Arab world. But a country that has never fought a war for its people does not truly inspire the Arab imagination.*

Whatever influence Saudi Arabia has, it has been bought with petro dollars. Egypt on the contrary has been the engine of Arab imagination, its intellectual and political centre. If Egypt becomes democratic, democracy will become the norm in the Arab World.”

The relationship between Egypt and Iran has been rocky throughout the post-Second World War period. While maintaining diplomatic relations, the two countries often found themselves at odds with one another because of their respective ideological allegiances. Relations between Nasser’s revolutionary Egypt and Iran began to sour when Iran’s Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh was toppled in a CIA-backed coup in 1953 and the Shah became increasingly dependent on the US. Nasser saw this and the Shah’s *de facto* recognition of Israel as a betrayal. When Anwar Sadat came to power in October 1970, Egypt adopted a more westward-looking foreign policy which naturally brought it closer to the monarchy in Tehran. This close relationship and Sadat’s signing of the Camp David Accord became liabilities in the eyes of the newly established Islamic Republic post the revolution of 1979. Furthermore, Anwar Sadat infuriated the new Iranian government by welcoming Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the exiled Shah of Iran. In 1979, Iran officially cut all ties with Egypt. Relations did not improve as Egypt supported Iraq during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War. It was only after the revolution which ousted Mubarak in February 2011 and Egypt relation with Israel soured, that Iran tried to mend fences with Egypt. Egypt blamed Israel for starting hostilities that led to violence in the Gaza strip in March 2012 and, in spite of the 33-year-old peace treaty, an Egyptian parliamentary resolution stated: ‘*Egypt will never*

*be the friend, partner or ally of the Zionist entity [Israel] which we consider as the first enemy of Egypt and the Arab nation.*²³ Iran attempted to find a supporter in its Anti-American stand in the Egypt under Presidentship of Mohamed Morsi, but the pressure of maintaining its Arab ties kept the relations at neutral.

Egypt on the other hand has sought to play a balancing act to avoid alienating its allies. It has maintained an ambiguous stance *via-a-vis* Iran: In July 2011, while courting Gulf states at a meeting of the Arab League, the then Egyptian foreign minister and newly elected Arab League chief, Nabil Al-Arabi said: *“Relations with Iran won’t be at the expense of Egypt’s relations with the Arab Gulf, or [at the] expense of [Gulf states’] security and stability.*²⁴” This helped to woo Gulf Cooperation Council members, who individually pledged significant economic assistance packages to Egypt, in an effort to coax Egypt away from Iranian influence. To Iran’s dismay, this was followed by assurances from the Muslim Brotherhood that despite recent statements, the peace treaty with Israel would be upheld (Mozgovaya, 2012). Simultaneously Morsi attended the NAM meeting in Iran and handed over the presidency to Iran while at the same venue chided Syria (close ally of Iran). Egypt under Mohammad Morsi also attempted to regain its leadership status in Middle East by attempting to bring together disparate group of Saudi Arabia. Iran, Turkey on situation

²³ Accessed at <https://www.rt.com/news/egypt-israel-enemy-gaza-485/> on 03 mar 2019

²⁴ Accessed at <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/iran-and-egypt-complicated-tango> on 03 Mar 2019

concerning Syria in Aug 2012. This was rejected by USA on ground of inclusion of Iran as a player in the negotiations. However Egypt continued to attempt this formation in a bid to resolve the Syrian issue which many felt was a viable way forward then (D.KirkPatrick, 2012). However the reign of Morsi was too short lived to create any tangible gains and his ouster in 2013 set Egypt on a path which was more aligned towards its Arab roots.

Iran also attempted to woo Egypt during the reign of Morsi and Muslim Brotherhood by selling it oil with Iranian Oil Minister Rostam Qasemi quoted as saying in Sep 2012 that Iran was in talks to sell two million barrels of oil to Egypt. Iran has also accepted criticism on Syria even when delivered on its homeland during the visit of Egyptian President in 2012, in an **attempt to build ties with Egypt which it saw in its new avatar under Muslim Brotherhood as a close ally capable of thwarting Saudi Arabia) domination of political space in Middle East**²⁵. However the overthrow of Muslim Brotherhood and election of President Abdelfattah Elsisi in 2014 (re-elected in 2018) set Egypt on a middle path, where it is trying to balance its relation with all key players and grow internally before seeking a bigger role for itself. In 2016 it has faced economic crisis and deft handling by the government supported by military has put it on path of recovery. History and Geography, however portends a bigger role for Egypt – the original proponent of Arab nationalism – in the Middle East, provided it can set its internal health right.

²⁵ *ibid*

4.2.3 **Rise of Sunni Revolutionary: A Wild Card**

The emergence of Sunni revolutionary also called “Salafi Jihadist” has added a third major player in Middle East politics. The term is sometimes synonymous with “Wahhabism” – so named after its originator, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, of Saudi Arabia – an extremely strict form of Islam. However that analogy may always not be correct considering that the ‘Salafis’ find eulogising an individual heretic and the term Wahhabism inadvertently eulogises Abdul Wahab. **“Salafi” refers to the extreme sect of Islam which believes in purification of Islam and taking it back to the first 300 years of its origin when it was at the purest.**

Saudi Arabia, since 1979, has branded Revolutionary Shia Islam as the religion of the state of Iran and has continued to fight against it and gained USA and Arab world support for same. Saudi monarchy, while fighting against Iranian Revolutionary Government, simultaneously had sought to balance internal opposition demands with external policies by promulgating its special branch of conservative Islam known as Wahhabism.

Sep 2001 attacks on Twin Towers³ in New York and subsequent events have turned this argument of Saudi – branding Islamic Revolution of 1979 as Revolutionary - on its head. 15 of 19 terrorist involved in 9/11 were of the Saudi origin highlighted the threat which extreme ideology posed. The rise of ISIS and its raising the banner of Caliphate in Middle East brought the Sunni government into direct confrontation with these elements. Further east, post the Afghan Operations and decimation of Al-Qaeda, the government of Pakistan

has been declared a legitimate target of these jihadists because of its close ties with the United States in the post-9/11 era. **No clear political-military alliance is developing among the Sunni states to counter the ‘Salafi Jihadist’ threat.** In fact, an argument is being made that the Sunni governments are confused about how proactive they ought to be in reforming their Islamic curricula without triggering the criticism from Sunni religious scholars that they are playing politics with Islam merely to appease the United States (Ahrari, 2006).

Shia Islam in Iran is on the other hand free of such profound tensions that undermine the legitimacy of the governments. The real significance of the Shia Crescent was / is that it is challenging the strategic dominance of the United States and its allies in the Middle East, in a manner that no Sunni state ever did. Ehsan Ahrari in this article *“The Real Challenge From the ‘Shia Crescent’* in 2006 wrote *“The only similar challenge to both the U.S. and the Sunni states is coming from Salafi forces. However, since no state is behind those forces, the real threat stemming from their activities has not yet jelled. In the post-9/11 era, when Islamic radical forces are running rampant, taking on the United States, the Arab regimes, and Israel, a potential coalescing of the Shia (or Shia-dominated) states is causing a lot of consternation among the Sunnis”*.

This summation is still valid as events in Pakistan, Syria and Yemen show the threat of Salafi Jihadist. Arab Nations are now looking at developing nationalism as a counter to this threat rather than look at pan-Arab / pan-Islamic nationalism as their primary goal. Saudi Arabia under Crown Prince Salman has taken baby steps in this regards post 2017, with rapprochement

attempts to woo minority Shia, attempts at presenting a more modern outlook during foreign visits etc.

4.3 Are Shia's Rising: A Counter View

The study would be incomplete without analysing a counter view to the aspect of Shia's rise. Maximilian Terhalle while analysing this aspect in his article "*Are The Shia Rising?*" in Middle East Policy Council in 2007, has contended that that the "**Shia Rise**" **lacks both the political and religious cohesiveness of what is conceived of as a monolithic Shia bloc with Iran as its driving force.** He argues that **first** Shia populations are shaped by local social, political and economic conditions. External influence has not managed to successfully compete with the respective states' national interests. **Second**, international relations and the pursuit of national interests have severely restrained the extension of a transnational movement based on a common belief system. **Third**, nationalism has had a firmer grip on Shia loyalty than common beliefs, thereby undercutting politically exploited aspirations. Also Iran's minimal trade with neighboring countries does not contribute to strengthening of Iranian influence either.

He further argues that the factual strength emanating from the alleged "Shia Crescent" is minimal, since the conditions on which its influence is predicated are weak. Rather, the nuclear context, which frames all of these discussions, is a multilayered political problem and not a religious issue. This, in turn, allows for a political understanding. He contradicts Ehteshami's allegation — the "Shia Crescent" will not shake "the very foundations of the political orders that were

resurrected atop the old Ottoman territories early last century. The author feels that the perception of a “Shia Crescent” is distinctly different and serves a certain policy. He argues that in the case of Saudi Arabia, this perceived threat is taken advantage of for political reasons, partly “coded” in a rivalry. With the kingdom indirectly pressuring the United States to defend Iraq’s Sunnis, this serves the purpose of halting a premature withdrawal of U.S. troops from the region. As per the author, **the real issues behind the “Shia Crescent” concern the unresolved geopolitical arrangements in the region, stretching over almost three decades.** The sectarian argument, well-known and frequently utilized, serves as a means to reassure Sunni rulers of the legitimacy of their actions. Important external players could take decisive steps to undermine the perpetuation of this status quo.

A similar argument has been raised by Talmiz Ahmed in “*Sectarianism and Security Implications for West Asia*” (Prasanta Kumar Pradhan, 2016), wherein he argues that concept of Shia Crescent is not based on any rational thoughts but being used as a tool to mobilization and political competition by both Saudi Arabia and Iraq. As per him the Shia do not have a central authority and both seminaries at Najaf (Iraq) and Qom (Iran) carry equal weightage. Even concept of *velayet-e-faqih*, has been disputed by prominent clergymen in Iran and has not been accepted in Najaf. Also political mobilization within Shia has not been monolithic. *Dawwa* and *Message*, both transnational activist networks have different origins and followers within Shia Islam. Further Shia’s of Iran and Iraq have placed their national rather than religious identity on forefront when deciding issues in past. Lastly he argues that Palestine struggle, which unites the

Arab world, has support without sectarian bias and Iran has found considerable popularity in a predominant Sunni cause.

The author however does agree that **rise of Iran is seen as a threat by Saudi Arabia and availability of Iraq Shia in its support only complicates matter further. Iran on the other hand sees USA-Saudi Arabia-Israel nexus as an existential threat and endeavors to use all possible means to raise support for its cause.** Its largest Shia population base, covert nuclear capability and a controlled society gives it the inherent leadership mantle in the Shia community. Also its anti USA stands finds more resonance in radical Arab world rather than the all accommodating Saudi Arabia – USA relation, forcing Saudi Arabia to increase the rhetoric around the Shia Crescent.

CHAPTER V

USA POLICY IN MIDDLE EAST

“Since World War-II, bearing the burden of global leadership, sustaining liberal trading regime and promoting democratic values has been the tripod on which American foreign policy has rested”

Anon

“There is much continuity between Trump and Obama; the USA does not have answers to the complicated problems of the Middle East and is not willing to fight a major war to try and solve them”

Philip Gordon (Council on Foreign Relations): Jan 2019

5.1 History

World War –I saw the Ottoman Empire align with Germany. This brought the western powers into the arena of Middle East. Prior to this discovery of oil in 1908 in Iran had seen Western economic activity take place. In 1914, British soldiers were deployed at Basra, in southern Iraq, to protect oil supplies from neighboring Persia. The defeat of Ottoman Empire aided by the Arab revolt led by Sharif Hussein – hereditary ruler of Mecca – and subsequent betrayal by Allied forces created a number of British and French colonies in the Middle East. This brought a lot of antipathy against the British and French. **The United States exhibited little interest in gaining territory and focused on commercial interest.** Red Line Agreement of 1928²⁶ and humanitarian

²⁶ *The 1928 Red Line Agreement was a deal struck between several American, British, and French oil companies concerning the oil resources within territories that formerly comprised the Ottoman Empire within the Middle East at the end of World War-I. Details accessed at <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1921-1936/red-line> on 04 Mar 2019*

assistance were some of the positives which were associated with United States in the Middle East. This was **responsible for Middle East traditional affinity towards the Americans** versus British and French who they hold responsible for creation of Israel (Tristam, 2018).

American troops were stationed for the first time in Iran during World War II to help transfer military supplies to the Soviet Union and protect Iranian oil. At the end of the war, **President Truman solidified America's relationship with Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi**, in Iran and also brought Turkey into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The end of World War-II also saw exit of British and French from their colonies in face of Arab Nationalism. Creation of Israel and USA (President Truman) recognition of State of Israel within 11 minutes after its creation on 14 May 1948, was another landmark step in cementing place of USA as a prime western power in Middle East (Tristam, 2018). The importance of Oil had been driven home to all concerned and its control became the new battleground. Anglo-American Petroleum Agreement in 1944 divided the Middle East oil rights and ability to control global prices between these two allies. The arrangement kept both the Persian and Arab oil (in turn relation with the countries of Iran and Saudi Arabia) with the western powers on even keel. This also set tone for *Cold War* battles which were to be fought in the region in coming years.

In 1953, **President Eisenhower ordered the CIA to depose Mohammed Mossadegh, the popular, elected leader of the Iranian parliament** and an ardent nationalist who opposed British and American influence in Iran. The

coup severely tarnished America's reputation among Iranians, who lost trust in American claims of protecting democracy. Eisenhower regime also saw the nationalization of Suez Canal by Egypt but refused to join the war. The Vietnam War (1955-1973) saw the focus of USA shift away from Middle East. However in the intervening period, President Johnson openly sided with Israel during the Six Days War of 1967 and in Yom Kippur War of 1973, bringing it into a potential confrontation with the Soviet Union over the Middle East. The resultant oil embargo of 1973 brought effect of rising prices to USA and it negotiated between Israel, Syria and Egypt. This sequence of events beginning with Six Day War established the supremacy of Americans in Middle East politics.

Jimmy Carter's presidency (1977-1981) saw **Carter's mediation led to the 1978 Camp David Accord and the 1979 peace treaty between Egypt and Israel**, which included a huge increase in U.S. aid to Israel and Egypt. On the flip side, the **Iranian Revolution** started in 1978 with demonstrations against the regime of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, and culminating with the establishment of an Islamic Republic, with Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, on April 1, 1979. It was also followed in Nov 1979, by **the (in) famous 444 days siege of the American Embassy**, culminating in release of 52 hostages only on the day Ronald Reagan was inaugurated as the President in 1981 (the last of the hostages was released only in Dec 1991)².

The **Reagan years, or the decade of eighties was marked by the American involvement in the Israel-Lebanon war and withdrawal post bombing of**

USA Embassy in Beirut and the Iran-Contra affair (arms-for-hostages deals with Iran). The administration along with Saudi Arabia also supported Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88), in the belief, that Saddam could destabilize the Iranian regime and defeat the Islamic Revolution.

August 1990 saw the start of **Operation Desert Shield by the US Army under the leadership of George H W Bush** after Saddam Hussein led Iraq invaded Kuwait. The initial aim was to defend Saudi Arabia – a key ally through all these years. Operation Desert Shield became **Operation Desert Storm** when Bush shifted strategy – from defending Saudi Arabia to repelling Iraq from Kuwait. Kuwait was liberated after a 38 days air campaign and 100 hour ground war but the push to invade Iraq did not happen. Only a No Fly Zone was implemented which did not stop Saddam Hussein from prosecuting Shia's of Iraq for not supporting his cause. The period also saw American launch **Operation Restore Hope**, involving 25,000 U.S. troops, which was designed to help stem the spread of famine caused by the Somali civil war. One of the opponents of American forces – Osama bin Laden – was to play a key part in shaping the later year American policy in Middle East.

The **Clinton years (1993-2001) were in some sense seen as the years in which USA attempted the “nation building”** philosophy. However the failure of Oslo Accord of 1993 and the collapse of Camp David summit in Dec 2000 prevented the Clinton legacy to flourish. Also, throughout the Clinton administration, terrorist attacks orchestrated by the increasingly public Osama bin Laden punctured the 1990s' post-cold war air of quietude. From the 1993

World Trade Centre bombing to the bombing of the USS Cole, a Navy destroyer, in Yemen in 2000 the footprint of USA across the Middle East were increasingly being challenged by the extremist Islamic groups.

The **policy was initially derided by his successor George W Bush but was turned back after the Twin Towers attacks of September 11³**. Bush Jr had the world's backing when he led an attack on Afghanistan in October 2001 to topple the Taliban regime there, which had given sanctuary to Al-Qaeda. Bush's expansion of the "war on terror" to Iraq in March 2003, however, had less backing (Tristram, 2018).

5.2 **Analysis of US Policy in Middle East (1953-2001)**²⁷

The period saw the **U.S. policy in the Middle East based on principles of Anti-Communism and ensuring access to Middle Eastern petroleum. Two key alliances with Israel and Saudi Arabia** saw through this period without many major hiccups. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 saw Iran turn pariah for USA. The challenge of its exporting the revolution to Middle East was met with supporting rise of deeply conservative Wahhabi form of Islam propagated by Saudi Arabia. The availability of oil with Saudi Arabia and its ability to control the Arab world was another key reason for the alliance. It also acted in mutual support against Egypt which under Abdel Nasser professed Pan-Arabian spirit and attempted leadership of Arab world. Israel its other ally has been supported

²⁷ *Derived from readings of the quoted work by Juan Cole: "The Iraqi Shiites"*

through the times based on requirements of domestic constituencies. It has also acted as counter to a strong Arab world which could dictate policies based on its economic might.

The United States could maintain an alliance with both the Zionist state and the Wahhabi kingdom, even though the two did not care very much for one another, because both disliked the Soviets and leftist Palestinians. Also because the **Cold War was a contest of economic systems**, Riyadh supported Western European prosperity by investing (“recycling”) its petrodollars back into the West. Saudi Arabia also acted as a key ally in fight against Iraq when it captured Kuwait and had to be forced out. The rise of extreme Islam and targeting of USA on its home soil (Sep 11 attacks³) with participation of 15 Saudi national was a turning point in US-Saudi relations.

5.3 **Post 9/11 – USA Middle East Policy**

In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, the newly inaugurated Bush administration launched a new – and in some respects even revolutionary - strategy for the Middle East. Inspired by *neo-conservative ideology*, the **Bush administration set out to transform the political and strategic landscape of the Middle East**, essentially combining classic Wilsonian ideals of **spreading democracy** with realist assertions about the necessity of **using military force; unilaterally if needed**.

According to this theory, democracy was a long-term remedy for the many security challenges emanating from the region and was therefore, in the security realm, in the best interest of the US to further democracy building. It was

believed that the so-called lack of democracy in the Arab world was the primary reason for the region's social stagnation, endemic corruption, and popular dissatisfaction. The Arab predicament had strengthened Islamist movements, who had emerged as the only real alternative and oppositional force to incumbent regimes. The absence of peaceful democratic channels through which opposition and grievance could be expressed had caused Islamic extremism and in the last instance terrorism to grow. And hence by conversion, **by supporting processes of democratisation, the USA would be uprooting the very causes of terrorism.** In a famous 2003 speech to the National Endowment for Democracy²⁸, Bush boldly proclaimed that *“60 years of tactical cooperation and support of authoritarian governments had neither brought the USA stability, nor served as a bulwark against Islamist radicalism. On the contrary, the close alliance with dictators in the region had brought 9/11 and a sea change was long overdue.”*

This facet of USA policy in Middle East post 2001 focused immediately on the Israel Palestine conflict. The administration was convinced of the need for a leadership (Yasser Arafat) change and this belief was strengthened in the wake of 9/11, when Israel successfully aligned its own battle against Palestinian militants in Gaza and the West Bank with the Bush administration's “Global War on Terror”. Israel and the USA seemed to agree that Arafat could not be

²⁸ Accessed at <https://www.ned.org/remarks-by-president-george-w-bush-at-the-20th-anniversary/> on 01 Mar 2019

trusted and that he was incapable or perhaps even unwilling, to control Hamas and Islamic Jihad. The USA sought more or less to edge Arafat out of power in 2004 and embraced the nomination of Mahmoud Abbas as prime minister. **In the new scheme of things the Palestinian authority needed to undertake political reforms** – notably of the security sector and having elections – before the USA would engage in serious Middle East Peace efforts. This downplaying of peace negotiations and upgrading of democratic reform was also evident in relation to the Arab government in general. **The Bush administration held a belief that Arab leaders had to recognise that it was not the Arab-Israeli conflict, but the lack of democracy, which constituted the underlying cause of the region’s problems.** This policy shift was in many ways a revolutionary decision, as for long the Arab-Israel conflict had been a defining feature of security infrastructure in the region and goalpost of its resolution were now being changed (Prasanta Kumar Pradhan, 2016).

Democracy was to be promoted by both military and diplomatic means as per this policy. Launch of Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI)²⁹, as early as 2002, by Colin Powell (US Secretary of State) supplemented by Broader

²⁹ *MEPI was a U.S. State Department program announced in Dec 2002 at Heritage Foundation Washington DC. The aim of the programme is to foster meaningful and effective partnerships between citizens, civil society, the private sector, and governments in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region to resolve local challenges and promote shared interests in the areas of participatory governance and economic opportunity and reform. It is headquartered at US State Department.*

Middle East and North Africa Initiative (BMENA)³⁰ were some of the diplomatic tools used. At the same time, however, the USA was preparing for war against Iraq. The overthrow of Saddam Hussein was not only to hinder Iraq from requiring nuclear weapons; it was supposedly also designed to establish the conditions for lasting peace and freedom in the region. Some hints of military initiative in the offing were seen for example in the Vice President Dick Cheney's speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars 103rd National Convention, on 26th Aug 2002, where he argued that regime change in Iraq should be seen as an opportunity for people in the region to grow up in freedom and dignity instead of oppression and poverty, terror and tyranny. It was hoped that Iraq would emerge as a beacon of democracy, spreading liberal ideas and inspiring reforms in the region. Iraqi democracy would prove the thesis of Arab exceptionalism wrong, both by inducing people in the region to call for reform and by putting indirect pressure on Iraq's neighbouring regimes to democratise.

The Iraq war thus turned out to be the defining feature of American Middle East Policy post 2001. The administration also viewed Iraq as its new stronghold in the Gulf, as a counter against Saudi Arabia which had been a staunch ally since the 1950's. The terrorist attacks against the Twin Towers and Pentagon in 2001³ changed the equation. The House of Saud was obviously not behind the attacks, but it was at the same time well known that

³⁰ *Refers to meeting of G8 nations leaders with leaders of Afghanistan, Algeria, Bahrain, Jordan, Turkey Yemen and newly independent Iraq on initiative of President Bush in Nov 2003 with the aim to discuss the challenges faced in the region*

the Saudi monarchy for years had sought to balance internal opposition demands with external policies by promulgating its special branch of conservative Islam known as Wahhabism. 15 out of the 19 terrorists involved in the terrorist attacks had Saudi origin, and the American public raised questions about the long-term strategic logic of maintaining such close ties with the Saudi Royal family. The Saudi monarchy was also increasingly pressured from within – ironically not least from Bin Laden’s rhetoric – to make the USA withdraw from “The Land of the Two Holy Places”. In 2002, the Saudis thus denied the Bush administration use of its air bases for the Iraq invasion, and in the autumn of 2003, American troops and military infrastructure were pulled out of the permanent bases in Saudi Arabia, redeployed to Qatar, and of course to Iraq. Iraqi Oil was also visualized as a counter to Saudi Oil on which USA had been dependent since its discovery.

The invasion and subsequent regime change in Iraq were to thus change the strategic alliances in the Gulf in the short run and adjust the political landscape of Middle Eastern states in the long run. This logic was also in part held to be true in terms of Iran with which USA had no official relation post the embassy hostage crisis of 1979. The Clinton administration had followed dual containment policy involving Iraq and Iran, however the Bush regime went on the offensive with regards Iran also. In 2002, Iran was lumped

together with North Korea and Iraq as part of the “Axis of Evil³¹”. Strong quarters of the Bush administration in fact believed that the **war in Iraq would also solve the US security problems with Iran**, serving either to frighten the clerical leadership into moderation or inspiring the Iranian people to rebel against their oppressors.

By end of 2006, however USA was sucked into the quagmire of Iraqi sectarian politics. It was clear that the Iraq war had not eroded the power of Iranian regime. On the contrary it had strengthened it both domestically and regionally. These rising tensions culminated with the war between Israel and Hezbollah and the simultaneous crackdown on Hamas in 2006. The region was now on the brink of three civil wars in Iraq, Palestine and Lebanon, and this contributed to a U-turn in the US Middle East strategy.

5.4 **2006-2007: A Turning Point for US Policies**

In the midst of Israel’s pursuit of Hamas in Gaza, aerial strikes in Beirut, and Iraqi quagmire **America unveiled yet another “new Middle East Policy”**. This Middle East in the making was no longer defined by an axis of evil, but by a **battle between “moderates” and “extremists”**. On the **side of the latter stood Hezbollah, Hamas, Syria and above all Iran**, whereas the **former side was less explicitly defined, but seemingly including Israel, Jordan, Egypt**

³¹ *The phrase was first used by U.S. President George W. Bush in his State of the Union address on January 29, 2002, to describe foreign governments that, during his administration, sponsored terrorism and sought weapons of mass destruction*

and Saudi Arabia. According to this new perception of the Middle East, each conflict of the region was locked into a larger battle between moderates and extremists. **This dichotomised version of the region superimposed a somewhat orderly and neat image of the region's security problems,** while also allowing the Bush administration to turn around on key positions and assumptions with respect to democracy promotion, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the strategic possibilities in the Gulf.

Prior to this, Saudi Arabia and Egypt had been singled out as particularly in need of reform, and the regimes' appalling human rights records had frequently been mentioned in foreign policy speeches and diplomatic conversations. With the Middle East divided along lines of "extremist" and "moderates", **the authoritarian character of the regimes in Saudi Arabia and Egypt were now considered less of a problem, if not completely forgotten.** In the fight against Iranian hegemony and the growing regional influence of Hezbollah and Hamas, the so-called moderate Arab regimes were once again considered key allies and strategic assets in the power balancing games of the region. The Bush administration was only too willing to turn a blind eye to democratic setbacks be it the postponing of elections by Mubarak regime in 2006 or closing of ranks in Saudi Arabia, since the incumbent **Arab rulers again were seen as necessary partners in the fight against so-called Islamic extremists.** The period also saw the coining of term "Shia Crescent" possibly to highlight the growing ascendancy of Iran in the regional affairs and to colour it with the vision of Shia-Sunni divide.

A fresh initiative was undertaken to resolve the **Israel-Palestine** issue. With the launch of the Annapolis conference of November 2007, Bush aimed to reach an Israeli-Palestinian agreement on the foundations of a Palestinian state within a year – a truly ambitious agenda considering that the Palestinians were under two separate governments and internally at war, the Israeli leadership was exceptionally weak with Prime Minister Ehud Olmert under criminal investigation for corruption. While many reasons are propagated for this delayed interest in the region, seen from the new formulation of a ‘moderate’ versus ‘extremist’ strategy, Abbas stood on the side of the “moderates” in the region, and his government in the West Bank was fighting against the “extremists” in Gaza, who were supported by Iran. Bush supported Abbas as highlighted by his following statement on 27 Nov 2008....*“The time is right because a battle is underway for the future of the Middle East -- and we must not cede victory to the extremists. With their violent actions and contempt for human life, the extremists are seeking to impose a dark vision on the Palestinian people -- a vision that feeds on hopelessness and despair to sow chaos in the Holy Land. If this vision prevails, the future of the region will be endless terror, endless war, and endless suffering. Standing against this dark vision are President Abbas and his government”*.

Year 2007-08 was also a turning point in Iraq with a civil war in offing. Rather than sparking regional democratic change, the invasion of Iraq had

resulted in a failing Iraqi state and immense regional instability. A troop surge of 30000 affected in 2007³² did help in reducing violence but concerns were raised over how these newly armed groups could be disarmed or incorporated into the Iraqi army in the longer run, and how this local security policy fitted with the overall US political strategy of supporting and building up the central government.

While the overthrow of Saddam Hussein certainly did not result in democracy and effective Iraqi governance, it also did not change the balances and alliances in the Gulf, the way the Bush administration had hoped for. **Instead of paving the way for a strategic swap between Saudi Arabia and Iraq, Saudi Arabia re-emerged anew as one of the most crucial allies of the USA.** With the rise of Iranian influence in the region, especially in Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the USA seemed once again to share common security concerns and interest.

Iran thus emerged as one of the foremost security challenges in the Middle East for the USA Administration. The disclosure of Iranian Nuclear enrichment program in 2002 highlighted a fresh challenge. While the Bush administration was struggling to keep the international diplomatic pressure intact, it also sought to deter Iran. Several air and naval exercises were undertaken to signal that the USA was ready to protect its allies in the Gulf and giving credibility to the “military option”. Yet doubts were raised as to whether

³² *The surge refers to increase in the number of American troops in order to provide security to Baghdad and Al Anbar Province. The surge was developed under the working title "The New Way Forward" and was announced in January 2007 by Bush during a television speech*

the USA actually was prepared to stop the Iranian nuclear programme by force. The USA was obviously already tied down in Iraq, and it seemed unlikely that the American public, let alone key European and Arab allies, would be willing to support a military response. To the extent that “surgical attacks” against Iranian nuclear enrichment complexes at all were possible, such bombings would probably spur an Iranian counter-attack against oil-installations in the Gulf, blowing up the region and starting another round of soaring oil-prices. Thus, although the Bush administration was eager to move against the clerical leadership in Iran, the USA found itself caught in a web of ineffective policy-option and unwanted consequences.

President Obama came with a mandate to review the American policy in Afghanistan and Iraq. In removing the Baath regime and eliminating constraints on Iraqi Islamism, the United States has unleashed a new political force in the Gulf: not the upsurge of civic organization and democratic sentiment as visualised by American, but the aspirations of Iraqi Shiites to build an Islamic republic. American administration under Obama realized that the **only way to pull out of Iraq lay with a stable government at helm supported by a stable army and police force.** The **US-Iraqi Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA)** that the United States signed with Iraq on November 17, 2008, provided a potential basis for such a partnership. It described areas for long-term cooperation “to support the success of the political process, reinforcing national reconciliation within the framework of a unified and federal Iraq, and to build a diversified and advanced economy that insures the integration of Iraq into the international economy.”

The geopolitical problem the Americans faced was that, with the United States gone, Iran emerged as a powerful conventional power in the Persian Gulf. When the Americans finally withdrew in 2011, it was almost two years behind schedule and they still left behind a nation which was in the throes of nation building which was far from complete. Iraq has thereafter grappled with rise of ISIS and sectarian violence. The coalition forces with almost 5200 US troops (Hindustan Times, 2018) have assisted the Iraqi forces through airstrikes and training in thwarting the spread. Almost 08 years of democratic rule has led to some sort of stabilisation in Iraq.

The period also saw overtures by the Obama regime towards Iran. It signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JOCPA) on 14 Jul 2015 with its P5 + European Union to oversee the nuclear program of Iran and lifted the sanction which had been in place for almost a decade. This paved the way for Iran economic recovery but the plot unravelled under the Trump presidency in 2018 again with withdrawal of USA from above agreement.

However USA faced its worst crisis post 2011 in Syria. Its inaction in closing year of Obama presidency came under lot of criticism. The handling of crisis as covered earlier and sudden withdrawal of USA in Dec 2018 has only added to giving a geopolitical win to Russia and Iran in this sordid drama, which is however far from closure.

5.5 **In Summary: The Emerging Middle East**

With the American focus shifting to Asia-Pacific, the Middle East today is in a state of evolution. **The fundamental flaw in American policy when it**

invaded Iraq was not in its execution but in the political expectations that were put in place. The decision to destroy the Baathists put the Sunnis, who were the backbone of Saddam's regime, in a desperate position. Facing a hostile American army and an equally hostile Shiite community backed by Iran, the Sunnis faced disaster. Taking support from where they could get it — from the foreign jihadists that were entering Iraq — they launched an insurgency against both the Americans and the Shia (Friedman G. , Aug 2010). The better part of the formative years of a fledging democracy were thus spent in fighting interior forces as also the ISIS in later years. The Kurds minority and their battle was another loose end which fuelled unrest in young Iraq.

Undoubtedly, in the aftermath of the war in Iraq, Iran's regional power was greatly enhanced. Traditionally, Iraq has been the only major regional counterweight to Iran, but with the removal of Saddam Hussein and the Baathist state apparatus, Iran was now left unchecked, and neighbouring states were anxiously calculating Iran's intentions and ambitions in the region. This sense of heightened insecurity was further exacerbated by Iran's continued ability to defy international demands for halting its nuclear program, as well as from Iran's visible and strong influence in Iraq.

Concerns for growing Iranian power were closely coupled with fears of rising Sunni-Shia divisions. The "Shia Crescent" description by King Abdullah of Jordan in 2004, combined with Mubarak accusing Shi'ites in Iraq and the Gulf of being more loyal to Iran than their respective national governments contributed to the sectarian policies in the region. The return of the

Shia-Sunni split also made for media headlines and fear-mongering book titles such as, “*Arab Leaders Watch in Fear as Shia Emancipation Draws Near*” (Guardian 27.01.2005); “*Are Shia’s on the Brink of Taking Over the Middle East?*”, (The Observer 23.07.2006); “*Shia Crescent: Emergence of World War III*” (Haquani 2007); in the initial years only served to highlight this divide. In the latter years the Bahrain uprising of 2011 was another flash point in Shia-Sunni rivalry. The rise of ISIS and their targeting of Shia are also seen as part of the same thread, as is Iran support for Houthi insurgency in Yemen.

The Syrian quagmire is another flash point in the Middle East politics. **The interest of Iran lies in a stable regime led by Bashar al-Assad. The Shia Alawite led government gives Iran a stable axis with Iraq to project a viable alternative to Saudi led Sunni dominated Arab world.** The withdrawal of USA forces in 2019 has left the field open for Russia and Iran to exploit. “*Is it a good sign for the Americans to quickly and suddenly withdraw from Syria? Or will it once more strengthen the capacity of Russia and Iran to exert their influence.*” These remarks of Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany during Munich Security Conference on 16 Feb 2018 voiced the concerns of allies. However things are too fluid under the current leadership of USA to draw any meaningful options. **It is this emergence of Iran and its ability to act as a spoiler in the region’s three centres of crises - Israel-Palestine, Syria and Iraq-Afghanistan -with its alliance with Hezbollah, Syria and Hamas that has aggravated the concerns of successive Israel and Arab governments.**

Saudi Arabia on the other hand is firmly in alliance with USA. Saudi Arabia brings to table a stable – though autocratic - regime which is capable of looking after two primary interest of USA i.e. Oil and influencing opinion. Notwithstanding the blips of post 9/11 or more recent Jamal Khashoggi affair this alliance has seen through the thick and thin in last almost 70 years of post-World War-II history.

Yet **Middle Eastern allegiances and conflicts do rarely fall into neatly dichotomized camps**, but are in fact cross-cutting, shifting and contradictory. To illustrate, Hamas is a Sunni, and not a Shia-based party, inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and not by the clerical leadership in Iran. Syria in turn is strategically allied with Iran, and governed by a Shia Alewite regime, but it is also a Sunni majority country with democratic values in past. Equally, the Shia dominated and religious government in Iraq is backed by the two fiercest enemies in the region: the USA and Iran. Qatar, which is a main ally of the USA is also one of the greatest financial supporters of Hamas in Gaza, just as the regime in Saudi Arabia is pro-western, but hardly can be described as moderate. **The current Middle East is in other words composed of many strange bedfellows and cross-cutting allegiances.**

Yet the threat of Shia-Sunni divide as manifested between relation of its two leaders – Iran and Saudi Arabia – is a portent for Muslim community around the world. As custodians of holy sites of respective faith, their cold war rivalry is bound to find many fields to play in future. Asia-Pacific, home to almost 60% of Muslims is not untouched with Muslim majority countries of Pakistan and

Bangladesh facing sectarian violence between two communities on regular basis. India with second largest Muslim population in the world is not untouched by rise of extrem(e)ism thoughts in Islam. Shia persecution in India is currently not so much manifested, as is the fear of prosecution of a minority community as a whole. Kashmir though continues to be a different battle ground with support from Pakistan and rise of radicalized Islam.

CHAPTER – VI

SIGNIFICANCE OF ISSUES IN INDIAN CONTEXT

“The Middle East has been crucial for India for decades. It’s been a source of energy, jobs, remittances and military equipment and holds religious significance for tens of millions of Indians. It’s also been a source of concern, with fears about the negative impact of regional instability on Indian interests. But today, there’s also opportunity for Indian policymakers in the fact that, for a number of reasons, India is important to Saudi Arabia and a number of Middle Eastern countries in a way and to an extent that was never true before.”

Tanvi Madan: Newsweek Apr 2016

6.1 Muslims in India

6.1.1 History³³

Contrary to popular belief, Islam arrived in India in the Seventh century, when Arab traders came to Malabar and Gujarat coast. Cheraman Juma Mosque in Kerala is thought to be the first mosque in India, built in 629 CE by Malik Deenar. The earliest contact was limited to trading communities along the coastal areas in India. Islam arrived in North India with the establishment of Delhi Sultanate in 1206, although forays earlier in 8th and 10th century had happened under Ummayyad and Ghaznivad dynasty. The initial period of Muslim rule till the 15th century is documented as being oppressive and led to antipathy in local population. The second wave of Central Asian descendant

³³ Derived from readings of quoted works of MJ Akbar “The Shade of Swords’ and Saeed Naqvi “Being the Other: The Muslims of India”

rulers established the Mughal Empire which saw the amalgamation of cultures and establishment of governance practices, many of which survive to this day. It also gave Islam its distinctive Indian flavor, which led to a golden period of Indian art and culture in the 17th century. New elements were introduced into the Indian architecture that include: use of shapes (instead of natural forms); inscriptional art using decorative lettering or calligraphy; inlay decoration and use of coloured marble, painted plaster and brightly coloured glazed tiles. Urdu was developed in the region. The GDP during the Mughal era was 25 percent of World GDP which fell to 1.6 percent under the British Rule (Naqvi, 2016). The Mughal Empire ended with Bahadur Shah Zaffar –II, but not before acting as a magnet for unifying the Indian for a brief period during the 1857 Uprising.

The Independence struggle saw the Muslim population participate towards a common cause with many stalwarts as leading lights. Only in 1940 the Muslim League adopted the Lahore resolution for independence based on religious division resulting in state of Pakistan being created in August 1947. At the time of independence almost one-third Muslim population stayed back in India.

Muslims in post-independence India have done well in various fields. Besides rising to highest office of President of India on three occasions, Muslims have representation across all spectrum of society. However their average lower economic status is also to do as much with the lower status of states where they are found in majority, as also their non-emancipation from a closed society. Ghettoisation of Muslim community which started in 1970's is a result of

communal violence which found its roots in India then and has heightened in the Post 1990 era.

The majority of Muslims in India are of Sunni sect, though Shia's make up a fair number, with the Lucknow belt boasting of substantial Shia culture. Besides above India is also home to Sufi tradition which was closer to the local culture and found readied acceptance cutting across religious lines. The Kashmir culture is (was) a symbol of same, as is the presence of Ajmer Sharif and Hazrat Nizamudin Dargah to name a few. India is also home to Dawoodi Bohra Muslims, which originated from the *Fatimid Shia Islam* in Yemen. The sect moved to India in 16th century under its 25th *Dai* (Sect leader so named after occultation of 21st Fatimid Imam) and continues to flourish under 52rd *Dai* presently with *Dawat (mission)* in Mumbai. **The history of Muslims in India is thus a story of amalgamation of cultures without any major intra religion sectarian issues creating a divide.**

A peculiar aspect of amalgamation of culture is the prevalence of caste system in Indian Muslims, contrary to its monotheist culture. The divisions were as rigid as those in Hindu system but based on feudal system rather than the varna or caste based system (Naqvi, 2016). Saeed Naqvi in his book "*Being the other: The Muslims in India*" quotes the thoughts of Syed Ahmad Khan who laid the foundation of Aligarh Muslim University in the late nineteenth century on the premise, that it was a campus for *Ashraf* genteel or well-bred elite) and not for *Ajlaf* (Weaver or *Julahas*) and *Arzal* (menial class). The Sachar Committee Report of 2005 has documented the divide of Muslim into *Ashraf* (higher caste

based on West Asian ancestry) and Ajlafs. Dr B R Ambedkar has also cited prevalence of untouchability in Muslim, with *arzal* caste being prosecuted similar to Dalits, in his book *Pakistan or The Partition of India*. In Chapter X of the book titled “*Social Stagnation*” he writes “*Take the caste system. Islam speaks of brotherhood. Everybody infers that Islam must be free from slavery and caste. Regarding slavery nothing needs to be said. It stands abolished now by law. But while it existed much of its support was derived from Islam and Islamic countries ... But if slavery has gone, caste among Musalmans has remained*”. Dr. Ambedkar then quotes the 1901 census report for Bengal to show that Muslims there have several castes including *Arzal* or untouchable castes with whom no other *Mohamedan* would associate and who are forbidden to enter the mosque to use the public burial ground. He also quotes from the same report about the panchayat system of each caste which extends to social as well as trade matters resulting in castes which are as strictly endogamous as Hindu castes. He concludes, “*the Mohamedans observe not only caste but also untouchability*”.

6.1.2 **Demography**

The 1951 census placed the Indian Muslim population at approx. 35 million which was almost 10% of the total population. Muslims in 2011 constitute 14.2% of total India’s population with 17.22 crores residents as per statistics of Census of India (India C. O., 2011). India is 3rd largest country with Muslim population, even though overall they are a minority in the country. The states with a large number of Muslims (>15%) are Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Kerala,

Assam and West Bengal. This coincides with the spread of the Mughal Empire and its seats of power, apart from what has been divided into Pakistan and now Bangladesh. **Less Kerala other states are also lower in economic and human development status within India, contributing to overall lower readings for Muslims in above parameters.**

6.1.3 Sectarian Divide in Indian Muslim

Although no official census has been conducted, various surveys indicate place Shia population between 10-15% to 20-25% of Muslims in India. The numbers at approx. 3-4 crores places it amongst the second largest Shia population after Iran.

According to Shia mythology as a means of resolving the conflict between the two forces before *Battle of Karbala*, Hussein ibn Ali had suggested that he would proceed to an outpost of the expanding Mughal empire which was the *alHind*. Post his martyrdom ladies of the house of Prophet Mohammad came to Punjab. A shrine in Lahore of *Ruqqaya bint Ali*, daughter of Ali stands testimony to this folklore. The recorded history of Shia's in India has its roots in Awadh region with earliest settlers being recorded in the tenth century. Nawab of Awadh and in turn the modern Lucknow, thus forms a key linkages to history of Shia Muslims in India. Sayyad's of Awadh occupy a key position in hierarchy of Muslims being of direct descendants from Prophet Muhammad family.

Shia's have faced persecution under some rulers of Mughal dynasties in India. Two of the five revered martyrs of Shia faith are from India, who were martyred during Mughal era. The Shia also faced persecution in Kashmir from invaders

across. Historical records of the Ten *Taarajs*³⁴ also known as ‘*Taraj-e-Shia*’ between 15th to 19th century exist during which the Shia habitations were plundered, people slaughtered, libraries burnt and their sacred sites desecrated, forcing them to flee north where they can be found in substantial numbers in Kargil areas. During the British rule, Nawab of Awadh found favour with East India Company and later British rulers. This led to hardening of stance of some Sunni thinkers, prominent amongst them were Syed Ahmad Bareilvi of Rae Bareli. He was vehemently opposed to Shia Islam and professed jihad both against the British as also Shia Muslims in India (Nasr, 2006).

Post-Independence Shia’s have not faced large scale persecution. India is the only non-Muslim country which has a national holiday on Ashura (Martyrdom day). *Azadari* or practice of mourning for *Hussein ibn Ali*, on day of Ashura is carried out across India (less Jammu & Kashmir) with number of non-Muslims participating in a few areas. The practice of Ashura has led to Shia-Sunni tensions in Lucknow in past and have been banned four times (1968-69, 1974 and 1977) in the post Independent India. India also has a separate All India Shia Personal Law Board (est2005) which was segregated from All India Muslim Personal Law Board (est1972) to address legal needs of Shia population.

³⁴ *Akin to a cleansing act. During Taarajs, Shia habitations were plundered, people killed, libraries burnt and sacred sites of Shia’s desecrated*

6.2 India Linkages to Middle-East

The period post the World War-II saw the unravelling of the colonial era. Large number of Middle East countries and India gained independence during this period. **The division of India along religious lines created a natural affinity / sympathy for Pakistan in Middle East countries.** Further breakdown of democracy and imposition of military rules for large period of time saw more convergence with monarchy system prevalent in the Middle East. Also the non-alignment policy followed by India was in conflict with the natural affiliation which Middle East countries had with USA. Its ideological support to Palestine was neutralised by simultaneous recognition of Israel as also vocal support o secular regimes in Egypt and Syria. The India-Pakistan conflict starting with 1947 annexation of Kashmir, 1965 and 1971, saw support being rendered based on religious affinity as also Pakistan (member of CENTO) being a defacto USA ally. Till the decade of 1970, India's relations with Middle East were, thus based on economics and trade. **Despite its large Muslim population India was not able to moderate the debate with respect to Kashmir, membership of OIC or other aspects of religious affiliation with Middle East and continued to be viewed through a prism of India-Pakistan hyphenation.**

The decade of 1970 saw a few narrative changing events take place. The defeat of Pakistan and creation of Bangladesh debunked the two nation theory and raised the prestige of India military might in the eyes of Middle East countries. However, the covert nuclearisation as also Russian invasion of

Afghanistan gave fresh impetus to Pakistan standing in the Sunni dominated Arab Middle East. The Iranian revolution of 1979 divided the Middle East on sectarian basis, which has continued till date, and called upon **India to balance its relation with both groups viz; Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and Iran.**

The economic liberalisation and the resultant growth cycle put India's relation with Middle East on firm footing especially with respect to energy trade. The end of cold war and in turn the non-alignment era also saw pragmatism creep into India's relation with individual countries in Middle East. The scope of engagement also increased with bilateral visits and trade beyond energy sectors. The rise of expatriates also saw the human angle being brought into picture. **The economic growth and increased interaction also blunted the negative perception built through the prism of India-Pakistan hyphenation earlier.** However balancing the two sectarian groups of Middle East was major foreign policy challenge. Kashmir issue, Babri Masjid, India support to Israel and Iran continued to be pin pricks which needed to be dealt with by India while managing relation in the Middle East.

The Post 9/11 scenario brought a fresh change in the outlook of both India and Middle East countries. The radicalisation of Muslim population became a talking point for the world and Middle East as the undisputed leader of Muslim world bore the brunt of the outfall. **India with its sizeable Muslim population, unaffected to a large extent by this radicalisation, and stable democracy became the beacon to the Muslim world while searching for solution to this**

imbroglio. The fresh impetus in relation was also aided by India's continued economic growth and enhanced military might. The Naval diplomacy and anti-piracy patrols brought India closer to the Middle East region. Fresh impetus was also granted by increased political interaction at highest levels by visit of PM Manmohan Singh visit to Saudi Arabia in 2010, PM Narendra Modi visit in 2016 and visits of King of Saudi Arabia and Crown Prince in 2006 and 2019 (Ministry of External Affairs, 2016) have only deepened the relation. The relation with Iran has also continued on even keel with India looking towards securing its relation with Central Asian Republic and Afghanistan through Iran.

It is an ode to India's diplomatic skill that it has maintained this delicate balance between the two disparate groups in Middle East. The principled and nuanced stand provides India the leverage and respect with each of these blocs, besides mutual benefit to these groups gain in investing in the world's fastest growing economy. However it is surprising that within the Ministry of External Affairs Government of India, Middle East, as the world looks at it, is divided under three Divisions. Gulf Division looks after all matters relating to Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, UAE, GCC and OIC. Iran is still hyphenated with Pakistan and Afghanistan (as part of PAI Division) and balance of countries viz; Egypt, Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Palestine are organised under the West Asia North Africa (WANA) Division (MEA Govt of India, 2019).

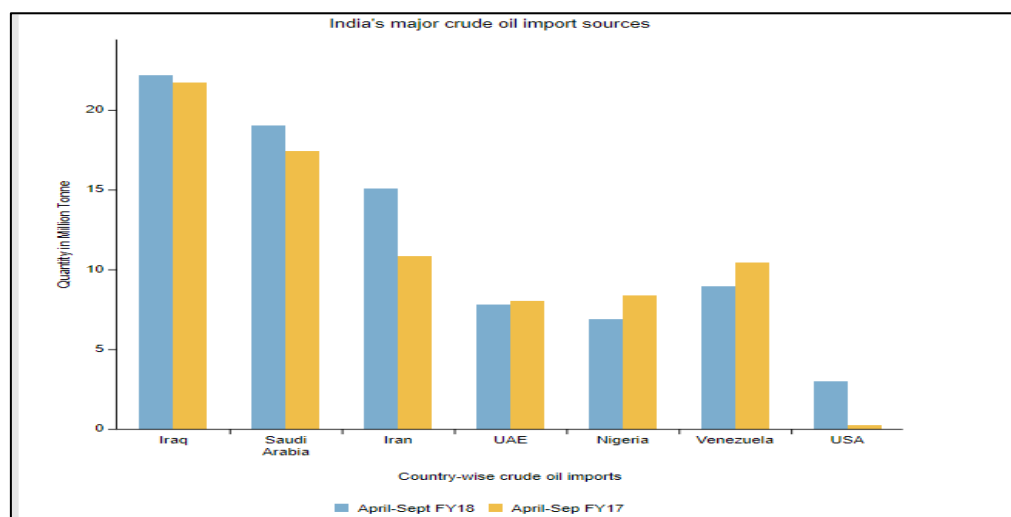
India today **draws its linkages to Middle-East** on account of three factors viz; the **Oil Economy** (almost 60-75% Indian imports from Middle East

countries), **Expatriates** (almost eight millions Indians in Middle East), and **the religious factor** (almost 10% of world Muslim population in India). The battle for supremacy being played in Middle East as analysed in previous chapters affects each of these aspects individually as also a sum of whole.

6.2.1 India and its Oil Economy

India's oil and petroleum products imports have been continuously rising. From an import figure of approx. 63 Thousand Metric Tons (MT) in 1998-99 to

Figure 6.1: India's Major Crude Oil Import Sources



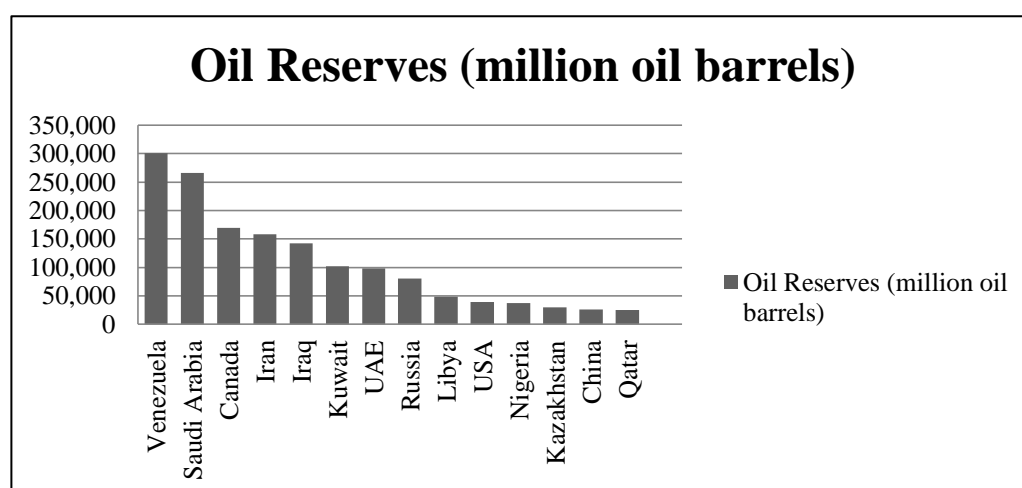
Source: www.dgciskol.gov.in

approx. 255 thousand MT, the rise has been as steady as its economy. Of this, approx. 60-75% of imports come from the Middle East on account of reduced cost due geographical proximities. Within Middle East, based on figures from Apr-Sep 2018, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Iran and United Arab Emirate (UAE) had a share of 34.6%, 29.7%, 23.5% and 12.2% respectively (See Figure 6.1). The Iranian oil saw a jump of almost 39% from 10.84MT (Apr-Sep 2017) to 15.05 MT (Apr-Sep 2018). In the corresponding period Saudi Arabia saw a jump of

9%, Iraq 2.2% and while UAE registered a drop of almost 1.5%. The period coincided with the sanctions being placed once again on Iran by USA after withdrawal from JCOPA. However India managed a waiver from the above sanctions and continued to import from Iran. The jump in oil import from Iran is also on account of better pricing and credit terms. The three month credit period offered by Iran results in lower working capital for domestic Indian refiners leading to lower borrowings and increased floating money. Also, Iranian crude bodes well for Indian refiners as it is usually sold at a discount of up to \$2-\$4 per barrel to other Middle Eastern crude oil grades (IDSA, 2014). While attempts have been made to diversify the basket to America and Africa, especially import from USA, which saw a jump of almost ten times, the geographical advantages which Middle East countries offer, cannot be negated so easily.

Three factors work in favour of continued dependence on Middle East for

Figure 6.2: Top 15 Countries with Proven Oil Reserves



Source: Energy Information Administration USA 2017

India's oil requirements. First it is the region with the world's major oil and gas

reserves. Four countries in the region—Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirate (UAE)—rank among the top 10 countries of the world with large proven gas reserves; and five countries— Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait and the UAE—rank among the top 10 countries of the world having large proven oil reserves availability of oil in the region (see Figure 6.2) (EIA, 2017). Secondly, the cost of production of oil in these countries is lower when compared to others. The cost of production, with the exception of Oman, amounts to US\$ 3–5 per barrel. Thirdly, three countries, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait, have spare capacity which they can bring to the market when needed. Normally, Saudi Arabia plays a significant role when it comes to the production of extra oil to meet a shortfall at short notice, making it a key player in the world energy market.

Currently India energy requirements are growing at a pace of almost 5% yearly in sync with average economic growth of 7-8%. **India has not faced any issues in the past with respect to procuring its requirement from Middle East. This could be attributed to its amiable historical relations but is also a result of growing and stable market for these countries.** The regional complexities arriving out of various geopolitical issues viz; Syrian and Yemen imbroglio, ISIS footprints in Iraq, Turkey and Syria, Palestine and above all Saudi Arabia-Iran+Iraq conundrum, will however affect the India – Middle East relations with respect to oil economy. **Iran continues to face sanction and although imports from them have seen an upswing due to waiver of sanction which has been granted to India, long term goals cannot be set in current scenario.** Iraq has emerged as major supplier for India, ahead of Saudi

Arabia, but **with both Saudi Arabia and Iran vying for control of Iraqi oil long term hedging becomes difficult. Saudi Arabia continues to be the key to stability in oil availability** but needs to be balanced against advantage with Iranian oil as enunciated above. China with its increasing footprint in the region with bases at Gwadar and Djibouti will provide **fresh thoughts on the need to not only procure but also secure oil from the Middle East for India.**

6.2.2 India and its Expatriates

Indians moved to the Middle East in large numbers following the oil boom of the 1970s, and their numbers grew further as the economies especially of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states—Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—expanded in the following decades. Iran and Iraq also saw large numbers, but these have shrunk specially after the Iran-Iraq war and US operations in these areas post 9/11. As of Dec 2018 there are close to Eight million expatriates in Middle East (See Table 6.1).

Table 6.1: Table Showing Overseas Population in Middle East

<u>Country</u>	<u>Non Resident India (NRI)</u>	<u>Person of Indian Origin (PIO)</u>	<u>Total Overseas Indian</u>
Bahrain	312,918	3,257	316,175
Kuwait	928,421	1,482	929,903
Qatar	691,539	500	692,039
Saudi Arabia	2,812,408	2,160	2,814,568
UAE	3,100,000	4,586	3,104,586
Egypt	3,000	265	3,265
Iran	4,000	273	4,273
Iraq	10,000	0	10,000

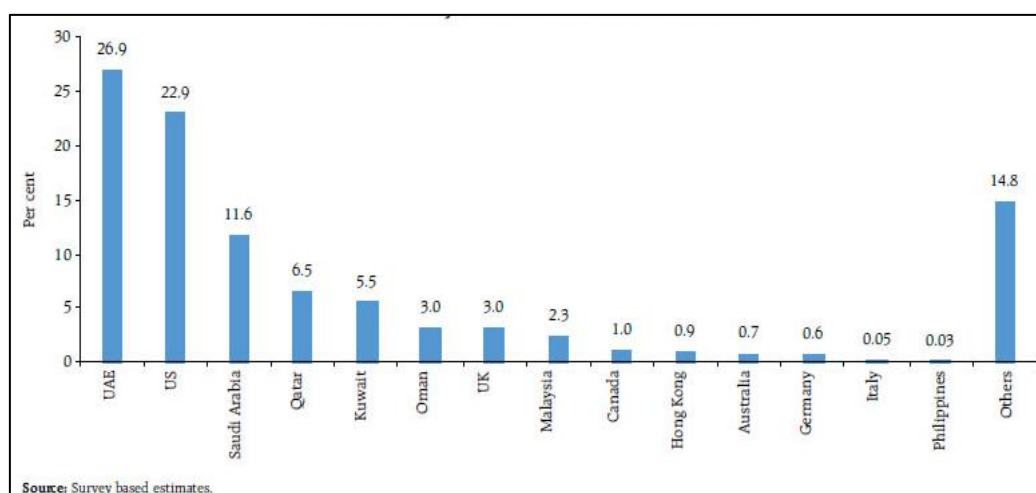
<u>Country</u>	<u>Non Resident India (NRI)</u>	<u>Person of Indian Origin (PIO)</u>	<u>Total Overseas Indian</u>
Syria	107	0	107
Yemen	500	10,000	10,500
Lebanon	8,500	37	8,537
Jordan	20,050	157	20,207
TOTAL OVERSEAS INDIAN (MIDDLE EAST)			7,914,160

Source : Ministry of External Affairs (India G. o., 2018)

Not only are they the second largest overseas Indian community situated in a geographical region, they also remit more than one-third of the annual \$80 billion remittances by the Indian expatriates to India. Collectively, they also outnumber expatriates from other individual countries in the region. The initial influx of the emigrants was on account of the exorbitant welfare policies of the states which emanated from as much from newly acquired wealth from oil, as also to keep the monarchies running. The resultant reluctance to take up many jobs by local population led to an emigrant boom, with peak figures of 70% of labour force in GCC comprising of non-arab residents / emigrants. Initially comprising primarily of unskilled and semi-skilled labour, this expatriate community has steadily encompassed small but growing numbers of skilled and professional migrants. This in turn has had deep social, political, cultural and economic impact.

The initial settlers were Sindhis who have become integral part of the business communities especially in UAE. The majority of the Indian population in the GCC is from the southern Indian states of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Kerala, while the rest belong to Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Rajasthan (IDSA, 2014). **In a large population base country, like India, this migration has served dual purpose, one is the provision of jobs and secondly the foreign remittances received from these expatriates.** As per World Bank press release dated 08 Dec 2018, India

Figure 6.3: Country Wise Distribution of Remittances



Source: RBI Bulletin dt 14 Nov 18

received maximum remittances in the world with an estimated \$80 billion being sent home by expatriates in 2018. RBI Bulletin dated 14 Nov 2018 further breaks down this data to show that almost 50% of remittances take place from Gulf countries with UAE accounting for almost 26.9 percent and Saudi Arabia another 11.6 percent of total remittances for Year 2017 (See Figure 6.3). The remittances thus contribute a vital part in foreign reserves for Indian economy

and their continued inflow is a matter of importance for state of Indian economy.

The peaking of oil economies and the “The Arab spring” brought fresh challenges for these expatriates. Under pressure from local population the GCC countries began diversifying their economies and tightening the norms for expatriates. This was necessitated to provide opportunities for local educated unemployed populace with an aim to wean them away from restiveness as witnessed during “The Arab Spring”. Saudi Arabia was the first to lay down a policy of *Nitaqat* which was implemented over a two year period from 2011-13. The same enforced a mandate for all companies operating to have a fixed number of local population in their workforce else pay damages. Similar arrangements were made by other countries to indigenize their workforce in GCC countries. Yet, consistently high (and growing) remittances from the region and rising numbers of migrants over the past decade and more, also indicate that the Indian migrant is capable of adapting to various contingencies to survive, and even thrive. India does however need to ensure that migrants are more professional and better informed while picking up jobs in Middle East to ensure that they are sufficiently higher up in the socio-economic chain.

Another aspect related to the Indian expatriates has been the issues faced due to uncertain situations in the region in last decade. On number of occasion expatriates have been caught in the midst of hostilities on account of economic considerations or incorrect reading of the situations. India has evacuated her

citizens from Kuwait in 1990 (one of the largest airlifts of the kind till date), Lebanon in 2006 and, Libya in 2011 and most recently from Yemen in 2015. In all these instances, the government was able to mobilise and utilise all available resources: armed forces of the country, the national carrier and even private airlines were pressed into service to evacuate the stranded citizens. **The success of these operations is dependent on careful planning, but above all good international relations with host and neighbouring countries. The Iran issue currently on the horizon has potential to destabilize a large number of countries including the waterways leading to these countries, and India needs to plan for same.**

All this however doesn't take away the issue of what **uncertainty in Middle East** and the resultant return of this expatriate population can lead to. At the outset it **will create immense pressure on Indian economy in terms of jobs, employment and stoppage of foreign remittances** to say the least. A stable Middle East is therefore very essential for India in this context.

6.2.3 **India-Religious Connect with Middle East**

With almost 190 million Muslims living in India, theoretically this should have been the strongest connect in the relation between India and the Middle East. Pakistan on independence propounded the two nation theory and gained a natural affinity with the Middle East. Its geographical location, nuclear status and a large population base provides it with an exalted status in the Muslim world which it has used to its advantage through its history. The Sunni domination and Islamic radicalisation, it has nurtured post the 1970's has seen

its close ties being cemented with Saudi Arabia. Its geographical location has provided it with leverage over both Afghanistan and Iran thus rendering the connect with USA and Saudi Arabia inseparable. **As covered earlier Pakistan has been able to run through narrative of Indian Muslims with India-Pakistan hyphenation because of above.**

India on the other hand **amalgamated its Muslim population into the mainstream post-independence.** Islam which had come to India and especially to the Central India was not Arabised and was amalgamated in the Indian society. The Indian freedom movement had further cemented the bonds between the two societies. The understanding of Indian including Muslim leaders was therefore more secular in nature and a number of them were opposed to India's partition on communal lines. No discrimination based on religion was therefore enshrined in the Constitution of India, and has been adhered to in last almost 72 years of Independence with few exceptions (incidents) proving the proverbial rule. The minority status enjoyed by Muslims in India has helped them gain valuable push-up in the society. Today Muslims are entwined into the Indian fabric and have risen in various fields of life.

Kashmir continues to be an issue which has been burning since independence and provides a counter to above narrative. Initially Middle East countries saw the narrative through the eyes of Pakistan. Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) since independence had raised the issue on insistence of Pakistan. Only in the 21st century, post economic liberalisation, shedding of non-aligned baggage by India and the Global War on Terror

aftermath, has the Middle East realised the involvement of Pakistan and duplicity of whole issue. **Primarily from a religious angle, as is the mandate of this study, Muslim population in Jammu & Kashmir (approx. 85.6 lacs) account for five percent of Indian Muslim population (India C. O., 2011). However the traction it gains in the international forum, wrongly dictates the narrative of Muslim fundamentalism in India.**

This narrative has however found favour in Sunni dominated Middle East and religious funding has been finding its way into heartland converting the secular fabric of Muslims into more orthodox thinking. The role of Jammat-e-Islami, Tableeqi Jammat, Ahle Hadith etc has been very prominent. Leading the drive is Saudi Arabia wherein Indian media quoted a report by India's Intelligence Bureau as saying that ultra-conservative Saudi Islamic scholars were frequently visiting Indian Sunni Muslim communities. **The Bureau reportedly put the number of visitors in the years between 2011 and 2013 at 25,000.** It said they had distributed tens of millions of dollars. Further South Asia scholar Christophe Jaffrelot has been quoted as saying that Muslim institutions in Kerala, including the Islamic Mission Trust of Malappuram, the Islamic Welfare Trust, and the Mujahideen Arabic College had received "millions of (Saudi) riyals possibly as a result of large number of expatriates working in Saudi Arabia. (Dorsey, 2019). That this commentary came at the end of visit of Turkish President Tayyip Erdogaan visit to India signifies the interests of Middle East countries in Indian Muslim. Whether Madrasa education has led to the decline of educational or economic position of Indian Muslims in present environment may be a debatable issue, given that Articles 30 (1) of the

Constitution of India provides for the rights of the Minorities to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice. These provisions need to be fully utilized for the benefit of these weaker sections in our society, but that its Islam-centric teaching is not friendly to the job market in the contemporary world is the ground reality. In the absence of modern knowledge the graduates produced by madrasas are neither able to improve their own material prosperity nor they provide leadership to the Muslim community to face the challenge of modern world.

However these madrasa have normally targeted the Sunni Muslims of lower economic class structure where indoctrination is easier. No Shia has been part of this radical restructuring as per Saeed Naqvi. He has expressed his thoughts about Muslim social hierarchy of late thirties with this couplet of Akbar Allahabadi in his book “Being the Other: The Muslims of India”... “*Council mein bahut Sayyid; Masjid mein faqat Jumman*” (The Viceroy’s executive council is full of Sayyid’s, But the mosque are packed only with Jumman or lower caste Julaha). The same still holds well for Shia Muslims of India who have held on to their ancient history and amalgamated into the Indian culture and are invariably found at higher end of economic ladder. However at a sizeable number they do find themselves target of propaganda from Iran and are affected by events in the Middle East Region, although no reliable numbers exist.

The other connect with the Middle East is on account of the regular Haj pilgrimage which Indian Muslims undertake. As the data shows the number of

Haj yatris from India has been continuously rising from 1990 onwards. From approx. 24 thousand vacancies allotted in Government discretionary quota in 1990 it has reached approx. 1.3 lakhs in 2018 (Haj Committee of India, 2018). The above is indicative of increasing clout of India with Saudi Arabia in specific and Middle East in general.

Another important fact is the **Shia connect with Iran**. As home to numerically the second largest Shia population in the world, this is but natural with a large number of Indians undertaking the journey to holy towns of Najaf and Qom in both Iran and Iraq. As covered earlier the Sayyad's of Awadh owe their linkages to the family of Prophet Muhammad and are considered as aristocracy in Shia linkages. As a testimony to growing relations India recommenced a direct flight from Lucknow to Najaf after 30 years on 15 Feb 2019. This connection is independent of India's relation with GCC countries and drives on person to person contact. **The tensions which prevail in the region though have an adverse impact on the same**. Iran also sees the tilt towards Middle East countries running counter to economic narrative.

Overall Islam's experience in India has been more wholesome and led to a great multicultural edifice. Independent India has not been affected by this sectarian divide to a large extent primarily on account of its ability to amalgamate the Muslim population into the mainstream. The politics of popularism does create issues when pandering is done on sectarian lines in India, however such instances have been few and far between. **The sectarian divide of Middle East has its own issues and presents a series of challenges**

for India. Internal challenges remain on account of democratic nature of the Indian society, however these are not unsurmountable. India cannot afford to take sides in this conflict for regional dominance and must build its relation with Middle East independent of the Sectarian divide.

CHAPTER – VII

CONCLUSION

The study was undertaken with the aim of to examine the facet of sectarian divide in Islam, its manifestation in Middle East, the effect of USA policies in the region and the effect of same on India. The research objectives accordingly evolved and enunciated in Para 1.4 above were to examine the effect of USA Global War on Terror, undertaken in the first decade of twenty first century in Middle East, especially in context of sectarian divide in Islam and its overall impact on India socio economic landscape. In pursuance of above the key findings based on above chapters are summarised in the succeeding paragraphs.

7.1 History of Sectarian Divide and its Current Manifestations

There are two theories which primarily support the rise of Shia Islam in Islamic history. While one of them emphasises on the political struggle which broke out post the death of Muhammad the second view taken is that it is a purely religious separation. This theory also emphasizes on different interpretation of Islam which led to different understanding about the role of Caliphs and Ulamas.

Post the divide Shia political aspirations were more or less denied as the Muslim community transformed into a distinctly Arab empire. However, Shia Islam as it evolved was more appealing, particularly to non-Arabs, when Islam spread to other parts of the world specially the Persian Empire and eastwards and contributed to its growth in these regions.

As covered in the main chapters, an estimated 15% of the world's Muslims are Shia, which corresponds to about 270 million Shia Muslims worldwide. Shia Muslims, though a minority in the Muslim world, constitute the majority of the populations in Iran, Azerbaijan, Bahrain and Iraq. The persecution of Shia's throughout history by Sunni co-religionists has often been characterized by brutal and genocidal act. **This historical antipathy towards Shia in the Islamic world has been the foundation of the rise of the Shia Sunni Sectarian split – and search for identity and stronger role in the Islamic world by the minority Shiite population.**

7.2 Centrality of Iran to Shia Crescent

With an area of 1,648,195 sq km, Iran is the 19th largest country in world. Iran is also the 17th most populous country in the world, with about 82 million people (United Nations Statistic Department, 2019). It boasts of fourth largest oil reserves (See Figure 6.2). All the above, combined with superbly defensible borders, a disciplined central government and an excellent intelligence and internal security apparatus gives its the stability and the aura which it needs to drive the agenda of the Shia world. In addition the nascent nuclear program, overtures in Iraq (post US invasion), support for Hezbollah and economic forays into Central and South Asia give it the tools to assert its rise in status in the Middle East politics.

7.3 Effect of USA Invasion of Iraq

The United States of America invaded Iraq with one of the (un)stated aim of finding a counter to Saudi Arabia in a post 9/11 attacks³ scenario. It visualised a

democratic Iraq as counter to the totalitarian regimes in the Middle East and a base for its future operation. Historically, Iraq had been a counter to Shia dominated Iran despite of almost 60% Shia population, due to its Arab supported Baathist government. **The American invasion destroyed the Iraqi army and government, and the United States was unable to re-create either thus, providing Iran an avenue to influence events in a Shia dominated Iraq.** The coupling of two largest Shia dominated countries led the Sunni dominated Middle East to fear the rise of “Shia Crescent”- a fact espoused by King of Jordan as early as 2004 (Jordan, 2004). As events have played out the Iran cornered a larger role for itself in Iraq, especially with rise and ultimate annihilation of ISIS in Iraq between 2006 and 2017. **The quagmire resulted in reversal of American policy by 2007, and its re-alignment with Saudi Arabia only helped in cementing the Iran-Iraq partnership.** This drew the ire of Saudi Arabia led Sunni block which feared the rise of Shia Iran as anathema in religious context and a threat to its supremacy in the Muslim world order. The presence of these two countries on either side of the narratives in Syria, Yemen and Palestine stand testimony to this sectarian divide.

7.4 **Repercussion of Sectarian Divide in Middle East on India**

Post-Independent India’s relations with the Middle East were initially hyphenated with Pakistan due to the two-nation theory. **Despite its large Muslim population India was not able to moderate the debate with respect to Kashmir, membership of OIC or other aspects of religious affiliation with Middle East and continued to be viewed through a prism of India-**

Pakistan hyphenation. The economic boom and the end of Cold War saw the relation bloom with trade and economics as key drivers. In a Post 9/11 attacks³ scenario, **India with its sizeable Muslim population, unaffected to a large extent by this radicalisation, and stable democracy became the beacon to the Muslim world while searching for solution to this imbroglio.**

India today **draws its linkages to Middle-East** on account of three factors viz; the **Oil Economy** (almost 60-75% Indian imports from Middle East countries), **Expatriates** (almost eight million Indians in Middle East with bulk in Gulf Cooperation Council – GCC- countries), and **the religious factor** (almost 10% of world Muslim population in India). The oil economy started off with trade in favour of the Middle East countries in initial stages of India's economic growth, is now being operated on even status with India emerging as a stable market for oil producing countries of Middle East. Also diversification of interests is a key driver of the economic trade. The expatriates provide a twin advantage of a job market as also foreign exchange earner for heavily populous country like India, while Middle East gain on manpower. **India however currently operates independently with each of the nations based on mutual interest and is a respected figure in the comity of Middle East nations.**

The sectarian divide of Middle East has its own issues and presents a series of challenges for India. The sectarian divide has not largely manifested in India due to the integration of Islam into the culture at initial stages. However the sizeable numbers of Muslims in India create a pressure group which each of the Middle East group wants to dominate. India also needs to

address its Muslim constituency with continuous secular politics. Their educational and economic upliftment and integration into Indian economy is the need of the hour.

The relationship between the GCC countries (which represents the dominant Sunni world) and Iran (representing Shia world) will be an important determinant of the future of Gulf politics and security. There are a number of issues such as ideological rivalry, Iranian nuclear issue, presence of the US forces and clash of interests over regional political and security issues which inhibit the GCC–Iran relations. The Arab Spring had further worsened the GCC–Iran relationship as Iran supported the protesters against the Arab Gulf regimes and tensions aggravated as Saudi forces entered Bahrain to quell the protests. Saudi-Iranian rivalry is also playing out in Syria and Yemen making recovery of Iraq more prolonged.

7.5 Conclusion

In context of the study the factors which inhibit relations in the Middle East are based on perception of each side. GCC countries (representing the Sunni world) view India's relation with Iran with suspicion. **India's relation with Iran**, which are based on energy needs and securing connectivity to Central Asia and Afghanistan, draw suspicion on religious grounds from GCC. Pakistan, due religious affinity and close relation with Saudi Arabia, is another hindrance which has managed to colour the vision of Sunni world while painting India's secular policies as anti-Muslim. **India's close relation with Israel** – an anathema in Muslim World – is another inhibiting factor which

creates issues with both domestic and foreign Muslim constituency for India. **The USA influence in the Middle East** dictates policies and interests of the Sunni world. So the USA-Taliban talks (Jan-Feb2019) may run against the will of Afghan government, but is supported by Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.

The **sectarian divide** as manifested in **Saudi Arabia- Iran rivalry** is going to be a **major driver for future in Middle East**. The GCC – Iran relations is another issue which will affect both the political and economic agenda of the region. The **seeming withdrawal of USA as a global policeman** and its focus on internal issues will undoubtedly leave a vacuum in the Middle East which **Russia and China** will attempt to fill. **India though desirous may not have the economic and more importantly the military muscle to fulfil the same.**

Given the complex nature of the politics in the region, it would be wise for India to continue with the policy of balancing its relationship with major players in the region based on mutual interests. India today provides a stable market for all the Middle East countries and the relation is much more balanced today even in context of oil economy. As India has stakes transcending the GCC, Iran and Iraq, taking sides will be detrimental to India's interests. Rather, India should try to engage with the countries and work together on the mutual areas of interest diversifying from energy trade only. **India also needs to continually de-hyphenate the Pakistan angle from its relation with Muslim countries** and invitation for OIC summit in March 2019, albeit as guest of honour, is a step in the right direction which must be exploited.

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