

Masters by Research: SAUDI ARABIA'S STRATEGIC CULTURE

To what extent can strategic culture help us understand the KSA's strategic decision-making and behaviour with regard to its security policy?

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ABSTRACT

This thesis demonstrates the utility of the strategic culture concept in understanding threat-perception and strategic behaviour, insofar as the KSA is concerned. Many of the KSA's critical junctures originate from sub-state actors and factors, supra-state ideologies, and non-state actors. The threat perception at these critical junctures required behavioural responses that balanced the often-competing demands (upon the state) or requirements (of these actors) by the ruling elite within the KSA. Indeed, the strategic culture concept has allowed this thesis to explore the linkage between cultural aspects internal to the KSA against its strategic choices and behaviours in relation to its foreign and security policies, primarily by analysing the construction of the KSA's different identities. Specifically, the norms associated with being the *Custodians of the Two Holy Mosques*, the de-facto head of the *Wahhabi* school of Sunnism, and its doctrinal hostility to Political Islam and pan-Arabism, have demonstrated behavioural trends, or a strategic approach which is highly centralized in order to omni-balance against these (often) competing, paradoxical and contradictory strategic challenges.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Definitions and Glossary: Page 4.

Chapter 1:

Introduction, Strategic Culture, Research Questions and Methodology, The KSA's State Formation. Pages 5 to 16.

Chapter 2:

Introduction, Literature Review: Regional Security Context and Strategic Culture, Summary. Pages 17 to 48.

Chapter 3:

Introduction, The impact of Wahhabism and Islamism on KSA's strategic behaviour: a strategic paradox, Summary. Pages 49 to 78.

Chapter 4:

Introduction, The impact of the Iranian Revolution on KSA's strategic behaviour: a strategic paradox, Summary. Pages 79 to 109.

Chapter 5:

Introduction, Case Studies: KSA and Afghanistan; KSA and the Arab Spring, Summary. Pages 110 to 137.

Chapter 6:

Conclusions. Pages 138 to 151.

Bibliography: Pages 152 to 165.

DEFINITIONS AND GLOSSARY

Umma – Muslim population.

Wahhabism – *Wahhabism* is a living theological tradition and the only permissible Sunni doctrine within the KSA. It is named after the eighteenth-century scholar, Mohammed ibn' Abd al Wahab.

Tawhid – Monotheism.

Takfir – Excommunication (from Islam).

Al Saud – The House of Saud; the ruling family of the KSA.

Jahiliya – Ignorance.

Jihad – Religious struggle.

Fatwa – religious declarations.

Al-wala wa-l-bara – loyalty to God and the disavowal of all else.

Fard Ayn – Collective, defensive duty, often cited in terms of defensive Jihad.

Al-tadamun al-Islami – Islamic jointery.

Fitna – Unresolvable chaos or distress.

Ikhwan – Brothers.

Dar al-khufra – the land of the heretics (non-Muslim lands).

DAESH – The Islamic State, or ISIL.

Khawarij – Excessive deviation and therefore 'expelled'.

Shi'at Ali – Party of Ali, the Fourth Righteously Guided Caliph. The spiritual leader of Shia Muslims.

Omqa-e rahbordi – Strategic depth, achieved by 'offensive realism'.

Ulama – Influential Islamic clerics.

Velayat e-feqhi – Guardians of the Jurists.

Maslaha – Expediency (the Ayatollah's ability to over-rule religious doctrine in order to avoid a political impasse).

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This thesis examines the nature of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's (KSA) strategic culture and how the KSA wields power to achieve its strategic objectives. It argues that KSA has faced and continues to face complex and specific challenges that influence its foreign and security policy behaviour. The thesis will determine whether or not the KSA has enduring strategic culture traits. This thesis will examine the KSA's strategic behaviour by drawing on the concept of strategic culture. This concept may provide a useful explanatory framework for what can often be seen as 'irrational' Saudi strategic decision making, for example that KSA is a state-sponsor of extremist organisations. The thesis will attempt to ascertain the extent to which strategic culture is a useful concept for academics and policy makers to understand why KSA behaves the way it does, whether it has a strategic culture rooted in history, one that is stable and consistent, or one that is susceptible to evolution, revolution, or other strategic shocks. Special emphasis will be placed on its hard power, specifically identifying cultural factors that either inhibit, promote or constrain the use of its conventional military capabilities and its apparent preference for wielding its hard power through non-state actors and supranational institutions. Realists may suggest that the KSA's foreign and security policy behaviour should be analysed in terms of military, financial, materiel, and geostrategic power. Yet such an approach is probably unable to provide an explanation for seemingly irrational strategic behaviour by the KSA, whereas the concept of strategic culture might help explain why it behaves in ways that are, by Realist standards, irrational.

In discussing individual threats to the KSA, each variously and individually appear as a range of cross-cutting factors. It becomes difficult to isolate any of these threats without

acknowledging their political, cultural and religious connectedness. Furthermore, the Middle East will continue to provide challenges to the stability of international order that will most probably elicit Western responses. For example, this thesis will attempt to demonstrate that in 2011, despite decades of involvement in the region, Western actors suspended their better judgement in assessing the Arab Spring, and the apparent breakout of democracy across the region, by not anticipating the scale of response by counter-revolutionary regimes such as the KSA.

Indeed, “democracy and liberalism have generally gone hand in hand in the Western experience”.¹ Conversely in the Middle East, democracy may be regarded as a dangerous means of consolidating power in favour of a particular confessional group or accompanied by the associated destabilising progress of neo-liberalism. Democracy could therefore be regarded as a threat to existing political constructs, including the norms associated within, and around the country, such as family, tribe, Arabism and Islamism.² The extent to which this particularly applies to the KSA will be examined when we analyse its identity within the context of a country beset by a range of significant security threats, such as: Iran, extremist Shi’ism, Sunni Islamism in the guise of the Muslim Brotherhood, and violent Islamist nihilists (such as al-Qaeda or other Salafi-Jihadist groupings). The general lack of contextual understanding or misjudgement by Western policymakers of the KSA’s strategic behaviour has primarily featured in the security domain leading to the mostly predictable evolutionary pattern of some events, for example, the evolution and subsequent disaggregation of Islamic extremism and its splintering into different groupings across the wider Middle East, and the KSA’s

¹ Shadi Hamid, *Islamic Exceptionalism*, (Griffin, June 2017), pp. 3-10.

² *Ibid*, p. 11.

behavioural choices within this disaggregation.³ Using a strategic culture framework may assist in understanding the extent and context of such disaggregation, and why the KSA pursued particular strategies at one time or another in relation to political Islamists and Islamic extremists.

STRATEGIC CULTURE

Culture has become a common explanatory variable in international relations scholarship particularly in the post-Cold War era. One of the most surprising aspects of this scholarly interest has been the emerging consensus that national security policy can be significantly affected by culture and norms.⁴ During the Cold War, scholars attempted to develop a concept of political culture, and the term ‘strategic culture’ was eventually coined in the 1970s by Snyder, who offered the basic framework of strategic culture in devising a framework upon which different cultural factors can be analysed.⁵ Snyder argued that Soviet strategic culture provided the context for understanding why the Soviet Union behaved the way it did. He argued that the development of Soviet nuclear doctrine was the product of organizational and historical contexts, and crucially that these two contexts shaped Soviet patterns of behaviour.⁶ Snyder described strategic culture as a socialised set of values and ideas which shape the behaviour of strategic actors over time.⁷ His

³ Patrick Coburn, *The Age of Jihad*, (Verso, October 2017).

⁴ Bahgat Korany, *The Many Faces of National Security in the Arab World*, (Palgrave Macmillan) p. 15.

⁵ Jack Snyder, ‘The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations’, *RAND*, 1977. pp. 3-11.

⁶ Norbert Eitelhuber, ‘The Russian Bear: Russian Strategic Culture and What it Implies for the West’, *Connections*, Vol.9, No.1, Winter 2009, pp. 1-28.

⁷ Snyder, ‘Soviet Strategic Culture’. pp. 3-11.

concept of strategic culture largely failed to make significant scholarly progress as a unified theory that might rival Realism, and as such it remained largely unused.⁸ Following shortly behind Snyder, the idea of strategic culture as an ethnocentric approach to strategy was developed by Booth. He built upon Snyder's Soviet-specific analysis and argued that scholars should think in terms of "cultural relativism".⁹ This relativism requires scholars to consider why Americans think and behave like Americans, why Russians think and behave like Russians, and for the purpose of this thesis, why Saudis think and act like Saudis. Successive scholars have revitalised the theory as a means to explain strategic studies with some very notable contributions.¹⁰ There have also been broader scholarly theories around 'civilisational culture', as expounded for example by Samuel Huntington who used aspects of culturalism to predict international conflict drivers such as the conflicts caused by religious extremism.¹¹ These contributions will be analysed in detail in chapter 2.

Using a strategic culture framework to examine the KSA's strategic behaviour seems particularly appropriate. The KSA is replete with powerful and possibly dominant

⁸ Lucian W. Pye, *Culture and Foreign Policy*, (Boulder, Colorado, 1997), p. 2.

⁹ Ken Booth, *Strategy and Ethnocentrism*, (New York: Holmes and Meier), 1979, p. 1.

¹⁰ For example, Peter Katzenstein, *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Colin Gray, *Nuclear Strategy and National Style*, (Hamilton Press, 1986); Alastair Iain Johnston, 'Thinking About Strategic Culture', *International Security* 19, No.4, 1995; Ethan Kapstein, 'Is Realism Dead? The Domestic Sources of International Politics', *International Organization* 49, No.4, 1995; John Glen, 'Realism versus Strategic Culture: Competition and Collaboration', *International Studies Review*, Vol.11, No.3, 2009; Colin Gray, *The Geopolitics of Super Power*, (University Press Kentucky, 1988).

¹¹ Samuel P Huntington, *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order*, (New York: Simon and Schuster), 1996.

cultural factors that influence its desired strategic outcomes: the all-pervasive role of religion, its state-creation and concomitant leadership role within the broader Arab world, and the existence of several autocratic neighbours whose legitimacy – like that of the KSA – is not defined by democratic principles of responsibility, accountability and authority.¹² The former point is a particularly important aspect of the KSA's culture and its desire to maintain its legitimacy and its role as the self-appointed custodian of Mecca and Medina, and by extension Islam. For example, since the 2011 Arab Spring we have witnessed the rise and demise of new political actors, the proliferation of non-state actors, Gulf Arab regional assertion and in particular, the KSA's move towards a more proactive foreign policy amidst internal problems of generational succession, and its continued preoccupation with Iran.¹³

By focussing on the determinants of the state's foreign and security policy provides the opportunity to explore the roles that – what we might call - intra-state identity norms shape the KSA's strategic behaviour.¹⁴ A good example of this is the post-Nasser era perception of the gradually less dominant pan-Arab political particularities and the idea of a unified *umma* – Muslim population – in favour of an increased trend towards favouring the nation-state system and its concomitant Realist behavioural qualities as explanatory variables.¹⁵ Yet a close look at the focus on the KSA's hard power in

¹² Gilles Kepel, *Jihad*, (IB Tauris & Co Ltd), July 2009.

¹³ Toby Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab Spring that Wasn't*, (Stanford Briefs), July 2013.

¹⁴ Gerd Nonneman, *Analyzing Middle East Foreign Policies and the Relationship with Europe*, (Routledge, July 2005), p. 1.

¹⁵ Anthony Cordesman, *The Gulf and the West*, Routledge, (September 1998); Nonneman, *Analyzing Middle East Foreign Policies*; Anthony Cordesman, *Saudi Arabia: Guarding the*

subsequent chapters might demonstrate that its political system and the requirement to balance, either coercively or defensively, against non-state actors remains significant.¹⁶ Or in other words, other states are not necessarily the KSA's key security challenge.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

This thesis's primary research question is: To what extent can strategic culture help us understand the KSA's strategic decision-making and behaviour with regard to its security policy?

The thesis will follow a chronological method, examining the dominant cultural factors and critical junctures and the KSA's decision making over the following key periods of its history: the KSA's state-creation in 1932; the period colloquially known as Nasserism during the 1950/60s; the period following the 1979 Iranian Revolution; and concluding with case studies into the KSA's behaviour during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan during the 1980s, and during the civil and proxy war carried out in Syria following the events of the Arab Spring in 2011. These chronological events will allow me to examine some specific secondary research questions which will support the elucidation of the KSA's strategic decision-making behaviours.

Desert Kingdom, (Perseus, January 1997); and Courtney Freer, *Rentier Islam*, (Oxford University Press USA, May 2018).

¹⁶ Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab Politics*; Stephen Walt, *The Origin of Alliances*, (Cornell University Press, September 1990); and F Gregory Gause III, 'Systemic Approaches to Middle East International Relations', *International Studies Association*, 1999.

Before examining these chronological periods, chapter 2 will examine the scholarly literature surrounding the concept of strategic culture in order to better understand its utility and appropriateness in compared to other concepts. Chapter 2 will also briefly examine scholarly literature surrounding Middle East area studies in order to assist in situating the KSA within the Arabian Peninsula and wider Middle East. Chapter 3 will examine those dominant cultural factors influencing the KSA's decision making behaviours in response to Nasserism, specifically by enhancing our understanding of the intra-Sunni competition over identity and leadership. This chapter will help achieve a better understanding of the following secondary research question relating to the KSA's strategic culture: To what extent does intra-Sunni religious doctrine – specifically *Wahhabism* – influence the KSA's strategic decision-making behaviours in relation to its critical junctures?

Chapter 4 will follow a similar process by examining the events of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, and the resulting intra-Islamic competition over identity and leadership over the Muslim world. This analysis will develop and discover an enhanced understanding of an additional secondary research question: Does this intra-Islamic competition constrain in any way the KSA's strategic behaviour – insofar as the *Wahhabi* doctrine of *tawhid* (monotheism) and *takfir* (excommunication) are concerned – and does the KSA's apparent requirement to evolve and refine its identity provide an additional paradox to the KSA's security policy?

The case studies in chapter 5 will help to discover, or otherwise, our understanding of the KSA's foreign and security policy behaviour by identifying any behavioural patterns or trends that can be attributed to the KSA's strategic culture.

Finally, chapter 6 will offer conclusions and suggest any possible areas for further scholarly research.

THE KSA'S STATE FORMATION AND ITS REGIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY.

The KSA's regional security strategy has remained stable since it was established as an autonomous state in 1932. It lies at the confluence of history, ethnicity and religion, and on the post-World War One fault lines of the McMahon letter,¹⁷ the Sykes-Picot Agreement,¹⁸ the Balfour declaration,¹⁹ the treaties of Lausanne and Sevres.²⁰ It is ultimately the result of the Saud's' ability to eject the Hashemites, who were the previous rulers of the Hejaz, from the western Arabian Peninsula. Each of above factors impacted the KSA and the other member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC),²¹ and all provide historical and contextual understanding to the contemporary foreign and security policies of the KSA.

The KSA's overriding goal has been to maintain the security of the regime in the face of conventional military threats, transnational ideological challenges such as pan-Arabism,

¹⁷ McMahon letters are actually a series of letters exchanged during World War I in which the British government agreed to recognize Arab independence after the war in exchange for the Sharif of Mecca launching the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Turks.

¹⁸ The Sykes-Picot Agreement was a secret agreement, by which most of the Arab lands under the rule of the Ottoman Turks would be divided between Britain and France.

¹⁹ The Balfour declaration was a public statement issued by the British government during World War I, announcing support for the establishment of a national home for the Jewish people.

²⁰ The Treaty of Sevres was imposed on the Ottoman Empire after World War I.

²¹ The Gulf Cooperation Council was created in 1981, primarily as a response to the Iranian revolution and Iran's subsequent attempts to export revolutionary Islam in Arabia. Its founding members were Saudi Arabia, UAE, Oman, Qatar, Kuwait and Bahrain.

Political Islamism and extremist religious challenges to its domestic political stability and legitimacy.²² These challenges are compounded by their requirement to maintain strategic alliances with superpowers, regional powers, and non-state actors. Typically, the means used by the KSA to secure its interests in the region have involved the wielding of financial power, diplomatic balancing, and its carefully balanced transnational ideological network.²³

Like any regional power, the KSA's security policy seeks to prevent actors becoming regional hegemony. However, the KSA's security policy cannot be understood solely from the Realist perspective of maintaining the balance of power over neighbouring states. Perhaps uniquely in the Arab world, and with the KSA at the centre of Sunni'ism, security challenges most often materialise by transnational ideologies and movements that can mobilise populations – the *umma* – against incumbent rulers. Indeed, in the broader Middle East there are powerful transnational identities grounded in Islam and Arabism that attract political loyalty across national boundaries.²⁴

The Saudi regime has historically been particularly vulnerable to such transnational ideologies as a result of its own nation building experience. The Saudi state emerged from the Arabian Peninsula that had been characterised by political fragmentation for centuries. It is less than 100 years old and was united by military power, unassisted

²² Bahgat Korany, *The Foreign Policies of Arab States: The Challenge of Globalisation*, (American University in Cairo Press, 2008).

²³ F Gregory Gause, *The International Politics of the Persian Gulf*, (Syracuse University Press, 2011).

²⁴ See for example, Mohammed Ayoob, 'Third World in the System of States', *International Studies Quarterly* 33, no.1, 1989.

initially by any unifying nationalist ideology. Rather, Abd al-Aziz ibn Abd al-Rahman Al Saud (the founder of the KSA and referred to as Ibn Saud) justified his rule on the basis of a specific strand of Islam called *Wahhabism*. Ibn Saud rejected those that were not *Wahhabist*. Indeed, the modern institutions of the state such as defence, economy, foreign affairs and internal security, which have been established since the state's establishment have been adapted from the traditional form of tribal patronage - appointments to such institutions now, reflect the importance of Wahhabism.²⁵

The KSA's regional security strategy has primarily been one of power balancing, seeking out regional and international allies against other state and non-state powers that threaten the regime or its regional interests.²⁶ In a multipolar regional environment, where a number of state-sponsored and non-state threats exist, deciding whom to balance against, and when, characterises the KSA's strategic decision making.²⁷ We will examine why historically it has balanced within the Middle East region by blocking any attempts by other states at gaining regional hegemony, and of more relevance to this thesis, how it has balanced primarily against ideological challenges to the Saudi regime.²⁸ This dominant aspect of its foreign and security policy is extremely interesting. This thesis will aim to generate a better understanding of what determines this behaviour whenever the KSA has dealt with challenges "coming from below" in pursuit of what Barnett calls

²⁵ Korany, *The Many Faces of National Security*, pp.12-13.

²⁶ Nonneman, *Analyzing Middle East Foreign Policies*, p. 251.

²⁷ F. Gregory Gause, 'Balancing What? Threat Perception and Alliance Choice in the Gulf', *Security Studies* 13, no.2, 2004.

²⁸ Hinnebusch and Ehteshami, *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, (Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, London, 2002).

“identity hegemony”, that is, securing its ontological security by reframing its identity in response to events, via its discursive power.²⁹

The predominant method used by the KSA for advancing its regional security policy has been the weaponisation of identity.³⁰ The KSA has established robust regional ideological networks, whose various aims have been to disseminate the KSA’s interpretations of *Wahhabism* and its claim to be the protector of the Islamic faith.³¹ Chapter 3 will analyse these aspects of its strategic culture in more detail in order to demonstrate *why* the KSA has positioned itself ideologically as the centre-ground of Islam, in particular, Sunni Islam within the region. This central tool of Saudi statecraft has allowed the KSA to intervene in the politics of other regional states in order to advance its own interests in the name of Islam. For such purposes, the KSA has established and maintained alliances with non-state actors, especially Islamist organisations. An intriguing aspect of this thesis is that the level of support for such groupings, although generally consistent in a relationship sense, is variably dependent on the KSA’s understanding and analysis of the ideological threats it is balancing against at a particular time.³² Understanding why the KSA behaves this way appears curious and contradictory. Chapters 3 and 4 will provide several

²⁹ Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab Politics*, pp. 22 – 25.

³⁰ Noting that KSA’s most preeminent tool of statecraft is its financial power, which allows it to support its regional allies directly or indirectly as part of its omni-balancing. The examination of its fiscal policy in support of its security strategy, as a behavioural tool, is outside the scope of this thesis. Indeed, it would almost certainly require a standalone thesis.

³¹ See for example, Simon Ross, *Force and Fanaticism*, (Hurst and Company, London, 2015), Keppel, *Jihad*.

³² See for example, F Gregory Gause, ‘Saudi Arabia in the New Middle East’, (Council on Foreign Relations, December 23, 2011); James Piscatori, *Islamic Fundamentalism and the Gulf Crisis*, (Boston: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1991).

examples of the undulation of these relationships, including the determinants on the KSA's behaviour, thereby demonstrating the difficulty associated with maintaining the appropriate control over these behavioural relationships. It will also demonstrate what happens when these strategies go wrong, and the resulting unintended consequences. The literature highlights a predominant tension with balancing ideological stakeholders when the KSA's strategic behaviour runs contrary to these ideologies.³³

In conclusion, since its formation, the KSA's rulers have confronted a number of challenges to their domestic stability. The thesis will note that none of these challenges has involved the prospect of direct military invasion by a neighbouring power.³⁴ Rather, challenges to its domestic stability have come from further afield. Efforts at destabilization have sought to mobilise opposition to the Saud's rule through ideational ways. We will examine the extent to which these challenges were socially constructed involving a combination of identity politics in order provide, or otherwise, legitimacy of behaviour. The extent to which the KSA's strategic culture provides behavioural legitimacy – the justification of foreign and security policy behaviours in accordance with historical norms - is the centre of gravity of this thesis. Chapter 2 will now examine the literature surrounding strategic culture in general, and specifically as it relates to the KSA. It will also examine the KSA's regional security context which will help situate subsequent chapters where we will focus on the KSA's strategic culture around its critical junctures.

³³ Gause, *Saudi Arabia in the New Middle East*.

³⁴ Ken Pollack, *Armies of Sand*, (Oxford University Press, 2019).

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will examine the scholarly literature of strategic culture and will apply the concept to examining the KSA's behaviour according to critical junctures throughout its history. It will examine the different generations of scholarly literature that has employed the concept of strategic culture in its analysis of international relations. It will begin with Cold War explanations as to its utility for explaining or understanding strategy, before examining subsequent scholarly works that have prioritised cultural aspects as important or decisive determinants of strategic behaviour in their own right. Critical to this analysis is the recognition of the importance of identity, identity security, and the perception of threat in and how the KSA pre-emptively or reactively responds to these threats. It is applied to analyse the KSA's decision-making behaviours for several reasons: the KSA leads a relatively stable alliance and sub-region within the wider Middle East; the KSA experiences a seemingly complex regional security dilemma, yet it has not been significantly – visibly at least – impacted by the Arab Spring; the KSA has religious legitimacy amongst Sunni Muslims, albeit such legitimacy has been increasingly challenged by various non-state and state actors; and it has been the West's principal regional Arab ally since the Second World War.³⁵ The KSA has also been involved in the majority of unconventional conflicts within the region, and along the region's frontiers, as subsequent chapters will demonstrate.³⁶

³⁵ Bernard Haykel et al, *Saudi Arabia in Transition*, (Cambridge University Press, January 2015).

³⁶ Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihadi Culture*, (Cambridge University Press, June 2017).

Indeed, throughout its near 100-year history, the KSA had not – up until its intervention in Yemen in 2015 – waged a conventional, military intervention, anywhere. This is despite its geographic proximity and its ideological connectedness to every regional conflict since the pan-Arab war against Israel in 1948.³⁷ Yet this thesis will demonstrate its involvement in the majority of flashpoints around the Middle East, which might imply a preference for unconventional interventionist behaviour. Before turning specifically to strategic culture, we will now briefly discuss each of those regional security challenges that the KSA's faces in turn below.

The Nasserist challenge. Gamal Abd al-Nasser, Egypt's leader from 1954 until his death in 1970, asserted his leadership of the Arab world by mobilising the *Arab umma* into a Pan-Arab (trans-nationalist) movement in order to challenge Israel, Western influence in the Middle East and the broader leadership role of pan-Arab unity. Chapter 3 will analyse Nasser's ability to destabilise several monarchies in the region, helping to topple the regimes in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Yemen, whilst simultaneously threatening the survival of the rulers of Lebanon and Jordan. The Saudi leadership – King Feisal in particular – feared Nasser's ability to mobilise support for pan-Arabism and also topple it from power.³⁸ An unintended consequence of Nasser's pan-Arabism was the dramatic rise of the Muslim Brotherhood from an organisation conceived to purify Egypt of *jahiliya* – ignorance – following its colonial rule by Great Britain. The Muslim Brotherhood posed as a pan-Islamic challenge to Nasser's pan-Arabist project. Despite being financed and supported by the KSA, the Muslim Brotherhood's rise became an identity tool of the pan-Arabists and Political Islamists, which in turn created identity anxiety for the KSA. The

³⁷ Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival*, (WW Norton & Company, October 2016).

³⁸ Alexi Vassiliev, *The Life and Times of King Feisal*, (Saqi Books, 2016).

impact of these cultural factors on KSA's strategic behaviour will be analysed in chapter 3. Chapter 5 will go on to focus on events since 2011 surrounding the *Arab Spring*, itself partly an offshoot of Nasserism four decades prior, and the KSA's reaction to the Arab Spring, which helped foment a series of counterrevolutions.

The challenge from Revolutionary Iran after 1979. Post-Revolutionary Iran challenged the KSA's leaders in a number of ways. This *Islamic Revolution* demonstrated that it was possible for an Islamist idea to overthrow a powerful monarchy, even one allied to the US. The Islamic credentials of the Ayatollah's narrative challenged the KSA leaders' legitimacy as de-facto *Guardians of the Two Holy places* (i.e., of Mecca and Medina), and criticised the un-Islamic credentials of the Saudi royals. Additionally, the Ayatollah's emphasis on anti-Americanism challenged the KSA's pre-eminent international security relationship, which involved the USA. And finally, the Ayatollah sought to unite the broader Shia community across the Middle East and within the KSA, under his leadership and religious influence. This thesis examines this particular challenge in chapters 4 and 5, specifically the degree to which the KSA's strategic behaviour is heavily influenced by ontological security, in particular the sectarianisation of identity politics, in order to protect or enhance the regime's interests.

The Salafi-Jihadism challenge represented by Al-Qaeda and other nihilist organisations. This challenge to the KSA's security became fully-fledged by the early 1990s, with roots planted during the Afghanistan *Jihad* - religious struggle - during the 1980s. The early aspects of this threat emerged during the 1990s, but it exploded to prominence from 2003, following the US-led invasion of Iraq. This moment signified a specific security challenge to the survival of the Saudi regime, as it questioned the sincerity of the KSA's adherence to its own *Wahhabist* doctrine, and its paradoxical

alliance with the US. Chapter 3 will examine this intra-Sunni doctrinal challenge in detail in order to understand the impact of these dominant cultural factors on the KSA's behaviour. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 will look at the wider strategic paradox confronting the KSA's omni-balancing efforts.

The Arab Spring and its counterrevolutions. The 2011 *Arab Spring* and its aftermath is the latest challenge confronting the KSA. Yet intriguingly, its constituent parts could be described as a contemporary continuation of the challenges already described. Nevertheless, the events of the Arab Spring and in particular their aftermath are informative in analysing the KSA's strategic behaviour, when confronted by a plethora of normative and cultural factors, including pan-Arabism, Political Islam, Salafi-Jihadism, increasingly malign Iranian activity inspired by Shi'ite revolutionary zeal, all the while maintaining its vital strategic relationship with the US. Chapter 5 of this thesis will examine this in some detail by focusing on events within Syria.

International Alliances. Germane to each of the challenges listed above is the KSA's strategic alliance with the US. There exists a persistent tension in the KSA's grand strategy, between the maintenance of ties with the US as the ultimate guarantor of its security status and its desire to prevent this alliance usurping its foreign policy in Arab and wider Middle Eastern affairs.³⁹ According to Gause, the KSA has been successful at balancing the contradictions between its regional and international strategies. When faced with contrary pressures from the US vis-à-vis the KSA's regional and domestic demands the KSA has often balanced the contradictions successfully and managed to successfully

³⁹ Matteo Legrenzi, *The GCC and the International Relations of the Gulf*, (IB Tauris, August 2015).

hedge their position.⁴⁰ How the KSA balances contradictory pressures and interests will be discussed later in this chapter and throughout this thesis.

Regional Alliances – the GCC. A shared identity is what motivated the Saudis, along with other Gulf Arab states to form a regional intergovernmental political and economic union, alongside economic factors, and in part a response to the Iranian revolution of 1979.⁴¹ The Gulf Arab states are considered to be natural allies, sharing common historical experiences. By creating the GCC they aspired to construct a “psychologically satisfying political community” at ease with each other, and ostensibly with a shared identity and a shared perception of the threat they faced, by non-GCC Otherness.⁴² The GCC’s shared identity allowed it to identify the boundaries of their non-discretionary norms and behaviour – seeking to establish behavioural rules in their collective or individual power politics insofar as these behaviours related to Others - and also to frame and define their perception of regional threats within the context of a collective alliance.⁴³ This thesis will return to examine alliance-building and identity in greater detail later in this chapter and throughout the thesis as it is a recurring feature in the literature of the KSA’s strategic behaviour. Alliances are an important element of Saudi foreign and security policy. Saudi leaders seek to operate as a fulcrum against those who oppose their own conservative/status quo norms, in respect of the region’s international relations’

⁴⁰ F. Gregory Gause, ‘Saudi Arabia’s Regional Security Strategy’, in Mehran Kamrava (ed.), *International Politics of the Persian Gulf*, (Syracuse University Press, 2011), p. 173.

⁴¹ Marina Calculli, ‘The Securitization of Identities’, *International Relations of the Middle East*, 4th edn, pp. 8-25.

⁴² Peter Katzenstein, *Culture of National Security*, (Columbia University Press, September 1996), p. 423.

⁴³ Malcolm Kerr, *The Arab Cold War*, (Oxford University Press), 1971.

radical actors, such as political Islamists, violent extremists, and revolutionary Shia state of Iran.⁴⁴

Variation in the foreign policies of GCC states results from a complex interaction of identity and material factors within each constituent state. Status quo foreign policies are most likely to be pursued when identity is shared, while identity that is subject to sectarian fault-lines is most likely to be a source of tension.⁴⁵ Membership of the exclusively Sunni GCC "...requires that the state proclaim itself as a member of the community, and express and uphold those values and norms that constitute it. To do so, the state must have a stable identity".⁴⁶ Understanding the KSA's perspective on the constitution of these cultural norms seems to be vital if we are to better understand its effects on strategic behaviour relating to the intricacies of alliance formation that take shape in order to deal with the threats that arise against the KSA.⁴⁷

Whilst not all states with a shared identity will define threats in the same way, scholars note the extent to which there is an important connection between identity and threat that is of interest to understanding certain behaviours.⁴⁸ In other words, Arabism might affect

⁴⁴ Legrenzi, *The GCC and the International Relations of the Gulf*, pp. 27-45.

⁴⁵ Fawcett, *International Relations Middle East*, p. 168.

⁴⁶ Katzenstein, *Culture of National Security*, p. 411.

⁴⁷ According to Christopher Davidson, Marc Lynch, Gerges, Fawcett, Hegghammer et al.

⁴⁸ Fred Halliday, *The Middle East in International Relations*, (Cambridge University Press), October 2011, p82; Fawcett, *International Relations Middle East*; Fawaz Gerges, *The New Middle East*, (Cambridge University Press), December 2013.

the identity and interests of, and the socially acceptable policies available to the KSA's leaders in ways that fundamentally shape their desired and available security policies.⁴⁹

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY

My research exists at the nexus of two national security scholarly subfields: security studies and Arab studies. According to Realists, threats to national security are external and implicitly militaristic, rather than associated with intra-state protracted social conflict.⁵⁰ However, according to Gause, there is a deficit in combining international relations theory and Middle East studies.⁵¹ Many international relations scholars retain a tight focus on the state as the primary object of analysis, Middle Eastern scholars have had a different focus: one that places material interests alongside identity and domestic concerns at the centre of their analysis.⁵²

Despite Realism's popularity as an IR theory, it is incomplete and even misleading.⁵³ It is misleading because its simplicity can provide only a partial understanding of the way

⁴⁹ Katzenstein, *Culture of National Security*, p. 408.

⁵⁰ For example, Hassan Hamdan al-Alkim, *The GCC States in an Unstable World*, (Saqi Books, February 2001), p4-15; Nonneman, *Analyzing Middle East Foreign Policies*, p123-160; Zalmay Khalilzad, *The Implications Of The Possible End of The Arab-Israeli Conflict For Gulf Security*, (RAND Corporation), 1997; John Garnett, *Strategic Studies and its Assumptions*, (Gale ECCO), April 2018; Mohammed Ayoob, *Security in the Third World*, (Lynne Rienner), January 1995; P Edward Haley, *Strategic Studies and the Middle East*, (Johns Hopkins University Press), May 2006.

⁵¹ F Gregory Gause III, *Systemic Approaches to Middle East International Relations*, p. 11.

⁵² For example, see Baghat Korany, *Many Faces of National Security in the Arab World*.

⁵³ According to, for example, Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, (Waveland Pr Inc), February 2010; Joseph Nye and Robert Keohanne, *Power and Interdependence: World Politics*

the KSA has dealt/deals with the challenges listed earlier in this chapter, in that it prioritizes the nation-state and transposes the Western experience as a universal model onto the specific experiences of the KSA.⁵⁴ Indeed, this thesis is less interested in “the state” per se, but rather how domestic and regional characteristics, and norms, highlighted earlier, create unconventional threats to the KSA’s national security.⁵⁵ The majority of these threat characteristics have been described as “protracted social conflict”.⁵⁶ Of interest to this thesis is how the prevalent patterns of protracted social conflict in the Middle East manifest at the intra-state level, and largely as a result of “becoming exploited by inter-state relations, religious animosities, tribal divisions, or other social factions”.⁵⁷

The cultural factors underpinning Ayooob’s assessment of the Middle East are prevalent. They include Arabism, Sunni’ism, Shi’ism, Political Islamism, and religious extremism. What Hudson describes as the cultural characteristics of the contemporary Saudi state which creates a “multidimensionality of its security concerns”.⁵⁸ If, as we noted in chapter 1, Snyder contended that the concept of strategic culture was comprised of “semi-

in Transition, (Pearson), February 2011; James Rosenau, *Turbulence in World Politics*, (Princeton University Press), July 1990.

⁵⁴ Korany, *Many Faces of National Security*, p6-10; Charles Tilly, *The Formation of National States in Western Europe*, (Princeton University Press), July 1975.

⁵⁵ Kamel Abu-Jaber, *Strategic Studies and the Middle East: A View from the Region*, Princeton University Press, 1991, p. 221-235.

⁵⁶ Edward Azar, *National Security in the Third World*, (Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd), May 1988, pp. 41-69.

⁵⁷ Mohammed Ayooob, *Security in the Third World*, p. 51.

⁵⁸ Michael Hudson, *Arab Politics: The Search for Legitimacy*, (Yale University Press, New Haven and London), September 2009.

permanent beliefs...and behaviour patterns”,⁵⁹ later, Duffield’s work on Germany’s security policy on unification noted that a state’s strategic culture defines the foreign and security policy goals that influence that state’s behaviour. That is, the state relies on cultural and social factors to shape public perceptions of the context surrounding the state’s international environment. He went on to suggest that state security policies encompass emotional attachments, patterns of identity and of affinity.⁶⁰

Duffield’s explanation suggests that the concept of strategic culture is a highly applicable theory for examining the KSA’s strategic behaviour. However, Snyder and Duffield both suggest that strategic culture is static or resistant to change, which would imply that a region beset by coups, civil-strife and revolutions is less suited to analysis using a strategic culture framework. However, newer literature does concede that strategic shocks may lead to more rapid changes in foreign and security policy behaviour, and that if there exists a high correlation between strategic preferences and strategic behaviour, then the strategic culture concept becomes more applicable, regardless of misperceptions of being static or resistant to change.⁶¹ Therefore, understanding the KSA’s ‘strategic preferences’ and analysing those preferences against actual behaviour are necessary. Although scholars hitherto have disagreed on the relative strengths and weaknesses of strategic

⁵⁹ Jack Snyder, ‘The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Nuclear Options’, *Santa Monica: RAND Corporation*, 1977, p. 8.

⁶⁰ John Duffield, *World Power Forsaken: Political Culture, International Institutions, and German Security Policy after Unification*, (Stanford University Press), 1999, p. 23.

⁶¹ Alistair Iain Johnston, ‘Thinking About Strategic Culture’, *International Security* 19:4, 1995, pp. 37-39.

culture as a primary IR concept for understanding state and sub-state actors' behaviour, it has still remained a secondary concept when compared to Realism.⁶²

Nowadays, however, with more than three decades of post-Cold War experiences behind us, critics charge that Realism fell short in predicting major events - the ideas-behaviour nexus - and does not adequately describe behaviour and decision making. Whilst this thesis does not intend to examine in detail the scholarly debate over the utility of Realism in examining international relations, it is necessary to briefly examine certain elements of it, particularly insofar as Realism focuses on examining security threats and how these bring about alliances. For Realists, culture and identity are, at best, derivative of the distribution of capabilities and have no independent explanatory power.⁶³ That is, actors deploy culture and identity strategically, like any other resource, simply to further their own self-interests. Neo-Realism, for example, insists that shifts in the balance of relative capabilities/power are the main determinants of states' behaviour in international politics. Generally speaking, Neo-Realists treat culture and identity as secondary, as a "superstructure" determined in the last instance by the "material base".⁶⁴ That is, they are factors that contribute and influence strategic behaviour by states but are not the primary determinants of it. This is arguably the dominant view of state environments in security studies. Indeed, this view is so pervasive that even its critics, such as Neo-Liberal

⁶² Michael Desch, 'Culture Clash: Assessing the Importance of Ideas in Security Studies', *International Security Studies, International Security* 23, No.1, 1999, pp.156-180.

⁶³ Kohany, *The Many Faces of National Security*.

⁶⁴ For example, Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, *International Institutions and State Power*, (Harvard University Press), January 1993.

institutionalists, typically refer to structure in material terms and then treat norms, rules, and institutions as mere 'process'.⁶⁵

Competing Conceptions of Strategic Culture

The concept of linkage between cultural/normative factors and national security behaviour exists in classic works, including that of Carl Von Clausewitz. Clausewitz's trinity of government, the army, and the people were the three most important aspects in any given war, thereby recognising the link between the cultural and anthropological aspects and government.⁶⁶ Snyder brought the political culture argument to the fore by developing a link between strategic culture and strategic behaviour, with bottom-up influences that are dependent on historical societal norms, to interpret Soviet strategy.⁶⁷ Lantis interprets this as a landmark work that suggested that elites articulate a concept of strategic culture related to a wider manifestation of public opinion. This wider manifestation serves as an independent determinant of national strategy.⁶⁸ Conversely, Gray claimed that a national style should be an enduring explanation of state behaviour.⁶⁹ Gray criticised strategic culture as a preeminent theory, primarily because of the unique cultural aspects that make up each state. Supporters and detractors of the concept of strategic culture, he argues, agree that it is often too static and focused on enduring

⁶⁵ Katzenstein, *Culture National Security*, p.17-38

⁶⁶ Michael Howard, 'Clausewitz, Man of the Year', *New York Times*, January 28, 1991.

⁶⁷ Snyder, *Soviet Strategic Culture*.

⁶⁸ Jeffrey Lantis, 'Strategic Culture and National Security Policy', *International Studies Review*, Vol.4. No.3 (Autumn 2002).

⁶⁹ Colin Gray, 'National Style in Strategy: The American Example', *International Security* 6, No.2, 1981, p. 35.

historical orientations.⁷⁰ In the context of this thesis however – if Gray is accurate - they are of use. That is, enduring historical orientations might allow for strong predictive capability in ways that Realism does not have. In terms of the KSA, examining its strategic culture allows us to try and identify patterns within its ‘cultural thought-ways’.⁷¹

Debates regarding strategic culture have primarily concentrated on the ‘first and third generations of scholars’.⁷² The first generation was led by Gray and used the concept in order to understand the ‘why’ different cultures used different IR theories – which we will elaborate on shortly - in different ways.⁷³ The third generation, largely led by Johnson, criticised the first generation as being largely unproven and instead focused on falsifiable theories. These two scholars have staked out opposite positions that have largely shaped the existing thinking on the usefulness of applying the concept of strategic culture in helping researchers understand state behaviour. In general terms, their body of literature advanced two theses. Firstly, due to cultural differences among different nations, nations will make different choices when faced with identical security challenges based on such cultural differences. Secondly, some nations are likely to exhibit

⁷⁰ Colin Gray, ‘The Geopolitics of Superpower’, *Lexington: University Press of Kentucky*, (1988), p. 42-43.

⁷¹ Jeffrey Lantis, ‘Strategic Culture and National Security Policy’, *International Studies Review*, Vol.4. No.3 (Autumn 2002), p. 95.

⁷² Alastair Johnston, ‘Strategic Cultures Revisited: Reply to Colin Gray’, *Review of International Studies*, 25:3, (1999); Colin Gray, ‘Strategic Culture as Context: The First Generation of Theory Strikes Back’, *Review of International Studies*, 25:1, (1999); Stuart Poore, ‘What is the Context? A Reply to the Gray-Johnston Debate on Strategic Culture’, *Review of International Studies*, 29:2, (2003).

⁷³ For example, Colin Gray, ‘National Styles in Strategy: The American Example’, *International Security* 6, No.2, (1981); Colin Gray, ‘Nuclear Strategy and National Styles’, *Hamilton Press*, (1986).

consistency of choice and behaviour over time because of cultural norms associated with their identity, and the constraints or rules inferred by these cultural norms.⁷⁴

Both theses are of interest in trying to identify an observable pattern of behaviour when dealing with different stakeholders. For Johnston, strategic culture affects state behaviour by presenting policy makers with a “limited set of grand strategic preferences” with which to interact with within the security environment.⁷⁵ This approach isolates strategic culture as an independent variable and then assesses its impact on state behaviour. It also implies an emphasis on the importance of cultural norms when examining state behaviour. Gray, on the other hand, argued that strategic behaviour cannot be separated from strategic culture as both are linked to our understanding of “the wrap of context”.⁷⁶ The implication of this approach means that one ought to only understand rather than explain strategic behaviour, which implies an interpretation of past events, rather than a more positivist goal of understanding the causes of that strategic behaviour.⁷⁷ The important area that distinguishes Johnston and Gray is the extent to which strategic culture should be conceptually distinguished from strategic behaviour. We will return to this question shortly. The ‘second generation’⁷⁸ of scholarly work examined the utility of strategic

⁷⁴ Edward Lock, ‘Refining Strategic Culture’, *Review of International Studies*, Vol.36, No.3, (2010), p. 686.

⁷⁵ Johnston, *Cultural Realism*, p. 38.

⁷⁶ Gray, *Strategic Culture as Context*, p. 51.

⁷⁷ Christopher Meyer, ‘Convergence Towards a European Strategic Culture? A Constructivist Framework for Explaining Changing Norms’, *European Journal of International Relations*, (2005), p. 524.

⁷⁸ Again, the ‘three generations’ is a term coined by Alistair Johnson. Johnston, ‘*Cultural Realism*’, p. 36.

culture in determining and understanding behaviour. Yosef Lapid and Ted Hopf, for example, brought about a resurgence in studies focusing on organisational processes, history, traditions, culture and their impact on identity.⁷⁹ They argued that the role of Constructivism allowed a new wave of strategic culture research in that the Constructivist approach pays particular attention to the role of identity and identity formation.⁸⁰ This Constructivist work allows us to focus specifically on this area of disagreement between Johnson and Gray, and to draw conclusions as to the disputed connectedness of strategic culture with strategic behaviour.

No generalisable conclusion can be drawn from the ‘three generations’ of scholarly work on strategic culture that have proliferated since the end of the Cold War. Most scholars, as Lock notes, have self-defined strategic culture, which means that the conceptual foundation for advancing a theory is lacking.⁸¹ For example, in addition to the ‘three generations’ of strategic culture’ scholars, Glenn advances a slightly different perspective of strategic culture, suggesting that competitive collaboration should exist between Realism and strategic culture.⁸² Specifically Glenn posits that there are four conceptions of strategic culture which can aid our understanding of strategic behaviour and that an overlap exists between each ontological and epistemological position regarding the

⁷⁹ Yosef Lapid, ‘The Third Debate: On the Prospects of International Theory in a Post-Positivist Era’, *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol.33, No.3, (Sep 1989), p235-254; Ted Hopf, ‘The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations’, *International Security* 23, No.1, 1998, p. 914.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Lock, *Refining Strategic Culture*, p. 701.

⁸² John Glenn, ‘Realism versus Strategic Culture: Competition and Collaboration’, *International Studies Review*, Vol.11, No.3, (Sep 2009).

concept. Glenn describes these as Epiphenomenal, Constructivist, Post-Structuralist, and Interpretivist. Glenn's analysis of strategic culture is rooted however in efforts by Realists to explain the actual policies adopted by states in a particular period of time. Glenn distinguishes that Epiphenomenal strategic culture is merely a short-term deviation of state behaviour away from Realist norms. He regards Constructivist strategic culturists as viewing shared beliefs and norms as influencing deviations away from Realist norms. That Post-Structuralists strategic culturalists are users of discursive strategies to explain deviations from Realist norms, and finally Interpretivists who would suggest that sub-state ideals and norms influence the state's unique perspective of the international social environment and the state's role within it.⁸³ Epiphenomenal strategic culture is generally sought to identify preferred military strategies adopted by states in the pursuit of foreign and security policies. To accomplish these ends, scholars of the Epiphenomenal perspective use cultural aspects that are limited to those concerned with military strategy only.⁸⁴ The absence of a significant or effective military capability has contributed, but not been the strategic driver for how the KSA wields hard-power.⁸⁵ In addition, scholars of the Epiphenomenal perspective, like Johnston's 'first generation scholars', were not advocating strategic culture as a dominant theory over Realism, but rather, they generally considered it to be temporary or specific variable or deviation from Realism.

Nevertheless, some notable scholars of the Constructivist school, such as Katzenstein have argued the "sociological perspective on the politics of national security... [in] that

⁸³ Glenn, *Realism versus Strategic Culture*, pp. 530-531.

⁸⁴ Glenn, *Realism versus Strategic Culture*, p. 531.

⁸⁵ Pollack, *Armies of Sand*.

security interests are defined by actors who respond to cultural factors.”⁸⁶ Recently, some Constructivists have attempted to explain these ‘deviations’ away from Realist explanations, whereby they have sought with partial success to understate the factors of materialism in favour of other factors such as regional identities.⁸⁷ They have particularly advanced our understanding of two region-specific normative factors – pan-Arabism and Islamic identity – which carry powerful credibility and influence within the *umma*.

Reversing the hitherto predominant Realist view, Constructivism has allowed us to reframe how states view their identities as shaping their strategic interests, and therefore how they execute strategic behaviour, or strategy, based also on ideational and normative factors. Specifically, insofar as our understanding of the KSA’s strategic behaviour is concerned, the Constructivist method of examining strategic culture allows us to examine the KSA’s strategic behaviour from a cultural perspective that is not totally Western dominated. That is, it allows the analytical freedom to examine cultural factors that may be particularly significant in our understanding of intra-state dynamics specific to the KSA.⁸⁸

The Constructivist literature does not suggest that material gain is not sought by Arab elites, just that identity requires it to be balanced, or constrained, by the norms of Arabism and Islam. In other words, Saudi leaders may seem to behave on the surface according to anarchic and purely materialistic rationales as Realists would argue, but their ways for achieving their strategic ends may be more heavily constrained by ideational and

⁸⁶ Katzenstein, *Culture National Security*, p. 3.

⁸⁷ Nonneman, *Analyzing Middle East Foreign Policies*; Katzenstein, *Culture of National Security*.

⁸⁸ Gause, *Systemic Approaches to Middle East International Relations*, p. 13.

normative factors that are more easily recognisable by advocates of the Constructivist method.⁸⁹ Despite these very welcome advances in understanding the challenges confronting Arab regimes in general, until we specifically analyse these cultural pressures on a state by state basis, the available literature generally wraps all Arab states as precisely that: Arab. This thesis will hope to demonstrate the limitations of such a broad-brush approach, and that being Arab or being a Muslim nation does not necessarily bind these nations into a collective lump. Our analysis of the KSA's strategic culture, and the way the KSA constructs identity, how it identifies the norms associated with this identity, and how it defines threats to this identity, allows us to understand its behavioural choices around things like alliance construction.

Generally speaking, the perspective of post-Structuralist strategic culture scholars, like Constructivists, recognise the importance of cultural and identity norms that actors identify with. These scholars identify actors' most prized or valuable relationships as being with other actors. Often these relationships will specifically include actors with different identities and interests that can pull strategic behaviour in different directions.⁹⁰ Therefore, a 'natural' condition of anarchy is but one possible behavioural output as a result of a specific context.⁹¹ Determining the behavioural output will require knowing more about the internal situation within a nation state than about the distribution of material power or the structure of authority within the international system. That is, one will need to know about the culture, norms, institutions, procedures, rules, and social

⁸⁹ Nonneman, *Analysing Middle East Foreign Policies*, p. 6-7.

⁹⁰ For example, Lynch, *After the Sheyks*, 2014, Gause *Systemic Approaches*, 2011, Martin Kramer, 'Ivory Towers on Sand', *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, January 2001.

⁹¹ Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, (Cambridge University Press), Spring 1999, pp. 391-425.

practices that constitute the actors and the ‘ideas-behaviour’ decision-making structure, alike.⁹² In other words, Post-Structuralists, like Constructivists claim that material power must be combined with “discursive power”,⁹³ in order to understand why some countries prevail while others do not.⁹⁴ This discursive power suggests a premium on engagement with stakeholders, in a constant attempt to influence behaviour in order to retain or regain an element of control over outcomes. What is perhaps unique insofar as how this discursive power is exercised by the KSA is the extent of the potential or actual power of many of these stakeholders – specifically those stakeholders that are able to confer legitimacy or illegitimacy such as religious leaders - the majority of whom are intra and inter-state in tandem.⁹⁵

Alistair Johnston’s definition of strategic culture – which we will discuss shortly – fits neatly with the notion of discursive power and bodes well for more analysis of the way the KSA employs its discursive power. Generally speaking, the available literature suggests that Arabs employ discursive power as a social process as a means of identifying or conferring state-level capabilities or power.⁹⁶ That is, there may be a direct link

⁹² Ted Hopf, *Making Identity Count*, (Oxford University Press), May 2016, p. 173.

⁹³ Discursive Power refers not only to the language, rhetoric and symbology used by a stakeholder – predominantly regarded as nation states – to express their identity and interests, but also the practices they undertake in order to achieve their strategic objectives. Fred H Lawson, *Constructivism, Post-Structuralism, and Post-Modernism, International Relations of the Middle East*, (Oxford University Press), 2006.

⁹⁴ Lawson, *International Relations Middle East*, p. 30.

⁹⁵ Mandaville, *Islam and Politics*, 24, p370-374; Gerges, *The New Middle East*, pp. 274-275.

⁹⁶ Thierry Balzacq, ‘The Three Faces of Securitization Theory’, *European Journal of International Relations*, (June 2005), p25-32, discusses the concept of securitization theory in

between the audience of the KSA's discursive power, that is with those sub-state or non-state actors that can impact the perception of legitimacy of the KSA's strategic behaviour, and its national security behaviour.

Indeed, as Glenn discusses in more generic terms, the KSA's leaders could be viewed as behaving in a Neo-Realist fashion with regards to their diplomatic approach to the West, with an emphasis on their analysis on factors such as statehood, state creation, and the state's alignment with superpowers. Yet in contrast, internally within the state, thresholds of acceptable cultural behaviour will require the KSA's leaders as behaving in a Constructivist fashion.⁹⁷ This method would emphasise factors such as Arab identity, shaping their discursive power and their strategic behaviour as they seek to balance internal factors (such as identity competition) and external factors.⁹⁸ Nonneman describes this as Arab states not resembling as monoliths acting under the mere influence of systemic factors, but rather as entities involving distinct groups with a wide variety of interests and linkages that may or may not influence the state's behaviour in the international arena.⁹⁹ This is a very interesting observation that requires further attention. For example, the relationship between the *Wahhabi* clerics and the political leadership may be in lockstep on some but not all issues regarding the KSA government's foreign relations.

great detail, with an emphasis on how the puzzle of everyday events can become transformed into matters of national security through 'discursive power'.

⁹⁷ Glenn, *Realism versus Strategic Culture*, pp. 533-536.

⁹⁸ Mohamed Ayoob, *The Third World Security Predicament*, (Boulder), p. 117.

⁹⁹ Nonneman, *Analysing Middle East Foreign Policies*, p. 8.

The KSA's strategic alliance with the US is a clear example of tensions originating from such relations. Similarly, the KSA's use of Arabism as a means of creating alliances and projecting a united Arab front against Iran was not possible during the period known as Nasserism. Subsequent chapters will examine these paradoxes in much greater detail in order to ascertain the extent to which Nonneman is accurate, but more so to understand the wide variety of interests and linkages that determines how the KSA's strategic leaders employ their discursive power.

THE FRAMEWORK OF THE KSA'S STRATEGIC CULTURE

As we have already briefly noted, the 'first generation' scholars of strategic culture placed emphasis on military culture. However, unlike the concept outlined by Snyder, Duffield, Gray and other 'first generation' scholars, the KSA's strategic culture is not necessarily a product of its military culture. Rather, the extent to which it has primarily been influenced by other cultural factors such as religion and Arabism, and the extent to which both are a dominant influence on the KSA's strategic behaviour, will largely determine the usefulness of a particular concept of strategic culture theory. Firstly, we must understand the constitutive elements that constitute and frame the KSA's strategic culture:

Identity and Threat

The specific difference between the 'first generation' – of strategic culture - and the second and third generations is the explicit connection between the politics of identity and the politics of strategy.¹⁰⁰ Of interest to this thesis is the evolution of these concepts and in particular the utilisation of identity as a strategic tool of statecraft. By this I mean

¹⁰⁰ Klein, *Hegemony and Strategic Culture*, p. 133.

the ability to predict behaviour, and not primarily or solely as a concept for understanding what happened in the past, and why. Indeed, inspired by Constructivism and Post-Structuralism, the ‘second generation’ of strategic culture scholars began to explore how strategic culture is shaped and may evolve, even allowing us to better predict events, rather than merely being an “explanation of last resort”.¹⁰¹ The ‘second generation’ literature questions basic assumptions such as the state as being a natural, stable and unitary security actor that possesses a unique yet given identity and culture.¹⁰² Such assumptions ignore the often-constructed relationships between these identities, and the contingency – especially from the KSA’s perspective – of these relationships.¹⁰³

Thus, the ‘second generation’ suggests a greater focus on analysing how a particular strategic culture shapes the content and meaning of strategic behaviour as well as the implications that follow from that particular behaviour. Understanding the consequences that flow from understanding the identity of different Saudi stakeholders, and that of the relationships and dependencies between them is an exciting prospect. Or put another way, within strategic culture theory, the ‘ends’ are likely to be constructed socially and involve identity factors.¹⁰⁴ This thesis aims to build upon such a conceptualisation, adding more emphasis and discovering the primacy of sub-state factors, the nature of power at the intra-state and trans-state levels than purely at the national level. It also aims to highlight the ‘juxtaposition of the features of cooperation alongside persistent conflict’ within the

¹⁰¹ Jeffrey Lantis, ‘Strategic Culture and National Security Policy’, *International Studies Review*, Vol.4, No.3, (2002), p. 103.

¹⁰² For example, Gray, *The Geopolitics of Superpower, on the Cold War*; Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History, on the Ming Dynasty*.

¹⁰³ Theo Farrell, *The Norms of War: Cultural Beliefs and Modern Conflict*, (Boulder), 2005.

¹⁰⁴ Lock, *Refining Strategic Culture*, p. 707.

KSA.¹⁰⁵ Understanding this source of power, and the impact non-state identities has upon its strategic behaviour, allows us to interpret patterns of strategic behaviour and therefore trends in the conduct of conflict or coercion during times of war and peace. These areas of strategic culture are of significant importance in the context of understanding the factors that determine strategic behaviour in the KSA's sphere of influence.

There is also a contrary view, an intriguing characteristic of some of the scholarly literature that suggests the possibility of strategic cultural change over time. Berger and Glenn assume that politico-military strategy is directly linked to domestic cultural factors, and therefore are relatively fixed and resistant to change, principally because “disconfirmable cognitive elements are buffered by the psychological phenomenon of consistency seeking. Information that reinforces existing images and beliefs is readily assimilated, while inconsistent data tend to be ignored, rejected, or distorted in order to make them compatible with prevailing cognitive structures”.¹⁰⁶

This body of work generally emphasises that historical memory and factors such as multilateral commitments – such as, alliances with the US, and with the GCC – shape strategic culture, and that therefore they undergo gradual change only over long periods of time.¹⁰⁷ These scholars acknowledge that strategic cultural models are not necessarily static and unresponsive, yet they do require a catalyst for change. Such catalysts – or

¹⁰⁵ Fawcett, *International Relations Middle East*, p. 9.

¹⁰⁶ Thomas Berger, ‘From Sword to Chrysanthemum: Japan’s Culture of Antimilitarism’, *International Security* 17, No.4, 1993, p119-150; John Glenn, ‘Realism versus Strategic Culture: Competition and Collaboration?’ *International Studies Review*, Vol.11, No.3, (2009).

¹⁰⁷ For example, Lockhart, *Cultural Contributions*; Duffield, *World Power Forsaken*; Cruz, *Identity and Persuasion*; Gray, *First Generation Strikes Back*; Michael Desch, ‘Culture Clash’, *International Security* 23, No.1, (1999), pp. 156-180.

critical junctures – can come from external events such as civil-wars or revolutions.¹⁰⁸ Such change then requires a reorientation process, involving participation by the society, the leadership, and the other stakeholders involved. Insofar as this thesis is concerned, this is again a very valuable area of research which will feature prominently in subsequent chapters.

For example, chapter 4 will examine how the KSA responded to the Iranian Revolution, and how the leadership responded by crafting a compromise on its traditional foreign policy orientation. In this sense, the chapter will argue that culture and behaviour may be understood as a consensus-building exercise for the Saudi leadership. Chapters 4 (the KSA's response to the Iranian Revolution) and 5 (the KSA's response to the Arab Spring) will analyse the parameters of acceptable change for the Saudi leadership, and the extent to which ideologies – for example Pan-Arabism and religion – feature prominently in influencing the KSA's behaviour. It will also analyse the evolution of the KSA's identity over time and its behaviour in response to regional events.

Alliances and Identity

As we noted earlier in this chapter, alliances and identity are common factors that affect the KSA's regional security challenges. International Relations theorists are nearly unanimous in their conclusion that alliances are driven by expediency in the face of an immediate threat.¹⁰⁹ Resting on a foundation of need, alliances are formed either to bandwagon or balance against a specific threat, the form of the alliance being determined

¹⁰⁸ Duffield, *World Power Forsaken*, p. 11.

¹⁰⁹ Katzenstein, *Culture of National Security*, p. 400.

by the nature of the threat.¹¹⁰ The key Realist theorist regarding alliances and threat perception is Stephen Walt. His work puts emphasis on the construction of alliances based on perceived threats. Walt suggests that threat is derived from a combination of powerful intentions and other geostrategic factors.¹¹¹ Furthermore, a majority of scholars – Realist and Constructivist – respectively depict alliance formation as balancing against a collective material threat, or as an alliance designed as a means of preserving or enhancing state or collective identity.¹¹² Constructivists like Barnett and Wendt¹¹³ suggest that the intention of pan-Arabism specifically, as an ideological force and as a challenge to state legitimacy, sovereignty and internal stability do advance the scholarly debate around Arab security policies. Specifically, insofar as cultural and sociological factors like identity are concerned. Yet still, even this ideological threat was framed as a potential threat to Arab governments “as it challenged the very territorial basis of their existence”.¹¹⁴ This implies that countries almost always engage in balancing behaviour when they confront actual or potential aggressors, and that balancing among states plays a key role in preserving the stability of the system as a whole.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁰ Randall Schweller, ‘Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In’, *International Security* 19, no.1, 1994, pp.100-107.

¹¹¹ Stephen Walt, *The Origin of Alliances*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987 pp. 22-30.

¹¹² For example, Katzenstein, Michael Barnett, et al.

¹¹³ Alexander Wendt, ‘Anarchy is What the State Makes of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics’, *International Organisation* 46, no.2, (Spring 1992), pp. 391-425.

¹¹⁴ Peter Katzenstein, *Culture of National Security*, p. 404.

¹¹⁵ Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, p149; and F Gregory Gause III, ‘Sovereignty, Statecraft, and stability in the Middle East’, *Journal of International Affairs* 45, Number 2, (1992).

In other words, ideologies like Islamism and (Pan-) Arabism, and the architects and actors associated with them, might affect the identity and interests of - and the socially acceptable policies available to - the KSA's leaders in ways that fundamentally shape its desired alliance partners and available security policies.¹¹⁶ Insofar as the Constructivist framework of strategic culture is concerned, Barnett, Katzenstein, Nonneman and Wendt have undertaken much relevant analysis. They recognise that (Pan-) Arabism and religion have a direct link between identity and threat, and that Arabism or religion might affect the identity of strategic alliances and the strategic behaviour of these alliances. They also advance the debate on alliance-formation in areas germane to the KSA's sphere of influence moving beyond theories of balance of power and balance of threat, towards a recognition of the norms associated with state behaviour when operating as a member of an alliance with a shared identity. And they go further by signposting the risk of conflict between these states when these norms are flouted by another state.¹¹⁷ These are important considerations in understanding the KSA's foreign and security policy behaviour and suggest the usefulness of the Constructivist concept of strategic culture.¹¹⁸

These patterns of behaviour – the execution of strategy via influencing predominantly non-state actors, such as the custodians of particular identities – are becoming more rather than less complicated and chaotic given the evolution of radical and extremist groups across the region.¹¹⁹ What is also an interesting aspect of the Constructivist method of strategic culture is the relative lack of significant academic research on the conduct or

¹¹⁶ Katzenstein, *Culture of National Security*, p. 408

¹¹⁷ Katzenstein, *Culture of National Security*, p. 409; Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab Politics*; Nonneman.

¹¹⁸ Jacek Kugler, *Power Transitions: Strategies for the 21st Century*, (CSQ press), 2000.

¹¹⁹ Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab Politics*.

execution of the KSA's 'discursive power', via its partnerships with other non-state alliances in pursuit of this end and what this can tell us a lot about the ways in which the KSA utilises its hard power.¹²⁰ This is an intriguing area worthy of greater examination that we will undertake in subsequent chapters, for example, we will look at the attempts by King Faisal of the KSA to mobilise non-state actors in an alliance against Nasser. Indeed, employing the conceptual construct of strategic culture, allows us to better understand the KSA's strategic decision-making behaviour relating to identity, threat identification, and alliance creation. This will be helpful in better understanding the existing literature surrounding the concept of "omni-balancing",¹²¹ whereby their threat-perception of different stakeholders is a trade-off, at the domestic, transnational, regional and/or international levels.

The domestic aspect of this omni-balancing is described by Steven David as the contract between the leadership and citizenry, which we will explore in Chapter 3. Conversely, balancing obligations with the US may require a difference in approach by the two nations, for example through supporting completely non-aligned or un-unified stakeholders. And conversely again, at the regional and transnational levels, there may be a requirement to hedge, in concert with the GCC, against a "balance of threat".¹²² These paradoxes are intriguing and seem to demonstrate the appropriateness of the Constructivist and Post-Structural concepts of strategic culture.

¹²⁰ Pollack, *Arabs at War*.

¹²¹ L Carl Brown, *International Politics and the Middle East*, (Princeton University Press), 1997; Steven David, 'Explaining Third World Alignment', *World Politics*, Vol.43, No.2, Jan 2011, p. 251.

¹²² David, *Explaining Third World Alignment*, p. 233-256.

The absence of a unifying concept of strategic culture does mean, however, that it is possible to advance an aspect of a particular generation, insofar as it advances our understanding and knowledge of the KSA's strategic behaviour. For the purposes of this thesis, I have used Johnston's definition of strategic culture as "an ideational milieu which limits behaviour choices",¹²³ as it neatly bridges all possible idea-behaviour domains – domestic, regional, international, ideological, etc – and it avoids the pitfall of linking strategic culture specifically with politico-military culture, and therefore affords me greater freedom of action in my analysis.

The avoidance of politico-military-focused concept of strategic culture is profoundly important in the construct of this thesis. As we have noted, epiphenomenal strategic culture is generally sought to identify preferred military strategies adopted by states in the pursuit of foreign and security policies. To accomplish these ends, scholars of the epiphenomenal method use cultural aspects that are limited to those concerned with military strategy only.¹²⁴ The absence of a significant or effective military capability has contributed to – but not been the strategic driver for how the KSA wields hard power – successive KSA leaders' pursuit of a security policy style that has substantial roots in Arab tribal culture.¹²⁵

The principal features of this Arab tribal style include: a tendency to appease, compromise or discreetly concede, and to avoid irreparable or decisive military conflict if military conflict becomes inevitable; a tendency to wait for events to unfold and to hedge a position, rather than trying to shape these events in a particularly decisive way; and a

¹²³ Johnson, *Cultural Realism*, p. 45.

¹²⁴ John Glenn, 'Realism versus Strategic Culture: Competition and Collaboration', *International Studies Review*, Vol.11, No.3, (Sep 2009), p. 531.

¹²⁵ Pollack, *Armies of Sand*.

propensity to prioritise the immediate over longer-term strategic planning when the two come into conflict.¹²⁶ Johnston's definition goes on to explain that the ideational milieu consists of "shared assumptions that impose a degree of order on individual and group conceptions...whose dominant culture emphasises preserving the status quo".¹²⁷

Johnston's conceptual approach to strategic culture as a set of assumptions, shared by domestic society, national leaders, and other stakeholders, allows us to examine the extent to which these assumptions are indeed shared in order to better understand and therefore signpost the behaviour of a strategically vital nation. The extent to which it holds true will be judged throughout the thesis. For example, contemporary scholarship contends that leaders' behaviour may be more appropriately described as strategic "users of culture"¹²⁸ as opposed to the generally accepted 'guardians of identity and culture' which is synonymous with identity politics.¹²⁹ That is not to imply a failure to uphold historical responsibilities. Rather the thesis will examine the past behaviour of many Saudi leaders in order to demonstrate their choice of when and how they have staked those historical claims, especially when it matches their unifying purpose of preserving or enhancing their legitimacy.

CONCLUSION

¹²⁶ Pollack, *Armies of Sand*; Nadav Safran, *Saudi Arabia: The Ceaseless Quest for Security*, (Cornell University Press), 1988.

¹²⁷ Johnston, *Thinking About Strategic Culture*, p. 45.

¹²⁸ Consuelo Cruz, 'Identity and Persuasion: How Nations Remember Their Pasts and Make Their Futures', *World Politics* 52, No.3, (April 2000), p. 278.

¹²⁹ Swidler, *Culture in Action*, pp. 97-99.

There exists a significant amount of scholarly literature regarding anarchy, identity, alliances, and threats, the majority of which is framed around Arab states conceived as collective/monolithic entities.¹³⁰ Using a strategic culture framework allows us to recognise that insofar as the KSA is concerned, the significant challenges it faces that originate from sub-state factors, supra-state ideologies, and non-state actors, Consequently, a different understanding of threat-perception and strategic behaviour, than that typically employed by scholars of the Realist school, is required. These threats may require behavioural responses that balance the often-competing demands (upon the state) or requirements (of these actors) by the ruling elite within the KSA. Indeed, the strategic culture method will allow this thesis to critically assess and understand the link between a shared identity at the Saudi state level as well as the linkage between cultural aspects internal to the KSA and its strategic choices and behaviours in relation to its foreign and security policies and choices.

By analysing the construction of the KSA's different identities this thesis will demonstrate the utility of the strategic cultural method in helping us understand in the KSA's strategic behaviour vis-à-vis the national security challenges it has faced both historically and more recently. Specifically, the norms associated with being the *Custodians of the Two Holy Mosques*, the de-facto head of the *Wahhabi* school of Sunnism, and its doctrinal hostility to Political Islam and pan-Arabism, may demonstrate behavioural trends, or a strategic approach which is highly centralized in order to omnibalance against these (often) competing, paradoxical or contradictory challenges and threats.

¹³⁰ Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, p149; and F Gregory Gause III, *Sovereignty, Statecraft, and Stability in the Middle East*, *Journal of International Affairs* 45, Number 2, (1992); Lawson, *International Relations Middle East*.

Therefore, examining the KSA's strategic culture will provide us context for understanding Saudi state behaviour. I hope to demonstrate that it can also be a useful scholarly method in interpreting and possibly predicting events rather than a method of last resort for explaining historical events. Studying the KSA's strategic culture allows us to understand its cultural thought-ways, and therefore allow us to ascertain a set of shared assumptions and decision-rules which allow us to separate the constants and the constraints of its strategic behaviour and enable us to predict the KSA's strategic decision-making patterns of behaviour.

Indeed, a central aim of this thesis is to examine how trans-alliances and sub-state alliances *compete* over the ideological question of 'which identity norms' define them. For example, Arabism and Islamism have norms associated with them. These norms provide instruction or guidance on how the Saudi leaders ought to behave. And yet, even with regard to norms, much (but not all) of the existing literature frames these norms as having consequences between Arab states when they are ideologically non-aligned whereby even the smallest ideological intricacies can carry exponentially great levels of importance.

Rather, this thesis will examine the extent to which these consequences constrain or shape the KSA's behaviour. Indeed, as Walt notes: "A different form of balancing has occurred in inter-Arab relations. In the Arab world, the most important source of power has been the ability to manipulate one's own image and the image of one's rivals in the minds of other Arab elites"¹³¹. This is a powerful indicator of how cultural factors, such as norms, as opposed to military capabilities have greater primacy in inter-Arab politics. Strategic

¹³¹ Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, p.149.

culture provides a framework for analysing the consequences of violating norms through different lenses, especially those that have a direct bearing on the legitimacy of the state.

These challenges are often identified by the state's strategic ends or behavioural *ways* - discursive power - which is not necessarily an end in itself, but more a way of identifying or perceiving threats from other actors. Each of these actors will have their own agency, and this agency in turn will place challenges and constraints on statecraft because of an inevitable competing interest or ideational constraint.¹³² Therefore the KSA's leaders must operate first and foremost in what Gerges describes as "a sub-environment", that is beneath a recognisable – yet changeable and different according to the specific contexts of these critical junctures - international political threshold that doesn't trigger outside interference, unless that interference is actually desired.¹³³

Chapter 3 will now explore *Wahhabism*¹³⁴, Political Islam, pan-Arabism, Islamic extremism, and the subsequent impact of these contradictory cultural tensions on KSA's strategic behaviour. This will assist in determining the extent that intra-Sunni religious doctrine – specifically *Wahhabism* – has instrumentality and utility beyond broader geopolitical factors in determining KSA's strategic decision making.

¹³² Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab Politics*, pp. 22 – 25; Ayoob, *The Third World Security Predicament*.

¹³³ Fawaz Gerges, *The New Middle East*, pp. 270-73.

¹³⁴ Wahhabism (named after the eighteenth-century scholar Mohammad ibn' Abd al Wahab) is not a political doctrine, but a living theological tradition, interpreted and contested by generations of scholars, including some of the militant variety like Maqdissi, Azzam and others. Wahhabism and Salafism will be more fully explained throughout this chapter.

CHAPTER 3

INTRODUCTION

Chapter 2 discussed how the KSA's pursuit of a unique identity exacerbates the breadth of challenges confronting the KSA. Using Johnston's 'ideational milieu' framework of strategic culture, which emphasizes the notion that strategic preferences constrain or aid strategic choices, this chapter examines in detail the religious dimension to the challenges confronting the KSA. Specifically, this chapter will explore *Wahhabism*,¹³⁵ Political Islam, Islamic extremism, and the subsequent impact of these contradictory cultural value systems have had on the KSA's strategic behaviour. The examination of relevant scholarly literature will assist in discovering the extent to which intra-Sunni religious doctrine – specifically *Wahhabism* – has instrumentality and utility beyond broader geopolitical factors in determining the KSA's strategic decision making. This examination will help me answer one of my secondary research questions, namely the extent that intra-Sunni religious doctrine – specifically *Wahhabism* – influence the KSA's strategic decision-making behaviours in relation to its critical junctures?

STATE FORMATION AND IDENTITY

The KSA was not formed on the basis of a single national identity. Indeed, its society, composed of diverse tribes, did not allow for the development of a collective identity despite the mutually strict adherence to Islam by most of such tribes. However, it is widely accepted that the Arabian Peninsula was never unified until the emergence of

¹³⁵ Wahhabism (named after the eighteenth-century scholar Mohammad ibn' Abd al Wahab) is not a political doctrine, but a living theological tradition, interpreted and contested by generations of scholars, including some of the militant variety like Maqdissi, Azzam and others. Wahhabism and Salafism will be more fully explained throughout this chapter.

modern-day Saudi Arabia in 1932.¹³⁶ The modern KSA is the result of the Al-Saud family's alliance with Mohammed ibn' Abd al-Wahhab. The resulting alliance led to the development of an identity that was thus unique to surrounding nation states – all of which were emerging from colonialism – with its *Wahhabi* interpretation of Islam, and its focus on upholding custody of two of the three holy cities within its borders – Mecca and Medina.

The distinctiveness of the KSA's early identity is reflected by its behaviour. Acquiring identity security entails reproducing and routinising the sense of self versus the others. As Darwich notes, "states' ability to uphold a continuous distinctive identity vis-à-vis others influences the stability of state identity at the domestic level".¹³⁷ Hence, once identity is consolidated over time by narrative and discourse, critical junctures alter this normative behaviour posing risk to the state's strategic leadership.

Scholars have differentiated strategic behaviour differently, dividing them into two categories: 1) the perception of threat to a nation's distinctiveness which triggers anxiety; and 2) threats with perceived specific objectives that will generate fear.¹³⁸ From this perspective, according to Darwich, "anxiety causes a state of ontological insecurity that is not based on a material threat".¹³⁹ In other words, there could be a different behavioural

¹³⁶ Michele Kjørlien, State and Religion in Saudi Arabia, *The Arab Studies Journal*, Vol.2, No.1, 1994, p. 36-43.

¹³⁷ May Darwish, 'The Ontological Security of Similarity', *German Institute for Global and Area Studies*, 2014.

¹³⁸ For example, Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, (CA: Stanford University Press, 1991); Charles Snyder and Howard Fromkin, *Uniqueness: The Human Pursuit of Difference*, (New York; Springer, 1980); F Gregory Gause, 'Balancing What? Threat Perception and Alliance Choice in the Gulf', *Security Studies* 13, p. 273-305.

¹³⁹ Darwish, 'The Ontological Security of Similarity', p. 9.

response to threats perceived as being enduring and ideological, and therefore challenging the KSA's Sunni, religious leadership credentials, as opposed to material threats, such as the geographic encroachment of Iranian proxies within the KSA's sphere of interests (we will explore the KSA's threat perception of Iran in Chapter 4).

The KSA's leaders rely on the promotion of Sunni Islam. The KSA hierarchy is aware of the ability of rejectionists – such as Islamists or more radical Salafi-Jihadists - to also use religion as a critique against them. Islam has periodically been used by some Saudi Islamists to delegitimise the KSA's leadership.¹⁴⁰ Therefore, this chapter will examine how the KSA mobilises its distinct culture, specifically its Sunni-leadership credentials, against other states and non-state actors, in order to strengthen its ideological leverage over them. Specifically, this chapter will examine the role of the central pillars of *Jihad* within Sunni Islam, and more specifically the impact these pillars have on the KSA's strategic behaviour. Examining the KSA's behavioural response to intra-Sunni challenges provides a useful opportunity to assess the validity of strategic culture in helping researchers understand and identify instances of identity competition, and its impact on strategic behaviour - principally by demonstrating that identity similarity across the Arabian Gulf and wider Middle East has been a source of fear and anxiety.

These identity challenges present the KSA with a foreign and security policy paradox. The Saudi monarchy bridges between two opposing political communities: a pro-Western element, and a *Wahhabi* religious establishment, whilst KSA's rulers attempt to pursue policies that balance both camps.¹⁴¹ The debate rests on the central role of *tawhid* (the Oneness of God, or monotheism). *Tawhid* is closely connected to *Jihad* (the struggle against *jahilya* (ignorance)). The doctrine of *tawhid* ensures a unique political status for

¹⁴⁰ Neil Patrick, *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy*, (IB Tauris, 2018), p. 4.

¹⁴¹ Michael Scott Doran, 'The Saudi paradox', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.83, No.1, Feb 2004.

the religious establishment of the KSA in that it claims that it alone has the religious training to “safeguard [the] KSA’s religious purity”.¹⁴² And yet the KSA’s most important international ally is the United States. The religious establishment believes in purifying the nation from political secularism, whilst encouraging the eviction of *influidels* (non-believers) from Muslim lands. The contradiction inherent between these two communities is a microcosm of the contradiction that informs the KSA’s foreign and security policy, in that the KSA utilises *tawhid* as a unifying and legitimising factor in its quest for regime stability. This approach engenders the KSA’s first foreign and security paradox.¹⁴³

Pan-Islamism and pan-Arabism have overtly attempted to overcome national entities in the wider Middle East region, which chapter 2 noted has produced security dilemmas, particularly regarding alliance formation, for the KSA’s leaders. This second paradox is also highly relevant in examining the KSA’s strategic culture, demonstrating how cultural factors, in this instance the intra-Sunni competition, can produce a security dilemma by causing anxieties over identity.

Throughout this chapter we will examine critical junctures such as the evolution and rise of pan-Arabism, Islamism and Salafi-Jihadism in order to understand how these paradoxes have influenced or provided shape to the KSA’s behavior, whether it has been constrained by these religious doctrines and concepts, or whether it has weaponized them. Indeed, this chapter will demonstrate that it is possible to identify a chain of causation, amongst Islamist narratives that then can metastasize into more radical and extreme forms

¹⁴² Doran, ‘The Saudi paradox’, p. 37

¹⁴³ Gause, ‘KSA’s Regional Security Strategy’.

of ideological doctrine. This is useful in that it helps chart the severity of consequences, intended and unintended, to strategic choices and strategic behaviour.¹⁴⁴

Identity and Behaviour

The KSA has relied upon Islam to provide its unique identity within the region, insofar as regional challenges have been concerned.¹⁴⁵ Given the centrality of religion in Saudi political discourse, has Saudi statecraft and its foreign policy actually been equated with an Islamic foreign policy? This question becomes a factor of high relevance whenever issues of identity or regime legitimacy feature in the KSA's geo-politics.¹⁴⁶ For example, when challenged by Nasser's vision of pan-Arabism in the 1950s and 1960s, King Faisal (the ruler of the KSA between 1964-1975) drew on the pan-Islamic vision of a united *umma* to strengthen the KSA's regional influence and counter that of Egypt. Faisal used Islamic tenets to forge alliances against political opponents who were portrayed as enemies of Islam.¹⁴⁷ As a consequence of these challenges, the KSA reinforced the role of Islam as an instrument of foreign and domestic policy.¹⁴⁸

This pan-Islamic narrative was mobilised as a primary method, adapted as it became necessary, by the Saudi state, utilising discourse that included the KSA being the sole state to be governed by the *shari'a* (the Islamic laws derived from God), at least until the

¹⁴⁴ See, for example, Thomas Heggerhammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia*, (Cambridge, 2010), p. 7.

¹⁴⁵ Abdulla Hamid Al-Din, 'Saudi National Identity', (Al-Hayat, 2014). Available at: <http://alhayat.com/Opinion/Abdulla-hameed-Al-Deen/4700740>.

¹⁴⁶ Patrick, *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy*, p. 17.

¹⁴⁷ Madawi Al Rasheed, *Salman's Legacy*, (Hurst, 2018), p. 130.

¹⁴⁸ Stig Stenslie, *Regime Stability in Saudi Arabia*, (Routledge, 2012).

Taliban came to power in Afghanistan in 1988.¹⁴⁹ In the years following the demise of pan-Arabism and the KSA's move for developing its pan-Islamic leadership pretensions of the Middle East, it faced a new and acute challenge following the rise in prominence of the Muslim Brotherhood's pan-Islamic appeal.¹⁵⁰ The Muslim Brotherhood adopted a pan-Sunni approach similar to that of the KSA. This overlap was of significant concern to the KSA as its self-designated role as leader of the Sunni Islamic community was now being challenged.¹⁵¹ The KSA's behavioural responses to the rise of Political Islamists was noteworthy, and included: 1) the discrediting and denial of the Muslim Brotherhood's claim to be of *Salafi* origin; and 2) the portrayal of itself (KSA) as the guardian of the purest version of moderate Islam as opposed to the "politically pragmatic Muslim Brotherhood",¹⁵² with such a connotation of the Brotherhood implying its faithlessness. In this way, the KSA was able to reclaim a coherent and distinct national identity that

¹⁴⁹ Abdullah Sindi, *King Faisal and Pan-Islamism*, (London: Croom Helm, 1986).

¹⁵⁰ It should be noted that a large number of Muslim Brotherhood affiliated organisations built their support on the back of extensive social welfare initiatives, often being the only provider or organiser of basic services to their respective populations when their respective states (or, in Hamas' case, the occupying military power) were either unable or unwilling to provide such services. Indeed, in such provision, they mirror many other faith-associated political organisations throughout history, including many associated with Christianity. Moreover, the objective is not always political: many religions, especially the Abrahamic religions, encourage their believers to demonstrate charity in the form of social welfare support. However, as this chapter will discover, it is the Brotherhood's competing narrative – born of different visions of Banna and Qutb – which consequently oscillates the norms associated with different elements of the organization(s). It is the unpredictability and oscillation of the Brotherhood's norms and narratives that is of interest to this thesis.

¹⁵¹ Madawi Al-Rasheed, 'Saudi Arabia: Local and Regional Challenges', (Contemporary Arab Affairs Vol.6), pp. 36-40.

¹⁵² Abd Al-Rahman Al-Sayali, 'Religious Scholars: The Muslim Brotherhood Do Not Like Al-Sunna', (Al-Madina, 2013). Available at: <http://al-madina.com/node/473106>.

once more relied on cultural factors – religion in this instance - to confer greater legitimacy to itself.

Islamism and Strategic Preferences

Islamists argue that Muslims ‘have become uncoupled from their cultural mores in modern societies where people live increasingly atomised lives, prompting them to seek supra-cultural, transnational identities within an imagined *umma*’.¹⁵³ It was precisely this shift towards a unified transnational *umma*, away from its original purpose that secured “the social and moral purity of Egypt”.¹⁵⁴ The Brotherhood’s idea of *Jihad* oscillates between the foundational orientation of its founder, Banna, and a more universalist orientation associated with Qutb.¹⁵⁵ In other words, something that is locally-focused versus something that is more utopian and internationalist with a vision of a supranational pan-Islamic community.¹⁵⁶ This tension within the Muslim Brotherhood community proliferated amongst other Islamist movements which led to the creation of different concepts of *Jihad*, such as ‘*Civil Jihad*’ and eventually the concept of ‘*Global Jihad*’.¹⁵⁷ This poses an important dilemma to Saudi strategists: to what extent should organisations (in this instance the Muslim Brotherhood) that contain nationally, and regionally oriented aspirations of power, be disenfranchised, thereby limiting their ability to affect change of the status-quo, or, aligned with as means of pursuing a specific mutual interest.

¹⁵³ Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism*, (Hurst, 2016), p. 172.

¹⁵⁴ Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism*, p. 182.

¹⁵⁵ Rhiannon Smith and Jason Pack, ‘Al-Qaida’s strategy’, (*Perspectives on Terrorism*, 2017, Volume 11, Issue 6), p. 190.

¹⁵⁶ Courtney Freer, *Rentier Islam*, (Oxford, 2018), p. 164.

¹⁵⁷ Elizabeth Kendall, *Twenty-First Century Jihad: Law, Society and Military Action*, (IB Tauris, 2016).

On the specific case of the Muslim Brotherhood this is reflected in the movement's oscillation between violence and politics, although whether or not this oscillation is due to the appeal of Qutb's ideology or due to a wider systemic or structural deficit within the Muslim Brotherhood remains a subject of much debate, and unfortunately is beyond the scope of this thesis.¹⁵⁸ What is clearer however, within the context of the KSA's strategic culture, is that regardless of ideological oscillation or structural deficits, both are perceived as a threat to the KSA's leadership.¹⁵⁹ Under Qutb's ideology, which was initially framed against Nasser's leadership of Egypt, the KSA's opposition to regimes regarded as *takfir* or *infidel* now became a priority. This approach by Qutb's followers both within and outside the modern Muslim Brotherhood frames perfectly why the KSA remains deeply skeptical of its desired 'ends'. As Kendall notes that:

the Brotherhood's practical stance towards armed violence and *Jihad* was, like the regime's foreign policy, pulled in two directions: internally toward reform and consolidation within the state and externally toward [safeguarding] the concept of the *umma*. These two tendencies were encapsulated in the thought of Banna and Qutb respectively.¹⁶⁰

Even at a relatively early juncture of analysis, the analysis concludes that the KSA's ability to influence the religious establishment's *fatwas* (religious declarations) becomes demonstrably important. Johnston's definition of strategic culture fits neatly with the notion of discursive power and bodes well for more analysis of the way the KSA employs

¹⁵⁸ Heggehamer, *Jihadi Culture*.

¹⁵⁹ Gause, 'Regional Security Strategy', pp. 23-26.

¹⁶⁰ Kendall, *Twenty-First Century Jihad*, p. 170.

its discursive power. That is, the extent it employs it as a social process as a means of identifying or conferring state-level capabilities or power.¹⁶¹ That is, there may be a direct link between the audience of the KSA's discursive power, that is with those sub-state or non-state actors that can impact the perception of legitimacy of the KSA's strategic behaviour, and its national security behaviour. This influence is a direct consequence of the strategic partnership between the KSA's familial, political leaders, and the religious *Wahhabi* leaders. This partnership provides the Al-Saud considerable influence and it is enabled in a doctrinal sense by the KSA's appropriation of *al-wala wa-l-bara* (loyalty to Islam, Muslims, and God and disavowal of everything else), which we will discuss later in this chapter.¹⁶²

ISLAMISM AND SALAFI-JIHADISM

As already noted, Political Islamism is associated with the ideas of Banna and Qutb and refers to what starts out as activism necessary to topple a Muslim government through a military coup. Violent pan-Islamists on the other hand refer to orthodox concepts of defensive *Jihad* and offensive *Jihad*, such as those articulated by Abdallah Azzam, the cofounder of al-Qaeda.¹⁶³ Azzam argued that infringement by non-Muslims of Muslim territory demands an immediate response in defence of such territory. Violent pan-Islamism (or Classical Jihadism to give it its pure title) evolved to also include 'offensive

¹⁶¹ Thierry Balzacq, 'The Three Faces of Securitization Theory', *European Journal of International Relations*, (June 2005), p. 25-32, discusses the concept of securitization theory in great detail, with an emphasis on how the puzzle of everyday events can become transformed into matters of national security through 'discursive power'.

¹⁶² Joas Wagemakers, 'A Purist Jihadi-Salafi: The Ideology of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 2, 2009, pp. 281-297.

¹⁶³ Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism*.

Jihad’, that is, taking the fight to the enemy, conceived as a form of pre-emptive defensive intervention. This has been dubbed Global *Jihadism* in contemporary vernacular. Azzam advocated guerrilla warfare within defined conflict zones in defence of Muslim territory. This set the Classical and Global *Jihadists* together in a strategic alliance, against the ‘Near’ – regional - and ‘Far’ apostates – the US – enemies.¹⁶⁴ *Jihadism* in Saudi Arabia by contrast has generally been more ‘Islamist’ than ‘revolutionary’ in that the KSA’s Islamists do not necessarily seek to overthrow their ruling regime – a contested *Wahhabist* doctrinal concept called *la-wala-wa-l-bara*, a distinction unique to the KSA which we will discuss later in this chapter.¹⁶⁵ That said, Saudi Islamists were crucial in influencing the doctrinal evolution of *Jihad* from a defensive concept to an offensive one.

This evolution started with Azzam’s entrepreneurship during the ‘defensive’ Jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan. Such a defensive concept spread amongst many of these Jihadists who eventually returned with their understanding of defensive Jihad to Saudi Arabia and subsequently to Bosnia, Chechnya and other countries.¹⁶⁶ This development is extremely significant to the Saudi strategist. It marked the moment in history that the export of fighters in the name of defensive *Jihad* as a tool of foreign and security policy evolved into an existential threat against the former masters of such fighters. Nevertheless, later case studies will demonstrate that the prosecution of what Abdo calls “perpetual conflict”, often along ideological, religious or sectarian lines, in

¹⁶⁴ Smith and Pack, *Al-Qaida’s Strategy*, p. 190.

¹⁶⁵ Basheer M Nafi, ‘The Islamists: A Contextual History of Political Islam’, (Afro-Middle East Centre, 2017), pp. 233-245.

¹⁶⁶ Noman Benotman, Jason Pack, and James Brandon, “Islamists”, in *The 2011 Libyan Uprisings and the Struggle for the post-Qaddafi future*, p. 191.

pursuit of defensive *Jihad* remains the Saudis' preferred way of achieving security policies or securing military objectives.¹⁶⁷

The non-revolutionary Islamist position, adopted by Saudi Islamists, is at odds with the Islamism that emerged from Arab republics that emerged during Nasserism.¹⁶⁸ The KSA's pan-Islamism was revived by Saudi King Faisal as a means of coordinating the foreign policies of Muslim countries and was called the '*al-tadamun al-Islami* – Islamic Jointery'.¹⁶⁹ It was actually designed as a counter-weight to Nasser's pan-Arabism, seeking to boost the religious legitimacy of the ruling Saudis. To underscore the importance of buttressing this legitimacy, 'foreign policy' institutions such as the Muslim World League (MWL) and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) were founded by the KSA and still exist today as a means of coordinating pan-Islamic solidarity and support in accordance with Saudi foreign policy. The creation of these institutions, although established very much as a soft power tool had a subconscious impact which was the fostering of support to Muslims in need around the world, almost a soft power defensive *Jihad*. More significantly regarding the evolution of Classical Jihadism toward Global Jihadism, these institutions were symbols of Saudi influence internationally, not just within the Arabian Peninsula.¹⁷⁰ Many of these institutions mobilised in response to the suffering of Muslims in places like Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, Palestine and southern Lebanon. Pulling on these ideological levers of influence was a crucial

¹⁶⁷ Genevieve Abdo, *The New Sectarianism*, (Oxford, 2017).

¹⁶⁸ Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia*, p. 14.

¹⁶⁹ Robert Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom*, (Arrow Books, 2010).

¹⁷⁰ Shadi Hamid, *Islamic Exceptionalism*, (St Martin's Press, 2016).

requirement for King Faisal in his response to counter Nasserism in the 1950/60s. Yet, this chapter will go on to show that they are levers that cannot be easily manipulated.

The promotion of pan-Islamism, including as a tool of Saudi's external security policy, was now a defining feature of its strategic behaviour in response to threats to its ideological political model and to the survival of the Saudi regime. Pan-Islamism, a political act initially mobilised to contain Nasser's ambition in post-revolutionary Egypt - and later to contain the challenge of post-revolutionary Iran which chapter 4 will analyse - had acquired a militant dimension. Whether a link in the chain of causation or not, the increasingly militant dimension of pan-Islamism ensued in tandem with increasingly violent conflicts such as the Intifadas in Palestine and the war against the Soviets. Religiously oriented 'proxy warfare' along pan-Islamist lines now became entrenched along religious lines.¹⁷¹

'Controlled' or 'Uncontrolled' Extremism – creating or avoiding Fitna¹⁷²

The term *Jihad* has come to be used as a byword for fanaticism and Islam's allegedly implacable hostility towards the West.¹⁷³ Yet, *Jihad* has multiple resonances and associations, its meaning shifting depending on the context. Understanding the context

¹⁷¹ Proxy warfare is generally understood to mean a war (or conflict) that is instigated by a more significant power which does not itself become involved. For an excellent insight into proxy warfare see, Andrew Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013, p. 141.

¹⁷² Fitna is generally equated with trial, affliction, unresolvable chaos, or distress.

¹⁷³ Omar Ashour, 'Post-Jihadism: Libya and the Global Transformation of Armed Islamist Movements', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol.23, No.3, 2011, p. 379.

in which it sits is a fundamental requirement to modern strategists within the KSA.¹⁷⁴ This section will try to demonstrate that it is possible to employ *Jihad* as a strategic behavioural lever in certain contexts.¹⁷⁵ Since policy responses to local and Global *Jihadism* should be distinct and contextually relevant, this is an important distinction to draw. Yet, this section will also demonstrate how exceedingly difficult it, *Jihad*, is to control, subsequently. At its extreme, uncontrolled extremism can create a situation of *fitna* – a situation that is regarded as unsolvable.¹⁷⁶ As such, *fitna* is a hugely important concept to understand. For the KSA, avoiding unintended consequences that spiral and create *fitna* is evidently important. However, it can also have its advantages in demonstrating a possible state of affairs should citizens prioritise liberalism or Islamism over authoritarianism, as for example, in Syria during 2011-2016. (This thesis will explore contemporary Syria in chapter 5, in particular the extent to which *fitna* there is indeed unintended).

Thus, this section will now examine the causation of *fitna*, its risk to status quo powers across the region, and its utility as a tool of the KSA's strategic behaviour. It will demonstrate how Islamist doctrines can evolve and eventually achieve self-perpetuating radicalism.¹⁷⁷ It will describe the evolution of groups like al-Qaeda from the early

¹⁷⁴ Martin Kramer, 'Coming to Terms: Fundamentalists or Islamists?' *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol 10, No.2 (2003), pp. 65-77.

¹⁷⁵ David A Charters, 'Something Old, Something New?', *Al Qaeda, Jihadism, and Fascism*, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol.19, No.1, 2007, p. 69.

¹⁷⁶ Jeffrey Bale, 'Denying the Link between Islamist Ideology and Jihadist Terrorism: Political Correctness and the Undermining of Counterterrorism', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol 7, No.5, 2013.

¹⁷⁷ Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism*.

Muslim Brotherhood (Qutb's) ideology and then go on to describe how militant groups, devoid of 'controlling influences' of the state can mutate. Examples of these mutations include al-Qaeda in Iraq during the period 2003-2006, and its evolution to becoming DAESH, an intra-stakeholder rupture where different interpretations of radical ideology are pursued causing a mutation within the formerly unified stakeholder.¹⁷⁸

It is sometimes assumed that *Jihad* is a cultural tool, used at the whim of Muslim leaders against those portrayed as *infidels*.¹⁷⁹ According to Bale, this view is now commonplace among uninformed Western commentators.¹⁸⁰ That is that *Jihad* is both a 'way' or a tool of statecraft, but it can also be an 'end' in itself, as in a state of permanent being.¹⁸¹ For example, defensive *Jihad* is a *fard 'ayn* (collective duty) to protect Muslim lands from external aggression. Still the ideological forces which underpin *Jihad* are so strong that, despite it being used as an ideology of imperial expansion throughout periods of Islamic history, the dominant trend has been for Islamic states to seek to dampen expansionist *Jihadi* thought in favour of Realpolitik once the limits or ambitions of state or stakeholder power have been reached.¹⁸² As Kendall notes, the idea that *Jihad* is naturally expansionary is deeply problematic, and that there is some kind of tipping point, beyond which the ideologies that legitimise *Jihad* evolve thereby pushing the boundaries or limits

¹⁷⁸ Emma Sky, *The Unravelling*, (Public Affairs, 2016).

¹⁷⁹ Simon Ross Valentine, *Force and Fanaticism*, (Hurst, 2015).

¹⁸⁰ Jeffrey Bale, 'Denying the Link between Islamist Ideology and Jihadist Terrorism: Political Correctness and the Undermining of Counterterrorism', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol 7, No.5, 2013.

¹⁸¹ Jarret M Brachman, *Global Jihadism: Theory and Practice*, (Routledge, 2009), p. 4.

¹⁸² Kendall, *Twenty-First Century Jihad*, p. 5.

of religious acceptability. It is the speed of this evolution and its causes that can significantly contribute to a situation of ‘undesired *fitna*’.¹⁸³

Of equal importance to the KSA’s strategic culture, however, was the role played by the Saudi *Ikhwan* in the early 1900s. Their expansionist *Jihads* across parts of Arabia led by Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab against largely nomadic tribes ended with a vastly greater land mass controlled by Ibn Saud in what eventually became modern Saudi Arabia. Converting those within the territories acquired to Wahhabism would welcome them from the *Dar al-khufi* (the land of the heretics). The *Ikhwan* unleashed to conquer the *Dar al-khufi* had now become increasingly controlled and constrained by Ibn Saud. Thus, by 1926, they eventually turned on him. Their main grievance was that Ibn Saud, in deference to Christian patrons, such as Great Britain who controlled modern day Kuwait and Iraq in the early 20th Century, stopped their *Jihad* and prevented the spread of Allah’s word.¹⁸⁴ Indeed, the role played by these Saudi *Ikhwan* in the much later creation of groups like al-Qaeda and DAESH is profound. This evolution from the Saudi *Ikhwan* of the early 1900s to modern day global Salafi-Jihadism is very instructive in understanding a number of features of the KSA’s strategic culture, in particular the role that sectarianism occupies as a significant lever of statecraft, specifically insofar as it relates to the KSA’s use of norms and narrative as behavioural tools. Indeed, the evolution and transformation of the Saudi state since the eighteenth century has been a process in which *Jihad* – ostensibly state-sponsored - has occupied centre-stage.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸³ Kendall, *Twenty-First Century Jihad*, p. 133.

¹⁸⁴ Kendall, *Twenty-First Century Jihad*, p. 144.

¹⁸⁵ Thomas Hegghammer and Mansour Alnogaidan and Liz Kendall, *Jihadi Culture*, (Cambridge, 2017), p. 152.

The contemporary re-emergence of the Saudi *Ikhwan*'s ideology - the use of offensive *Jihad* by Ibn Saud's followers - and the insurrectionary stance adopted by Qutb's doctrine for the Muslim Brotherhood (as we noted earlier), both reflect the competition in radical Sunni circles.¹⁸⁶ Yet, understanding the cultural similarities and differences between the two is critically important insofar as the KSA's behaviour is concerned. This thesis will now examine these cultural factors in more detail.

Mutation

Let us examine this evolution carefully starting at the far end of the nihilist spectrum.

The term Salafism refers to the "righteous predecessors of the first generations of Muslims" – the Salaf.¹⁸⁷ Viewed this way, Salafism is a philosophy that believes in progression through regression, or in other words, they prefer to emulate the original "righteous predecessors" as much as possible including their physical appearance and shunning modernity.¹⁸⁸ Their doctrine is principally concerned with the realisation of

¹⁸⁶ Mamoun Fandy, *Saudi Arabia and the Politics of Dissent*, (Palgrave, 1999); Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad – The Life of Al Qaida Strategist Abu Musab al-Suri*, (Hurst, 2007); Majer, Salafi Jihadism; Roel Meijer, 'Re-Reading Al Qaida', *ISIM Review*, 2016.

¹⁸⁷ Maher, Salafi-Jihadism, p. 7.

¹⁸⁸ For example, groups like DAESH are a religious group with carefully considered beliefs. Unlike the Muslim Brotherhood, DAESH has little interest in existing state structures. Indeed, the DAESH manifesto, written in 2004 and titled *The Management of Savagery* argues that state boundaries are part of their repression, specifically the boundaries that fall-out from the Sykes-Picot era. To DAESH followers, as with 'quietist' Salafists, the last caliphate was that led by the righteously guided caliphs that were closest to the Prophet Mohammed. In their contemporary manifesto, DAESH accuse the likes of the Muslim Brotherhood as being heretical and secular when compared to DAESH and their ideology. They refer to themselves as monotheists, which according to their doctrine requires that the sacred texts be followed in a literal manner.

God's unity, *tawhid*, and maintenance of religious purity. Salafis believe that only they constitute the so-called 'victorious group' that comes from a reference in the *hadith*, which states Islam will splinter into various movements of heresy 'at some point in the future'.¹⁸⁹ Only one faction will practice Islam as God intended and will consequently be 'saved'. In this context, the works and legacy of Abd al-Wahhab are of significant importance to Salafis. Yet, *Wahhabism* remains a contested message, whose real meaning is claimed both by 'quietists' and 'radicals' alike. Scholars have divided Salafis into three broad categories: conservative (sometimes referred as purists), politicians, and *Jihadists*.

According to Keppel,¹⁹⁰ Roy,¹⁹¹ and Maher,¹⁹² the term Salafist-Jihadism is an ideological strain that has separated from the conservative 'quietist' doctrine of Salafism historically associated with Salafism and *Wahhabism*. They also argue that Salafi-Jihadism represents a "post-Islamist phase because of the perceived failures of Islamist actors."¹⁹³ From the KSA's perspective, they point to the decentralised nature of Salafi-Jihadism, the totalitarian character of its ideology, and its competitive posture that are the greatest risk to the KSA's leaders. Again, as we saw with Political Islamists earlier in this chapter, the Salafi-Jihadists' challenge to the KSA's legitimacy is another feature of the KSA's identity anxiety. We will now briefly explore below the defining characteristics

¹⁸⁹ Aida Arosoaie, 'Doctrinal Differences between ISIS and Al Qaeda: An Account of Ideologues', *International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research*, Vol. 7, No. 7, 2015, pp. 31-37.

¹⁹⁰ Giles Keppel, *Al Qaeda in its own words*, (Harvard, 2005).

¹⁹¹ Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam*, (Harvard, 2003).

¹⁹² Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism*.

¹⁹³ Keppel, *Al Qaeda in its own words*, p. 17.

of Salafi-Jihadism, each derived from *Wahhabism*, all of which have a causal link to the KSA's strategic behaviour.

Jihad as an opportunity and a threat

Jihad is probably the best-known Islamic concept. *Jihad* was sanctioned after the first thirteen years of Islam when the Prophet Mohammed migrated to Medina for protection against the *Quraysh* – the tribe principally responsible for suppressing Islam during its early years. This history of *Jihad* is celebrated within *Wahhabi* circles, particularly by two of its famous doctrinal scholars, Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal and Ibn Taymiyya. The latter holds huge significance to contemporary *Wahhabists*, in particular regarding the emphasis on physical struggle in the cause of God as the pinnacle of Islam - many *Wahhabist* scholars describe the 'defence of Muslim lands' as their first article of faith.¹⁹⁴ It is generally accepted within Islam that only a rightful authority can sanction offensive *Jihad*. Defensive *Jihad* is different in that it is more reactionary to external aggression or occupation.

Maier argues that *Jihad* occupies an important place within Salafi-Jihadism which represents *Jihadist's* 'lifeblood', looking to defend and promote the religion.¹⁹⁵ Given that *Jihad* emerged as a response to the Prophet Mohammed's persecution (from the Quraysh tribe), it has enjoyed an elevated position within Islam. It also represents the earliest Islamic concept of conquest, which is reflected by the Battle of Badr in 624AD. This battle is significant in that it was offensive rather than defensive *Jihad*, but perhaps

¹⁹⁴ Phyllis Chesler, 'Empowering Jihad: The Deadly Myth of a Root Cause', *New York Post*, February 26, 2015. Available at: <http://nypost.com/2015/02/26/empowering-jihad-the-deadly-myth-of-a-root-cause/>.

¹⁹⁵ Maier, *Salafi-Jihadism*, p. 39.

more significant were the assurances and virtues of ‘martyrdom’ that were offered to the relatives of those Muslims killed in the battle. According to Maher, Badr established a shift in the notion of martyrdom away from the passive to the active, whereby dying for God could be actively sought out.

According to Salafi-Jihadism, *Jihad* is also, therefore, decentralised as an individual responsibility within the Islamic faith and, therefore, a duty for all followers. Arguments about defensive *Jihad* remained straightforward, especially in places like Afghanistan against the Soviets. However, offensive *Jihad* against fellow Muslims, requires a specific trigger event, a chain of causation. When considering offensive *Jihad* against the West, this chain of causation more often than not reflected a narrative of ‘continued colonialism’. Yet, offensive *Jihad* against fellow Muslims remains deeply contentious. In Salafi-Jihadist circles, offensive *Jihad* became permissible, because they regarded the Muslim world as being under the West’s control. Nevertheless, waging war – or offensive *Jihad* – remains a challenge for Salafi-Jihadists requiring the development of sophisticated chains of causation, or triggers.¹⁹⁶ Having influence or control over the religious characteristics of these trigger events, therefore, might be considered a critical requirement for the KSA and could be an interesting area of further forensic study.

Takfir and Khawarij as an opportunity and a threat

The 2003 invasion of Iraq changed the way Islamists could interpret the doctrine of offensive *Jihad*, so too did it provide motivation for them to re-interpret the concept of *takfir*, (the concept of excommunication). Not only did this present Salafi-Jihadists with greater legitimacy in their attacks against the West, but they also used the concept of

¹⁹⁶ Keppel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*, (IB Tauris, 2006).

takfir to justify their attacks against fellow Muslims, and Shia Muslims in particular. As Maher notes, it can seem like an archaic concept, because it “draws a line against those deemed to have left the faith”.¹⁹⁷

For Salafi-Jihadists the concept of *takfir* has become hugely valuable, with their rationale for attacks against Shia Muslims being justified by their own excommunication from Islam, that is, by not being Sunni Muslims.¹⁹⁸ As such it has become a potent tool by Salafi-Jihadists for legitimising intra-Sunni, intra-Islamic and inter-civilisational conflict particularly in regions where sectarian fault lines exist, such as in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Bahrain and Yemen. Salafi-Jihadist interpretation of *takfir* calls for “active homogeneity with explicit emphasis on active rather than passive struggle”.¹⁹⁹ It is not sufficient, thus, to be a passive Muslim. This is at odds with normal conservative Islam where rules generally place a premium on stability within the community, discouraging rebellion even when confronted by oppressive rulers, which we will discuss later in this chapter. It is also accepted, however, that to be accused of apostasy a ruler must deviate significantly from the *Shari'a*. ‘Excessive deviation’ is therefore a label that all Islamic rulers seek to avoid and is an exceedingly important requirement in retaining legitimacy. It is a heavily contested aspect of doctrine among *Wahhabists*.²⁰⁰

Historically the precedent for the concept of pronouncing someone *takfir* was set during the fall-out from the assassination of Uthman, the third of the four ‘righteously guided

¹⁹⁷ Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism*, p. 71.

¹⁹⁸ Mohamed Ali Adraoui, *Militant Jihadism*, (Leuven University Press, 2019), pp. 21-23.

¹⁹⁹ Keppel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*, (IB Tauris, 2006), pp. 15-25.

²⁰⁰ Joseph Nevo, ‘Religion and Identity in Saudi Arabia’, (Middle Eastern Studies, Vol.34, No.3, July 1998), pp. 34-53.

caliphs' following the Prophet Mohammed's death. Uthman was the second successive caliph to be assassinated (Osman was the first) and pressure mounted on Ali ibn Abu Talib, his successor and the fourth 'righteously guided caliph', to bring his killers to justice. Ali's unwillingness or inability to bring the killers to justice eventually led to an Army being raised against his rule, an army led by the Prophet's widow Aisha, who fought Ali's army at the Battle of Camel in 656. This battle is more colloquially regarded as the *First Fitna*. It represents the first occasion that Muslims had demonstrated their willingness to violently confront one another in response to political events.

However, the *First Fitna* was not fought on a *takfir* basis. The first *takfir* movement was to follow the Battle of Camel (or the *First Fitna*) at the Battle of Saffin fought by Ali against the governor of Damascus, Muawiyah ibn Abu Sufyan. During this battle, Muawiyah's soldiers hoisted copies of the Quran in the air appealing to Ali to resolve his differences with Muawiyah through arbitration rather than fighting. Ali agreed to the overture. However, many of Ali's own followers did not. These followers accused Muawiyah and Ali of committing apostasy by threatening the unity of the Islamic *umma*. They then went further and pronounced *takfir* on Ali arguing that his decision to arbitrate had denied God's right to pick a victor via conflict. Ali had, therefore, usurped God's rights. The *First Fitna* and the Battle of Saffin are therefore regarded as hugely symbolic moments in Islamic history, especially in so far as religious responsibility, accountability and authority are concerned. Both events highlight the control held by the custodians of religious doctrine and the *umma*'s interpretation on these exceedingly important religious concepts.²⁰¹

²⁰¹ Lesley Hazleton, *After the Prophet*, (Anchor Books, 2013), p. 96.

After the battle of Saffin those who broke away from Ali's leadership became known as *il khawarij* (those who went out).²⁰² The term is today used pejoratively by the KSA against violent extremists and nihilists like al-Qaeda and DAESH. Conversely, they in turn, use it against the KSA's rulers. It is also often occasionally used by some Sunni Muslims to describe Shia Muslims. Over time it has become a particularly loaded term with derisory religious significance. Although this new movement was militarily defeated by Ali at the Battle of Nahrawan in 658, it had nevertheless made its mark and argued that 'legitimacy' was not derived through the established institutions within Islam, such as the Caliphate, but through original Quranic scripture alone. Protecting its regime from these contentious religious doctrines becomes a critical requirement for all Islamic leaders, but the KSA in particular by dint of its assumed Islamic leadership role.²⁰³ Viewed in this way, *khawarij* became a potent threat to the stability of the Islamic community. Ultimately, *khawarij* were able to regroup after their defeat at Nahrawan and they subsequently assassinated Ali, the fourth righteously guided Caliph. In the context of contemporary strategy and conflict in the Middle East it is again important to realise that *khawarij* was a consequence of Ali's perceived 'usurping the rights of God' at the Battle of Saffin. The subsequent labelling of Ali as *takfir* unleashed a chain of events that would see him assassinated and the *umma* split into Sunni and Shia.²⁰⁴

Today the issue of *takfir* is inextricably linked with the protection of Islam itself. *Takfir* is, therefore, a hugely significant concept of stability – and instability in terms of those

²⁰² Ancient (heretics) outcasts: the central contention between Shia and Sunni Muslims goes back to the validity of the claim made by the partisans of 'Ali, the husband of the Prophet Mohammed's daughter, Fatima, that he should succeed Mohammed upon his death.

²⁰³ N.R. Keddie, 'The Revolt of Islam, 1700-1993: Comparative Considerations and Relations to Imperialism', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol.36, No.3, 1994, p. 467.

²⁰⁴ Nasr, *The Shia Revival*.

who use it to challenge those in power - within the Arab world. Perceived religious illegitimacy can become politically fatal to the KSA's rulers and is perhaps the fastest way to 'losing', strategically.²⁰⁵ Balancing unintended, unwarranted or uninvited accusations of *takfir* or *khawarij* is strategically vital. *Takfir* has always, therefore, operated in political environments whenever pronounced, making it an especially useful weapon for all religiously framed stakeholders – be they state or non-state - in their attempts to de-legitimise the rulers of the KSA.²⁰⁶ In the modern era this has been especially evident since the 'Iraq earthquake' of 2003. According to Kazimi, the brutality of the Iraqi insurgency stems in large part to its liberal use of the term *takfir* to stoke a sectarian war against the Iraqi Shia, notwithstanding in large part the way Western military intervention abetted sectarianism.²⁰⁷

Tawhid as an opportunity and a threat

Tawhid is the central pillar of Islam – the doctrine of the oneness of God, or monotheism. Within Islam this characteristic distinguishes it from the pre-Islamic era known as *jahiliya* – a blend of ignorance and polytheism. *Tawhid* is the third central component of *Wahhabist*, and therefore also Salafi-Jihadist doctrine, which the Salafi-Jihadist community leverage as a powerful weapon of legitimacy.²⁰⁸

In the formulation of strategic alliances and coalitions, there is considerable scope for the KSA to be accused of demonstrating insufficient adherence to *tawhid*. Salafi-Jihadists

²⁰⁵ Hazleton, *After the Prophet*, p. 201.

²⁰⁶ Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism*, p. 82.

²⁰⁷ Nibras Kazimi, 'A Virulent Ideology in Mutation: Zarqawi Upstages Maqdisi,' *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology, Vol 2, Hudson Institute, 2005*.

²⁰⁸ Keppel, *Al Qaeda in its own words*, p. 152.

and other Islamists go even further. They developed an understanding and doctrine that calls for fighting for *tawhid* for the sake of God. Therefore, it should not just be considered a passive act of faith. In order to fully realise the most important and basic article of faith – demonstrating belief in the oneness of God – they cultivated the Wahhabi notion of Islam as striving to achieve *tawhid* through offensive *Jihad*.²⁰⁹ This was a remarkable development in militant Islamist doctrine, and when coupled with their interpretation of *takfir* and *Jihad*, demonstrates a Salafi-Jihadist desire for perpetual conflict in God’s name.²¹⁰

Al wala wa-l-bara

The final intra-*Wahhabi* doctrinal concept of relevance to the KSA’s strategic culture is *al-wala wa-l-bara* (loyalty to Islam, Muslims, and God and disavowal of everything else).²¹¹ It has developed in important ways that affect the KSA’s strategic behaviour. Indeed, the extent to which it is a critical requirement of the KSA’s ability to lead effectively, and the extent to which it necessitates a highly centralised command structure is beyond the scope of this chapter but would be a useful area of further study. In *Wahhabi* writings, the term is used to signify the loyalty that all Muslims show to God and Islam, and to denote the notion that Muslims should disavow all things considered to be un-Islamic.²¹²

²⁰⁹ Kazimi, *A Virulent Ideology in Mutation: Zarqawi Upstages Maqdisi*. p. 200.

²¹⁰ Brynjar Lia, ‘Understanding Jihadi Proto-States, Perspectives on Terrorism’, *Vol.9, No. 4, Special Issue on the Islamic State, 2015*, pp. 31-41.

²¹¹ Joas Wagemakers, ‘A Purist Jihadi-Salafi: The Ideology of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi’, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, Vol. 36, No. 2, 2009*, pp. 281-297.

²¹² David Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia*, (IB Tauris, 2006).

Al-wala wa-l-bara's interpretation has changed according to the political – not necessarily religious - context of the time. The religious scholars at the time of the second Saudi state (in the 19th century) realised that the collapse of their union with the Al-Saud family during the period 1824-91 deprived them of their power and diminished their influence. According to Wagemakers, this realisation was the most significant legacy of the second Saudi state for *Wahhabi* scholars and therefore features prominently within the modern KSA.²¹³

As *Wahhabi* religious scholars moved away from criticizing their political leaders, they avoided the earlier writings of their religious doctrine and stripped *al-wala wa-l-bara* of its political relevance, instead relegating it purely as a social concept applicable for interpersonal relations.²¹⁴ Similarly, with the evolution of the KSA's response to external identity challenges - by Nasserism and subsequently by Political Islamists - the interpretation of *al-wala wa-l-bara* has evolved in response to regional political events, to avoid a repeat of the pitfalls of the 19th century civil-war.²¹⁵ This behavioural change allows considerable freedom to the modern rulers of the KSA, a key component of its discursive power, and therefore its strategic behaviour, when conducting internal and external balancing with non-state ideological actors. In its religious scholarly form, it has been used effectively as a component of the KSA's discursive strategy against pan-Arabists, Political Islamists, and more recently against Salafi-Jihadists.²¹⁶ The evolution

²¹³ Joas Wagemakers, 'The Enduring Legacy of the Second Saudi State', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol.44, No.1, 2012, pp. 93-110.

²¹⁴ Madawi Al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State: Islamic Voices from a New Generation*, (Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 36-37.

²¹⁵ MJ Crawford, 'Civil War, Foreign Intervention, and the Question of Political Legitimacy: A Nineteenth Century Dilemma', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 14, 1982, p. 248.

²¹⁶ Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia*, p. 97.

of the *al-wala wa-l-bara* - in order to improve the political survivability of the Saud/Wahhab alliance – goes a long way to explaining the ‘how’ the KSA is able to manipulate the religious doctrines discussed above, and is a significant behavioural tool available to the KSA’s leadership, and yet it is totally dependent on the perceived legitimacy of the KSA’s leaders in the eyes of those determining such judgements, primarily religious actors, audiences, state and non-state stakeholders.²¹⁷

However, the evolution of these doctrines (making them more useful, politically, to the KSA’s leaders), is not without its challenges. As this chapter has noted in the evolution of Islamist challenges to the KSA’s identity and leadership, Abu Mohammed al-Maqdisi helped revive this powerful discourse against the KSA’s rulers in the period between 1991 and 2003 (the period of the two Gulf Wars against Iraq). Al-Maqdisi revived the specific aspects of *al-wala wa-l-bara* that sought to demonstrate KSA’s departure from the embodiment of a *Wahhabi* Islamic state. Al-Maqdisi sought to weaponise *al-wala wa-l-bara* against the KSA’s leadership, an act that led to the re-establishment of the political rather than purely social connotations that would become a mainstream concept within Salafi Jihadist circles. The KSA’s rulers, including the *Wahhabi* religious leaders, emphasise its role purely as a quietist means of guiding social behaviours, and crucially, the need for obedience to the rulers in order to avoid a situation of *fitna*.²¹⁸ This aspect of *Wahhabi* doctrine could be argued as serving as a significant constraining factor on the KSA’s strategic behaviour, yet the KSA’s leaders’ abilities to continually balance the religious and political components of national power demonstrates its behavioural

²¹⁷ Joas Wagemakers, ‘The Enduring Legacy of the Second Saudi State: Quietist and Radical Wahhabi Contestations of Al-Wala Wa-L-Bara’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol.44, No.1, February 2012, p. 97.

²¹⁸ Joas Wagemakers, *The Transformation of a Radical Concept: Al-wala wa-l-bara in the Ideology of Abu Mohammed al-Maqdisi*, (London: Hurst&Co, 2009), pp. 85-88.

emphasis, or ‘the how’. Indeed, the shock of the second Saudi state’s collapse (1824-1891) and its impact on *Wahhabist* scholars themselves led to a transformation within their religious doctrine, away from a doctrine for the entire *umma*, that is pan-Islamic, because they realised that they needed the protection of a ruler in order to avoid a situation of *fitna*.²¹⁹

CONCLUSION

This chapter has discussed the competition between the radical intra-Sunni stakeholders, and how their competition over religious identity presents challenges to the KSA. How the KSA responds to these challenges is highly dependent on the political context of the time, and the severity of the risk presented. Indeed, this chapter has demonstrated that sometimes, these radical intra-Sunni stakeholders become a cause to champion, and in other times they become a cause to guard against. Although this may imply that their strategic behaviour is therefore inconsistent, this chapter has started to discover that this is not necessarily the case. Indeed, the KSA’s threat perception of cultural factors being weaponised against them, causing them identity anxiety, will typically involve a similar behavioural response which is to try to delegitimise its opponent, and to re-emphasise its own unique identity and religious legitimacy amongst the *Umma*.

This chapter has also discussed the uniqueness of Islam in creating ideological *fitna*, whereby radical leaders with pan-Islamic ideologies clash with their ideological competitors and create a crisis situation that becomes difficult to reverse. Where no decisive act is possible to reverse the situation, then *fitna* will most likely occur. This chapter has demonstrated that the chain of causation towards creating a situation of *fitna*

²¹⁹ Commins, *Wahhabi*, pp. 93-103.

becomes more likely when these stakeholders are outside the control of the state. Therefore, the extent to which the KSA's leaders will go to limit or influence this chain of causation is an important characteristic of its strategic behaviour. This suggests that the KSA's strategic judgements are indeed framed by strategic cultural preferences, that are often, but not always (especially in the case of *al-wala wa-l-bara*) influenced by cultural factors. These limits are often reliant on religiously inspired coercion to achieve a position of influence. We will examine in later case studies, specifically regarding contemporary conflicts in Syria and Afghanistan, how the KSA secures this coercive position of advantage, and the requirements in strategic culture terms that allows it to remain discreet and highly centralised. This might be regarded as the opposite of a conventional approach towards strategic behaviour where strategic intent may be clear(er), and with its execution, decentralised.

This chapter has also demonstrated the significance of the discursive power of intra-Sunni ideological debates. These may have a direct impact on the nature of the KSA's strategic behaviour and their decision-making. The chapter has demonstrated the importance of understanding these non-state ideologies, and their subtle intra-stakeholder fissures and distinctions. It seeks to offer an explanation in behavioural terms, especially when terms are used loosely and widely, for example where Jihadism, Islamism, and Salafism may be conflated. Such an understanding obscures important differences, Islamism and Salafism, for example, are not the same thing, and in fact are often in competition with each other. Indeed, the literature notes that most Islamists are not Jihadists, just as most Salafists are not Jihadists. How the KSA utilises these ideologies either through alliance formation and alignment, or through conflict, or as their own proxies, are important factors to consider within the context of the KSA's strategic behaviour.

This chapter has also demonstrated the KSA's behavioural flexibility surrounding its identity. As regional or domestic events create behavioural anxiety, the KSA has tended to reshape or repackage its sense of identity in order to demonstrate its sense of uniqueness. This reshaping generally involves the reframing of an opponent's identity in an attempt to demonise or delegitimise it, whilst simultaneously enhancing or emphasising the uniqueness of its own. The KSA has shifted its policies around alliance formation and alignment, albeit demonstrating consistent behavioural characteristics whilst doing so, reinventing specific elements of self-identity with relevant emphasis depending on context. This reinventing has continuously evolved, from being initial champions of pan-Islamism as a counter to Nasser's pan-Arabism, from pan-Islamism to a more conservative focus on leaders of Sunnism, and from Sunnism to a much more specific focus on *Wahhabist* discourse following the ascendancy of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Political Islamists.

Finally, this chapter has demonstrated that cultural similarities that challenge the KSA's unique religious leadership role is a source of anxiety. By analyzing the chronological aspects of pan-Arabism, Islamism, and Salafi-Jihadism, this chapter has noted two strategic preferences that are influenced by its strategic culture. Both preferences involve a desire to retain a distinctive discursive power based on two exclusive identity markers which portrayed the KSA initially as the sole legitimate leader of Islam in response to pan-Arabism, and then subsequently as sole legitimate leader of conservative Sunni Islam in response to Islamism and Salafi-Jihadism. These similarities in identity can often be a source of division insofar as the KSA is concerned. Chapter 4 will now go on to highlight another identity-distinction following the 1979 Iranian revolution, and how an Iranian regime using religion and religious legitimacy as a powerful tool of identity competed with the KSA for the title of 'leader of the Islamic world'.

The policies the KSA has pursued in pursuit of these objectives might imply a readjustment of contemporary understanding of sectarian conflict and is potentially an area for further study. That is, predominant explanations for intra-state conflict in the Middle East region ordinarily suggest identity differences. Scholarly literature, as we have noted so far, demonstrates this to be true in generic terms. However, by examining some important trends in the KSA's strategic behavior, focused specifically on the strategic culture that shape its strategic preferences and behaviour, we discover that the KSA has a vested interest in maintaining sectarian division, a form of intra-Sunni sectarianisation as a distinct objective of its foreign and security policy. These aspects of its strategic culture might provide an opportunity for scholars to further develop an explanatory framework when assessing the KSA's strategic behaviour.

CHAPTER 4

INTRODUCTION

Chapter 3 discussed the challenges of pan-Arabism and Sunni Islamism to the KSA's legitimacy and how the KSA responded in behavioural terms. It concluded that the KSA generally responded by emphasising specific aspects of Sunni religious doctrine in order to reaffirm its legitimacy internationally and domestically. These behavioural traits were attempts to re-emphasise its religious legitimacy, leadership credentials, and unique identity. In so doing, chapter 3 also addressed some of the doctrinal concepts shaping its strategic culture - such as *Wahhabism*, Islamism and Arabism - that influence the KSA's strategic behaviour. Chapter 3 also briefly discussed the risks associated with the employment of these doctrines, specifically the strategic anxiety caused by identity-proximity, and also the challenges associated with exercising control over the more extreme interpretations of these doctrines and strategies.

These deductions are also germane to this chapter. This chapter will analyse the KSA's response to the Iranian revolution of 1979 with specificity on the role of those cultural thought-ways associated with identity-anxiety, threat perception, and how they impact the KSA's strategic behaviour. It will follow a similar process to chapter 3, but by examining the events of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the chapter's focus will be on the resulting intra-Islamic competition over identity and leadership over the Muslim world, rather than the narrower focus on Sunnism, discussed in chapter 3. This analysis will facilitate the understanding of an additional secondary research question: Does this intra-Islamic competition constrain in any way the KSA's strategic behaviour – insofar as the *Wahhabi* doctrine of *tawhid* (monotheism) and *takfir* (excommunication) are concerned – and does the KSA's apparent requirement to evolve and refine its identity provide an additional paradox to the KSA's security policy? Noting the simultaneity and multitude

of events, and the association between actions and consequences with other state actors, this chapter will not consider wider relationships beyond Iran-KSA relations, other than brief references to Great Power politics. Instead, this chapter will focus on those cultural factors that allow for similarity between the Iranian and Saudi leaders, thereby triggering anxiety, and strategic behavioural responses. Identifying the extent to which continuity in politico-military strategy is directly linked to domestic cultural factors, and the extent that these behavioural responses are relatively fixed, or not, specifically contributes to the examination of my primary research question viz a vis the utility of strategic culture in understanding the KSA's strategic decision-making and behaviour.

This will allow us to better discover the relationships between the KSA's strategic culture – specifically insofar as religion is concerned - and strategy. As chapter 2 noted, an intriguing characteristic of some of the scholarly literature suggests the possibility of strategic cultural change over time. Indeed, this chapter will discover the extent to which – as suggested by Berger and Glenn assume - politico-military strategy is directly linked to domestic cultural factors, and therefore are relatively fixed and resistant to change, principally because “disconfirmable cognitive elements are buffered by the psychological phenomenon of consistency seeking. Information that reinforces existing images and beliefs is readily assimilated, while inconsistent data tend to be ignored, rejected, or distorted in order to make them compatible with prevailing cognitive structures”.²²⁰ Indeed, discovering the parameters of acceptable change for the Saudi leadership, and the extent to which some of its cultural thought-ways and norms, specifically those inferred by *Wahhabism*, may actually be pre-determined, or whether they are susceptible to

²²⁰ Thomas Berger, 'From Sword to Chrysanthemum: Japan's Culture of Antimilitarism', *International Security* 17, No.4, 1993, p119-150; John Glenn, 'Realism versus Strategic Culture: Competition and Collaboration?' *International Studies Review*, Vol.11, No.3, (2009).

strategic shocks, such as the Iranian revolution of 1979. Specifically, whether the threat was perceived along religious lines (that is, a revolutionary Shia ascendancy), or perceived as an ascendent hostile state.

This secondary research question is important in determining the overall mechanism by which the KSA perceives threats, and its behavioural responses. That is, can the strategic culture method posited by Glenn, or Berger, or Johnston, demonstrate that the KSA's culture and behaviour is relatively fixed, and therefore its behavioural responses to critical junctures be comparable?

The work by Glenn and Berger in particular, generally emphasises that historical memory and multilateral commitments – such as, alliances with the US, and with the GCC – shape strategic culture, and that therefore they undergo gradual change only over long periods of time.²²¹ These scholars acknowledge that strategic cultural models are not necessarily static and unresponsive, yet they do require a catalyst for change. Such catalysts – or, critical junctures – can come from external events such as civil-wars or revolutions.²²² Such change then requires a reorientation process, involving participation by the society, the leadership, and the other stakeholders involved. Therefore, this chapter will examine how the KSA responded to the Iranian Revolution, and how the leadership responded by crafting a compromise on its traditional foreign policy orientation.

²²¹ For example, Lockhart, *Cultural Contributions*; Duffield, *World Power Forsaken*; Cruz, *Identity and Persuasion*; Gray, *First Generation Strikes Back*; Michael Desch, 'Culture Clash', *International Security* 23, No.1, (1999), pp. 156-180.

²²² Duffield, *World Power Forsaken*, p. 11.

To do so, this chapter will examine Iranian foreign policy toward the KSA since 1979, and vice versa, and in so doing this chapter will highlight some intriguing common interests and similar behavioural ways between both actors. These similarities in desired strategic ends, and behavioural ways cause identity-anxiety within both the KSA and Iran which in turn have the effect of triggering an emphasis on Iran's 'identity-otherness' in the eyes of the KSA's leaders, and vice-versa.²²³ It will also allow us to focus specifically on intra-Islam's sectarian²²⁴ competition (between Sunni and Shia) relating to identity and hegemony.

According to Alaadin, the contemporary origins of sectarianism grew as a consequence of authoritarian rule and the emergence of groups drawing their legitimacy and support from different ethnic and sectarian communities.²²⁵ This sectarianism-question in the Gulf region has something of the 'chicken or egg' metaphor about it.²²⁶ This chapter will examine the available literature regarding this rise of violent sectarianism, and regional conflicts via Islamic-justified radicalism, and the extent that they are inevitable, or state-designed. For the most part this chapter will focus on those aspects of culture that best highlight the rivalry between the KSA and Iran. In so doing this chapter hopes to

²²³ Maaïke Warnaar, *Iran's Relations with the Arab States of the Gulf*, (Gerlach Press, 2016), p. 103.

²²⁴ Noting that the term 'sectarian' is usually deployed to account for divisions *within* a polity, and not between different states. The term is relevant in this context as it evidences a distinctive behavioural way, employed by the KSA (and Iran) in waging conflict via other actors, almost exclusively along religious lines. Put another way, the Sunni *Wahhabists* 'Other' the Shia, and vice versa.

²²⁵ Ranj Alaadin, *The Legacy of Iraq*, (Edinburgh University Press, 2015), p. 181.

²²⁶ Stephanie Cronin and Nur Masalha, 'The Islamic Republic of Iran and the GCC states: revolution to realpolitik?', *London, LSE Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf states, August 2011, No.17*, p. 12.

demonstrate the utility of the strategic culture method for analysing and understanding seemingly irrational behaviour by (Iranian and) Saudi leaders, at least by Realist standards.

Religious Differences and the Other

Soon after the death of the Prophet Mohammed in 632 CE, a debate emerged within the early Muslim community over succession. One group became known as Sunni (people of tradition and the consensus of opinion) and argued that the next leader should be chosen from the close companions of their prophet, Mohammed. Another group, who became the Shia (from the term Shi'at Ali, or party of Ali), believed that the new leader must be a descendant of Prophet Mohammed. This early dispute concerned the proper function of a Muslim leader, and the broader subject of the moral basis of legitimate political and religious authority in Islam. Notwithstanding the historical and theological significance of this divide, scholarly literature and more generic public discourse, generally points at this factor as the biggest contributor to the explosion of sectarian conflicts in the Arab Islamic world today. Indeed, attempts to make sense of the turmoil engulfing the Middle East today through this seventh-century prism distorts our understanding of statecraft in this region.²²⁷ A much smaller body of scholarly literature disagrees that sectarianism is the driving cause.²²⁸

Insofar as the KSA is concerned, since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Saudis have regularly represented Iran as a source of regional instability and more often than not, have

²²⁷ For an excellent summary of this perspective see, Khaled Beydoun, 'Dar al-Islam Meets Islam as Civilization', *UCLA Journal of Islamic and Near Eastern Law*, 2015, p. 43.

²²⁸ Hashemi and Postel provide a thorough dissection of this perspective in, Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel, *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*, 2017, p. 1.

emphasized either historical Persian expansionist trends, or its Shia religious credentials.²²⁹ Islamic fundamentalism grew exponentially after the 1979 Iranian revolution – the deposing of the pro-Western Shah by those inspired by Ayatollah Khomeini. Under the monarchy, the US was a close ally. Iran even had excellent relations with Israel. In the Arab world, Iran often sided with conservative Sunni monarchies such as Saudi Arabia and Jordan, whereas it had a strained relationship with the more radical states like Saddam Hussein’s Iraq.²³⁰ Indeed the most common explanation for portraying Iran as a threat to the established regional balance of power has been consistent with Nasr’s much narrower view of “Sunni-Shia conflict(s) playing a large role in defining the Middle East”, an inevitable sectarian divide between Sunni and Shia.²³¹ According to Zubaida, sectarian divisions in any religion are mostly peaceful and only become conflictual when overlaid with geopolitics. Therefore, the extent to which the KSA’s domestic cultural factors, as the second generation of strategic cultural scholars would suggest, constrains or emboldens the KSA’s leaders is an important reference point. Of course, what events have demonstrated is that in fact, the greatest boon toward what we earlier described as ‘perpetual *fitna*’, occurred in 1979.²³²

That being said, there is some scholarly literature that suggests regional insecurity since 1979 is not solely a result of Iran’s Shia identity, rather that Iran’s predominantly non-

²²⁹ Anoushiravan Ehteshami, *Iran’s Foreign Policy: From Khatami to Ahmadinejad*, (UK: Ithaca Press, 2008).

²³⁰ Majid Behestani and Mehdi Shahidani, ‘Twin Pillars Policy: Engagement of US-Iran Foreign Affairs’, *Asian Social Science* 11, no.2 (2015), p. 27.

²³¹ Nasr, *The Shia Revival*, p. 24.

²³² Zubaida, *Twenty First Century Jihad*, p. 141.

Arab identity underlies the KSA's attempts to bandwagon alliances against Iran.²³³ The KSA's behavioural relationship with Iran has operated in a context of the KSA as a major Arab leader, and the de-facto religious leader in the vanguard of pan-Arab cooperation, despite the KSA historic mistrust of pan-Arabism as we noted with Nasserism in chapter 3, when not functioning on the KSA's terms.²³⁴

Threat Perception

Relations between the KSA and Iran have been poor since the Iranian Islamic revolution of 1979, and its concomitant regional reverberations. The regional wide repercussions and geo-political rivalry are unprecedented in that on almost every issue in the region, Saudi Arabia and Iran disagree.²³⁵ Each is able to challenge the other and they do on several fronts. According to Patrick, the KSA's lesser fighting capacity compounds their threat perception and its habit therefore of relying on their agency, exercised by numerous witting and unwitting stakeholders, predominantly the use of the Sunni religious establishment.²³⁶ This division is attributed as the cause of most conflicts far beyond their respective borders. According to Gause, they are both capable of wielding unparalleled influence among different political, Islamist, nationalist groups, and even Great Powers like the US and Russia.²³⁷ Iran has had to be strategically self-reliant and endure

²³³ Gawdat Bahgat, 'Egypt and Iran: The 30-Year Estrangement', *Middle East Policy*, Vol.16, No.4 (Winter 2009), pp. 40-54.

²³⁴ Gawdat Bahgat, 'Egypt and Iran: The 30-Year Estrangement', *Middle East Policy*, Vol.16, No.4 (Winter 2009), pp. 40-54.

²³⁵ Sara Masry, *Iran's Relations with the Arab States of the Gulf*, (Gerlach Press, 2016), p. 34.

²³⁶ Patrick, *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy*, p. 111.

²³⁷ Gregory Gause, 'The Gulf Regional System and the Arab Spring', *The Montreal Review*, March 2012, available at <http://tinyurl.com/ju99h87>.

economic sanctions since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979. Indeed, Iran works hard to authenticate its religious credentials and to have influence beyond its own domestic constituency. In turn, the KSA responds to threats to its national security interests that involve any Shia Arab or Shia Iranian cultural aspect, by pre-emptively or reactively responding, often using its discursive power, emphasising or highlighting the opponent's Shia identity.²³⁸

By linking its threat-perception to Iran, the threat becomes an “othered” non-Arab and non-Sunni one, and therefore is able to trigger behavioural responses by the KSA to claim legitimacy as the defenders of a pan-Arab or pan-Sunni regional order. Indeed, Monier notes that in this context the Arabness of Middle East politics remains highly influential.²³⁹ In a similar process to the use of *takfir* (excommunication/heresy) discussed in chapter 3, highlighting the non-Arab status of Iranian led Shia activism justifies alliance creation in the guise of Arab unity. As chapter 3 noted, one of the most significant behavioural ways, a feature of the KSA's culture, is afforded by *takfir*. It is a concept that serves both the KSA and Iran equally well – the KSA as the guardian of Islam's most holy places for the Sunni faithful, and Iran as the de-facto leader of Shia Muslims.

As this thesis has discovered, once put into practice, *takfir* takes on a very powerful significance, and can very rapidly manifest itself violently. It has the unique ability as being a core Islamic tenet and yet it also paves the way for sectarian conflict between

²³⁸ For a detailed account of this behaviour, see: Patrick, *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy*, p. 111.

²³⁹ Elizabeth Monier, ‘Using Sectarianism to “De-Arabize” and Regionalize Threats to National Interests’, *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 69, No.3 (Summer 2015), pp. 341-357.

Muslims. Indeed, a competition now exists between both nations over what constitutes *takfir*.²⁴⁰

As we've already noted, the KSA's *Wahhabist* doctrine requires a commandment to worship only God and regard those who do not as *infidel*, applying *takfir* (excommunication) to polytheists. And as we noted in chapter 3, *Wahhabism* regards Shia Muslims as polytheists - because Shia doctrine requires veneration of the Prophet Mohammed, his bloodline, and also of Imams – and require their excommunication from Islam.²⁴¹ The resultant escalation between the KSA and Iran amounts to the equivalence of a strategic shock. The importance of this discovery is not necessarily that divisions within religions can escalate quickly and slowly with the passage of time, but rather that uniquely within Islam, the concept of *takfir* and *tawhid* act as significant accelerants in the hostile 'otherness' of the opposition. Put another way, an internal, or sub-state cultural doctrine has the ability to trigger significant tension and conflict escalation, and without religiously ordained de-escalatory levers. This is a significant discriminator in discovering the influences on the KSA's strategic behaviour.

Anxiety

Following the 1979 revolution, Iran sought to achieve identity-security by attempting to re-establish a combination of previous identities: Persian and Shi'ite. Some political psychologists note that nations with ontological insecurity typically respond to such

²⁴⁰ Sayed Hassan Aklaq, 'The Guise of Sunni-Shi'ite Use of Excommunication in the Middle East,' *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.38, No.4, 2015, pp. 1-22.

²⁴¹ Madawi Al Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, (Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 16.

insecurity to reaffirm one's self-identity as a way of reducing collective anxiety.²⁴² In Iran's case, this involved recreating a lost sense of ontological security and anxiety, reaffirming its religious identity as a result of its more secular constitution up until its 1979 revolution. As we have already noted, nationalism and religion are both intimately linked as powerful identity markers. Indeed, nationalism and religion have been demonstrably successful behavioural ways than other identity signifiers, and according to Kinnavall, nationalism and religion are such powerful sources of identity, and also tools for controlling or reducing anxiety, that they also have a tendency to make fundamentalism possible.²⁴³ Likewise, according to Giddens, nationalism relies on the construction of "the nation-as-this, and the people-as-one" which then guide the cultural, social, and political actions of the state.²⁴⁴ When combined with institutionalised religion, the *umma* – be they Iranian influenced or Saudi - are supplied existential answers 'by God', thus relieving the *umma* from the responsibility of having to make significant choices.²⁴⁵

In providing answers to these questions, Khomeini was able to institutionalise the idea of intolerance against those not sharing his belief. In this way, Khomeini's use of nationalism and religion as cultural markers increased Iran's sense of identity and

²⁴² Catarina Kinnavall, 'Globalisation and Religious Nationalism: Self, Identity, and the Search for Ontological Security', *Political Psychology, International Society of Political Psychology*, Vol.25, No.5, October 2004.

²⁴³ Kinnavall, 'Globalisation and Religious Nationalism', p. 11.

²⁴⁴ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and society in the late modern age*. (Cambridge, 1991).

²⁴⁵ Giddens, *Modernity*, pp. 51-53.

security.²⁴⁶ However, the securitisation of identity requires ‘others’ to be involved in the process. In the case of post-revolutionary Iran, the ‘others’ were the US and the KSA.

In the KSA’s case we will now consider its response to post-revolutionary Iran, how it again looked inward, at cultural factors that might compel greater Arab and religious unity, acts firmly rooted and provided by cultural factors, not materialism.²⁴⁷ Glenn’s positivist definitions of strategic culture fits neatly with the notion of how these cultural factors may enable and even empower the KSA’s discursive power. Generally speaking, the available literature suggests that Arabs employ discursive power as a social process as a means of identifying or conferring state-level capabilities or power.²⁴⁸ That is, there may be a direct link between the audience of the KSA’s discursive power - that is, those sub-state or non-state actors that can impact the perception of legitimacy of the KSA’s narrative, norms and ultimately, its strategic behaviour - and its national security behaviour.

Culture as a strategy

Rather than uniquely aggressive and sectarian, Iran is generally understood as a ‘regional middle power’ whose foreign policy has been shaped in the context of the systemic

²⁴⁶ Sayed Mohammed Marandi, ‘Iranian Studies and Constructions of Post-Revolutionary Iran: A Case Study’, *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 37, No.2, 2014, pp. 41-55.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁸ Thierry Balzacq, ‘The Three Faces of Securitization Theory’, *European Journal of International Relations*, (June 2005), p25-32, discusses the concept of securitization theory in great detail, with an emphasis on how the puzzle of everyday events can become transformed into matters of national security through ‘discursive power’.

insecurity of a regional system penetrated by the West.²⁴⁹ This has led to an Iranian security policy that is intimately intertwined with its espousal of asymmetric strategies of opposition to the West and the KSA, which has often taken the form of financial and military support for politically responsive stakeholders, most notably co-sectarian proxies.²⁵⁰ This manifests in a deliberate strategy, seeking to create the conditions for co-sectarians to become politically responsive, or the reaction to events deemed exploitable given the security and geopolitical context at a specific time.²⁵¹

Many of the political variables of these stakeholders, such as their desired political ends, lie beyond Iran's control, but the literature suggests that the most consistent variable is sectarianism.²⁵² This aspect of its culture affords Iran opportunities. Iran's revolutionary political structure allows its institutions to manage distinct if intimately connected aspects of various conflicts. In this way, Iran's foreign ministry can propose diplomatic initiatives calling for political resolutions, while Iranian Revolutionary Guard commanders proceed to supervise and orchestrate militias and other proxies waging conflict, managing co-sectarian 'assets by weaponised, or state-sponsored sectarianism.'²⁵³ This suggests that Iran is able to contribute to situations in which regional powers can exploit (or create)

²⁴⁹ See for example, Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival*, and Nader Hashemi & Danny Postel, *Sectarianization*, p. 160.

²⁵⁰ Jeff Colgan, 'How Sectarianism Shapes Yemen's War', *The Monkey Cage (Washington Post Blog)*, April 13, 2015, available at www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/04/13/how-sectarianism-shapes-yemens-war/.

²⁵¹ Sayed Mohammed Marandi, 'Iranian Studies and Constructions of Post-Revolutionary Iran: A Case Study', *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 37, No.2, 2014, pp. 41-55.

²⁵² See for example: Hashemi & Postel, *Sectarianisation*, p. 163.

²⁵³ Afshon Ostovar, 'Iran Has a Bigger Problem than the West; Its Sunni Neighbours', *The Brookings Institution*, 2015.

opportunities to increase their power, yet beneath a tipping point or threshold, insofar as Great Powers are concerned. Waging this sub-threshold hard and soft power enables them to avoid swift or disproportionate reprisal.²⁵⁴ Iran has referred to this as *omq-e rahbordi* (strategic depth), a deliberate strategy that allows it to keep instability and threats at a safe distance. It has also been termed ‘offensive realism’.²⁵⁵ Or, in the words of Mearsheimer, “looking for opportunities to alter the balance of power by acquiring additional instruments of power at the expense of potential rivals.”²⁵⁶ Distinct from soft power, *omq-e rahbordi* requires relationships with militias and other non-state actors and stakeholders to form the centrepiece of its strategies of opposition. These asymmetric strategies in the post-1979 era can be best understood as emerging from Iran’s direct identity anxiety and resulting competition with the KSA. Sectarianisation therefore, has been described by several scholars as a necessary by-product of its confrontation with the KSA.²⁵⁷ It is used as a counter to Iran’s role in regional conflicts, by the KSA, and vice versa, to the point where victory becomes hard to discern, and perpetual conflict is more likely.²⁵⁸ Iran uses these interlocking webs of security dilemmas which emerge in weak states, which can

²⁵⁴ See, for example, Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, ‘IRGC Publication: Is the Revolutionary Guard After War’, *Al Monitor*, October 12, 2012, available at <http://iranpulse.al-monitor.com/index.php/2012/10/482/irgc-publication-is-the-revolutionary-guard-after-war/>.

²⁵⁵ Hashemi & Postel, *Sectarianization*, pp. 159 – 168.

²⁵⁶ John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 164.

²⁵⁷ See for example: Norton, *Hezbollah*.

²⁵⁸ F Gregory Gause, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, (Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 127.

engender the conditions for convergence and shared interests between the weak Arab state, and the foreign backer, in this instance, Iran.²⁵⁹

Guardianship of the Jurist versus Wahhabism

The trajectory of Iranian Shia Islamism is intimately linked to that of the clergy. Its clerical sociology institutionalises the *ulama* (influential clerics) and their role in government, a notion vehemently opposed by the KSA and *Wahhabists*. Within post-revolutionary Iran, the doctrine of *velayat e-feqhi* (Guardians of the Islamic Jurists) most influenced the manner in which the Shia version of Islamism was conceived. This doctrine emphasised that the nation would be directly controlled by the Ayatollah, vested with all of the power of the Prophet and imams. This unique distinction allowed, for the first time, Shia Islamists to “abolish the frontier between political and religious authority” and therefore placed supreme political and religious authority in the hands of the Ayatollah and his immediate circle of clerics, the *ulama*.²⁶⁰ This is the opposite of *al-wala wal-bara* practiced by the KSA, which we discussed in chapter 3. King Fahd’s (the ruler of the KSA at the time of the Iranian revolution) response to *velayat e-feqhi* was to further tighten the links between the Saudi *ulama* and the government.²⁶¹

²⁵⁹ Indeed, Iran’s asymmetric clients are typically an amalgam of fundamentalists, nationally oriented militias, or extremist. According to Norton, the political purposes and goals of these clients vary and include: an armed group embedded within a broader social movement and series of local networks, which possesses an independent political agenda with self-sustaining revenue, such as Lebanese Hezbollah; or, an armed group with access to domestic resources especially money by intra-elite bargaining, but receiving military training and support from an external power; or, an armed client group funded, organized, and trained exclusively by Iran and serving the latter’s goals. According to: Ostovar, *Iran Has a Bigger Problem than the West*, pp. 11-15.

²⁶⁰ Laurence Louer, *Sunnis and Shia: A Political History*, (Princeton University Press). Accessed by JSTOR: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/j.ctvp2n4ft.6>

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*

According to Shia theology and narrative, only one of their infallible imams, the Twelfth Imam, is eligible to establish and lead a religiously legitimate government.²⁶² Since his absence in the 9th century AD, a Muslim sultan is permitted to rule in his stead. In Iranian history, the Safavids (1501-1722) were the first dynasty to establish Shi'ism as the nation's religion, and the first dynasty to appoint a sultan as the ruler.²⁶³ The second key feature of Shia's narrative is that of Hussein's martyrdom which involves the concept of *Jihad*. It is Hussein's role as a fighter and martyr (at the battle of Karbala) which has been codified within Shi'ism: '*Jihad* in the path of the martyrs'.²⁶⁴ In this narrative, *Jihad* in the path of the martyrs will usher in the re-appearance of the hidden Imam Mahdi, either before or on the cusp of the apocalypse. According to this narrative, activism and revolutionary situations are to be encouraged in order to hasten the Mahdi's return, hence the revolutionary *Jihad* and outlook of Khomeini's Iran.²⁶⁵

Historically, from the Safavid era onwards, the religious authorities and the ruling political dynasty cooperated closely. Once Khomeini assumed power in 1979, he elaborated these two concepts further by introducing a concept called *maslaha* (expediency). The principle of *maslaha* established that if Islamic law contradicted the interests of the regime, then the ruling jurist – the Ayatollah – had the religious authority

²⁶² The Twelfth Imam is a messianic figure within Shia doctrine, known as the *Mahdi* (Lord of the Age) who is believed to be in occultation until Resurrection Day.

²⁶³ Mehdi Khalaji, 'Iran's Regime of Religion', *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol.65, No.1, *Inside the Authoritarian State*, 2011, pp. 131-147.

²⁶⁴ Kendall, *Twenty-First Century Jihad*, p. 148.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p. 151.

to overrule it.²⁶⁶ The political implications of this are vast, and according to Khalaji, equated the Ayatollah as the Supreme Leader.²⁶⁷ These three concepts within *velayat e-feqi* - *Jihad in the path of the martyrs*, *the Supreme Leader*, and *maslaha* (expediency) - present an ideological and legitimacy challenge to the KSA's leadership of the Muslim world.²⁶⁸ Their effect has been a transformation of revolutionary convenient religion into a symbolic form of identity and legitimacy amongst the indigenous Iranians, and also to large numbers of Shia across the wider Middle East. The expansion and monopolisation of the Shia religion has allowed Iran to dramatically increase the size of its supporters inside and outside Iran. At its most extreme, these concepts underpin the conditions for 'ideological *fitna*' between Iran and the KSA.²⁶⁹ Indeed, this chapter will now go on to demonstrate the behavioural difficulties encountered by the KSA, in that both the KSA and Iran have a heavy reliance on their respective religious establishments for the legitimacy of their identity. It follows then that neither has much discretion in countering the other, and that they must either win, lose, or engage in perpetual *Jihad*, which might be considered both winning and losing. As Zubaida notes, "The sectarian dimension now engulfs both internal struggles and rebellions and international relations: ours is becoming the era of sectarian *Jihads*".²⁷⁰

²⁶⁶ Sami Zubaida, *Law and Power in the Islamic World*, (IB Tauris, 2005), p. 16.

²⁶⁷ Mehdi Khalaji, 'Iran's Regime of Religion', *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol.65, No.1, 2011, p. 135.

²⁶⁸ Joas Wagemakers, 'The Enduring Legacy of the Second Saudi State: Quietist and Radical Wahhabi Contestations of Al-Wala Wa-L-Bara', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol.44, No.1, February 2012, p. 91.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p. 136.

²⁷⁰ Kendall, p. 155.

Similarly, with the evolution of the KSA's response to external identity challenges - by Nasserism and subsequently by Political Islamists - the interpretation of *al-wala wa-l-bara* has evolved in response to regional political events, to avoid a repeat of the pitfalls of the 19th century civil-war.²⁷¹ Its collapse caused *Wahhabi* religious scholars to adopt an attitude of quietism to the state and the ruling King, resulting in a strictly social interpretation of *al-wala wa-l-bara*.²⁷² This behavioural change allows considerable freedom to the modern rulers of the KSA, a key component of its discursive power when conducting internal and external balancing with non-state ideological actors. In its religious scholarly form, it has been used effectively as a component of the KSA's discursive strategy against pan-Arabists, Political Islamists, more recently against Salafi-Jihadists, and also against post-revolutionary Iran.²⁷³ Indeed, what we discover by examining the KSA's behavioural responses to the Iranian revolution and specific Iranian policies is that *al-wala wa-l-bara* provides the KSA with a cultural 'fire-break'. That is, it allows for a bottom-up method for severing the perpetual radicalization of tawhid and takfir. Viewed in this way, the threat perception and conflict escalation between the KSA and Iran is very neatly encapsulated by both the second and third generation of strategic cultural scholars. It allows for understanding why and how critical junctures as strategic shocks can be born of 'otherness' and allow for escalation; whilst also encapsulating Johnston and other third generation scholars of the strategic culture method advocate that it (that is, the method) provides an *ideational milieu* which consists of ... "shared

²⁷¹ MJ Crawford, 'Civil War, Foreign Intervention, and the Question of Political Legitimacy: A Nineteenth Century Dilemma', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 14, 1982, p. 248.

²⁷² Joas Wagemakers, 'The Enduring Legacy of the Second Saudi State: Quietist and Radical Wahhabi Contestations of Al-Wala Wa-L-Bara', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol.44, No.1, February 2012, p. 97.

²⁷³ Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia*, p. 97.

assumptions that impose a degree of order...on group conceptions...whose dominant culture emphasizes preserving the status quo”.²⁷⁴

Fixed or Incremental cultural factors: tipping points between status quo and strategic shocks.

Notwithstanding the historical and theological significance of the sectarian divide, the KSA’s identity – as the source of its legitimacy – has evolved in order to remain unique and incontrovertible to its audience.²⁷⁵ Its claim to be the Guardians of Sunni Islam created vulnerability to other evolving models of Islamism as evidenced by its behavioural responses to the Muslim Brotherhood’s ascendancy, with Nasser’s pan-Arabism, and the evolution of Salafi-Jihadism. Post-Revolutionary Iran created an additional challenge to the KSA’s uniqueness and distinctiveness. At the macro level, Khomeini adopted a pan-Islamic identity marker similar to that of 1970s the KSA. The KSA responded by narrowing its own source of distinctive legitimacy by narrowly focussing its uniqueness on *Wahhabism* and conservative interpretations of Sunni Islam more broadly. Iran therefore became the ‘Shi’ite other’.²⁷⁶

Khomeini’s idea of the *velayat-e feqih*, the supremacy of his clerical politics over cultural and social aspects of society, and with *expediency* to flex within the confines of Islam, provided ideological legitimacy to a form of Islamic governance that was opposed to

²⁷⁴ Johnston, ‘Thinking About Strategic Culture’, p. 45.

²⁷⁵ Khaled Beydoun, ‘Dar al-Islam Meets Islam as Civilization’, *UCLA Journal of Islamic and Near Eastern Law*, 2015, p. 43.

²⁷⁶ Mary Darwich, ‘The Ontological Insecurity of Similarity’, *German Institute for Global and Area Studies*, 2014, p. 13.

Western “usurpation of Islam”.²⁷⁷ In many ways, Khomeini’s revolution as a “fight for the liberation of the oppressed” resonated well with Marxist and socialist groups within Iran.²⁷⁸ Thus, the revolution’s reach moved beyond its own borders and constructed alliances among disenfranchised actors across the region, in traditional Arab (and mostly Sunni) lands.²⁷⁹ One of its principal aims was to eradicate the borders of the Middle East, defy the concept of the nation-state, and thereby depose Arab leaders in the process.²⁸⁰ This would place Iran at the centre of a new regional order providing the Muslims of the Middle East, disillusioned with Western ideologies of nationalism and replaced with a new socialist pan-Islamic model.

Protecting the revolution was a military and cultural enterprise that went beyond the borders of Iran, and the way it was established provided the ways and means for liberation groups unaligned to other states “to emancipate themselves from the alien, non-Islamic oppression – both in the socio-political and cultural spheres”.²⁸¹ Establishing alliances would therefore be a critical behavioural tool in strengthening *velayat e-feqhi* outside Iran’s borders, and as we have already noted, *maslaha* (expediency) provides the Ayatollah – the *Supreme Leader* – with behavioural flexibility. This flexibility allows religious identity and beliefs to influence Iran’s approach to foreign relationships, but not to necessarily dictate them. And according to Ostovar, religion matters little in Iran’s

²⁷⁷ Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, p. 103.

²⁷⁸ Takey, *Guardians of the Revolution*, p. 15.

²⁷⁹ Hashemi and Postel provide a thorough dissection of this perspective in, Hashemi and Postel, *Sectarianization*.

²⁸⁰ Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, p. 61.

²⁸¹ Wehrey, *Rise of the Pasdaran*, pp. 19-21.

state-to-state relationships, but it does figure much more prominently in its relationships and behaviour with non-state-actors.²⁸²

As the region has grown more sectarian (for example, since the 2003 war in Iraq the 2011 Arab Spring), Iran's foreign policy behaviour has also become more sectarian, partly a response to the rise of the KSA aligned non-state Sunni actors.²⁸³ Accordingly, Iranian strategic leaders regard the *velayat-e-faqih* as a divine office whose legitimacy is bestowed by the Imam Mahdi. This clerical elitism is diametrically opposite to *Wahhabism*. It causes particular difficulties to the KSA whose state creation was significantly reliant on a similar ideological concept - Ibn Saud's creation and mobilisation of the *ikhwan* which conquered the Arabian Peninsula – in pursuit of ideologically different ends, namely the purification of Islam by emphasising *Tawhid*, the Oneness of God.²⁸⁴

THE SIMILARITY OF 'OTHERNESS': ANOTHER SAUDI PARADOX

According to some scholars, Khomeini did not necessarily intend for his revolution and its subsequent foreign policy behaviour to become framed as a Shia identity.²⁸⁵ Rather, his initial vision was for Iran to become the vanguard for other revolutionary groups seeking to overthrow oppressive regimes. Yet, the vast majority of Iranians are Shia

²⁸² Afshon Ostovar, 'Sectarian Dilemmas in Iranian Foreign Policy: When Strategy and Identity Politics Collide', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2016, pp. 18-22.

²⁸³ Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival*.

²⁸⁴ Darwich, *The Ontological Insecurity of Similarity*, p. 16.

²⁸⁵ For example, Ostovar, *Sectarian Dilemmas in Iranian Foreign Policy*, p18-22; Oiliver Roy, *The Impact of the Iranian Revolution on the Middle East*, pp. 13-22.

Muslims compared to the vast majority of Arab nations being Sunni Muslims, and therefore Khomeini's revolutionary ideology – in particular the system of *velayat-e faqih* – does build upon Political Shi'ism.²⁸⁶ His pan-Islamic ideology was framed in binary terms: oppressors versus the oppressed. The notion of liberation was therefore a distinctly important feature. Khomeini made the distinction between the “true message of Islam” against “distorted versions”, rather than Shia interpretation against the Sunni interpretation. Indeed, he regarded divisions amongst Muslims as a product of these “distorted versions”, a product of a Western designed conspiracy to subjugate Islamic nations, to which certain regional actors – especially the KSA – are complicit.²⁸⁷ Khomeini therefore places Iran within his idea of ‘true Islam’, and the KSA on the side of the US dissenters. Khomeini's ideology called for unity among Muslims in their resistance against foreign domination.²⁸⁸

Initially, Khomeini's revolutionary ideology did attract some support from non-state Sunni actors. However, Iran's identity as the Arab's main ‘other’ was emphasized by Sunni leaders, and developments in Sunni religious doctrine such as the gradual increase of *Wahhabi* influence from the KSA, resulted in non-state Sunni actors increasingly disagreeing with Khomeini's “distorted versions”, and instead denouncing revolutionary Iran as Shia heretics.²⁸⁹ Khomeini then increasingly framed Iran's struggle in Shia religious symbolism, which had the unintended consequence of again emphasising Iran's otherness to the Arabs, and the KSA in particular.

²⁸⁶ Oiliver Roy, *The Impact of the Iranian Revolution on the Middle East*, pp. 13-22.

²⁸⁷ K. Ahmadi, ‘The Myth of Iranian-Arab Enmity: A Deconstructive Approach’, *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, Vol.2, No.2, 2001, pp. 79-103.

²⁸⁸ Abrahamian, *Khomeinism*, p. 36.

²⁸⁹ Roy, *The Impact of the Iranian Revolution*, p. 32.

This Iranian discourse is paradoxically reminiscent of post-colonial pan-Arabism which we discussed in chapter 3. That is, Iranian foreign and security policy confirm its image as an expansionist ‘other’, which evidences Arab distrust. Therefore, Iran’s foreign and security policy behaviour to the KSA and other Arab countries supports the perception of Iran as a non-Arab other, seeking to take advantage of divisions in Arabia in order to expand its influence.²⁹⁰ The concept of Iranian otherness is an enduring and contested issue, specifically regarding its national identity and the relationship between this identity and the state.²⁹¹

Post-revolutionary Iran has developed a distinct identity, generally accepted as being dominated by Khomeini’s *velayat-e feqhi*, but also contested by other national actors, in particular the exiled monarchists, and the Green Movement. Iran’s leaders and the exiled monarchists insist that their interpretation of national identity is the authentic one. The former emphasises religion (Shi’ism) and the latter ethnicity (Persian). So, just as the KSA seeks its unique identity and has evolved in response to or in anticipation of events, so has post-revolutionary Iran.²⁹² The successful revolution of 1979 has allowed Iran’s rulers to control all levers of power. With its noteworthy *velayat-e feqhi* political system, the rulers have constructed an identity that places the supremacy of the state over the nation. In fact, when the Islamic Republic was established in 1979, it ended a 250-year

²⁹⁰ Slavoshi, *Rethinking Iranian Nationalism and Modernity*, (University of Texas Press, 2014), p. 253.

²⁹¹ Slavoshi, *Rethinking Iranian Nationalism and Modernity*, (University of Texas Press, 2014), p. 253.

²⁹² Afshin Marashi, *Nationalising Iran: Culture, Power, and the State*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), pp. 49-85.

identity-emphasis based on Persian ethnicity and identity. It was replaced by Shia Islamism, with an emphasis on the “ideal Islamic community of the seventh century”.²⁹³ And therefore directly competing with conservative Sunni leaders. Fearing domestic or instability within its own sphere of influence, the KSA responded by highlighting differences not only between Sunni and Shia, but also between Arab and Persian. The point being that sectarian and ethnic policies seem to generate a cycle of responses that can eventually lead to a – desired or undesired – situation of *fitna*.²⁹⁴

Significantly insofar as it concerns this chapter’s secondary research question, the KSA-Iranian behaviour highlights the ‘juxtaposition of the features of cooperation alongside persistent conflict’ within the KSA.²⁹⁵ Understanding this source of tension, and its impact upon executive power, and the impact non-state identities has – bottom up – on the KSA’s decision making, allows us to interpret patterns of strategic behaviour and therefore trends in the conduct of conflict or coercion during times of war and peace. These areas of strategic culture are of significant importance in the context of understanding the factors that determine strategic behaviour in the KSA’s sphere of influence. This is an intriguing discovery that suggests the possibility of strategic cultural change over time, as posited by Glenn, Berger, et al.

In security terms, the rise of Khomeini’s Islamism presented a significant challenge to the KSA. Khomeini sought to discredit the KSA’s leadership credentials, and its own religious beliefs. Khomeini also took aim at the KSA’s interpretation of *al-wala-wa-l-*

²⁹³ Slavoshi, Rethinking Iranian Nationalism, p. 269.

²⁹⁴ Oiliver Roy, The Impact of the Iranian Revolution on the Middle East, p. 30.

²⁹⁵ Fawcett, International Relations Middle East, p. 9.

bara doctrine, which we discussed in chapter 3 and earlier in this chapter, specifically the division of politics and religion that had been adjusted by the *Wahhabi* leaders out of pragmatism following the demise of the second Saudi state in the nineteenth century. All of these circumstances necessitated a behavioural response from the KSA in order to separate them from the now generic pan-Islamic rhetoric adopted by Khomeini.²⁹⁶ Accordingly, the KSA narrowed its identity further, to a distinctly Sunni approach which provided religiously derived doctrinal opportunities over Iran. In so doing, the KSA reinvigorated a sectarian discursive power.²⁹⁷ Sectarian language became more explicit in the KSA's discursive behaviour, with accusations of *takfir* (heresy) levelled at Khomeini's Shia revolution. The KSA framed revolutionary Iran outside of the Sunni community and therefore, by extension of being polytheists, they became legitimate targets of *Jihad*. Sectarianism became again useful in highlighting the KSA's religious uniqueness, and therefore since 1979 has strongly featured within its foreign and security policy behaviour. The KSA adopted a discourse of exclusion, based on its own pursuit of religious legitimacy and uniqueness. Sectarianism became the strategy for re-establishing the KSA's distinctiveness and its leadership. Religious legitimacy once again became the primary arm of state for influencing the behaviour of other actors.²⁹⁸

This evolution of the KSA's identity – the KSA's distinctiveness has required adjustments to its own self of identity on three occasions as a result of pan-Arabism, Sunni Islamism, and now pan-Islamism - is extremely interesting in predicting its strategic behaviour. This claim may sound perplexing given the prevailing wisdom by

²⁹⁶ Khaled Beydoun, 'Dar al-Islam Meets Islam as Civilization', *UCLA Journal of Islamic and Near Eastern Law*, 2015, p. 143.

²⁹⁷ Darwich, *The Ontological Insecurity of Similarity*, p. 13.

²⁹⁸ Wagemakers, *The Enduring Legacy of the Second Saudi State*, p. 97.

Realist definitions of the KSA's behaviour as predominantly irrational and unpredictable, the exact opposite.²⁹⁹ The available literature does indeed demonstrate that the KSA's behaviour was not the inevitable result of sectarian schisms within Islam, but rather that it – sectarianism - is an effective strategic tool weaponised by leaders.³⁰⁰

Others are less cynical yet do concede the inevitability of a sectarian discourse.³⁰¹ Nasr, for example, concluded that formerly dominant concepts used to study the Middle East, such as modernity, democracy, fundamentalism, and nationalism were no longer sufficient to explain the region's politics. Yet he blames the unleashing of intrinsic religious factors as being responsible for the recent upsurge in sectarian conflict.³⁰² Other scholars suggest that politicians manipulate sectarianism to achieve political goals. Sectarianisation in this context is distinctly different to the majority of scholarly literature which emphasises sectarianism as a static trans-historical, enduring and immutable force.³⁰³ This is an important distinction in the KSA's strategic culture. Sectarianisation requires authoritarianism. Sectarianism, on the other hand, is theological. This section demonstrates how different national leaders – authoritarian or theological – apply

²⁹⁹ For example: Shadi Hamid, 'The End of Pluralism', *The Atlantic*, July 23, 2014, available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/07/the-end-of-pluralism/374875/>; Ashutosh Varshney, *Ethnicity and Ethnic Conflict*, (The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics, Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 274-294.

³⁰⁰ Jane Kinnimont, *Iran and the GCC: Unnecessary Insecurity*, (Chatham House, July 2015), p. 12.

³⁰¹ In the interests of clarity, I still refer to sectarianism in the guise of intra-Islamic tension and conflict.

³⁰² Nasr, *The Shia Revival*, p. 82.

³⁰³ Khaled Beydoun, 'Dar al-Islam Meets Islam as Civilization', *UCLA Journal of Islamic and Near Eastern Law*, 2015, p. 143.

sectarianisation as a strategic tool, normally in the guise of identity politics.³⁰⁴ Sectarian identities are able to be mobilised because of differences in belief and their historical narratives which means that radicalisation can occur because the threshold is already low.

For the KSA, the dominant discovered trend is that its politics is intimately concerned with survival strategies. Its leaders are fundamentally concerned with both their staying power and political survival.³⁰⁵ Commonly, social and political cleavages are manipulated, providing short term strategic options, albeit often at the expense of long-term social cohesion.³⁰⁶ Religious intolerances are used to justify the degree of violence required to perpetuate the regime's continued power.³⁰⁷ As Gause has noted, the objective is to expand their own regional influence, not to seek a decisive military victory.³⁰⁸

Therefore, while religious identities are more salient in the politics of the Middle East today than previously, this thesis' discovery is the extent to which these identities have been politicised by state actors in pursuit of political gain. Cultural factors like *takfir* and *tawhid* are accelerated, and then other cultural doctrines, specifically *al-wala wa-l-bara*, provide occasionally effective de-escalatory firebreaks. Moreover, perhaps authoritarianism is the key to understanding this problem, as several scholars have

³⁰⁴ Hashemi and Postel, *Sectarianization*, p. 7.

³⁰⁵ MJ Crawford, 'Civil War, Foreign Intervention, and the Question of Political Legitimacy: A Nineteenth Century Dilemma', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 14, 1982, p248.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid*, p. 30.

³⁰⁷ Little, 'Religion, Nationalism and Intolerance', pp. 10-30.

³⁰⁸ Gause, *Beyond Sectarianism*, p. 8.

demonstrated, the sectarianisation process involves the ‘cultivation of hatred’³⁰⁹ along cultural lines. It is a deliberate strategy, and despite its constructed character, sectarianisation has the potential to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Indeed, some of the literature suggests it is an unintended consequence unique to the Arab world.³¹⁰ They also identify that there is no ‘trans-historical sectarianism’.³¹¹ There are, instead, specific sectarian episodes that come about for a number of interrelated ideological, political, economic, and cultural reasons. But be that as it may, once ‘securitised’ sectarian identities assume a life of their own, permeating identity politics and public discourse, and feeding on state weakness and civil wars, with devastating consequences for the territorial integrity and national unity of a number of Arab states.³¹²

SUMMARY

This chapter’s purpose was to analyse the KSA’s response to the Iranian revolution of 1979 with specificity on the role of those cultural thought-ways associated with identity-anxiety and threat perception. This would allow a better understand of the relationship between intra-Islamic competition and the KSA’s strategic behaviour. This chapter has discovered that the relationships between the KSA’s strategic culture – specifically insofar as religion is concerned - and strategy is not fixed or resistant to change. Indeed, an intriguing discovery suggests the possibility of strategic cultural change over time,

³⁰⁹ See, for example, Peter Gay, *The Cultivation of Hatred*, (WW Norton & Company, 1993), p. 21.

³¹⁰ Al-Rasheed, *Sectarianisation*, p. 21.

³¹¹ Jeremy Bowen, ‘Sharpening Sunni-Shia Schism Bodes Ill for the Middle East’, *BBC News*, December 20, 2013, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-25458755>.

³¹² David Kenner, ‘Saudi Arabia’s Shadow War’, *Foreign Policy*, November 6, 2013, available at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/11/06/saudi-arabias-shadow-war/>.

whereby norms and narratives can be adjusted incrementally, eventually accumulating ‘critical juncture’ status. Indeed, this chapter has discovered the extent to which – as suggested by Berger and Glenn assume - politico-military strategy is directly linked to domestic cultural factors to a considerable degree.

This chapter has also noted that this behaviour is not resistant to change. Specifically, *takfir* and *tawhid* are significant cultural doctrines that accelerate a process of escalation, given certain context and circumstances. Indeed, this chapter has discovered the parameters of acceptable change for the Saudi leadership, and the extent to which some of its cultural thought-ways and norms, specifically those inferred by *Wahhabism*, may actually be pre-determined, albeit they remain susceptible to incrementalism or strategic shocks.

In general terms, this chapter has concluded that the KSA-Iranian, and therefore Sunni-Shia tensions are not necessarily ancient or deep-rooted. Indeed, both Saudi and Iranian regimes heighten or downplay them as the need arises, strategically. The KSA has no historical anti-Shia policy per se, but they do have anti-opposition policies.

A paradox has emerged in understanding how sectarianism is employed and controlled by those employing it as a strategic behavioural tool, and the difficulty posed in pursuing a less-violent political reality. The literature demonstrates that sectarianism may exist practically along each conflict fault-line in the Middle East, carefully and consistently constructed along regional, national, and local political realities. This construction is a by-product of post-Revolutionary Iran’s *velayat e-feqhi*, with its doctrinal emphasis on *Jihad*, *maslaha* (expediency), and the role of the Supreme Leader over politics and religion. This doctrine creates identity anxiety to the KSA on a number of levels, but in

particular that of its own cultural levers: *Wahhabism* and its broader leadership role within Sunni Islam.

Pronunciations of *takfir* against each other result in the radicalisation of ideologues, militias, proxies – depending on their geography and cultural affinity with Iran – which become the KSA’s behavioural ways. These behavioural responses have similarities to other external identity challenges discussed in earlier chapters - by Nasserism, Political Islamists, Salafi-Jihadists, and now by Iranian concepts and doctrine. The KSA has evolved its own cultural thought-ways, in particular the reinterpretation of religious concepts and doctrine in response. The interpretation and evolution of *al-wala wa-l-bara*, for example, in response to regional political events and to avoid a repeat of the pitfalls of the 19th century civil-war that led to the collapse of the second Saudi state, is a clear and simple demonstration of this.

This behavioural flexibility allows some freedom to the modern rulers of the KSA, a key component of its discursive power when conducting internal and external balancing with non-state ideological actors. In its religious scholarly form, *Wahhabism* has been used effectively as a component of the KSA’s discursive strategy.³¹³ The extent to which this implies a strategic culture which prioritises anti-opposition policies over ‘defence of the Sunni faithful’ policies will be considered next, in chapter 5’s case studies. For example, as al-Yassini notes, “excluding external factors, the survival of the royal family depends on its ability to convert tensions into balances and to maintain control over the religious and secular establishments”.³¹⁴

³¹³ Timothy D Sisk, *Between Terror and Tolerance: Religious Leaders, Conflict, and Peacemaking*, (Georgetown University Press), 2011.

³¹⁴ Ayman Al-Yassini, *Religion and State in the KSA*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1985), p. 23.

Given the importance of Islam to both states as tools of legitimacy it is easy to see how moves by either Iran or the KSA can have ramifications for the other. This directly shapes the behaviour of those sub-state stakeholders acting along ideological lines. This behaviour can be either soft, or as we have seen in Yemen, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, increasingly hard. This sub-state soft and hard power encapsulates the security dilemma confronting both the KSA and Iran. The mosaic of these threats presents unique challenges to the KSA's rulers, both internally and externally. The location and nature of a particular threat will determine the response, and more often than not, this response will impact upon a different stakeholder altogether. Some of these stakeholders, as we have already noted, have trans-state agendas that therefore can impact somewhere seemingly unconnected. Furthermore, the challenges posed by the various sub-state groups demonstrate how the KSA is susceptible to the actions of others. When these sub-state stakeholders are of a sectarian disposition – such as the IRGC analysed briefly in this chapter - the threats and conflicts that subsequently ensue can become perpetual and intractable.

The final deduction of interest to the research question relates to the inevitability or not of sectarian conflict within the Middle East. The research has demonstrated that sectarianism is not an inherent historical quality of the Arabs in general, or the KSA in particular. Rather, sectarian entrepreneurs continue to flourish and benefit from this narrative. Or in other words, sectarianism is a modern phenomenon exploited by those that equate autocracy with security: avoiding a Hobbesian *fitna* (which we also discussed in chapter 3). Of particular interest to this thesis is how Iran's strategic *ways* (ideological, sectarian, hegemonic, and revolutionary) create a security dilemma for the KSA and also for itself.

Indeed, how this security dilemma can have unintended consequences born of a complicated chain of causation. Central to these unintended consequences are the stakeholders themselves, that do not behave as unitary or unified actors. This chapter has demonstrated that the sub-state or non-state actors are often responsible for this chain of causation and therefore have a direct impact on the creation of a security dilemma. In particular the plethora of identities and ideologies existing within the region often create internal security dilemmas for Iran and Saudi Arabia that complicate escalation dynamics between them. Whilst the literature demonstrates a willingness to avoid conventional conflict by the KSA and Iran, their willingness to become decisively engaged with other actors is a significant security dilemma that has not yet constrained the KSA's strategic behaviour. That is, the literature demonstrates that the risk posed by continued radicalisation and empowerment of non-state actors aligned to the KSA's cause, is outweighed by their threat-perception of Iran, and in particular, post-revolutionary Iran's identity-proximity to the KSA. This dilemma is significant. It could give new meaning to the hackneyed expression of proxy warfare perpetrated by the KSA insofar as assuming that proxy warfare along ideological, sectarian or tribal lines is always state controlled.

Likewise, this chapter has noted the ambiguity of 'state control' over non-state stakeholders, and the implications of these forces being unleashed as a tool of statecraft. For example, retaining a physical and ideological buffer against accusations of *takfir* defines a nation's willingness to become overtly engaged beyond anything other than 'strategically aligned and engaged by proxy'. Chapter 5 will now go on to explore some of these deductions further, by examining two case studies: contemporary Syria, and Afghanistan in the 1980s.

CHAPTER 5

INTRODUCTION

The previous chapters have examined the strategic culture of the Saudi state, so far by exploring the link between identity, threat perception, alliance formation and behaviour. In so doing, these chapters have recurrently noted the importance of ideologically aligned non-state actors and other stakeholders in the execution of Saudi policy. This chapter will examine the trends in this causal link – in terms of strategic culture – between the KSA and non-state actors, in particular by focusing on the scholarly literature surrounding sectarian non-state actors. As noted by Klein, since culture need not solely apply to states, neither must strategic culture remain the preserve of states.³¹⁵ Indeed, according to Longhurst and Macmillan, any actor able to employ violence may have strategic culture so long as they are strategic actors.³¹⁶

Therefore, the chapter's sole research question is: to what extent does the KSA's state-sponsored sectarianism and sectarianisation (which we discussed in chapters 3 and 4) seek to align itself with - or coercively create the conditions for alignment with - non-state actors and stakeholders, with their own culture, in pursuit of its own behavioural outcomes? It is a particularly important aspect in determining the link between the KSA's strategic culture and its strategic behaviour. Whilst this chapter is primarily focused on the behavioural impacts connected to the security aspects of the KSA's grand strategy, chapters 1 and 2 of this thesis noted how the KSA's utility of a coercive form of discursive

³¹⁵ Bradley S Klein, *Hegemony and strategic culture: American power projection and alliance defence politics*, (Review of International Studies 14:02), pp. 133-148; and Edward Last, *Strategic Culture and Violent Non-State Actors*, (Routledge, 2021).

³¹⁶ Longhurst and Macmillan, *Strategic Culture and British Grand Strategy*, (Department of International Politics, University of Wales, Aberystwyth, 1996).

power present it with a paradox in attempting to balance those relationships and alliances it deems vital to its own survival, and its regional position, in grand strategic terms.

This chapter will briefly examine two critical junctures in the KSA's history: the role of the KSA in supporting the mujahedeen against the Soviets in Afghanistan during the 1980s; and the role of the KSA in the Arab Spring and its fallout. These case studies will focus specifically on the links between those cultural factors that influence the KSA's foreign and security policy – for example, identity proximity and threat perception – and the KSA's strategic choices in empowering sectarian aligned non-state actors as its behavioural ways. Of interest to this thesis is what Klein refers to as a non-state actors' "accumulated strategic traditions", enacted and discursive, that enable or constrain strategic violence.³¹⁷ In particular the interaction between the KSA's strategic narrative – its discursive power – and cultural practices.

As we outlined in chapter 2, and according to Neumann and Heikka, studies of strategic culture have tended to focus primarily on the ideational aspects and neglect the role of human agency in determining the actual link between culture and behaviour.³¹⁸ In chapter 2 we noted that much of the literature posits that strategic culture emerges during formative periods and is thus slow to change. For example, we noted that Johnston's "ideational milieu" incorporates a combination of variables which allow for a positivist and measurable approach to strategic culture.³¹⁹ Johnston is attempting to separate

³¹⁷ Bradley S Klein, 'Hegemony and strategic culture: American power projection and alliance defence politics', *Review of International Studies* 14:02, pp. 133-148.

³¹⁸ Neumann Iver, and Heikka Henrikki, 'Grand Strategy, Strategic Culture, Practice: The Social Roots of Nordic Defence', *Cooperation and Conflict* 40:1, pp. 5-23.

³¹⁹ Alastair Johnson, 'Thinking About Strategic Culture', *International Security* 19:4, pp. 32-64.

strategic culture from other factors in order to demonstrate a ranking of choices from which behaviour can be predicted. The extent to which Johnson's approach undervalues the role of influential human activity in the reshaping of narratives, and equally of strategic shocks and events in the reconstruction or acceleration of change, will be examined in this chapter. This latter factor is particularly acute for non-state actors. We will explore the extent to which the link between the KSA's state narrative, and seeking to control non-state actors or proxies, and the relative success or failure of their overall strategy. Last considers the stronger the correlation between narrative and behaviour suggests that narrative is a more dominant element of strategic culture.³²⁰ The extent to which the KSA has elevated religious patronage at the expense of the more traditional tribal patronage in pursuit of its dominant narrative, able to influence the behaviour of others in a preferable manner, becomes more evident throughout the case studies, as we will see.

In weak states, politics concerns survival strategies. State leaders are fundamentally concerned with both their staying power and political survival. Commonly, social and political cleavages are manipulated, providing short term strategic options, albeit often at the expense of long-term social cohesion, and often executed via non-state actors.³²¹ Weak states, as we noted in earlier chapters, are more prone to sectarianisation because manipulating identity is a dominant feature of their politics. That is, ethnical religious intolerances are used to justify the degree of violence required to perpetuate power.³²² For example, Yemen, Iraq, and Lebanon are the battlegrounds in the Iranian-Saudi rivalry

³²⁰ Edward Last, *Strategic Culture and Violent Non-State Actors*, (Routledge, 2021), p. 8.

³²¹ Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival*, p. 30.

³²² David Little, *Religion, Nationalism and Intolerance*, pp. 10-30.

in recent years however the conflict in Syria has become the ground zero.³²³ Both countries are heavily invested in the Syrian civil-war. The political stakes and consequences are high, depending on which side prevails.³²⁴ This helps to explain why the civil war continues now into its seventh year with “omnidirectional sectarianism”³²⁵: state and socially generated, fuelled by regional forces. We will explore this in more detail shortly.

Likewise, in 1980’s Afghanistan, the Soviet invasion in 1979 led the transnational Islamic organisations (the MWL and OIC) to issue calls for *Jihad* against Afghanistan’s occupation.³²⁶ This gave the conflict a religious dimension that would mobilise colossal levels of state and non-state resources from the KSA especially. With its involvement in Afghanistan, the KSA moved from passive and financial support to a militant approach towards pan-Islamism, an evolution from its traditionally more hands-off approach.

These two cases will situate political violence in its proper cultural and behavioural context. They will demonstrate that the behaviour of sectarian-motivated non-state actors was, in these instances, “culturally predicated”, and how these norms shaped their aims and ultimately their behaviour.³²⁷ Therefore, the extent to which it is the frame of reference within which sectarian-motivated non-state actors develop and employ their

³²³ Yusri Hazran, ‘The Shiite Community in Lebanon: From Marginalization to Ascendancy’, *Middle East brief*, 2009, p. 39.

³²⁴ Justin Gengler, *Group Conflict and Political Mobilisation*, (Indiana University Press, 2014), p. 57.

³²⁵ Paulo Pinto, *Ethnographies of Islam*, (Edinburgh University Press, 2016), p. 16.

³²⁶ Bruce Riedel, *What We Won*, (Brookings Institution Press, 2014).

³²⁷ Godson and Shultz in Edward Last, *Strategic Culture and Violent Non-State Actors*, (Routledge, 2021), p. 28.

own behavioural strategies is important in judging the utility of strategic culture as a model for understanding, and even predicting KSA's strategic behaviour.

CASE STUDY 1: KSA IN AFGHANISTAN - MUTATION OR CONTROL OF THE NARRATIVE

In December 1979, Soviet military forces intervened in Afghanistan, at the request of Kabul's communist and vassal government. Over the next ten years, thousands of Saudi nationals, and other Arabs, joined the calls for *Jihad* alongside Afghan Muslims resisting the Soviets. The KSA's rulers – both the political and religious establishments – played a critical role, in coordination with the US and Pakistan – in sponsoring and enabling the passage of these volunteers to Afghanistan. Though the military contribution of these Saudi nationals was judged to be minimal in terms of tactical impact against the Soviets, the links between narrative, state control over non-state actors, and subsequent behaviour of these actors is profound.³²⁸ Indeed, the linkage between strategic culture, strategic behaviour, and the mutation of the cultural narrative surrounding identity viz-a-vis doctrinal concepts such as *Jihad*, is extremely informative.

The existing literature on the subject of the strategic culture of the 'Arab Afghans' is relatively sparse. Two notable exceptions are Hegghammer and Sela.³²⁹ Hegghammer's focus is primarily on the role the Saudi state played in orchestrating pan-Islamic charities to enable logistical and financial needs of the individuals, while Sela has written

³²⁸ Avraham Sela, *Nonstate actors in Intrastate Conflicts*, (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), pp. 56-58.

³²⁹ For example, see: Thomas Hegghammer, 'Jihadi Culture', 2010; Avraham Sela, *State, Society, and Transnational Networks: The Arab Volunteers in the Afghan War*, (University of Pennsylvania Press), 2014.

extensively on the KSA's role in promoting a new *Jihadist* ideology, the frame of reference for the volunteers themselves.³³⁰ These scholars generally conclude that the KSA's eagerness to support the United States' anti-Soviet campaign was possible because of a rare alignment in desired strategic ends by the US, the KSA, and the social needs of other actors. This coalescence was a result of common ideological recognition that the highly valued *fard ayn* (Islamic duty to protect fellow Muslims) against the Soviets provided substantial political and social benefits. Hegghammer and Sela both note how the floating boundaries between deeply meshed cultural relationships allow paradoxical conditions, which shift according to circumstances and interest-based calculations.

These flexible relationships between 'sponsor' and 'executor' can become antagonistic and hostile, but they can also be mutually constitutive and cooperative.³³¹ The competition between the Saudi state and other social actors manifests itself in a repeatedly shifting alliance, where the actors, including the Saudi state, maximise their respective interests.³³²

Non-state actors such as the Muslim World League and Organisation of Islamic Conference on the one hand, and Salafi-Jihadi groups on the other, commonly assert themselves through dynamic interactions locally and regionally. By design, the KSA's sponsorship of non-state actors requires them to operate in an internationalised arena, in order to support the KSA's pursuit of identity-hegemony – noting that the scope and precise definition of its identity has altered following critical junctures in its history, some of which we discussed in earlier chapters. Some of the Salafi-Jihadist groups seek

³³⁰ *Ibid.*

³³¹ *Ibid*

³³² Joel Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States*, (Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 27-28.

revolutionary, fundamentalist, ideological or other politico-religious objectives, and are therefore highly likely to foster alternative ideologies that compete with the KSA's identity.

In many instances, the Saudi state cannot sufficiently placate those who demand a more extreme interpretation of the state's identity, especially when this identity is so heavily contested by other outside powers (for example, those discussed in chapters 3 and 4). This contested model underlines the gaps between the self-image of the KSA as the legitimate and unitary leader, and its actual character as a state required to balance several non-state actors with multifaceted interests, in particular the competing narratives, practices and norms associated with the *Salaf*, as we noted in chapter 3.³³³ Much of the available literature notes how the Saudi state established and cultivated separate relationships with individual Islamist stakeholders. Thus, despite their claim to be trans-national actors, these different stakeholders had political or diplomatic leverage with the KSA.³³⁴ During this *Afghan Jihad*, this linkage helped to bind the behaviour of non-state actors to the strategic culture of the KSA. Yet inevitably this link became fraught with risk which we will now explore.

Saudi support for the Afghan resistance did not reach significant proportions until the mid-1980s, and notably, in an attempt to avoid blowback, the KSA ensured that the vast majority of official Saudi support to the 'defensive *Jihad*' went to the Afghans, via the regionally aligned experts, the Pakistani ISI. However, the key point is that the political opportunities for mobilising willing volunteers were excellent, and the state ensured that

³³³ Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism*, (Hurst, 2016), p. 156.

³³⁴ Roy, Hegghammer, Last, Sela, Maher all conclude similarly.

volunteers could travel unimpeded via the OIC and MWL. That the resistance to the Soviets became so effective encouraged the KSA to expand the state's enthusiasm for Arab volunteers to travel to Afghanistan. The Kingdom's pan-Islamic offensive, thus, gave the regime a further legitimacy boost as champion of Muslim causes and liberator of Muslim lands. So, a documented foreign policy success, and a successful enterprise in further cementing state religious legitimacy, domestically and internationally.³³⁵ Hegghammer notes the enthusiasm for waging covert proxy war, along ideological lines could be more successful without the risk of becoming decisively engaged and committed publicly to a specific strategic course of action, if waging a conventional conflict.³³⁶

According to Keppel, for most Saudis that went to Afghanistan in the 1980s, *Jihad* was about *fard ayn* - repelling infidels in cases of territorial invasion and occupation.³³⁷ Yet, this strategic vision was not shared by all. The reasons why this vision was not shared by all is of profound importance to the KSA's leaders. Groups like al Qaeda were ideologically divided. When Abdulla Azzam and Osama bin Laden created al Qaeda, they were united by the Afghan *Jihad*. Still, their evolution away from defensive to offensive *Jihad* and the formation of al Qaeda created disagreement with their former sponsors as to their strategic utility and purpose. Some al Qaeda groupings, especially those from the Maghreb, retained a socio-revolutionary view much closer to that of their original 'founders', the Muslim Brotherhood and the ideology of Sayyid Qutb. These *Jihadists* wanted al Qaeda to topple *illegitimate* Arab governments conceived by them as their 'near' enemy. This disagreement did not produce a schism within the early al Qaeda

³³⁵ Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia*, (Cambridge, 2010), p. 40.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*

³³⁷ Giles Keppel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*, (IB Tauris, 2006), p. 90.

movement, but it did leave the question somewhat unresolved which would be re-examined by another generation of al Qaeda leaders following the 2003 US-led intervention in Iraq.³³⁸ Yet, insofar as the issue remained unclear in terms of global *Jihad* utility and purpose as a tool of KSA's statecraft, it had a bearing on the foreign policy of KSA's leaders.³³⁹

Abdullah Azzam's doctrine was controversial, because it advocated universal private military participation in territorial disputes between Muslims and non-Muslims, rather than leaving it to the populations most concerned by the struggle. It also represented a shift from the socio-revolutionaries towards something more global than local. According to Riedel, perhaps one of his greatest achievements was in the creation of his Afghanistan Services Bureau in Peshawar, which successfully blurred the lines between humanitarian, charitable and militant support to the Afghans. His achievement was the successful evolution of classical *Jihadist* doctrine and the blurring of the distinction between humanitarian and military assistance. This also has important 'narrative' connotations.³⁴⁰ According to Hegghammer, 1987 seems to represent the high-water mark of the mobilisation of Saudis, by which time recruitment had transcended personal social networks and reached all aspects of society. By 1987 Saudi *Jihadism* had become a social movement, actively encouraged by the KSA's leaders.³⁴¹ The Afghan *Jihad* produced a discourse, mythology and symbolic universe which shaped militant Islamist activism at that time. The most crucial factor behind the success of the mobilisation of

³³⁸ Keppel, *Al Qaeda in its own words*, p. 23.

³³⁹ Last, *Violent Non-State Actors*, p. 20-45.

³⁴⁰ Riedel, *What We Won*.

³⁴¹ Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia*, p. 90.

thousands of Arabs to Afghanistan was the articulation, in the early 1980s, of Abdullah Azzam's doctrine of classical *Jihad*, which offered new and very powerful ideological justification for individual involvement in the struggles of other Muslims. This narrative became totemic.³⁴² And because times of war act as a great accelerant, we would see this pattern repeated by the 2003 Western intervention into Iraq, and then again with the evolution of DAESH amidst the chaos of contemporary Syria and Iraq.

The chain of causation is clear to see: Qutb, Azzam, bin Laden, Zarqawi, al-Baghdadi. Each with a discourse more apocalyptic than his predecessor, and with some literature now linking these behavioural and cultural trends with 'future-casting'.³⁴³ This can no longer be regarded as an 'unintended consequence' of decentralised strategic behaviour, decoupled from a sure-footed identity and narrative.³⁴⁴

Many Islamic scholars, including the top religious officials within the KSA, endorsed Azzam's ideology and doctrine around *Jihad*. The KSA continued to encourage volunteers to support the Afghan resistance. The literature suggests this was a cynical attempt at deflecting internal troublemakers away from undermining the Saudi Royal Family and wider domestic policies; but also, a legitimate attempt to retain control of the narrative of defending Islam against infidels.³⁴⁵ Indeed, the broadly supported transformation from defensive to offensive *Jihad* was successful, and the role of Saudi politico-religious figures in enabling this is now considered as being vital. However, according to all of the available literature, the KSA's support for Azzam's revised

³⁴² Keppel, *Al Qaeda in its own words*.

³⁴³ For example, Edward Last, *Violent Non-State Actors*.

³⁴⁴ Hegghammer, *Jihadi Culture*, (Cambridge, 2017), p. 42.

³⁴⁵ Gerges, 'A Change of Arab Hearts and Minds', *CSMonitor*, 2004, pp. 62-68

ideology of *Jihad* reflects another paradoxical instance of the KSA appropriating the culture of the radical Islamists as a means of strategic containment or coercion.³⁴⁶

The case of the Saudi volunteers in the Afghan war highlights the multi-faceted relationship between culture and behaviour, between the state as a political institution, and non-state and state social movements. In this shifting environment, the KSA and non-state actors alternate between being complicit, being allies, tolerating, cooperating, and fighting each other.

MUTATION

However, the degree to which proxies are able to commandeer narratives and trigger a spiral of violence in tandem with a gradual ideological shift to extremism and nihilism became defined during this period. Indeed, as we now know, an unintended consequence of the mobilisation in support of the Afghans (against the Soviets) was their shift toward extreme pan-Islamism, which would become a potent tool in waging offensive *Jihad* against the Saudi regime themselves. Global *Jihad*, and its ideological roots, would now feature as an existential threat to the Saudis with three strategic responses (generally): rehabilitation; counterterrorism; and coercion of Jihadist organisations.³⁴⁷ This final factor helps to explain why strategy, and often including the execution of strategy, is highly centralised, precisely so as to have greater control over the actions, effects and outcomes against non-state actors, audiences, and adversaries.

Indeed, by 1990, only three years after the US' covert military support to the 'Arab Afghans' ended, Salafist-Jihadist perspective had shifted, and the idea of *Jihad* against

³⁴⁶ Last, *Violent Non-State Actors*.

³⁴⁷ Hegghammer, *Jihadi Culture*.

the US helped retain unity throughout the organisation. According to Riedel, this shift was probably the thread on which the non-state Salafi-Jihadist movements all could agree, and crucially, could implement their strategy in accordance with their own narrative.³⁴⁸ This narrative allowed a disaggregated strategy to be pursued by al Qaeda, and devoid of relying on the KSA's politico-religious leaders to determine, or legitimise it.³⁴⁹ Indeed they would now be in competition. To KSA's strategists, conducting their aggressive foreign, security and domestic policies relied heavily on avoiding unwanted backlash and a deviation from the narrative now being pursued by al Qaeda. However, al Qaeda's strategic unity and disaggregation still contained strong calls to focus on their 'near enemies'. This has led many regional strategists to conclude that al Qaeda's focus on the 'far enemy' effectively made them revolutionaries in disguise, and their divergence from the KSA's ideological narrative viz-a-vis *fard ayn*.³⁵⁰

This point raises an important issue in relation to an important norm. That is, to what extent does this particular element of Salafi-Jihadist doctrine actually have a revolutionary focus versus pan-Islamic ideology? In other words, Azzam's ideology relegates *fard ayn* in importance. As we have discussed al Qaeda was both a pan-Islamist and an intra-Sunni revolutionary organisation, and the tension between these two objectives shaped its behaviour, and the behaviour of the KSA's strategists towards them. The pan-Islamist dimension was arguably more important because al Qaeda's success depended on its recruitment and mobilisation of the *Umma*, which itself relied more on anti-Americanism than on fighting their own Arab leaders. It was necessary for bin Laden

³⁴⁸ Riedel, *What We Won*.

³⁴⁹ Keppel, *Al Qaeda in its own words*.

³⁵⁰ Thomas Hegghemmer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia*, (Cambridge, 2010), p. 113.

and Zawahiri to conceal their long-term plans vis-à-vis the ‘near enemy’, because they knew that revolutionary discourse would not mobilise sufficient followers from within the KSA. KSA’s response to al Qaeda, therefore, couldn’t use ‘hard power’ alone, and according to Keppel their use of force was relatively measured and targeted and not at all ‘conventional’³⁵¹. Saudi Arabia ran a vast and highly sophisticated propaganda campaign, which emphasised al Qaeda’s revolutionary fervour, rather than its anti-Americanism.

Nevertheless, insofar as it impacts on national or regional security for their strategists, the distinction between nationalist and socio-revolutionary ideologies within Arabia suggests there is a difference between conflict dynamics based on religion on the one hand and those based on socio-revolutionary phenomena (such as the ‘Arab spring’) on the other hand. This cultural and ideological schism within the KSA’s narrative became the new point of contention between KSA’s narrative and its behaviour when this behaviour is ‘decentralised’.³⁵²

This had a normative impact on bloody sectarian conflicts and the narratives and discourse of violent non-state actors (such as al Qaeda), and transformed sectarian groupings into paramilitary ones, serving a higher (ideological) purpose. What was regarded as rare in Afghanistan during the 1980s had now become common-place across the wider Middle East region.³⁵³ That it failed to achieve any of its objectives is also very illustrative in explaining the chain of causation that would ultimately conclude with the

³⁵¹ Giles Keppel, *Al Qaeda in its own words*, (Harvard, 2005), p. 218.

³⁵² Joas Wagemakers, *A Quietist Jihadi: The Ideology and Influence of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi*, (Cambridge, 2012), p. 195.

³⁵³ Madawi Al-Rasheed, *Salman’s Legacy*, (Hurst, 2018), p. 221.

creation of more militant Salafi-Jihadist phenomenon.³⁵⁴ That said, it was also this period that demonstrated the *Jihadist*' movements inability to seriously threaten the KSA regime.

Domestically, the KSA was ruthlessly effective at disrupting and pursuing extremist *Jihadist* networks, but ideologically, al Qaeda's new interpretation of *Jihad* combined Qutb's defensive *Jihad* with Azzam's neoclassical concept of *Jihad* in the defence of Muslim lands, which then evolved into offensive *Jihad* against the West. This mutation only occurred following their strategic failure at home, against Saudi's rulers, which we noted in earlier chapters. In terms of strategic culture this is extremely interesting, especially the linking of narrative and threat perception, with the behaviour of non-state actors. Those who conform remained within the protection and general orbit of KSA, whilst those that did not conform would become ideologically isolated. It suggests that Globalized Islamic *Jihad* should be viewed as the result of the strength of the strategic freedom of manoeuvre afforded by *la-wala w-la-bara* to the Saudi state, its narrative, and its ability to coerce non-state actors. In the case of the Afghan war of the 1980s, the KSA successfully contained domestic Islamist and *Jihadist* organisations, neutralized active extremists by exporting them, harshly neutralizing those that subsequently returned to the country and by externalizing any remaining identity-competition by contending that Azzam's followers were anti-state, imbued with a radical ideology, and with a broader anarchic global (and crucially, not solely anti-KSA) agenda.³⁵⁵

CASE STUDY 2. SYRIA. PROXIES: STATE CONTROL MECHANISMS

³⁵⁴ Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism*, (Hurst, 2016).

³⁵⁵ John Burke, *Honest Broker*, (Texas A&M University Press, April 2009), p. 25.

The previous case study demonstrated the relative ease, even predictably so, in which the link between narrative, identity and threat perception can become paradoxically misaligned when strategy is decentralised in behavioural terms and how this compounds the KSA's threat perception, narrative and behavioural responses. The previous case study also highlighted some emerging academic work linking strategic culture with an ability to predict patterns in (future) state behaviour.

Since 2015 the KSA-Iran strategic rivalry has intensified to the extent that even if they do not stumble into direct military confrontation, the intensity of their competition risks an escalation in the levels from perpetual simmering conflict toward something more akin to turmoil. The use of the term competition is increasingly utilised by scholars to highlight their perpetual quest for pre-eminence and legitimacy.³⁵⁶ This next case study briefly examines another critical juncture, the Arab Spring with emphasis on the ongoing situation within Syria, in order to identify the behavioural role of Iranian non-state actors and the concomitant response by the KSA. Specifically, we will look at its identity formation within contemporary Syria, its threat perception and its strategic discourse in order to bring to life the Iranian behavioural ways discussed in chapter 4. The case study will conclude, importantly, by observing the KSA's strategic responses.

The Iranian's strategic behavioural approach had a two-fold effect across the KSA's sphere of influence: attempting to delegitimise the Saudi leaders and also seeking to unsettle Shia communities across Arabia.³⁵⁷ Their targeted stakeholders were therefore:

³⁵⁶ John Calabrese, *The Saudi-Iran Strategic Rivalry, Shocks and Rivalries in the Middle East and North Africa*, (Georgetown University Press, 2020), p. 59.

³⁵⁷ Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond Hinnebusch, 'The Foreign Policies of Middle East States', *Lynne Rienner Firm*, July 2014.

influential, powerful and religious Shia figures, nation states that had a majority or powerful Shia population, and ‘revolutionary movements’, regardless of religious confession.³⁵⁸ Of particular interest to this thesis is how these Iranian behavioural ways create security dilemmas, and how these security dilemmas are able to cause unintended consequences. It is not appropriate to consider these two behavioural ways being executed by a coherent nation state, or by unitary and unified actors.

This thesis has already noted the role of sub-state or non-state actors in the scale of unintended consequences. Between KSA and Iran, this case study will demonstrate the literature’s conclusions regarding the vital role of non-state actors as often being responsible for this chain of causation.³⁵⁹ Intended by the sponsor or otherwise, their indirect role in the creation of a security dilemma is significant, especially when considering behavioural response options by opposing nation states, and specifically in the case of the KSA. The literature suggests this is especially the case when this *sub-state* activity is often aligned with a specific ideological framework.³⁶⁰ This dilemma is significant and it could also give new meaning to the expression of ‘proxy warfare’ insofar as assuming that ‘proxy warfare’ along ideological, sectarian or tribal lines is always state sponsored.³⁶¹

³⁵⁸ Matthew Levitt, *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon’s Party of God*, (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2013).

³⁵⁹ John Calabrese, *The Saudi-Iran Strategic Rivalry, Shocks and Rivalries in the Middle East and North Africa*, (Georgetown University Press, 2020).

³⁶⁰ Last, *Violent Non-State Actors*, pp. 51-90.

³⁶¹ Mark Lynch, *The Arab Uprising*, (PublicAffairs, January 2013); and Christopher Davidson, *Power and Politics*, (C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd, 2011).

NATIONAL SECURITY: CULTURE AND BEHAVIOURAL CONTROL

In stark contrast to the behavioural method employed by the KSA (which we discussed in the previous case study), one of the new institutions that the Iranian revolution created was the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, established with the task of safeguarding the revolution. Initially a coercive force – similar in scope to the KSA’s *Ikhwan* of the 1920s - it has remained an ideological motivated revolutionary force since the 1979 revolution.³⁶² According to Huntington and Halliday, revolutionary states are normally confronted with an immediate problem: develop their militaries into counter-revolutionary organisations, or oriented against foreign enemies, whilst simultaneously remaining subordinate to the revolutionary leadership. The literature normally categorises political-civil-military relations as either ‘professional’ or ‘praetorian’.³⁶³ The Iranian revolution was unique in that the IRGC became both. A revolutionary army protecting against internal threats to revolutionary gains and externally, pursuing political revolutionary goals on behalf of the political class.³⁶⁴ The IRGC’s relationship with its initial leader – Khomeini – was affirmed in their commitment to the *velayat-e faqih* and their resolve to fulfil his orders. Included in its initial congress in 1981 the IRGC was charged with “...export[ing] the revolution in every condition until the fluctuation of the flag of Islam in the high castles of the world”.³⁶⁵ And because the first principle of the IRGC’s ideological outlook is the protection and expansion of *velayat e-feqhi*, its ‘*hezboalli*’ networks across Arabia pose a legitimacy challenge to the KSA. And since

³⁶² Kenneth Katzman, ‘The Warriors of Islam: Iran’s Revolutionary Guard’, (Westview Press, 1993), p. 207.

³⁶³ Samuel Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory of Civil-Military Relations*, (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1957), p. 21; Fred Halliday, *Revolution and World Politics*.

³⁶⁴ Bayram Sinkaya, *Revolutionary Guards in Iranian Politics*, (Routledge, 2016), p. 21.

³⁶⁵ Bayram Sinkaya, *Revolutionary Guards in Iranian Politics*, (Routledge, 2016), p. 27.

the core of the IRGC is motivated by religious principles and its perception of post-revolutionary Iran's culture, the 'perpetual ideological conflict' implies that their ideological values were an end of itself.

According to Zabih, it is no coincidence that Khomeini declared the third day of *Shaban* (the eighth month of the Islamic calendar) and the birth date of Imam Hussein, to be 'IRGC day' in Iran so that "the philosophy of freedom-seeking and oppression-fighting of those who fought in the battle of Karbala would be the model and guiding principle [of the IRGC]."³⁶⁶ According to Sinkaya this has two important deductions: the blending of revolutionary ideals with a culture of *Jihad*, martyrdom and sacrifice on the one hand; and, the sanctification of the IRGC as the principal guardians of the revolution and of Imam Hussein's legacy and actions.

Strategic behaviour: Exerting Tighter Control Between Narrative and Norms?

Since the contemporary struggle inside Syria is between non-state actors, aligned to different ideologies, and occasionally as aligned proxies of regional (and even global) powers, is "semiotic" and "military" (which we discovered in chapter 2), this chapter evidences the utility of the strategic cultural concept adopted by Lock and others (which we also discovered in chapter 2) as the interaction of norms, narratives and practices.³⁶⁷ It more specifically links the norms and narratives with actual behaviours, whereas Johnston's use of the concept generally tries to separate the two. That said, the KSA's ability to oscillate and re-emphasise its norms and narratives, sometimes despite its behaviour, as we have witnessed with the promotion of violent *Jihad* in Afghanistan and

³⁶⁶ Sepher Zabih, *The Iranian Military in Revolution and War*, (Routledge, 1988), p. 111.

³⁶⁷ Last, *Violent Non-State Actors*.

within contemporary Syria, demonstrate the KSA's preference to separate norms and narrative from its actual behaviour. This dichotomy is discovered throughout this thesis. Therefore, rather than being a cause to dismiss Johnston's conception of strategic culture, especially his claims of its predictive utility, on the contrary, the KSA's behaviour is demonstrably predictable but in ways that are inconsistent with its use of narrative and norms.

As we have discovered, this is a behavioural characteristic of its requirement to omnibalance. The case studies involving proxies ideologically aligned to the KSA have shown that the strategic culture of the non-state actors is subject to change, normally as the result of a strategic shock or a critical juncture. This is consistent with the writings of the second generation of scholars. The consistency of this adaptation demonstrates the concept's utility. Berger and Glenn assume that politico-military strategy is directly linked to domestic cultural factors, and therefore are relatively fixed and resistant to change, principally because "disconfirmable cognitive elements are buffered by the psychological phenomenon of consistency seeking. Information that reinforces existing images and beliefs is readily assimilated, while inconsistent data tend to be ignored, rejected, or distorted in order to make them compatible with prevailing cognitive structures".³⁶⁸ Indeed, this chapter discovers that the parameters of acceptable change for the Saudi leadership, and the extent to which ideologies – for example Pan-Arabism and religion – may actually be pre-determined because they feature prominently in influencing the KSA's behaviour.

³⁶⁸ Thomas Berger, 'From Sword to Chrysanthemum: Japan's Culture of Antimilitarism', *International Security* 17, No.4, 1993, p119-150; John Glenn, 'Realism versus Strategic Culture: Competition and Collaboration?' *International Studies Review*, Vol.11, No.3, (2009).

In the case of state sponsored proxies, in particular violent non-state actors, their narratives, norms and behaviours are more disposed to change over time, because they lack formal structures, they are prone to factionalism, and because they ordinarily are dominated by powerful and charismatic leaders possessing an ability to coerce and persuade. Indeed, the case studies throughout this thesis have discovered both similarities and differences in the KSA's strategic behaviour, especially insofar as it relates to the employment of proxies.

The case studies have demonstrated that, despite their ability to diverge in terms of interests, their narratives and norms are founded on the same core beliefs. We have discovered that their main divergence is in the interpretation of critical junctures, and their perceptions of the threat at these junctures. The framing and interpretation of these junctures oscillates, and the KSA will often omni-balance and bandwagon with their ideologically aligned proxies despite a variance in their subsequent strategic behaviours. Indeed, what the Afghanistan case study demonstrates is the disconnect between the KSA's narrative and its practices, the latter of which reflect omni-balancing in its execution. The nested nature of al-Qaeda's identity, including its militant forerunners which we explored in chapter 3, imitates and diverges from that of its core sponsor during the Afghan *Jihad* of the 1980s – the KSA.

This idea of a nested identity and culture recognises the duality of the KSA's behaviour, as it omni-balances, and therefore displays characteristics reminiscent of an idiosyncratic strategic culture, conforming to both the second and third generation of strategic culture concepts. Going further, we have discovered that these requirements to omni-balance are heavily influenced by the KSA's need to have narratives with a degree of hybridity, characterising their antagonists, divided into non-Arab 'other', 'infidel Shia', and

‘faithless Sunni’ (in the case of Political Islamists that are not *Wahhabists*). This inherent narrative flexibility allows the KSA considerable freedom of action, providing – insofar as cultural norms are concerned – the concept of *al-wala wa-l-bara* is interpreted and promulgated by *Wahhabist* clerics as conferring legitimacy on the political status-quo.

Likewise, examining the Arab Spring allows this thesis to discover the complexity in pursuing sectarianism, with the inherent contradiction as to whether it is or is not the real driver of state policy. The response of Sunni autocrats in the Middle East laid this bare. Turkey and Qatar backed Muslim Brotherhood electoral victories in Tunisia and Egypt, while Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates opposed them and strongly backed the counter-revolutions that sought to overturn these political gains.³⁶⁹ Similarly, in Libya, different Sunni regimes backed different rebel groups in conflict with each other.³⁷⁰ “If this is a sectarian fight, the Sunnis have not had their act together”.³⁷¹ Since the Arab Spring, the region has become a theatre for Saudi-Iranian confrontation fought not through classical state-to-state military battles, but rather through domestic and transnational actors. As Gause has noted, the objective is to expand their own regional influence, not to seek a decisive military victory.³⁷² Therefore, while it is true that religious identities are more salient as behavioural tools in the politics of the Middle East

³⁶⁹ Mark Lynch, ‘Why Saudi Arabia Escalated the Middle East’s Sectarian Conflict’, The Monkey Cage (Washington Post Blog), January 8, 2016, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/01/04/why-saudi-arabia-escalated-the-middle-east-s-sectarian-conflict/>.

³⁷⁰ Jean-Pierre Filiu, *From Deep State to Islamic State: The Arab Counter-Revolution and its Jihadi Legacy*, (Hurst, 2015), p. 20.

³⁷¹ F Gregory Gause, *The New Middle East Cold War*, available at <https://youtu.be/jUejRWBDbEE>.

³⁷² F Gregory Gause, *Beyond Sectarianism*, p. 8.

today than previously, it is also true that these identities have been politicised by state actors in pursuit of political gain. Authoritarianism is the key to understanding this problem.

As chapter 4 noted, the literature on post-1979 KSA-Iranian relations depict it as being strategic, positional, and persistent/enduring in that each identifies the other as being its primary threat. It is positional, as opposed to spatial, in that the rivalry is rooted in a contest over relative status rather than exclusive control of territory. And it is enduring in those repeated conflicts have persisted for an extended period of time.

According to Diehl and Goertz, the initial political shock of the 1979 revolution would ordinarily be enough to set the stage for rapid changes in relationships which become very hard to dislodge or improve.³⁷³ They note that in the case of KSA-Iran, the evolutionary approach towards identity competition encompasses a narrative of “a history of hostility”.³⁷⁴ They also note that rivalries are neither predetermined nor irreversible, and that in some situations, circumstances might allow for the termination or de-escalation of a rivalry. However, given the preponderance to ‘outsource’ its strategic behaviour, or put another way, the outsourcing of the tactical execution of its strategic narrative, often to violent non-state actors (in KSA’s case) and violent state and non-state actors (in Iran’s case), the complexity in pursuing de-escalation is evident.

To achieve this, KSA’s strategic decision makers opted for a strategy that would remain beneath the ‘tipping point’ or threshold of state-on-state conflict. Rather, they sectarianized the geopolitical contest using both domestic and external actors, state and

³⁷³ Jean-Pierre Filiu, *From Deep State to Islamic State: The Arab Counter-Revolution and its Jihadi Legacy*, (Hurst, 2015), p. 20.

³⁷⁴ Diehl and Goertz, p. 336.

non-state.³⁷⁵ The securitization of vertical cleavages that have long coexisted with other class, ideological, and regional divisions ruptured the country along sectarian, religious, and ethnic lines. Saudi Arabia funded and supported local Salafi groups fighting in Syria to achieve its political objectives.³⁷⁶ Saudi Arabia's national-security strategists created an umbrella organisation called *Jaysh-al Islam* (Army of Islam) which by 2013 became the KSA's primary boots on the ground. The sectarianization of rebel forces ensured that the non-violent local opposition were side-lined, and the uprisings would become transformed into a sectarian military confrontation.³⁷⁷

For its part, Iran countered by investing heavily in support of Assad's regime. They managed to keep the regime afloat financially in the face of Arab League campaigns orchestrated by the KSA.³⁷⁸ The IRGC became Iran's key instrument in exporting the revolution, its role written within IRGC law as "a permanent struggle for realizing divine principles and expanding the rule of divine order...the range of our duty is not limited to our land and we have extra-border missions as well."³⁷⁹ The IRGC were able to establish

³⁷⁵ F Gregory Gause, 'The New Middle East Cold War', available at <https://youtu.be/jUejRWBDbEE>.

³⁷⁶ Jeremy Bowen, 'Sharpening Sunni-Shia Schism Bodes Ill for the Middle East', BBC News, December 20, 2013, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-25458755>.

³⁷⁷ Mark Lynch, 'Why Saudi Arabia Escalated the Middle East's Sectarian Conflict', The Monkey Cage (Washington Post Blog), January 8, 2016, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/01/04/why-saudi-arabia-escalated-the-middle-east-s-sectarian-conflict/>.

³⁷⁸ Afshon Ostovar, 'Sectarian Dilemmas in Iranian Foreign Policy: When Strategy and Identity Politics Collide', (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016), p. 25.

³⁷⁹ The IRGC Provisional Law, Article 2, Item 10, in, Bayram Sinkaya, *Revolutionary Guards in Iranian Politics*, p. 129.

connections across the Middle East and provide technical, financial or logistical support to them, with association between Iran and Hezbollah the most apparent and enduring of this. Jay Solomon describes the IRGC as “...a CIA, Pentagon, and State Department all rolled into one”.³⁸⁰ It had for decades, often in collaboration with Syria, manipulated extremist groups and militias. Even ‘Sunni’ extremists like Hamas would align themselves as proxies and willing to subordinate themselves to the IRGC when the objective, primarily anti-Israeli in their case was considered to be worth it.³⁸¹

Which Sunni non-state actors?

For Iran, their deliberate behavioural strategy, executed by the IRGC with a narrow spectrum of ideologically aligned non-state actors makes the link between strategic culture and execution easier to understand, and predict. For the KSA the link is much more difficult to discern, primarily because the intra-Sunni competition surrounding narrative is more congested, as chapter 3 has already outlined. In the case of Syria, there were broadly three different strands of Sunni-opposition stakeholders: moderate (such as the Syrian National Congress and the Free Syrian Army), Islamist (such as Ahrar as-Sham and the Syrian Islamic Front who did rely on calls to defensive *Jihad* but whose goals were therefore constrained within Syria), and Salafi Jihadist (such as Jabhat al-Nusra and DAESH who relied on offensive *Jihad* and therefore had trans-national objectives).³⁸² Saudi Arabia who would work and empower only those with whom the Saudis understood and approved, which excluded the Muslim Brotherhood³⁸³. The coordination of proxies

³⁸⁰ Jay Solomon, *The Iran Wars*, (Random House, 2016), p. 32.

³⁸¹ Sinkaya, *Revolutionary Guards in Iranian Politics*, p. 174.

³⁸² Christopher Davidson, *After the Sheyks*, (Hurst, October 2013).

³⁸³ Phillips, pp. 135-139

by their different sponsors therefore, in the case of Syria (as is the case within Libya at 2015) makes the formation of ‘sub-state alliances’, aligned in pursuit of a common objective a distinct feature of the KSA way in warfare, even despite there being no guarantee that stakeholders will even remain aligned with their sponsors, and there is no guarantee that stakeholders will not mutate. In fact, once execution became decentralised, rival stakeholders will often compete rather than unify, especially in the quest for more resources. Within Syria the unchecked radicalism of different networks would eventually create an environment in which Salafi Jihadists would thrive at the expense of their nationalist or Islamist competitors.³⁸⁴ The extent to which regional powers backed different stakeholders at the expense of unity because of the lack of a unified narrative implies a recognition of their unwillingness to be decisive.

SUMMARY

The KSA’s reaction to the opportunity of Afghanistan in the 1980s, and the KSA’s response to the situation in contemporary Syria, a microcosm of the Arab Spring and its fallout, are very informative in seeking to identify trends in the KSA’s strategic behaviour. It has identified, that insofar as these case studies are concerned, the KSA deliberately seeks to influence the norms of religiously aligned non-state actors in an attempt to influence the non-state actor’s behaviour. Indeed, these case studies have demonstrated that the KSA will even coercively influence these norms.

If the middle of March 2011 marked a pivotal turning point – when the contagious awakenings in Yemen, Bahrain, Syria and Lebanon turned violent – then the KSA’s reaction is profound and informative. To paraphrase Clausewitz’ aphorism about war

³⁸⁴ Peter Gay, *The Cultivation of Hatred*, WW Norton & Company, 1993, p. 21.

being the continuation of politics by another means, this chapter demonstrated that sectarian conflict in the Middle East today is the perpetuation of political rule via identity mobilization. The speed and alacrity of the KSA's response to Iranian actions (that is, the Iranian empowerment of non-state and state actors) is also informative as it highlights a predetermined assessment of tolerance for change and defined strategic and regional spheres of influence, by the KSA.³⁸⁵

This predetermined assessment was heavily informed and influenced by critical junctures discussed in this chapter. Likewise, the two case studies discussed in this chapter are two of many critical junctures, for example, one could also have included others such as Nasserism, the confluence of events in 1979, the US intervention into Iraq in 1991, the US intervention into Iraq in 2003, or the ongoing civil wars in Libya and Yemen. These would be interesting areas of further scholarly study.

This chapter has also explored the utility of strategic culture in predicting strategic behaviour, which as we noted in chapter 2, remains contested. Previous chapters have concluded that strategic culture can be dynamic, shaped by shocks and events, and is not necessarily static. We have noted that the link between strategy and behaviour is cyclical and that it operates at three levels, which this chapter's case studies have helped to illuminate: narrative, which is shaped by identity and threat perception; which feed into strategic behaviour; which in turn influences the evolution of the narrative. This chapter has emphasised the link between narrative and behaviour, by emphasising the frequency

³⁸⁵ For example, Qatar abandoned its former pragmatic foreign policy and band-wagoned with the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliated Islamists (both Political and Militant) in a bid to bolster its geopolitical weight. Qatar played a proactive role in regime change in Egypt, Libya and Syria. It led a campaign to isolate Syria from the Arab League. And it successfully engineered Hamas' exit from the Iranian-Syrian alliance (by becoming their sponsor in their stead

that behaviour is decentralized and conducted by non-state actors, but with an element of centralized control or influence over the non-state actor's 'norms', afforded by religious aspects of the KSA's strategic culture.

These case studies have also demonstrated that the link between discursive power (the narrative) and behaviour changes as new strategies and tactics are innovated. As such, the KSA's strategic culture seemingly does evolve, in part because of its reliance on non-state actors and other stakeholders, themselves being reliant on human agency brought on by radicalisation or deradicalization, leadership changes, and secession. We have noted that norms, identity and perceptions of threat are slower to change for the KSA in particular, but that these things are more prone to faster change for non-state actors. This can create a perception of a dominant cultural concept – in this instance, Wahhabism specifically and Sunniism in general – out of step with those claiming to execute its behaviour in its name.

This rise of pan-Islamism in the 1980s and early 1990s created a very beneficial political opportunity for the KSA to encourage activism abroad. *Classical Jihadism* became socially acceptable, not as a specific result of the state's Wahhabist doctrine per se, but actually as a response to an ever increasingly complicated regional security environment. As this chapter noted, militarised pan-Islamism became a tool of foreign and security policy for the KSA. It afforded the national and regional leadership considerable freedom of manoeuvre. In time, the negative connotations and consequences of empowering non-state actors would become apparent, and therein lies a security paradox for the KSA. Ambiguous relationships with proxies would generate unwelcome international

accusations of passive sponsorship of terrorism.³⁸⁶ So, the ideal strategic choices would involve proxy warfare, with all of its attendant strategic advantages, yet sufficiently controlled to avoid subsequent blowback...a strategist's nirvana. Controlling that link between narrative and behaviour seemingly requires highly centralised decision making, a distinctive feature of the KSA's strategic behaviour.

³⁸⁶ Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism*, Hurst, 2016, p. 37.

CHAPTER 6 - CONCLUSIONS

The primary research question of this thesis has been: To what extent can strategic culture help us understand the KSA's strategic decision-making behaviour with regard to its foreign and security policy?

The thesis followed a chronological method, examining the dominant cultural factors and critical junctures which affected the KSA's decision making. These included the KSA's state-creation in 1932, the period colloquially known as Nasserism during the 1950/60s, the period following the 1979 Iranian Revolution. The thesis included case studies that examined the KSA's behaviour during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan during the 1980s and during the civil and proxy war carried out in Syria following the events of the Arab Spring in 2011. In addition to the primary research question, these historical periods allowed me to explore several secondary research questions to better support my use of the strategic culture method to understand the KSA's strategic decision-making behaviours.

Chapter 2 examined the scholarly literature surrounding the concept of strategic culture in order to better understand its utility and appropriateness compared to other concepts. Chapter 3 examined those dominant cultural factors influencing the KSA's decision making behaviours in response to Nasserism, specifically by examining intra-Sunni competition dynamics over identity and leadership. This chapter also examined the extent to which intra-Sunni religious doctrine – specifically *Wahhabism* – influenced the KSA's strategic decision-making behaviours in relation to some of the key geopolitical challenges it has faced over the last several decades.

Chapter 4 examined the events of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, and the resulting intra-Islamic competition over identity and leadership that has played out in the Middle East. This analysis facilitated the answering an additional secondary research question which sought to explore the extent to which this intra-Islamic competition has constrained the KSA's strategic behaviour – insofar as the *Wahhabi* doctrine of *tawhid* (monotheism) and *takfir* (excommunication) are concerned – and the extent to which the KSA's evolution of its identity provides an additional paradox in understanding the KSA's strategic behaviour

Chapter 5 helped to complement our understanding of the KSA's foreign and security policy behaviour by identifying behavioural patterns within two critical junctures or trends that can be explained by the KSA's strategic culture. Specifically, these critical junctures highlighted the KSA's strategic preferences for utilising ideologically-aligned proxies in pursuit of the KSA's strategic objectives.

CONCLUSIONS

This thesis has proven the demonstrable utility of the concept strategic culture in helping us understand the KSA's threat perceptions and the strategic behaviour undertaken to deal with them. Many of the critical junctures that have affected the history of the KSA have originated from sub-state actors and factors, supra-state ideologies, and non-state actors. The threat perceptions that the KSA's ruling elites experienced during these critical junctures influenced behavioural responses that balanced the often competing demands on the Saudi state) or requirements by these actors. Indeed, the strategic culture method has allowed this thesis to analyse the linkage between cultural aspects internal to the KSA and its strategic choices and behaviours in relation to its foreign and security policies, primarily by analysing the construction of the KSA's different identities. Specifically, the

norms associated with being the *Custodians of the Two Holy Mosques*, the de-facto head of the *Wahhabi* school of Sunnism, and its doctrinal hostility to Political Islamist and pan-Arabist doctrines, have demonstrated behavioural trends, or rather a strategic approach which is highly centralized in order to omni-balance against these (often) competing, paradoxical and contradictory strategic challenges.

In addition, this thesis has demonstrated that the strategic culture concept can be a useful tool to interpret patterns of Saudi behaviour. Studying the KSA's strategic behaviour along its critical junctures has allowed us to understand its cultural thought-ways, and to ascertain a set of shared assumptions and decision-rules which allow us to separate the constants and the constraints of its strategic behaviour. The strategic culture concept, in particular Johnson's 'ideational milieu' approach, may even enable a modicum of predictability insofar as it applies to the KSA's strategic behaviour.

Key findings

Germane to the primary research question is the issue of identity and legitimacy. A recurring assumption throughout this thesis has been how state-based alliances and sub-state alliances *compete* over the ideological question of 'which identity' provides their legitimacy. This often frames their threat perceptions and their behavioural responses accordingly. Furthermore, this thesis has noted that conflict in the KSA's sphere of influence has many sources; and it has identified reasons other than *anarchy* for why states and non-state actors constitute a threat to the KSA. For example, in the case of the norms underpinning Arabism and Islamism, these norms provide instruction or guidance on how the Saudi leaders ought to behave. And yet, even regarding norms, much (but not all) of the existing literature frames these norms as having impacts only between states, and only when they are ideologically non-aligned.

Rather, by applying the strategic culture concept, this thesis has demonstrated the extent to which these consequences constrain or shape the KSA's behaviour regardless of the KSA's ideological alignment with other states. That is to say, the KSA's history is replete with examples of hostility to states that are demonstrably Sunni Arab, such as Nasser's Egypt and Qaddafi's Libya, and even towards those Sunni Arab states with which the KSA has a formal political and military alliance, such as Thani's Qatar. This is a powerful indicator of how cultural factors, such as norms, as opposed to military capabilities have greater primacy in helping us understand inter-Arab politics, intra-Islamic politics, and in relation to Iran. Strategic culture provides a framework for analysing the consequences of violating the State's norms through different lenses, especially those norms that have a direct bearing on the legitimacy of the Saudi state. Therefore, the KSA's strategic behaviour operates first and foremost in what Gerges describes as "a sub-environment", using its "discursive power" beneath a recognisable – yet changeable and different threshold according to the specific contexts of these critical junctures - international political threshold that doesn't trigger outside interference, unless that interference is actually desired.³⁸⁷

This thesis examined the competition between radical intra-Sunni stakeholders, and how their competition over religious identity and legitimacy presents challenges to the KSA. How the KSA responds to these challenges is highly dependent on the political context of the time and the severity of the risk to its own identity and legitimacy presented. Indeed, this thesis has demonstrated that sometimes, these radical intra-Sunni stakeholders become a cause to champion, and in other times they become a cause to

³⁸⁷ Fawaz Gerges, *The New Middle East*, pp. 270-73.

guard against. Although this may imply that the KSA's strategic behaviour is therefore inconsistent, this thesis has attempted to demonstrate that this is not necessarily the case. Indeed, its threat perception of cultural factors being weaponised against the Saudi regime, which has engendered amongst its leadership identity anxiety, will typically involve a similar behavioural response that attempts to delegitimize the regime's opponents and to emphasise its own unique identity and religious legitimacy amongst the *Umma*. This behavioural pattern has been remarkably consistent across the critical junctures examined.

The critical junctures discussed in this thesis identify and highlight the common intractable nature of conflict, usually conducted on ideological lines, and usually involving great animosity and vicious cycles of violence between opposing parties. Despite occasional periods of peace, the period since Nasserism has witnessed perpetual sub-state conflict fought along ostensibly sectarian lines, but more often because of identity proximity and anxiety. The perpetual and seemingly intractable ideological and sectarian challenge is more keenly conducted at the sub-state level, and as we have discussed, often by weaponizing apocalyptic cultural concepts and doctrines.

This thesis has also noted the uniqueness of Islam in creating ideological *fitna*, whereby radical leaders with pan-Islamic ideologies clash with their ideological competitors and create a crisis situation that can become difficult to reverse. Where no decisive act is possible to reverse the deteriorating situation, then *fitna* will most likely occur. This thesis has demonstrated that the chain of causation towards creating a situation of *fitna* becomes more likely (but not exclusively) when these stakeholders are outside the control of the state. Therefore, the extent to which the KSA's leaders will go to limit or influence this chain of causation is an important characteristic of its strategic behaviour. This

suggests that the KSA's strategic judgements are indeed framed by strategic preferences, that are often, but not always (especially in the case of *al-wala wa-l-bara*) influenced by cultural factors. These limits are often reliant on religiously inspired coercion to achieve a position of influence. We examined (specifically regarding contemporary conflicts in Syria and Afghanistan) how the KSA secures this coercive position of advantage, and the requirements in strategic culture terms that allow it to remain discreet and highly centralised. This might be regarded as the opposite of a conventional approach underpinning strategic behaviour where strategic intent may be clear(er), and with its execution being decentralised.

This thesis has also noted the significance of the KSA's discursive power within intra-Sunni ideological debates. This power may have a disproportionate impact on the nature of the KSA's preferred strategic behaviour and decision-making. For example, the thesis has demonstrated the span and importance of these ideologies and doctrines, the subtle intra-stakeholder fissures and distinctions underpinning such ideologies and doctrines, and the lengths the KSA will go to retain primacy or control over them. The thesis has offered an explanation in normative terms. Such an understanding obscures important differences, *Islamism* and *Salafism*, for example, are not the same thing, and in fact are often in competition with each other. Indeed, the literature notes that most *Islamists* are not *Jihadists*, just as most *Salafists* are not *Jihadists*. Using the strategic culture concept, this thesis has demonstrated how the KSA utilises these ideologies either through alliance formation, alignment, conflict, or as their own proxies. These ideologies are important components within the context of the KSA's strategic behaviour.

This behavioural flexibility provides the KSA's modern rules some freedom of manoeuvre. The frequency of this behaviour implies it is a key component of its discursive power when conducting internal and external balancing with non-state

ideological actors. In its religious scholarly form, *Wahhabism* has been used effectively as a component of the KSA's discursive strategy. The extent to which this implies a strategic culture which prioritises anti-opposition policies over 'defence of the Sunni faithful' policies was consistently observed throughout the thesis.

This thesis has also noted the KSA's behavioural flexibility surrounding its identity. As regional or domestic events have created behavioural anxiety, the KSA has tended to reshape or repackage its sense of identity in order to demonstrate its sense of uniqueness. This reshaping generally involves the reframing of an opponent's identity to demonise or delegitimise it, whilst simultaneously enhancing or emphasising the uniqueness of its own. The KSA has shifted its policies around alliance formation and alignment, albeit demonstrating consistent behavioural characteristics whilst doing so, reinventing specific elements of its self-identity depending on context. This reinventing has continuously evolved, for example, from the KSA touting itself initially as being champions of pan-Islamism as a counter to Nasser's pan-Arabism, to championing pan-Islamism into a more conservative focus on Sunnism, and from championing Sunnism to a much more specific focus on *Wahhabist* discourse following the ascendancy of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Political Islamist activists.

By using the strategic culture concept, this thesis has also demonstrated that cultural similarities – within Islam and inter-Arab - which challenge the KSA's unique religious leadership role within the Middle East become a source of anxiety. By analyzing the chronological aspects of pan-Arabism, Islamism, and Salafi-Jihadism, this thesis has noted two strategic preferences that are influenced by its strategic culture. Both preferences involve a desire to retain a distinctive discursive power based on two exclusive identity markers which portrayed the KSA, initially, as the sole legitimate

leader of Islam in response to pan-Arabism, and then subsequently as sole legitimate leader of conservative Sunni Islam in response to Islamism and Salafi-Jihadism. These similarities in identity – that is, similarity with other stakeholders – can often be a source of division insofar as the KSA is concerned. Indeed, chapter 4 highlighted another identity-distinction following the 1979 Iranian revolution, and that the Iranian regime's use of religious legitimacy as its own identity marker, led to a competition with the KSA for the title of 'leader of the Islamic world'.

The KSA's behavioural responses along its critical junctures also have similarities and consistency. For example, denunciations of *takfir* against non-aligned actors are common, often resulting in the radicalisation of ideologues, militias, and proxies. These denunciations initiate a wave of behaviour by aligned (and even non-aligned) non-state actors which become the KSA's behavioural ways, either directly or indirectly. These behavioural responses have similarities to other external identity challenges discussed throughout the thesis – by Nasserism, Political Islamists, Salafi-Jihadists, and by Iranian revolutionary concepts and doctrine. The KSA has evolved its own cultural thought-ways, in particular those related to the reinterpretation of religious concepts and doctrine in response to perceived threats and pronouncements. For example, the interpretation and evolution of *al-wala wa-l-bara*, in response to regional political events and to avoid a repeat of the pitfalls of the 19th century civil-war that led to the collapse of the second Saudi state, is a clear and simple demonstration of this.

FURTHER STUDY

In pursuing these 'legitimising policies', this thesis has noted how the KSA's behaviour might require a readjustment of understanding around sectarian conflict, in that it is not

solely a continuation of a *rupture* that occurred shortly after the demise of the Righteously Guided Caliphs. Indeed, this thesis has noted how at critical junctures throughout its history, the KSA has sought to tweak religious doctrines and concepts, which has had a concomitant impact on the behaviour and strategies of other actors, including non-state actors. The predominant explanations for intra-state conflict in the Middle East region is potentially an area for further study. Scholarly literature, as we have noted throughout the thesis, demonstrates that identity to be a significant cause in general.

However, by examining some important trends in the KSA's strategic behavior, by focusing specifically on the strategic culture that shapes its strategic preferences and behaviour, the literature also demonstrates that the KSA has a vested interest in maintaining sectarian division in the form of intra-Sunni sectarianisation as a distinct objective of its foreign and security policy. These aspects of its strategic culture might provide an opportunity for scholars to further develop an explanatory framework when assessing the KSA's strategic behaviour, perhaps even in a predictive fashion.

The utility of the strategic culture method has highlighted paradoxes which would also be of interest for further study. For example, a paradox has emerged in exploring how sectarianism is employed and controlled by those wielding it as a strategic behavioural tool, and the difficulty posed in pursuing a less-violent political reality whilst wielding such a tool. The literature demonstrates that sectarianism may exist practically along each conflict fault-line in the Middle East, carefully and consistently constructed along regional, national, and local political realities.

In the case of the KSA's competition with Iran, for example, this construction is a by-product of post-Revolutionary Iran's *velayat e-feqhi*, with its doctrinal emphasis on *Jihad*, *maslaha* (expediency), and the supremacy of the Supreme Leader over politics and religion. This doctrine creates identity anxiety with the KSA's leadership on several levels, but in particular with that of its own cultural levers: *Wahhabism* and its broader leadership role within Sunni Islam. Indeed, both the Saudi and Iranian regimes have heightened or downplayed Islamic doctrine as the need arose, strategically. The KSA has no deeply visceral and historical anti-Shia policy per se, but they enacted anti-*velayat e-feqhi* policies, as the thesis has discovered.

Given the importance of Islam to both states as a legitimising tool it is easy to see how moves by either Iran or the KSA can have ramifications for the other. This directly shapes the behaviour of those sub-state stakeholders acting along ideological lines. This behaviour can be either soft, or as we have seen in Yemen, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, increasingly hard. This sub-state soft and hard power encapsulates the security dilemma confronting both the KSA (and Iran). The mosaic of these threats presents unique challenges to the KSA's rulers, both internally and externally. The location and nature of a particular threat will determine the response, and often, this response will impact upon a different stakeholder altogether. Some of these stakeholders, as we have already noted, have trans-state agendas that therefore can impact somewhere seemingly unconnected to the original site of conflict/tension. Furthermore, the challenges posed by the various sub-state groups demonstrate how the KSA is susceptible to the actions of others. When these sub-state stakeholders are of a sectarian disposition – such as DAESH or the IRGC, both of which were looked at briefly in earlier chapters – the threats and conflicts that subsequently ensue from such sectarianism can become perpetual and intractable.

The final deduction of interest to the research question relates to the inevitability or not of sectarian conflict within the Middle East. The research has demonstrated that sectarianism is not an inherent historical quality of the KSA. Rather, sectarian entrepreneurs continue to flourish and benefit from this narrative. Or in other words, sectarianism is a modern phenomenon exploited by those that equate autocracy with security: avoiding a Hobbesian *fitna* (which was also discussed in chapter 3). Of particular interest to this thesis is how the strategic *ways* of other actors (ideological, sectarian, hegemonic, and revolutionary) create a security dilemma for the KSA and for these actors.

Indeed, this thesis has noted how this security dilemma can have unintended consequences born out of a complicated chain of causation. Central to these unintended consequences are the actors and stakeholders themselves, who do not necessarily behave as unitary or unified actors. This thesis has demonstrated that sub-state or non-state actors are often responsible for this chain of causation and therefore have a direct impact on the creation of a state's security dilemma. In particular the plethora of identities and ideologies existing within the region often create internal security dilemmas for these actors, including for the KSA, that complicate escalation dynamics between them.

Whilst the literature demonstrates a willingness to avoid conventional conflict by these stakeholders, particularly in the case of KSA and Iran, their willingness to become decisively engaged with other actors is a significant security dilemma that has not yet constrained the KSA's strategic behaviour. That is, the literature demonstrates that the risk posed by the continued radicalisation and empowerment of non-state actors aligned to the KSA's cause is outweighed by their threat-perception of powerful state-actors, for

example Nasser's Egypt and post-revolutionary Iran. This is particularly the case when identity-proximity causes anxiety to the KSA.

This dilemma is significant. It could give new meaning to the hackneyed expression of proxy warfare perpetrated by the KSA insofar as assuming that proxy warfare along ideological, sectarian or tribal lines is always state controlled, which could be a useful area of further scholarly study. Ideological *fitna*, therefore, provides us with some interesting points of reference when considering the KSA's strategic behaviour. For instance, we have discussed that the two most significant tools surrounding ideological *fitna* are narrative, especially ideological narrative, and the willingness of stakeholders, in particular radical sectarian groups, to wage *Jihad* in pursuit of their cause.

Significantly, this thesis has noted the ambiguity of the KSA's control, or not, over non-state stakeholders, and the implications of these forces being unleashed as a tool of the KSA's statecraft. For example, chapters 3 and 4 demonstrated how retaining a physical and ideological buffer against accusations of *takfir* defines the KSA's willingness to become overtly engaged beyond anything other than strategically aligned via its proxies. Chapter 5 explored some of these deductions further, by examining two case studies: contemporary Syria and Afghanistan in the 1980s. Specifically, chapter 5 discussed how the KSA's discursive power either directly or indirectly influences the strategy and behaviours of non-state actors in the pursuit of their own (the KSA) ends, and the extent to which state-sponsored sectarianism and sectarianisation policies encourage an alignment with non-state actors. These actors have their own culture, which is particularly important in determining the link between KSA's strategic culture and the strategic behaviour of these non-state actors.

The KSA's reaction to the opportunity of Afghanistan in the 1980s, and the KSA's response to the situation in contemporary Syria, a microcosm of the Arab Spring and its fallout, are very informative in seeking to identify trends in the KSA's strategic behaviour. The thesis identified that insofar as these case studies are concerned, the KSA deliberately sought to influence the norms of religiously aligned non-state actors in an attempt to influence the non-state actors' behaviour. Indeed, these case studies have demonstrated that the KSA will even coercively influence these norms.

If the middle of March 2011 marked a pivotal turning point – when the contagious awakenings in Yemen, Bahrain, Syria and Lebanon turned violent – then the KSA's reaction is profound and informative. To paraphrase Clausewitz' aphorism about war being the continuation of politics by another means, this thesis demonstrated that sectarian conflict in the Middle East today is the perpetuation of political influence via identity mobilization. The speed and alacrity of the KSA's response to Iranian actions (that is, the Iranian empowerment of non-state and state actors) is also informative as it highlights a predetermined assessment of tolerance for change and defined strategic and regional spheres of influence, by the KSA. This predetermined assessment was heavily informed and influenced by critical junctures discussed throughout this thesis.

This thesis has also explored the utility of strategic culture in predicting strategic behaviour, which as we noted in chapter 2, remains contested. This thesis has concluded that strategic culture can be dynamic, shaped by shocks and events, and is not necessarily static. The thesis noted that the link between strategy and behaviour is cyclical and that it operates at three levels, which the case studies have helped to illuminate: (1) narrative, (2) which is shaped by identity and threat perception, (3) which feeds into strategic behaviour, and in turn influences the evolution of the narrative. The thesis has emphasised

the link between narrative and behaviour, in particular by emphasising the frequency by which the execution of KSA's policies is conducted by non-state actors. Where possible, the KSA seeks to retain some centralized control or influence over the non-state actor's norms, afforded by religious aspects of the KSA's strategic culture, in particular the KSA's ability to influence *Wahhabi* doctrine. This link between its discursive power and its behaviour provides perhaps the KSA's most significant source of strategic flexibility and freedom of manoeuvre. Indeed, the thesis has demonstrated that the KSA is able to create a perception that it is upholding the norms associated with a dominant cultural concept – Wahhabism specifically and Sunniism in general – rather than as strategic users of culture in pursuit of its own ends.

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