

Middle East Summit

Topic 2: The Middle Eastern Proxy War

The conflict between Shiites and Sunnis has been ongoing since approximately 632 CE, following the death of the prophet Mohammed. The conflict came to a head when Ali, Mohammed's cousin and son-in-law, was chosen as the fourth caliph. Ali, two of the previous caliphs and his son Hussein were murdered, and the schism between Sunnis and Shiites was never repaired. While both Shiites and Sunnis worship the same God and prophet, they fundamentally disagree on certain issues and think the other side is *kafir* (كافر), heretical.¹ Sunnis make up the majority of the Muslim population in the world, with over 1.6 billion people across the globe. There are less than 200 million Shiite Muslims. The main center of Sunni Islam is in Saudi Arabia which contains both Mecca and Medina, the two holiest cities in Islam. The center of Shiite Islam is in Iran.²

The tension between Saudi Arabia and Iran started in 1979 when the Iranian revolution created a religious Shiite state. It increased when the United States overthrew Saddam Hussein in Iraq; Iraq served as a barrier to Iranian influence.³ Additionally, Iran post-revolution became anti-Western, and specifically anti-America, while Saudi Arabia and the United States remain allies.⁴ Following the nuclear deal in 2015, Iran was primed to be welcomed back into global politics. Saudi Arabia, in turn, became allies with those countries who remained against Iran, such as Israel.⁵ In 2016, Saudi Arabia executed an important Shiite cleric named Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr. In response, Iranian protesters lit the Saudi Arabian embassy in Tehran on fire.⁶ While the fight between Iran and Saudi Arabia stems from religious differences, both countries want power over the Middle East and see the other one as a threat to that control.⁷

¹ <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2007/02/12/7332087/the-origins-of-the-shiite-sunni-split>

² <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/mideast/what-are-differences-between-sunni-shiite-muslims-n489951>

³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42008809>

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<https://www.pri.org/stories/2017-11-12/cold-war-between-iran-and-saudi-arabia-heating-here-are-5-things-you-should-know>

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https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/12/20/whats-behind-the-feud-between-saudi-arabia-and-iran-power/?utm_term=.9a7e907efc48

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<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/reformist-cleric-sheikh-nimr-al-nimr-among-47-executed-saudi-n489116>

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https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/12/20/whats-behind-the-feud-between-saudi-arabia-and-iran-power/?utm_term=.9a7e907efc48

This tension continues to play out today in a proxy war, which is defined as “a war instigated by a major power which does not itself become involved”.⁸ While Saudi Arabia and Iran do not fight each other directly, they are engaged in several regional conflicts where Saudi Arabia provides funding and weapons to one side while Iran provides to the other.⁹ These conflicts include Yemen, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq. While the wars in these four countries had the potential to happen naturally, the interference of these two major powers has exacerbated the conflict, costing far too many innocent people their lives.

The following issues should be reflected upon and considered while researching the topic:

1. How is the best way to politically diffuse the situation between Saudi Arabia and Iran?
2. Is it possible to facilitate talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran? If so, how would those be facilitated and by whom? What are points of negotiation in this conflict?
3. Should the Iranian or Saudi presences or influences be removed from Syria and Iraq? Yemen? Lebanon?
4. What is the best way to remove Saudi and Iranian influences and proxies from the various conflicts to allow the conflicting parties to sort these issues out themselves?
5. How else has this conflict affected the Middle East in terms of trade, oil and diplomatic relations? What is the relationship between this proxy war and Saudi Arabia cutting off diplomatic relations with Qatar?
6. What steps can be put in place to ensure the treatment of Shiite Muslims in Sunni countries improves?

There are many issues that must be addressed under the proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and different countries are addressing different issues. Do not limit your research only to the topics mentioned above; these will be the starting point of our discussion. It is important to remain truthful to your country and to research not only the topic but also your country. In this situation, it would be strange to see Sunni and Shiite countries working together without extenuating political circumstances. Multiple resolutions can be passed on this topic; however, conflicting resolutions will not be allowed to pass. **Please remember that while sub-committees and sanctions can be helpful they will not solve the problem on their own.**

I urge you to research this topic and your countries in depth so you can be prepared for the complex discussions we will be having. Please be sure to present your country’s position and be familiar with the guidelines listed in the YUNMUN Student Handbook, especially those regarding plagiarism, as each paper will be checked for plagiarism through Turnitin.

⁸ https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/proxy_war

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<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/05/21/why-engage-in-proxy-war-a-states-perspective/>

Best of luck,
Reena Wasserstein
Chair, Middle East Summit