

Iran and the Middle East Perspectives Resting on Old Premises:

*Denuclearization of Iran. The Return of Russia.
Fear Among the Arabs. Israeli Scepticism.*

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The written-off return to the geopolitical game

The political, ideological and even military role of the Islamic Republic of Iran couldn't be overlooked in whatever has been happening in the Middle East during the past several decades. This is particularly visible since the 2011 *Arab Spring* which was deformed from a mass social rebellion against authoritarian regime into its antipode – the so called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or *Daesh*, as it is popularly called in the Middle East by its Arabic abbreviation. However, it was only in the summer of 2015 that the doors of the Middle East were reopened for the Islamic Republic of Iran, after the reaching of the agreement on its nuclear program with five world powers the international policy rests upon. The Iran nuclear *deal*, itself, could have contributed to defusing tensions and improving regional stability, therefore, it was accepted with relative approval by the majority of the Arab countries and Turkey. However, Saudi Arabia and Israel have rejected it and came to view it as a threat to their existence.

Although this is still far from the normalization of relations, the United States of America, a strategic ally of both Saudi Arabia and Israel, has accepted Iran, not just as a mere actor of events in the Middle East, but as a diplomatic partner in that region. Iran, although deeply involved in the Syrian war, yet ignored as a hostile side until past summer, has been offered a chair at the negotiations table in Geneva. In the fast growing international coalition of the fight against a new deadly virus of terrorism, which has been spreading throughout the world, there prevails a belief that the ISIL is a bigger evil than the regime of the president Bashar Al-Assad, which is something that the Iranian leadership was warning about in their own way and from their own national and ideological discourse, while the regional actors such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey have ignored it. After hesitations regarding a possible land intervention, and after NATO's aviation had already taken action, for the first time after the Cold War Russian aviation appeared over the Syrian front. For the first time in several decades and strained relations due to Ukrainian crisis, the United States of America and the Russian Federation have even established a communication line over the middle-eastern sky in order to avoid mutual confrontations.

In late 2015 and early 2016, the entire Middle East was brought to the verge of war through an ill-considered Turkish provocation of Russia, demonstrated through shooting down a Russian warplane over the Syrian border. The Administration of the American President Barack Obama was faced particularly last year with a political and military penetration of the Russian Federation into a region in which Russians have not been significantly entangled since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the fading away of the pan-Arabic nationalism and the emergence of the Islamic revolution in Iran. Thus the thesis of moving the US interests from this region to East Asia became questionable. Furthermore, the disturbances on the oil market prevented the United States from reducing its political and military presence in the Persian Gulf area.

Nonetheless, it is wrong that this newly created condition in the Middle East; all of the confrontations from Syria to Yemen; including the Palestinian-Israeli complex as their archetype; are often and almost exclusively reduced to sectarian confrontations between the Sunni and the Shia; the majority and the minority denominations in the Islamic religion. The Syrian war and the ISIL are viewed as both the cause and the measure of this division that reaches far beyond the Middle East to all areas inhabited by Muslims; “from Indonesia to Bosnia”, according to the way imam Khomeini, the initiator and the first leader of the Iran revolution, viewed the world of Islam. The initial premise is that the Sunni Arab countries and Turkey are threatened by the Shia Iran. This simplified understanding has spread particularly after the return of Iran to regional affairs after the abolishment of the sanctions that kept it in isolation due to the contentious nuclear program. Just like once the eastern regions of the Middle East¹ were referred to as the “Fertile Crescent”, in the last few years, due to the changed recourse, a new geopolitical term has emerged – the “Shia Crescent”. Osman Softić writes that “according to the Saudi observers, ISIL represents a sort of a buffer zone or a shield against the so called Shia Crescent, which stretches from Herat in west Afghanistan, through Iraq, Iran, Syria and Lebanon, the danger of which was first pointed out by the Jordan King Abdullah, when he subtly predicted the rise of the resistance towards the expansion of Iran’s influence.”²

There was another occasion that I myself have witnessed, of Jordan’s “subtle” involvement, when the Arab world was supposed to stand up to the Islamic revolution the year after its success. King Hussein, father of the king Abdullah, was tasked by his western allies and protégés to persuade the Iraqi president Saddam Hussein to wage a war against Iran, and together with him, and contrary to all international agreements, in September 1980, he toured the first few kilometres of the occupied Iran’s territory.

There is no doubt that in the beginning, the world of Islam has been divided into these two denominations; the Sunni and the Shia; which, in the first centuries of the expansion and the bloom of this new religion, had been centred in the regions opposite to those of today – the Sunni in the Abbasid Caliphate in Bagdad, and the Shia in the Fatimid Caliphate in Cairo. Amin Maalouf writes how “the schism, which dates back to a conflict within Prophet’s family during the seventh century, has always aroused bitter conflict among Muslims.”³ The truth is that even in the old times, the powers that were the instigators of the crusades have used the sectarian divisions among the Muslims, and this continued to happen until the 21st century. According to the professor and academic Esad Duraković “... at first glance, it appears as though the states, where exists a variety of militias and military formations, are at war in the Middle East, but what is generally recognized at the very core of the matter, is the conflict of Shia and Sunni fractions and all of their variants. That is the general ideological framework

1 Narrow regions of the Middle East connected to the East Mediterranean are often referred to as Near East, the term which, until the mid 20th century did not include Iran.

2 Osman Softić, *Pogubljenje Šejha Nimr Bakir Al-Nimra i diskriminacija šiita Saudijske Arabije (Execution of the Sheikh Nimr Baqir al-Nimr and the Discrimination of the Saudi Arabia Shias)*, Sarajevo, 2016, p. 76.

3 Amin Maalouf, *Krstaški ratovi u očima Arapa (The Crusades through Arab Eyes)*, Laguna, Belgrade, 2006., p. 63.

for current antagonisms.”⁴ These divisions in Islam, of then and of now, to Sunni and the Shia and their various schools of thought and variants, I myself see as an ideological frame for preservation of primarily political systems and borders. However, at its core are deeper intentions and ambitions of ruling and dominance, of a greater or smaller power, in this or that regional or even global geopolitical space, with spiritual support of this or that religion or ideology.

Even today, in a wider sense, it is primarily about geopolitical movement of axes and conflicts, perhaps even a new rearrangement of borders that can happen on the ruins of Syria and Iraq. Regional alliances and coalitions are being created and broken. On one side of those coalitions are Iran and Syria while Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar are on the other, yet they all follow their own interests that surpass sectarian. By sending its aviation to Yemen in March 2015, the Saudi Court made its coalition public in order to gain international support for bombing its neighbouring country. This created a precedent in the world of Islam – several Arab countries have in fact agreed to enter into an exclusively Arab Muslim coalition which has invaded a Muslim Arab country. It was robbed of the adjective of wider Muslim coalition by Pakistan, whose Parliament refused to give approval to the government to engage in a war with a Muslim country. Iran, on the other hand, acts from a different position; as it enters into Syria as its main strategic and military partner, it is obviously not guided by ideological reasons as much as by its interests.

It is hard to imagine that Iran would do that to ideologically support and rescue Al-Assad’s Ba’ath regime, which, even though it nominally falls under a Shia variant, is much closer to a Mussolini national socialism. On the other hand, it is clear that ideology plays no part in the approximation of Saudi Arabia and Israel who have pushed aside their ideological differences and united in resistance to the return of Iran to the international scene.

The “golden page” between three fires

Both in the ancient and in the modern sense, in continuity from the Achaemenid empire of Persia until the Khomeini’s Islamic Republic system, Iran has been a geopolitical force that has made a mark of its civilization on all of the nations that have belonged to it, or the empires that have tried to conquer it. In its existence through the ages, Iran was more successful than not in imposing upon other regional forces or preserving its independence and particularity, regardless of the fact which religion or ideology was dominant on its soil from Zarathustra’s monotheistic philosophy to today’s Shia denomination of Islam. Like with the ancient Greece long before, the Islamized Persians and the modern Iranians were in constant conflict with the Arabs in Mesopotamia and on the western shores of the Persian Gulf. The Arabs never succeeded in conquering the Iranian Plateau, and neither did the Ottoman Empire. It took almost two centuries for Islam to penetrate all parts of Iran, even though the Arab Muslim army had defeated the Iranian Sasanian dynasty in the Battle of Qadisiyyah in the south of modern day Iran in 636, only a few years after the death of Prophet Muhammad.

⁴ Esad Duraković, MUSLIMANSKI RATOVI DANAS: Krivo shvaćanje islama (Muslim Wars Today: Wrong Perception of Islam), Tugra, Sarajevo, 2015. p. 35.

In 1980, thirteen and a half centuries later, the Iraqi president Saddam Hussein will symbolically refer to the war against the new Islamic Republic of Iran as the “Second Qadisiyyah”.

From that standpoint, Iran has, since the establishment of the republic and theocratic system in 1979, twice suffered both political and economic isolation, yet it has managed to preserve its political system based on its own view of Islam, while resisting the attempts to serve the interests of external forces. The first time that happened was due to the 1980-1988 war with Iraq, and the second time due to the international sanctions imposed upon Iran for its development of proper atomic energy sources the end goal of which was, as it was perceived outside of Iran, to produce nuclear weapons. After the Agreement that was reached in Vienna on 14 July 2015 with the Security Council permanent member states and Germany (P5+1), on lifting the sanctions in exchange for restrictions of its nuclear activities, Iran was enabled to create preconditions for its economic recover and reintegration into global community . The Agreement was concluded only after both internal Iranian and foreign policy conditions were met.

Both sanctions and isolation from the rest of the world have exhausted the citizens of Iran. Next to oil, Iran possesses other natural resources, and its “economy is far more diverse than that of Saudi Arabia or any of the other energy producers in the region”.⁵ The embargo imposed on the export of oil in 2012 had caused substantial losses to its economy. Before the embargo, the gross domestic profit was at an average of 3.8 percent, and in 2012 and 2013 it was reduced to 1.9 percent. Oil production, which accounts for 80 percent of Iran’s export, fell from 2.5 million barrels a day in 2011, to a million a day in 2015. The European Union’s bilateral trade with Iran fell from 28 billion dollars in 2011 to 12.8 billion dollars in 2014.

Economic development, which was primarily based on the income from oil, was almost stopped, and it was lagging behind the region. In that sense, according to expert analyses, even the technology for the exploitation of Iran’s oil was twelve years behindhand the development of the other Gulf countries; the amount of time it took to complete the negotiations with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The discontentment of the masses, demonstrated by the unrests of 2009, the largest in scale since the establishment of the Islamic Republic, was motivated equally by the demand for system and human rights reforms as well as with the drop in living standard and impoverishment of the country caused by the sanctions. Because of such state of affairs, the leadership of the country has accepted a compromise with the international community, like it did with Iraq in 1988, after eight years of war which had economically drained the country in a different way, and had claimed hundreds of thousands of human lives. Although this happens in the authoritarian systems too, the assumption that Iran’s leadership was procrastinating the nuclear negotiations in order to strengthen the theocratic system of government, supposedly for the same reason it procrastinated the reaching of the peace with Iraq, is of a lesser importance.

⁵ William T. Wilson, *Lifting of Sanctions on Iran Complicates Policy Options*, The Heritage Foundation, www.heritage.org, 14. 4. 2016.

Nevertheless, “the nuclear deal”, could never have been reached if the administration of the leading western force; the USA, had not given up on viewing Iran as one of the world’s “axes of evil”. Unlike his predecessors, Barack Obama became convinced that Iran’s theocratic system could not be broken by force or sanctions. Understanding that without the involvement of Iran the current confrontations in the Middle East could not be stopped and regional stability could not be established, he was the first to extend his hand to the Ayatollah’s authorities. His action was not reciprocated until the President Hassan Rouhani had managed to persuade the Supreme Leader of the country, Ayatollah Khamenei, of how inflexibility in nuclear negotiations and resistance towards America are no longer in Iran’s best interest. A similar thing happened in 1988, when then President Rafsanjani had convinced the Imam Khomeini to approve the peace agreement with Iraq.

In mid January 2016, only after the International Atomic Energy Agency had confirmed that Iran has met all of the obligations agreed in the nuclear deal, have the US and the EU lifted the economic sanctions of Iran. The production of Iran’s oil has since been doubled. Although the price of oil fell on world’s market, the income received from oil was enough for first steps toward the revival of Iran’s economy. The government in Teheran has planned an increase in the economic growth from 0.5 percent in the previous year to 5 percent in 2016. By mid 2016, 55 billion out of the promised 100 billion dollars of Iran’s frozen assets in western banks have been released, and many European, primarily German, companies hurried to send its businessmen to Iran. Due to drastic sanctions that have been imposed upon Iran by the US in the past several years, not all of the financial hurdles have been lifted for business transactions between the EU countries and Iran. That is why until July this year, the order of 118 Airbus airplanes was not yet realized. These airplanes were taken as a symbolic example of a sudden boom of European business with Iran.

The conservative part of Iran’s politics and clergy was critical and reluctant on the nuclear negotiations from the start, and continue to do so even after the deal was concluded and the sanctions lifted. A detail in diplomacy from the last year’s UN General Assembly session perceived in the anti-reform media and even in the Iran’s Parliament as a betrayal of the revolution can be used to illustrate this. On 28 September, “an unprecedented event in the history of relations between post-revolutionary Iran and the United States took place: Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif shook hands with President Barack Obama. The handshake has led to severe criticism in Iran, with some hard-liners going as far as outright insulting their country’s foreign minister.”⁶ President Hassan Rouhani had avoided a direct meeting with Obama, yet his peace-toned address before the UN was understood among the hard-liners as currying favour with the West and the US.

Therefore, contacts with the West, and initiating political dialogue with the US in particular, is perceived by the conservative members of the Guardian Council, Council of Experts and the Parliament as a danger to the very essence of the system and a threat to their role of preserving the oath of Imam Khomeini who viewed America as the main enemy of the Islamic Revolution. These circles

⁶ Rohollah Faghihi, *Behind the Obama-Zarif handshake*, *Al-Monitor*, 5. 10. 2015.

have strong backing in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), whose over hundred thousand armed members, *the Basij*, represent a better equipped and better trained alternative to Iran's regular army. The IRGC special police, *the Pasdaran*, prevent the influence of western moral and culture in Iran's society. The IRGC's command top, coming from poor families and decorated by medals from the war with Iraq, became not just a strong ideological defence against any kind of system reforms, but also a powerful economic factor strengthened through performing various military and development projects. In June, the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei has placed an IRGC commander at the head of the entire country's military establishment. He replaced Maj. Gen. Hassan Firouzabadi, who was pro-nuclear deal, which is interpreted as the intention of the Supreme Leader to "re-engage with the West economically while making the argument at home that Iran will stay true to its revolutionary spirit".⁷

The reformists, who find themselves on the opposite end of a deeply divided spectrum of Iran's political and religious establishment, have a radical wing which had been decimated in the uprising of 2009, and a moderate wing, that has continued to advocate for democratization of society and opening the country to the rest of the world. In the last elections held in March, the moderate reformists won in Teheran and larger urban centres thus gaining stronger voice in Iran's Parliament and in the government. They are led by President Rouhani who constantly faces open criticism or covert conservative activities aimed at undermining his position and preventing him from winning a second term on the following presidential elections. Rouhani is probably exaggerating when he says that with sanctions lifted now turns a "golden page in Iran's history", but this needs to be understood in the scope of a difficult task he has set upon himself at the beginning of his first mandate.

This connotation of mandates can have significant meaning in US-Iran relations after the nuclear deal. In his first mandate, Obama extended his hand of reconciliation to Iran, which some American conservatives thought to be a degrading act for an American President. In his second turn, he brought the nuclear negotiations to an agreement.

In doing that, he had a good ally in the Secretary of State, John Kerry. In spite of having a leading role in preparing the nuclear deal, Kerry's predecessor Hilary Clinton, however, was not supportive of reconciliation with Iran and was strongly influenced by the pro-Israel lobby in that matter. Clinton is getting ready to become the next US President, and it can be assumed that she will not so fervently advocate the full implementation of removing the sanctions from Iran like Obama did. Middle East expert, Oliver Meier noted how the nuclear deal has many opponents in Iran, Israel and among some other Gulf States saying that: "There are a number of them in the USA, not just presidential candidate Donald Trump. Opponents in Congress continue to say, 'One cannot and should not trust Iran'."⁸ Likewise, Iran's leadership does not have much faith in US's good intentions towards their system doubting that the intention to transform Iran's

7 From Stratfor analysis, *A New Military Chief Rises in Iran*, 8. 7. 2016.

8 Oliver Meier from German Institute for International and Security Affairs, *Deutsche Welle*, 14. 7. 2016.

system hides behind the nuclear deal. By the end of nuclear negotiations, the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei said: “We only gave permission to negotiate on the nuclear issue, for clear and stated reasons, and the negotiators emerged well from this arena, and in other fields we will not negotiate with the Americans.”⁹

Morphology of the historic schism

On the other side of the Persian Gulf, the Saudi monarchy is eroding down the lines of its backward feudal system logic, which has survived until this day only due to wealth gained from oil and the role it was given to play by the US and its other oil consumers; the role of oil sources and transit lines guardian. That is how Saudi Arabia for decades fought the attempts of the Nasserist and the Ba’ath Arab nationalism to penetrate the county from within, however, for the past several years it has been shaken to its roots by social uprisings in the surrounding Arab countries and by the virus of Islamic terrorism. Both Al-Qaeda and even ISIL have emerged from the Saudi Wehhabism,¹⁰ and now they are coming back to their sources like a boomerang. In light of the danger threatening the regime, at the beginning of 2015 a radical group of princes gained power in the Royal Court of Saudi Arabia, who, instead of dealing with the Al-Qaeda and the terrorist groups that came from it, have further strained the relations with Iran. The first thing the sons and nephews of king Salman did in order to demonstrate their militant mind was an air invasion of Yemen.

Their justification for meddling in Yemen’s internal conflicts was the danger that threatens that country and other Arab areas between Syria and the south of Arabia, from Iran.

Ethnic, civilization, social, and cultural differences, which have evolved over time into different doctrine patterns of Islam, significantly contribute to modern day demonstrations of constant strain in relations between Saudi Arabia and the Arab east with Iran. A distant manifestation of those differences also reflects on relations among the Muslim communities far outside the Middle East. This includes the Balkans and Bosnia and Herzegovina that both Saudi Arabia and Iran are trying to entice into a sphere of their own ideological and even political influence.

In time, the two Islamic doctrines, the Sunni and the Shia, have developed cultural differences on both sides of the Persian Gulf, and they became official ideologies of the ruling dynasties and tribal sheikhdoms. Although in different circumstances, a similar thing was happening in the European West between Christian Catholicism and Protestantism. Even though these processes correlate both in time and in war cruelty, the clashes between the European monarchies that were winning new lands in the name of one or another Christian church, they did so in similar social and cultural surroundings, while between the Iranians and their Arab neighbours it were the civilization differences that were so drastic. In

⁹ Arash Karami, Report for *Al-Monitor*, 9. 9. 2015.

¹⁰ The common terms used are *Wahhabism*, *Selefism*, *Wahhabi Selifism*, however in the South Slavic languages the terms most commonly used are *Wahhabism and the Wahhabis*.

the time span from 17th to 20th century, the rulers of the Safavid and the Qajar dynasties were the patrons of literature and other art forms. They would invite European renaissance painters to embellish their chambers and teach Iranian students. Polo championships were held in the centre of Isfahan where the Shah would give away the trophy to the winners. At the same time, at the Arabian Peninsula, the Islamic civilization was sinking into decadence from which it never quite recovered. In the mid seventeenth century, Wahhabism, a “reductionist sectarian version of an interpretation of Islam”, emerged, named after a tribal clan of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab who formed a pact with another tribal leader from the province of Najd, Muhammad bin Saud, a distant ancestor of today’s Saudi monarchs. Their common plan was to conquer all of the Arabia; the first one as its supreme judge, the *qadi*, and the latter as its ruler, the *hakim*.

Among the orthodox Muslims all over the world, including the Balkans and Bosnia and Herzegovina, not a lot was known about Wahhabism, yet, what contributed to a simplified negative image of that movement were the stories circling in the mosques and religious upbringing about their desecration of graves of the family and first followers of the Prophet Muhammad.

However, *tons of books* have been written on Wahhabism and its followers, particularly after the emergence and expansion of its radical terrorist wing epitomized in the Al-Qaeda and the New York’s September 11th, the perpetrators of which were primarily Saudi natives. Furthermore, some old documents have resurfaced that shine a negative light on this movement even further. Such is the five-volume history of Arabia, written in the 1920 by the Turkish historian Ayyub Sabri Pasha.¹¹ In order for the Wahhabis with the Al-Saud’s clan to conquer Mecca, Medina and the entire Arabia, they had, on several occasions committed massacres over Arabians who refused to join them. They used sabres to kill several hundreds of Bedouins and their families, and left their bodies unburied, exposed to the animals; they were ordered by their leaders to gather and throw away all books from the mosques; illiterate bandits tore up copies of *the Quran* not knowing that it was most holy book of the Muslims. In the city of Ta’if, the streets were littered with thrown-out religious books.

It was easy for the Wahhabis and the Ibn-Saud’s clan to attract the poor Bedouins to their ideas of cleansing Islam from everything remotely similar to the pre-Islamic society by taking advantage of their primitiveness and ignorance. This was made even easier by the geographic isolation of the centre of Arabia, which secluded it from the changes in its surroundings, but what it really was about, just like today, was preventing the penetration of all new ideas among its illiterate subjects. Unlike Iran, where, with occasional halts, tradition was respected and rationalism advocated in matters of doctrine, or Turkey where Kemalism contributed to the rise of that country from backward social and economic relations through separation of the state and religious affairs, or Egypt, where the first reformist Islamic movements appeared, the Wahhabism has prevented a break-through of any kind of positive achievement of modern civilization into

11 Ayyub Sabri Pasha, *Mir’at Al-Haremain*, Matba’a-i Bahriyye, Istanbul, 1301-1306 A.H. Originally written in Arabic script, it was only made available to historians by Waqf Ikhlas in 1995 after he translated it to modern Turkish language.

societies of Arabia. Quite the contrary, Arabian Muslims had been exhausting themselves in tribal battles which have lasted until 1920s until the Al-Saud clan had been firmly established in Mecca and Medina and had defeated the rival line of Hashemites. Both those lines and their tribes were Sunni. Hashemites' leader, Sharif Hussein bin Ali, great grandfather of today's King Abdullah of Jordan, had sided over with the British in the last battles against the Ottoman empire, while Abdulaziz al-Saud, also known as Ibn Saud, the great-grandfather of today's King Salman, had proclaimed himself the king of Saudi Arabia.

Owing to such political and ideological constitution, as well as to its energy wealth through which it has obtained and secured its strategic significance in the West's politics in the Middle East, the Saudi monarchy has persisted during the 20th century. It is accepted among the Muslims, particularly among those of Sunni denomination, in its role of the „Custodian of the Two Mosques“, implying Mecca and Medina, which is also the official title of its king, the *hadim al-haramayn al-sharifayn*. The Saudi Royal Court has endured several attempts of coup from Arab surroundings. The war led by Egypt in Yemen in 1960s could easily have spread to Saudi Arabia. From the South Yemen, where a pro-Soviet regime was installed, there was an attempt to conquer Mecca, in which Saddam Hussein's regime was involved. During Saddam's invasion of Iraq in 1990, the Saudi monarchy had financed American coalition war against Iraq with tens of billions of dollars in order to protect itself from the next possible coup on its crown from the north.

Since the Islamic revolution in 1979, Iran has been assorted as a potential and geographically direct danger to Saudi monarchy. While there was a monarchy in Teheran as well, one that was another important pillar of American and Western policy in the Middle East, the danger for the survival of the Saudi Royal Court came from the Nasserist Arab socialism, the Soviet communism and Saddam's ba'athism.

It was only after Imam Khomeini had sent the Shah Reza Pahlavi into exile, and established his power as a supreme spiritual, legal and state authority, the *velayat-e faqih*, that the primary focus of the Saudi Royal Court became the Shia character of Iranian government, which was opposite from its Sunni's supreme authority as custodian of Mecca and Medina. In the absence and even disruption of its relations with the US, Iran became a bigger threat to Saudi Arabia because, next to a political factor, now there was an ideological one, which came in a form of a symbiosis of religion and politics, stronger than the one existing in the systems under Sunni authority. The ideological factor, taken in a sense broader than religion, after the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, had taken a new dimension in relations between these two countries which is beyond civilizational, ethnic or religious one; it is a social, and even beyond that, it is a revolutionary dimension. For Khomeini's Iran, every monarchy is anti-Islamic, but unlike the Saudi monarchy, not every monarchy is anti-Shia. Teheran, from its angle view interprets the Saudi Wahhabism as a conservative view on Islam and society, and therefore as anti-Islamic. The Shia spiritual leaders and thinkers believe that Islamic societies should defend the rights of the poor, disempowered, and

downtrodden people, the *mostazafin*, while some of their social theses, like those of Ali Shariati, were only slightly different from the socialist. In the words of Osman Softić: “For several decades, Iran has been recognized as a revolutionary state that supports the change of *status quo* in the region and the world in general. Unlike Iran, Saudi Arabia is a counterrevolutionary state. Because of that it stands against all kinds of ideologies that are committed to changing the *status quo*.”¹²

Based on these multidimensional foundations, hostility, accusations of internal affairs meddling and rivalry are rising between Iran and Saudi Arabia which, in some situations, is bringing them to the verge of armed conflict, and in others, to reconciliation and even alliance. Pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina has been one of the testing ranges of conflict from 1987, when three hundred Iranian hajjis were killed in the demonstrations until 2015, when close to 700 of them were killed in a stampede. The debate over the sovereignty over the two Gulf islands has contributed to increased tension and threats to block the oil transit through the Strait of Hormuz. At the end of the first decade, and particularly after the end of the Iran-Iraq war and substantial reduction of the Iranian-Shia Islam variant propaganda, the tension between the two countries had subsided. After Iraq had invaded Kuwait in 1990, Iran had accused Saddam Hussein’s regime, and proposed a formation of security alliance to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). At the time when Iranian President Mohammad Khatami was in office, the countries have signed a security agreement in 2001.

Since the American-British invasion of Iraq in 2003, and particularly after 2007, resistance is again rising in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states against the ideological expansion of the Iranian Islamic revolution, which they are using as a front to cover up the concern for survival of their own regimes. This fear is becoming increasingly more justified as the pro-Iranian government is solidifying in Baghdad as a consequence of a wrong American policy which had simply pushed that Arab country into Iran’s grasp. With the 2011 “Arab Spring”, viewed in Iran as “Islamic awakening” and alignment of Iran with Bashar al-Assad’s regime, a new strain of relations rises in Syria. An echo of “Arab Spring” in Bahrain almost led to the fall of the regime, which was rescued by the intervention of the Saudi army. The army was sent there to protect the dominance of a minority, of one fifth of the population who are Sunni, over the disempowered Shia majority. The justification given for this intervention was preventing Iran’s interference in the affairs of Bahrain, while, at the same time, the US could not find a justification for direct interference even though it has its fifth fleet stationed in that Gulf state, where recently, even the British have opened their naval base.

As regards the internal war in Yemen, which the Saudi army had inflamed with its aviation in the spring of 2015, Iran was immediately accused that its military has been helping the tribes which have been simultaneously fighting the pro-Saudi government and the Arabian branch of Al-Qaeda. When the Houthis, the largest tribe, have conquered the capital of Yemen, Sana’a, with their strike force, the *Ansarullah*, Riyadh understood this as an immediate threat to the Saudi Royal Court, and the leading Wahhabi religious authorities have invited Iran to “stop attacking the Saudi Arabia”. Even in this case, no evidence was

12 O. Softić, p. 77.

found of Iran's direct involvement, and the last light arms of Iranian origin came to those tribes in 2012. The desire of the Iranian theocratic leadership, and even instigation of the minority tribes and political movements to undermine the Saudi and other Arabian regimes cannot be denied, particularly if their members are Shia Muslims; however, there is a difference between when it is being done through propaganda and other means common to all other ideologies and systems, and when troops are being deployed to prevent those intents, like it happened in the case of Bahrain and Yemen. The Houthis belong to Zaidi sect, a Yemen branch of wider Shia Islam understanding and practice, similar to Syrian Alawites, but they are more loyal to their Arab identity and Arabian tradition than to Iran. Their resistance towards the Saudi policy of preservation and imposition of feudal social relations through Wahhabi ideology is primarily social. Just like in Bahrain, the "Arab Spring" in Yemen failed due to internal divisions and external meddling, and with the Saudi military intervention, this country in whose harbour of Aden one of the first labour movements in the Arab world was active, was left to languish in poverty, and political and tribal divisions. One of the more popular slogans of a wide social uprising in Yemen in 2011 was „*La Sunna, la Shi'a, wahda, wahda wataniya*“ – *No Sunni, no Shia, just unity, national unity!*

Although at least ten percent of the Saudi monarchy population are members of the Shia, forty percent in its eastern provinces, their attachment to Iran's model of government and arrangement of social relations is exaggerated. On the contrary, the Shia minorities in all of the countries of Arabia have followed their own path of political resistance to the government, and some of them, like the Yemen Zaidiyyah, followed a different doctrine to those of the Shia's spiritual centres of the Iran's Qom or the Iraq's Najaf. In that sense, the Iranian revolution did not contribute to their alignment to those centres; in fact, it has deepened the rift between the Shias of the Arabian Peninsula to sympathizers and opponents of the Iranian government model. Loyalty to the Iranian and spiritual leadership, and the full political and financial co-dependence can only be used in reference to the case of Lebanon's Hezbollah. Furthermore, Baqir al-Nimr, Shia activist whose execution in 2016 led to severance of diplomatic ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran, enjoyed a wide support not only among the Shias, but among the impoverished Sunnis as well.

He was primarily an authentic Arabian who fought for political and social reforms of autocratic monarchies and sheikhdoms on the western side of the Persian Gulf. His Shia denomination helped provide his resistance with a deeper social meaning, because, according to Karen Armstrong: "yearning for justice is at the heart of Shia piety".¹³

¹³ Karen Armstrong, *Bitka za Boga – fundamentalizam u judaizmu, kršćanstvu i islamu (The Battle for God: Fundamentalism in Judaism, Christianity and Islam)*, TKD Šahinpašić, Sarajevo, 2007., p. 154.

New maps, old alliances and rivalries

In the Middle East, the US and the world, the nuclear deal and lifting sanctions of Iran were met with mixed reactions; from positive, to reserved and utterly negative. Among the latter ones are Israel, Saudi Arabia, some other member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council, and they are joined by the American republicans and pro-Israeli lobbies. In order to avoid incurring the displeasure of the US as their strategic partner, all Gulf States have formally supported the deal at the Summit with President Obama in April 2016. Had they been able to avoid it, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain would never have signed such a statement, United Arab Emirates would have elided their neutrality as would Qatar and Kuwait their reservation, while Oman, the only country that has a tradition of good relations with Iran, was the only country that was openly satisfied.

Being unable to stop the signing of the nuclear deal or the lifting Iran's sanctions, the Saudi monarchy is now using its dominant position among the Gulf states and the economy to, if not prevent, then at least hinder that country's exit out of isolation and its economic recuperation. In the *Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC)*, it has torpedoed the attempt to stabilize the oil prices after Iran had ruled out the curbs on pumping. Businesses in Dubai are complaining about increased restrictions rising from the Saudi pressure on the GCC members to limit the business dealings with Iran. For Emirates, even during the time it was under sanctions, Iran was its third largest trade partner, right after China and India, so it is very likely that they will not succumb to the Saudi pressure. Shashank Joshi, from the United Services Institute in London stated for Bloomberg how the Saudis are "applying pressure on Iran wherever they are able to do so", adding, however, that "Iran is already integrated into the Gulf economic systems, and I don't think anything Saudi Arabia can do can seriously disentangle that. We still see pretty substantial disagreements within the GCC."¹⁴

The Saudis are trying to prevent new investments flowing to Iran even from other remote Arab countries. For example, Jordan was offered billions of dollars in investments in order to prevent its business dealings with Iran, while Lebanon was denied a promised three billion dollars for weapon acquisition, citing as the reason the rising influence of Hezbollah, a militant group backed by Iran.

Paranoid resistance of all Israeli governments, particularly that of the current Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, to Iran's nuclear deal is well known, and the opinion of the Saudi monarchy is not far from such formulation. Nuclear deal opponents find that it only postpones, and does not prevent Iran's advances towards gaining nuclear weapons, and that even the Americans will not be able to prevent this from happening once the fifteen years of limitations and reduction for enriching uranium have passed, which is what Iran has committed itself to do. They also believe that by signing this deal, Iran does not cease to be the destabilizing factor in the region, and that it will only grow as such with lifting of the sanctions and oil export profit increase.

Israel's Ministry of Defence, recently taken over by the former Minister of

¹⁴ Ladane Nasser and Glen Carey, *Saudi Arabia has a plan B to stop Iran's economic rise*, Bloomberg, 26. 5. 2016.

Foreign Affairs Avidor Lieberman, who, in his official statement has went as far as comparing President Obama with the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, and *Iran's nuclear deal* with the 1936 *Munich Agreement* with Hitler that “did not prevent the Second World War or the Holocaust.” It was a reaction to Obama’s meeting at the Pentagon to mark the one-year anniversary of the signing of the nuclear deal where the US President had made a statement that the deal is working as planned, that it has its military and security significance even though “Israel was the country most opposed to the deal”.¹⁵ Obama was being very precise in saying that the deal “has worked exactly the way we said it was going to work”. If Iran is no longer a threat, that calls for a conclusion that there is no longer a reason for the nuclear weapons race in the Middle East. This again raises the questions of what is Israel now going to do with the hundreds of nuclear bombs West military sources claim it has, and why shouldn’t the US now stop supporting Israel as the “only exception” from the list of countries that have signed the *Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)*? Israel’s Prime Minister Netanyahu and Defence Minister Lieberman have apologized for the Munich Agreement comparison, and that, according to the words of the Israeli liberal journalism veteran Akiva Eldar, is not “a shock. It is an earthquake”, because the “Israeli recognition of the fact that Iran does not have the capacity to produce nuclear weapons is the sky falling on Israel’s entire defence perception.”¹⁶

And what are the leading people of the current Israeli’s defence to say on Obama’s words from Hiroshima this past May when he called upon “nations like his own, that hold nuclear stockpiles”, to “have the courage to escape the logic of fear and pursue a world without them.”

President Obama has pointed fingers towards the US, and to all other countries, perhaps Israel in particular, because in 2012 he was forced, due to Israeli pressure, to postpone the Helsinki conference on nuclear-free Middle East. Regardless of all that, Iran’s nuclear deal has only temporarily muted, and not completely stopped, the debates on possible nuclear rivalry in the Middle East lasting not only from the beginning of the Iranian nuclear program, but also from the time when India and Pakistan, and especially Israel, have developed nuclear weapons. Making a correlation between Israel owning nuclear weapons and Iran’s nuclear deal and those ambitions, is being avoided as if it were a generally accepted reality. Out of other possible countries in the region mentioned in that sense, it is unlikely that Turkey would join them, especially because they don’t see an immediate threat in Iran, and for the same reason Egypt would have no interest in it even though in 1950s and the 1960s it harboured such plans.

Situation is different with Saudi Arabia that shares a common interest with Israel on that matter. At the beginning of May 2016, at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Prince Turki al-Faisal, former Saudi intelligence chief, openly suggested that his country will counter “future Iranian hostilities” with nuclear weapons. “All options are on the table”, Turki said. The Saudi prince left little doubt that his country would do everything in its power to protect itself, “including the acquisitions of nuclear weapons, to face whatever eventuality might come

15 Ben Caspit from Tel Aviv for Al-Monitor, 8. 8. 2016.

16 Akiva Eldar, *Why Israel won't admit success of nuke agreement*, Al-Monitor, 16. 8. 2016.

from Iran.” Although Saudi Arabia and Israel have no formal diplomatic ties, Turki was there with Israeli Army Major General Yaakov Amidror, a former adviser to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu who warned how “In principle, the Iranians can go nuclear and from the Israeli point of view, this is a threat to existence.”¹⁷ Disregarding the fact that it has no financial, technological or expert resources in its near future, Saudi Arabia remains to be the most likely regional state to pursue the nuclear option, because the Saudis regard Iran as “an implacable foe, not just an external threat determined to achieve regional hegemony but also an existential threat intent on undermining the Saudi monarchy.”

One such conclusion in a *Brookings*’ analysis easily turns attention towards possible consequences of Iran’s return to the Middle-Eastern scene, which it was enabled to do through *nuclear deal* along with sanction relief. One such consequence the American allies in the region fear, especially Saudi Arabia, is that the nuclear deal with Iran is “a part of a regional realignment unfavourable to America’s traditional partners”. Some Middle East governments, “especially among the Sunni Arabs”, see the deal “as an indication that the United States is withdrawing from or at least reducing its military presence in the region”. They fear that “the US may accept a prominent and even central role for Iran, and shift its allegiance from an exclusive focus on its traditional Arab partners to an approach balanced between those partners and Iran in which Iran would become a US partner in promoting stability and resolving conflicts.”¹⁸ Although the Obama Administration has made a major effort to dispel these concerns, what Obama said in a widely popular interview he gave for *The Atlantic Magazine* last spring on how the Saudis “must share” their region with Iran, hasn’t been forgotten.

It is not very likely that Obama’s probable successor, Hillary Clinton, will be prone to accept Iran as a partner, and especially if his successor gets to be Donald Trump who might even abolish the *nuclear deal*. One of the main conditions for the acceptance of Iran would be the reestablishment of diplomatic relations severed back in 1979. This is not feasible for as long as the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Khamenei opposes talks with the Americans outside of the scope of the nuclear deal and sanctions that are not fully lifted yet. Clinton is strongly influenced by the pro-Israeli lobby and she has publically stated that on her first working day when she is elected president she will invite the Prime Minister Netanyahu to visit the US. Nonetheless, *Wikileaks* has recently published her statement from the time when she was serving as Secretary of the State on how “donors in Saudi Arabia constitute the most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups.”

Another assumption is that this understanding based on common interests in view of Iran as a „common enemy“ will continue between Saudi Arabia and Israel, as the leadership of those two countries have stated. If the statement of the Prince Al-Turki at the aforementioned Washington institute is to judge by, this understanding could soon outgrow its form of silent agreement. “Cooperation

17 Joshua Yasmeh for AP from Washington, 8. 5. 2016.

18 Robert Einhorn and Richard Nephew, *Iran nuclear deal: Prelude for proliferation in the Middle East*, Brookings FP, 31.5.2016.

between Arab countries and Israel in meeting threats, from wherever they come, whether Iran, is better fortified if there is peace between the Arab nations and Israel." Both countries have in common resisting the reconciliation efforts America is making towards Iran, which is not only diminishing their role as principle support poles of the US policy in the region, it is also giving them a new dangerous rival. Nevertheless, both of them still have to tie their security and system survival with the United States that will, regardless of the possible modifications in the US policy, continue to exercise pressure on Saudi Arabia and Israel to ease their hostility towards Iran. The Saudis could fix their relations with Iran sooner; times of strain and reconciliation between the two have been witnessed before. It would be much harder to achieve that between Israel and Iran as long as the existing systems are in power, and these systems are very solid and stabile. They also have a distinctly different attitude towards essential problems in the Middle East, particularly with regard to Palestine, therefore, it is hard for me to mention, and even harder to believe in some of the theses how, in current circumstance, Iran and Israel could become strategic partners in the Middle East. Yet, that too had existed before, in not so distant past.

Outside of the complex relations of Iran, Saudi Arabia and Israel, but not unaffected by their smaller or bigger involvement or clash of interests, the war in Syria is both political and military hot spot that carries most uncertainties and dangers for the future of the entire region. The end result of the Syrian crisis could be the *remake* of the map of the Middle East; a map that, with the exception of the creation of the Israeli state has been known since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the forming of the Republic of Turkey. For the past ten years, two versions of possible new borders have been circling around; one by a famous British orientalist Bernard Lewis and the other by an American lieutenant colonel Ralph Peters; both men with vast experience in intelligence. In short,¹⁹ in the map according to Lewis' idea, Turkey would give the southeast to the Kurds, who would also get the northern part of Iraq and a part of Iran. Iran would lose the most and Israel would gain the most, and Palestine would not exist even as the West Bank. The American was more favourable to Iran, but he reduces Israel to its borders before 1967, which is one of the unfulfilled and perhaps impossible wishes of Barack Obama. Both maps predict division of Iraq on three small states: Kurdistan, which is *de facto* independent like Kosovo; a minority Sunni Arab state around Baghdad and the majority Shia Arab state, which is already functioning with Iran's full political and military support. This option was supported by Richard Holbrooke, a famous 1990s Balkan war mediator, and Peter Galbraith, former US Ambassador in Croatia who elaborated it in a separate book. Unfortunately, I myself fail to see a different future for today's Iraq with a note that ethnic Kurdish factor and American interests would have bigger strength than sectarian interests in that region.

The partition of Iraq would have a domino effect on division of Syria, for which there were some concrete ideas a year or two ago. However, they are no longer spoken about because most of the regional and world powers involved

¹⁹ For more detail see: Hajrudin Somun, *Is a remake of the Middle East map possible?*, Today's Zaman, Istanbul, 29. 3. 2013., *Balkanizacija Srednjeg istoka* (Balkanization of the Middle East), Oslobođenje, Sarajevo, 19. 6. 2016.

are trying to preserve Syrian territorial integrity, even at the cost of temporary survival of the existing Ba'ath regime that has led this country to today's tragic state. Ideas about new partition of Yemen emerged as well. Facing criticism of its western allies, as well as financial difficulties, Saudi Arabia could leave the Sana'a and the north of the country to the Houthis and form a vassal state in the south, make it a member of the GCC and use it to control the strategic Bab al-Mandab Strait. It is more likely that the militant Saudi princes are going to continue the war there, and accuse Iran for the continuation because "playing the Iran card keeps up public support for the war and rallies the bulk of the Gulf Cooperation Council behind it. It greatly exaggerates the Iranians' role in Yemen, but that is not the question for the king."²⁰

No matter how involved other countries may be, the axis allies in the Syrian war are Iran and the Russian Federation. Assisted by Iraq and Hezbollah, they form a common defence front for Al-Assad's regime, while the US, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Israel are directly or indirectly involved on the side of different opposing paramilitary groups. The only thing that all of the aforementioned countries and their policies have in common is a more or less truthful and mostly rhetorical hostility towards the so called Islamic state of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) formed in 2014 on the territory of Iraq and Syria. For the United States, elimination of ISIL, especially after the frequent terrorist attacks in Europe, has become a primary goal of American air forces involvement in Syria. Turkey and Arab GCC member states are more rhetorically for the war against ISIL, but they have done little to break it before it grew into a phantom state.

The Russian-Iranian military alliance has reached its peak on 16 August 2016, when the Tupolevs 22M3 and the Sukhoi Su-34 took off from the Iranian Hamadan Airbase in order to bomb the anti-al-Assad forces and the ISIL in Syria. That was the first time the Islamic State of Iran has allowed a foreign power to use its territory for military operations. Even though it was approved by the Supreme Leader Khamenei, this military action faced disapproval from conservative members of the Iranian Parliament. It is justified with necessity of Iran's participation in the war against terrorism until its complete "annihilation", as Ali Shamkhani, Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council told agency IRNA on the same day the Russian bombers took off from Hamadan.

By naming the participants in this war – Iran, Russia, Syria and Lebanese Hezbollah – he simultaneously drew a geographic line along which Iran is implementing its strategic role in the Middle East. Furthermore, the war in Syria has, for a long time, been an excuse, and an excellent opportunity for Russia to return to that region.

One of the consequences of the failed military coup in Ankara on 17 July was the approximation of Turkey to Iran, whose political leadership, along with Russian President Vladimir Putin, and contrary to the abstained responses of their western allies, expressed support to President Tayyip Erdogan with regard to his personal fate and the fate of Turkish civil government. Erdogan's meeting with Putin in Saint Petersburg settled the dispute and lifted the sanctions Russia

20 Bruce Riedel, *The Yemen Bellweather*, Al-Monitor, 14. 8. 2016.

imposed on Turkey because of the shooting down of its fighter jet last November, but Turkey might have been overreacting in its estimates that a new alliance has been formed in the Syrian front between Russia, Iran and Turkey. There are still major differences between Turkey on one side, and Russia and Iran on the other, for there to even be a possibility of speaking about a new *axis*. Erdogan would have to fundamentally change his policy in Syria up to date, and get on the wrong side of his Sunni Arab ally, the Saudi Arabia. Even if the approximation to Iran after the *nuclear deal* would be approved by the Americans, the strategic cooperation with Russia would pose a serious challenge for NATO and perhaps cause Turkey to leave it. That however, will not happen in some time. This is also indicated by the complete normalization of relations between Turkey and Israel, which Teheran may observe with some reservation.

Along the lines of the statement of the Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif in Oslo how “The Syrian crisis can be only resolved politically, and a solution to the Syrian crisis will not be achieved through military means“, there might sooner be a convergence of positions on Syria between the US and Iran based on finding a political solution. In his e-mail reply to reporter Laura Rozen he summarized Iran’s position on negotiations on Syria which is not based on “an individual”; that could be understood that Iran might sacrifice Al-Asad if its presence and wider interests in Syria would be preserved. “The answer is to focus on institutional dispersion of power and the future form of governance, through which you may be able to reduce or even eliminate the centrality of the role of any individual or ethnicity.”²¹

Many things have happened in the summer of 2016 which have either fortified or disrupted relations in the Middle East. The solution for the greatest crises today, the Syrian crises, is not yet visible. Even for the oldest one, the Israeli-Palestinian crises, there is still no solution that would be fair for the Palestinians, and safe for the Israeli. Current Israeli government continues to occupy and inhabit Palestinian lands, where conflicts in its neighbourhood are working to its advantage, as does the possible fragmentation of the region. For the past two to three years, the Israeli public is being reminded of such ideas, of biblical stories of Israel stretching from the Nile to the Euphrates, and especially of the 1982 Oded Yinon’s plan of the fragmentation of the region. This was the motive for the Israel Shahak, a liberal Israeli historian, to dedicate an analysis to Yinon’s plan, where he writes: “The idea that all the Arab states should be broken down, by Israel, into small units, occurs again and again in Israeli strategic thinking. For example, Ze’ev Schiff writes about the “best” that can happen for Israeli interests in Iraq: “The dissolution of Iraq into a Shi’ite state, a Sunni state and the separation of the Kurdish part.””²²

Compared to the influence of the states in the region and of the US and Russia on the events in the Middle East, the influence of European countries on this matter is rather small. Some initiatives of the European Union, such as former British Prime Minister Tony Blair’s mission to converge the positions of the Israeli and the Palestinians had failed, and the new French initiative on that

21 Iran’s Press TV report, 13. 6. 2016. and Laura Rozen, 17. 6. 2016.

22 Israel Shahak, *Greater Israel The Zionist Plan for Middle East*, Global Research, 23. 4. 2013.

matter is opposed by the Israeli. Europe is mainly interested in the events in the Middle East because of the security situation on its southern borders which is particularly visible in the refugee crisis, and because of economic and trade cooperation which it has demonstrated after the Iran nuclear deal.

In the narrow region of the Persian Gulf, within the scope of the aforementioned events and beyond them, a hegemony rivalry continues between the two largest and oil richest countries; Saudi Arabia and Iran; the first of which has gotten itself into an almost hopeless situation, while the other has managed to pull itself out of isolation and impose itself as an unavoidable geopolitical factor not just in the Gulf area, but in the entire Middle East as well. As the ideological material of both systems is Islam; the two polar opposite ends of Islam; it is only natural that religion is being employed in political showdowns and fights for influence in the region and in the wider Muslim world, just like any other political system is using ideology in the fight for power or predominance. The Shia Islam is defending itself from the inside by spreading its influence among the Muslim communities that belong to that denomination in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and Arabia. Just like the Sunni Saudi Royal Court is defending itself with its role of traditional custodian of Islamic holy mosques in Mecca and Medina, and by promoting itself as a representative of the entire Sunni Islam.

Indoctrination of young Muslims

These are the positions Iran and Saudi Arabia are coming from in the world of Islam and from which they are maintaining ties with Muslim minorities in Europe, in the Balkans and even in Bosnia and Herzegovina. While the Turkish Islamic government uses religion and the Ottoman legacy to attract regional countries to the orbit of its new policy, and extract primarily economic gain from them, the Saudi monarchy is systematically attracting Muslim communities into Wahhabism, while the Iranians are using their cultural and science institutions to try and explain the advantages of their own prevailing interpretation of Islam. Considering that almost all Muslims in BiH are of Sunni denomination, Saudi Arabia has a great advantage over Iran, because it can use religious institutions for dissemination of propaganda, particularly mosques which it uses as stages from which, along with local imams close to Wahhabism, it attracts devout Bosniaks to its own Islam interpretation and practices. The pro-Wahhabism clerics have imposed total control over a significant number of believer communities, the *Jamaats*, in Bosnia, Serbian Sandžak, Albania and Kosovo, while in Macedonia they have even forcefully removed representatives of official Islamic institutions from the mosques. From those circles, it wasn't hard to mobilise radical followers of Wahhabism for ISIL military and terrorist actions. Indoctrination of impoverished young Muslims was also done through granting scholarships for Saudi universities, from which, once they came back from, they used various models to persuade local Muslims of the advantages of the Wahhabism as the only correct practice of religious feelings and obligations. Education institutions, even universities, were too quick to accept donations from the Islamic Arab circles and humanitarian organizations, particularly Saudi Arabia's, thus, to say the least, numbing their

own critical view of the end goal of the donors. Offering free trips for many Muslims from these areas to do Hajj in Mecca and Medina, was also used as a propaganda for the Saudi understanding of not just Islam, but of politics as well, and as it is an obligation of each devout Muslim to make a pilgrimage to those two places, that was more important than the “politics” of their custodian.

Long and fierce debates were held and many comments and studies have been written on the phenomenon of Wahhabism and the earlier age-long favouritism of the Islamic community institution towards its expansion in BiH on one side, and on the other, on the resistance to the propaganda and indoctrination by a part of the young Muslims in BiH and the region to that essentially reductionist and backward interpretation of Islam, where the academic circle around the Sarajevo Faculty of Islamic Studies was at the forefront. The negative, almost destructive influence the Wahhabism cells had had on the stability of Bosnia and Herzegovina, a country already divided along its political, ethnic and ideological lines, is well known. For the purpose of this observation of reactions and possible implications of the nuclear deal leading world powers and institutions have made with Iran, and on that country's positions towards the events in the Middle East and the narrow region of the Persian Gulf in particular, I will mention additional two to three elements of no small significance for the perception and position of BiH's politics and its public towards the two main factors of this process, the Iranian and the Saudi.

The war against Bosnia and Herzegovina and the post-war period have undoubtedly presented an opportunity for the spread of political and ideological influence on Bosniak Muslim component, and with them, on the entire country, which was in different modalities, demonstrated and implemented by both the Islamic Republic of Iran and by Saudi Arabia. Strongly influenced by the US pressure, who at the time viewed Iran as a major source of instability and terrorism, the Iranian leadership had understandingly accepted the arguments which had been in that sense demonstrated to them by the Bosniak leadership – that their survival, and the integrity of BiH as well, is greatly dependent on American support. After that, Iran's presence in BiH was reduced to cultural centres and the *Ibn Sina* Research Institute activities, and on publishing books and magazines of primarily historic, cultural and literary and less of propaganda and religious content. However, the presence of Saudi Arabia was continued through financing religious institutions and mosques, with attempts to make some of them the extraterritorial property of that country. At the same time, the capital from Saudi banks was abundantly used to build new mosques and trade centres with the support of the ruling political elite and local businesses.

Along with resistance of other ethnic communities to intense presence of Saudi Arabia in BiH, the Bosniak public and academic community also found themselves divided on this matter. A mitigated version of Wahhabism as the official Saudi ideology was promoted among the believers, and a rising number of them viewed Iran primarily as a representative of a heretical Shia ideology. As if it were exclusively Shia-Sunni confrontation, the sectarian approach towards the events in the Middle East was spreading through the jamaats and the media. The

perception of Iran, as the Shia adversary to the Sunni majority Islam shared by the majority of the Arab countries, has an echo among the Bosniak believers as well. In religious circles, warnings are issued about the increase of sympathizers and followers of the Shi'ism, as counterparts to the Wahhabism followers, which can be dangerous for the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina. At the same time, in the fight against terrorism and violence exercised by the members of Al-Qaeda and ISIL, which is considered to be sectarian and not a quintessential fight against violence and extremism that is destroying the world of Islam, the role of Iran is being disregarded or minimized. For example, in BiH public and the media, it is very hard to find the information that it was Iran who first stood up to the emergence of the Taliban in Afghanistan. A part of Bosniak academic leadership views the nuclear deal with Iran as "empowerment" of that country by the US and the West in the Sunni-Shia sectarian war in the Middle East. Some of them even believe that lifting the sanctions is not in the best interest of the Iranian or other Muslims.