CHAPTER 1

THE SHIA CRESCENT AND SECTARIANISM: IRAN'S GRAND STRATEGY IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND ITS REGIONAL OPPONENTS

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1.1. Introduction

The phrase "Shia Crescent" has become one of the most controversial terms in Middle Eastern geopolitics since it first entered regional discourse in the mid-2000s. Originally coined by King Abdullah II of Jordan in 2004, the term was intended as a warning against the perceived expansion of Iranian influence across a crescent-shaped arc of predominantly Shia or Shia-aligned populations stretching from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon (Matthews, 2004). Since then, the Shia Crescent has been widely invoked by analysts, policymakers, and regional actors—some using it to highlight Iran's assertive regional strategy, others to critique what they see as the sectarianisation of Middle Eastern politics (Göksel, 2013; Haji-Yousefi, 2009; Mazur, 2009; Proctor, 2008). However, the concept is often used uncritically, conflating ideological, religious, and geopolitical elements, and obscuring the complex realities of Iran's post-revolutionary foreign policy.

This chapter investigates the idea of the Shia Crescent as a strategic framework and evaluates whether it reflects a coherent Iranian grand strategy in the post-1979 period. It asks three interrelated questions: What is the nature of Iran's grand strategy in the region? To what extent is sectarian identity instrumentalised in this strategy? And how have Israel and Sunni powers across the Middle East responded to Iran's actions? Through a critical analysis of Iran's regional conduct, ideological motivations, and institutional mechanisms, this chapter argues that the Shia Crescent is not simply a sectarian project. Rather, it is a hybrid geopolitical strategy that blends ideological commitments, strategic pragmatism, and identity politics, all of which serve to bolster Iran's position in a fragmented and competitive regional order.

The Islamic Republic's approach to the Middle East has evolved over the decades since 1979, yet certain core themes have remained consistent: resistance

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to Western (particularly the US) hegemony, the export of the revolution, and the cultivation of like-minded non-state actors as force multipliers. These goals have not been pursued solely through military or security means; instead, Iran has employed a wide array of instruments—from ideological narratives and religious institutions to soft power media and transnational Shia networks—to shape the region in line with its interests. This approach has led many outside observers to view Iranian regional policy as a coherent, if controversial, grand strategy (Göksel, 2013; Vasilenko, 2022).

The term "grand strategy" itself, however, raises important theoretical questions. Traditionally associated with the long-term coordination of military, diplomatic, economic, and ideological tools to achieve national objectives, grand strategy is often discussed in the context of great powers such as the United States, the United Kingdom, or China (Silove, 2018). But can revolutionary states in the Global South—particularly those with non-Western ideological foundations, such as the Islamic Republic of Iran—be said to possess grand strategies in the classical sense? And if so, how does Iran's use of religious identity and sectarian mobilisation complicate or reinforce this strategic logic?

Answering these questions requires both conceptual clarity and empirical grounding. This chapter will first situate the debate by clarifying the meaning of the Shia Crescent and reviewing broader academic discussions on sectarianism and grand strategy in International Relations (IR). In doing so, it will assess competing views on whether Iran's behaviour is best explained by Realist strategic calculations, ideological constructs rooted in political Islam and Shi'ism, or a synthesis of both. It will also address how the Shia Crescent label—despite being coined by Iran's adversaries—has shaped regional perceptions and responses, particularly among Sunni Arab states.

Subsequent sections will trace the ideological and strategic roots of Iran's regional policy, focusing on the political theology of Khomeinism and the operational role of key institutions such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its elite Quds Force. This will be followed by an in-depth exploration of how Iran has cultivated a regional axis of allies and proxies, including Hezbollah in Lebanon, Shia militias in Iraq, the Alawite regime in Syria, and the Houthis in Yemen. These case studies will demonstrate how Iran combines ideological alignment with pragmatic geopolitical calculation in pursuit of regional influence.

The chapter will then turn to the reactions of Israel and Sunni powers, who view Iran's activities as a direct challenge to the regional status quo. These responses—ranging from Saudi Arabia's sectarian counter-narrative to Türkiye's strategic balancing and Israel's most recent military intervention—reveal how the Shia Crescent has become both a security threat and a rhetorical device within Israeli national security and Sunni political discourse. At the same time, the Sunni

use of sectarianism for domestic legitimacy and geopolitical rivalry illustrates that sectarian politics is not a uniquely Iranian phenomenon, but rather a regional logic with multiple authors.

Finally, the chapter will provide a comparative analysis of key flashpoints—including Syria, Iraq, and Yemen—that have come to define the confrontation between Iran and its regional opponents. It will assess how these conflicts have been shaped by sectarian identities, strategic calculations, and evolving power balances, while also considering recent developments such as Iran-Saudi rapprochement talks, the normalisation of ties between Sunni Arab states and Israel, and the potential recalibration of Iranian strategy amid growing international pressures and the 2025 intense air bombardment campaign by Israel.

By integrating theoretical insights with empirical analysis, this chapter ultimately seeks to move beyond simplistic binaries of Shia versus Sunni or ideological versus pragmatic. It contends that Iran's post-1979 foreign policy—often encapsulated in the shorthand of the Shia Crescent—represents a flexible and multifaceted grand strategy, one that is deeply rooted in both the ideological DNA of the Islamic Republic and the shifting structural dynamics of the Middle East. Understanding this strategy, and the reactions it provokes, is essential not only for grasping the present contours of regional politics but also for anticipating its possible futures. This chapter draws upon a combination of primary and secondary sources to explore Iran's grand strategy and its reception by Sunni actors. These include official statements and speeches from Iranian leaders (e.g., Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and IRGC commanders) publications and media associated with Iran's ideological institutions (e.g., Al-Alam TV, Kayhan newspaper and IRGC-affiliated think tanks), and secondary literature including academic analyses, policy reports, and journalistic investigations.

1.2. Theoretical Framework: The Shia Crescent as Grand Strategy

The phrase "Shia Crescent" emerged in regional and global discussions in 2004 when King Abdullah II of Jordan cautioned against an expanding arc of Shia influence extending from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon. His remark followed the US invasion of Iraq and the emergence of Shia political supremacy in Baghdad, events that altered sectarian and geopolitical dynamics in the region. Initially meant as a caution, the phrase rapidly acquired popularity in policy discussions and the media as a concise reference to Iran's increasing assertiveness and its apparent utilisation of sectarian identity as a geopolitical tool (Kamel, 2018; Nasr, 2025).

The phrase is not neutral; it is ideologically charged and frequently employed by Sunni governments to characterize Iran's actions as disruptive, expansionist, and sectarian. The term "Shia Crescent," despite its widespread usage, conceals more

than it elucidates. It implies a unified group of Shia players directed by Tehran, overlooking the internal variety of Shia Islam, the intricate motives of Iran's friends, and the amalgamation of theological, geopolitical, and material objectives that inform Iran's regional actions. Nonetheless, the idea retains analytical use when seen not as a literal depiction of a sectarian alliance but as a discursive and strategic construct that influences both Iranian behaviour and Sunni reactions.

Comprehending the dynamics of the Shia Crescent necessitates a critical examination of sectarianism in the Middle East. Scholars often examine sectarianism via two primary frameworks: primordialist and instrumentalist (or strategic) viewpoints. Primordialist perspectives regard sectarian identities—particularly the Sunni–Shia divide—as fundamentally entrenched and historically enduring divisions, sometimes resulting in the presumption that sectarian strife is unavoidable or inherent in the area (Nasr, 2025, pp. 13–31). This viewpoint has faced significant criticism for neglecting the political, social, and geographical factors that influence the activation, suppression, or transformation of sectarian identities (Haji-Yousefi, 2009; Vasilenko, 2022, pp. 226–233).

Conversely, instrumentalist, or strategic theories assert that sectarianism serves as a mobilisational weapon utilised by both state and non-state entities for certain political objectives. Accordingly, sectarianism frequently results from elite manipulation, efforts at regime preservation, or foreign interference, rather than being the root cause of conflict itself (Haji-Yousefi, 2009). Thus, the sectarian framework of Iran's regional policy is seen not as an unavoidable result of Shi'a identity politics but as a strategic reaction to regional rivalry, especially following the 2003 Iraq War and the 2011 Arab Spring.

Iran's stance on sectarianism is highly ambiguous. The Islamic Republic positions itself as a leader of the Muslim world, sometimes promoting pan-Islamic unity; nonetheless, it has unquestionably fostered Shia groups and networks that exacerbate sectarian divisions (Göksel, 2013). This conflict highlights the deliberate use of sectarian identity by Iran and its adversaries to achieve wider geopolitical aims.

To evaluate whether Iran's activities represent a grand strategy, it is essential to define the phrase accurately. In International Relations (IR), grand strategy often denotes the systematic application of military, diplomatic, economic, and ideological tools over an extended period to fulfil national goals. Scholars such as Barry Posen, Hal Brands and Patrick Porter assert that grand strategy encompasses more than just tactical reactions or improvised judgments; it embodies a state's comprehensive vision for its role within the international system (Brands & Porter, 2015; Posen, 2003, pp. 19–20). Grand strategy is frequently linked to major powers, especially within the Western tradition. Recent studies have broadened the notion to encompass revisionist, revolutionary, and non-Western

governments. Michael Swaine has demonstrated this in the context of China, while academics such as Raymond Hinnebusch and Fred Halliday have contended regarding the Middle East that non-Western players frequently devise grand plans while being hampered by scarce resources or regional volatility (Halliday, 2001; Hinnebusch, 2003; Swaine, 2011).

A burgeoning debate in the field of IR concerns whether ideologically motivated, institutionally fractured, and externally challenged regimes, such as post-1979 Iran, possess a cohesive grand strategy. Some scholars have argued that Iran's foreign policy is reactive and inconsistent, influenced more by tactical opportunism than by long-term strategy (Proctor, 2008). However, other scholars suggest that Iran has exhibited notable strategic coherence, especially in developing proxy networks, reconciling ideology with pragmatism, and ensuring regime security through regional influence (Hinnebusch, 2003). This chapter supports the latter viewpoint, interpreting Iran's post-revolutionary regional behaviour as a manifestation of a flexible grand strategy, anchored in a unique vision yet adaptable to structural changes. The Shia Crescent may be understood not just as a sectarian alignment but as an expression of Iran's extensive geopolitical objectives.

Iran's Middle Eastern foreign policy vision theoretically aligns with both neo-realist and constructivist paradigms in IR. From a neo-realist standpoint, Iran seeks regional dominance within a self-reliant framework, reacting to structural vulnerabilities, the presence of the US, Israel, and competing Sunni powers. It aims to enhance its strategic depth using asymmetric methods, including backing proxies and employing deterrent measures to circumvent conventional conflict with more powerful opponents. Iran's strategic framework—its focus on deterrence, denial, and influence projection—corresponds with neo-realist concepts of power dynamics and regional equilibrium. Nonetheless, a constructivist perspective on this debate is also vital. Iran's overarching approach is profoundly ideological, influenced by revolutionary narratives, anti-imperialist rhetoric, and a distinctive political theology rooted in Shia Islam and Khomeinist principles. The notion of *Wilayat al-Faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurist) extends beyond a national doctrine, encompassing ramifications for foreign policy and offering a religious rationale for Iran's assertion of global leadership (Salamey & Othman, 2011). This conceptual basis differentiates Iran's strategy from that of status quo powers and provides consistency to its long-term goals, despite changing alliances and material limitations. Furthermore, Iran's establishment of a transnational Shia identity—via religious education, cultural outreach, and symbolic politics—embodies a normative agenda aimed at redefining political legitimacy and religious authority across the Muslim world. These endeavours are both philosophically rooted and tactically effective, further illustrating the confluence of constructivist and realist components in Iran's strategy.

A further theoretical inquiry pertains to the ability of revolutionary regimes to devise and execute grand schemes. Historically, revolutionary regimes—such as Maoist China or Bolshevik Russia—have amalgamated ideological zeal with long-term strategic planning, frequently yielding hybrid foreign policies that merge messianic objectives with realpolitik (Brands & Porter, 2015). Iran conforms to this pattern. The Islamic Republic, originating from a populist, religious revolution that opposed Western imperialism and secular nationalism, has progressively established strategic institutions (particularly the IRGC), ideological doctrines, and foreign policy priorities that constitute the elements of a grand strategy. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps–Quds Force has served as the guardian of revolutionary doctrine and the implementer of Iran's regional objectives. The IRGC's orchestration of Iranian strategy in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen indicates a degree of strategic coherence that is atypical for revolutionary governments (Kamel, 2018, pp. 711–717). Although Iran's strategy has undoubtedly transformed—especially with shifts in leadership from Khomeini to Khamenei—it has maintained a fundamental set of objectives: regime preservation, regional dominance, and ideological dissemination.

1.3. The Making of the Shia Crescent

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 signified a profound break from the Western-aligned monarchy of Mohammad Reza Shah. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's ascent to power initiated a novel ideological framework aimed at transforming Iran internally and reshaping the wider Islamic realm. At the core of this vision was the principle of *sudur-e enqelab* (exporting the revolution), based on the conviction that Iran bore a religious and moral obligation to assist oppressed Muslim communities and disseminate its revolutionary Islamic government model (Salamey & Othman, 2011). This objective was bolstered by an anti-imperialist discourse that saw the US and its regional partners, notably Israel and Saudi Arabia, as neo-colonial entities perpetuating injustice in the Muslim world (Salamey & Othman, 2011). This anti-imperialist character emerged as a fundamental element of Iran's overarching foreign policy agenda. Tehran's backing of non-state actors and opposition groups throughout the region, especially those marginalised or antagonistic towards pro-Western governments, was ideologically rationalised as an extension of the revolutionary mandate. Nonetheless, these doctrinal objectives coincided with Iran's geopolitical requirements to escape regional isolation and mitigate risks from antagonistic neighbours and the US military presence.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), especially its elite Quds Force, has been a pivotal instrument for the implementation of Iran's regional strategy, tasked with extraterritorial operations. The IRGC was created to safeguard the revolution from internal and external dangers, evolving into a

formidable hybrid entity that integrates military, intelligence, economic, and ideological roles. The Quds Force, led by commanders such as Qassem Soleimani, was instrumental in establishing and overseeing Iran's regional network of allies and proxies in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen (Alemzadeh, 2019). The Quds Force has functioned not just as a military entity but also as a strategic conduit between Iran and ideologically or sectarian-aligned groups. It has enabled the supply of armaments, training, and financial assistance while simultaneously cultivating ideological unity based on anti-Zionism, anti-Americanism, and a spirit of resistance. Through these initiatives, Iran established its influence beyond its borders, forging enduring ties with both state and non-state actors that corresponded with its revolutionary principles and strategic considerations.

The fundamental core of Iran's foreign policy is rooted in the political theology proposed by Ayatollah Khomeini: the theory of *Wilayat al-Faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurist). This idea posits that a senior Islamic jurist should possess both spiritual and temporal power, uniting religious morality with political rule. This notion, originally aimed at Iran's internal political structure, was progressively externalised to justify Iran's regional operations, especially among Shia communities across the Middle East. Khomeinism amalgamated Shia eschatological concepts, anti-imperialism, and Third Worldist principles into a formidable ideological structure (Yazdi, 2016). The *Wilayat al-Faqih* did not consistently resonate throughout Shia communities, many of which adhered to traditional quietist perspectives; yet, it provided a political theology enabling Iran to assert moral leadership over the worldwide Shia community. It has allowed Tehran to present its activities not as sectarian but as integral to an international fight against injustice and oppression.

Notwithstanding its ideological fervour, Iran's foreign policy has generally demonstrated significant pragmatism. Tehran has exhibited the ability to forge tactical alliances with entities that do not coincide with its religious or ideological perspective, as seen in its collaboration with Sunni Hamas in Palestine and its strategic partnership with secular Arab nationalist regimes such as Bashar al-Assad's in Syria (Wastnidge, 2017). This adaptable strategy indicates that Iran's main goal is not the advancement of Shi'ism itself, but the attainment of strategic depth and regional deterrence via asymmetric methods. Ideological language is frequently employed to rationalise and validate strategic choices, but pragmatic assessments dictate the timing and manner of intervention. This hybrid strategy has enabled Tehran to sustain a resilient and flexible regional approach, frequently labelled the Shia Crescent by its opponents, but more precisely characterized as a grand strategy that merges ideological ambition with geopolitical imperatives.

1.4. Instruments of the Shia Crescent: Iran's Regional Network

The effective execution of Iran's Shia Crescent strategy depends on a varied

array of instruments, including military proxies, religious institutions, strategic relationships and soft power mechanisms. The Shia Crescent should be perceived as a malleable, adaptable network of relationships—geopolitical in purpose, sectarian in discourse and revolutionary in self-perception. This section examines five principal instruments utilised by Iran: proxy forces, political patronage, sectarian alignment, soft power and asymmetric military intervention, concentrating on crucial regional nodes within the network: Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and transnational religious-cultural organisations.

Hezbollah exemplifies Iran's effective proxy-development strategy. Founded in the early 1980s amid Israel's incursion into Lebanon, Hezbollah sprang from Iran's ambition to disseminate its revolutionary principles and to oppose Western and Israeli dominance. Supported by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Hezbollah evolved into a disciplined paramilitary organisation, a formidable political entity, and an ideologically devoted extension of Iran's regional agenda (Husseini, 2010, pp. 806–811). Hezbollah's uniqueness lies not just in its military efficacy but also in its amalgamation of religious authority, community-based social services, and a narrative of resistance. The party officially emulates the Iranian revolutionary paradigm, professing loyalty to Iran's Supreme Leader and sustaining direct communication with Tehran about strategic choices (Husseini, 2010). Hezbollah has long offered Iran strategic depth against Israel and functioned as deterrence in the event of conflict. This embodies the complete actualisation of the Shia Crescent vision: a firmly entrenched, loyal and self-sufficient proxy adept at both safeguarding and advancing Iranian interests in the Levant.

Iraq is both the pinnacle and the most intricate obstacle under Iran's Shia Crescent framework. The 2003 US invasion dissolved the Sunni-dominated Ba'athist state and unintentionally facilitated Shia political strength. Iran capitalised on the US-generated void in Iraqi politics by fostering a diverse array of Shia political parties and militant factions. Prominent among these are the Badr Organisation—initially the military faction of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)—and subsequently numerous groups of the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF or al-Hashd al-Shaabi), many of which have strong affiliations with Tehran (Sarı, 2021). Although some militias gained legitimacy via their involvement in the battle against ISIS, they remain intricately woven within Iraq's political framework, frequently functioning alongside or even above governmental authority. The dual structure—formal incorporation of PMF troops into state institutions while maintaining loyalty to external benefactors such as Iran—has entrenched Iran's influence in Iraq. Iran has politically endorsed Shia coalitions and used intra-Shia divisions to obstruct the rise of a nationalist administration that may threaten its influence over Baghdad. Iraq has functioned as both a client and a buffer state in Tehran's geostrategic considerations since the late 2000s (Sarı, 2021).

Syria's involvement in the Shia Crescent has been pragmatic in nature. In contrast to Iraq and Lebanon, Syria does not have a Shia majority, and the recently overthrown Assad regime that ruled the country for decades was dominated by Alawites—a branch of Shia Islam whose theological validity is disputed even among Shia scholars (Husseini, 2010, pp. 806–812). Nonetheless, geopolitical alignment has superseded ideological disparities. Since the commencement of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, Iran evaluated the anti-Assad uprising not as a democratic insurrection but as an element of a larger Western-Gulf-Israeli scheme to undermine the Iran-led "axis of resistance" in the region (Akbar, 2023). In response, Iran engaged decisively—initially via advisors and material assistance, and subsequently with IRGC officers and allied militias from Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan (*Liwa Fatemiyoun*), and Pakistan (*Liwa Zainebiyoun*) (Haji-Yousefi, 2021). The militias provided the Assad government with the necessary troops to reclaim territory, while Tehran acquired military infrastructure, intelligence bases, and a land corridor extending from its borders to the Mediterranean. Until the Assad regime was finally defeated in late 2024, Syria provided Iran with strategic depth and territorial connectedness, a crucial aspect of the Crescent. The collapse of the Assad regime and its replacement by the Sunni militia-dominated administration of Ahmed al-Sharaa (former Emir of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham paramilitary organisation) in Damascus represents one of the greatest setbacks Iran's grand strategy has faced since 1979.

The Houthi movement in Yemen (*Ansar Allah*) constitutes the most contentious and asymmetrical element within Iran's network. Despite the Houthis being Zaydi Shias, a group distinct from Iran's Twelver Shi'ism, Iran has extended them varied levels of support, encompassing political endorsement, training, and allegedly sophisticated armaments (Juneau, 2024). The Houthis' capture of Sanaa in 2014 and the ensuing conflict with the Saudi-led coalition provided Iran with a strategic advantage: by backing the Houthis, Tehran could exert pressure on Saudi Arabia's exposed southern border while demonstrating its capacity to destabilise the area at minimal expense. Iran's association with the Houthis does not possess the ideological profundity and institutional cohesion evident in its connections with Hezbollah or the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF). It demonstrates Tehran's pragmatic readiness to use sectarian affinity when it produces geostrategic benefits. Furthermore, Houthi missile and drone assaults against Saudi, Emirati and Israeli targets have enabled Iran to exert influence through proxies, sustain plausible deniability, and generate leverage for forthcoming diplomatic discussions (Juneau, 2024, pp. 287–291).

Although Iran's hard power strategies—armed proxies and military interventions—dominate discourse, its soft power initiatives are equally vital for maintaining the Shia Crescent. One of the most persistent instruments has been

its multinational religious framework. Iran is home to prominent Shia seminaries in Qom, where numerous clerics from Lebanon, Iraq, Pakistan, Nigeria, and other regions acquire theological education and are introduced to Iran's revolutionary interpretation of Shi'ism. These clerics frequently return to their countries of origin with increased credibility and nuanced pro-Iranian inclinations, enabling Tehran to influence religious discourse throughout the Shia world (Abdullah & Ahmed, 2022). Iran also manages Arabic-language media channels, including Al-Alam and Press TV, which propagate its ideological themes under the pretext of pan-Islamic cooperation. These channels fulfil dual roles of propaganda and counter-information, contesting Saudi and Western narratives while portraying Iran as the champion of the underprivileged. Moreover, pilgrimage diplomacy—facilitating access to Shia sacred places in Iran and Iraq—has allowed Tehran to enhance interpersonal relationships, cultivate transnational networks of devotion, and entrench its influence in the quotidian religious practices of Shia communities (Abdullah & Ahmed, 2022).

Iran employs a variety of context-specific instruments to further its Shia Crescent agenda. In Lebanon, it has cultivated a fully institutionalised ally; in Iraq, it has established a hybrid state within a state; in Syria, it had supported a regime via a war of attrition from 2011 to 2024; and in Yemen, it has bolstered a non-Twelver insurgency to undermine its Sunni adversaries. In all these instances, Iran has exhibited the capacity to integrate military assistance with ideological alignment, and religious legitimacy with political expediency. Significantly, Iran's plan demonstrates a realist approach disguised in sectarian rhetoric—not a fanatical campaign, but a deliberate endeavour to augment power through a combination of belief and pragmatism.

1.5. Sunni Reactions to the Shia Crescent

The rise of the Shia Crescent as a geopolitical entity has elicited diverse reactions from Sunni-majority nations and groups throughout the Middle East. These reactions stem from ideological apprehensions and strategic considerations, particularly among Saudi Arabia, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations, Egypt, and Türkiye. The response has encompassed counter-sectarian narratives, regional military interventions, soft power diplomacy, and assistance for Sunni Islamist factions, all intended to diminish Iranian dominance. Saudi Arabia has been the most outspoken and aggressive among Sunni powers in addressing the perceived threat of Iranian expansionism. The Saudi government has characterized the Shia Crescent as a manifestation of Persian imperialism and sectarian strife, while promoting a counter-narrative rooted in Sunni orthodoxy and pan-Islamic unity under Saudi hegemony. This intellectual framework, sometimes imbued with Wahhabi/Salafi nuances, depicts Iran as a disruptive entity intent on subverting Sunni Arab sovereignty and Islamic legitimacy (Ghoble, 2019). The Saudi Kingdom

has participated in proxy confrontations with Iran in several regions, including Syria, Iraq, and notably Yemen, where it initiated a comprehensive military operation in 2015 to halt Houthi progress. The operation has been rationalised as a defence of Yemen's legitimate government against Iranian aggression; however, it has also exposed the limitations of Riyadh's military capabilities.

Saudi Arabia has sought to garner Sunni and Western assistance through diplomatic channels, including the Arab League, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and collaborative military efforts such as the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition. Riyadh has significantly invested in public diplomacy and media to counteract Iran's ideological influence in the region, especially among marginalised Sunni communities (Ghoble, 2019, pp. 48–50). Other Gulf monarchies, particularly the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain, have closely aligned with Saudi Arabia in their opposition to Iranian influence. Bahrain, characterized by a Shia majority and a Sunni governing class, is acutely attuned to suspected Iranian infiltration (Al-Rawi, 2015). The 2011 Arab Spring demonstrations in Bahrain, mostly spearheaded by Shia protestors, were brutally quashed with the aid of Saudi and Emirati security forces. Bahraini authorities have alleged that Tehran incited the unrest, seeing it as a component of a wider Shia insurrection (Al-Rawi, 2015).

The UAE, albeit somewhat pragmatic in its interactions with Iran, has nonetheless adopted a resolute position in Yemen, collaborating with Saudi Arabia to combat the Houthis. Emirati military and local proxies have been instrumental in the southern theatre of the conflict; nevertheless, increasing discord between Emirati and Saudi objectives has hampered this relationship (El-Dessouki & Mansour, 2023, pp. 396–404). The UAE has aligned with Riyadh in viewing the Shia Crescent as a catalyst for regional instability, especially regarding Iranian control over non-state actors. The GCC provides financial and ideological assistance to Sunni communities and religious organisations throughout the region, thereby supporting sectarian narratives that counter Iranian ideology. Media organisations such as Al-Arabiya and Sky News Arabia act as counterbalances to Iranian networks like Al-Alam and Press TV, promoting rival narratives on legitimacy, sectarian identity, and regional authority (Ghoble, 2019).

In contrast to the GCC governments, Egypt and Türkiye have adopted more prudent and, at times, ambiguous approaches regarding the Shia Crescent. Egypt's engagement with Iran and its Shia Crescent strategy is characterized by deep ideological suspicion but limited direct confrontation. Cairo views Iran's regional activism as both a sectarian threat and a challenge to the Arab state system, yet it rarely translates this perception into an overtly aggressive foreign policy. Since the 1979 Revolution, Egypt's political establishment — whether under Mubarak, Morsi, or Sisi — has regarded Iran's revolutionary Shia discourse as antithetical to Sunni

Arab nationalism and the legacy of Nasserism (Taflıoğlu, 2019). The assassination of Anwar Sadat by an Islamist with alleged Iranian sympathies cemented a long-term mistrust. Egypt consistently frames Iran's actions in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon as foreign encroachments on Arab sovereignty, aligning ideologically with Saudi Arabia's stance. Under Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's leadership in particular, Egypt has predominantly sided with Saudi Arabia in countering Iranian influence, particularly in Yemen and Syria. Nevertheless, Cairo's involvement has been constrained by internal objectives and a hesitance to become extensively involved in regional sectarian disputes. Egypt's conventional self-perception as a pan-Arab leader has also rendered it cautious of being viewed as a satellite state of Saudi Arabia (Taflıoğlu, 2019). Cairo's principal concern does not appear to be Shia expansionism per se, but Iran's capacity to exploit state weakness in Arab countries to undermine traditional centres of Arab power. Overall, Egypt frames the Shia Crescent as a political project cloaked in religious legitimacy—one that must be contained through regional Arab coordination rather than unilateral aggressive confrontation—thus offering a softer approach compared to the Saudi stance on the issue.

Türkiye's stance towards Iran over the last two decades has been more intricate compared to that of Egypt. Türkiye, a Sunni-majority nation with supposed neo-Ottoman and/or pan-Islamic aspirations under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's leadership, has frequently engaged in indirect rivalry with Iran (Haugom, 2019). Ankara strongly backed Sunni rebel factions in Syria and has maintained a robust military presence in northern Iraq. However, Türkiye has also sustained pragmatic diplomatic and commercial relations with Tehran, especially in energy commerce and regional diplomacy. Under President Erdoğan, Türkiye has aimed to establish itself as an autonomous Sunni entity that transcends sectarian divisions, notably through its endorsement of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist movements. In Syria and Iraq, Turkish and Iranian interests have often conflicted, notwithstanding instances of collaboration against Kurdish secession or in post-conflict reconstruction initiatives.

Even though Ankara has officially adopted a Sunni identity under the leadership of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), the Erdoğan administration has never fully supported the idea of a unified sectarian front led by Saudi Arabia against Iran. Instead, Türkiye has followed a multi-pronged foreign strategy that aims to restrict Iran's regional aspirations without sparking outright confrontation. Türkiye continues to rely heavily on Iran as a natural gas provider, and the two countries' trade has consistently shown resilience in the face of regional crises. Furthermore, the 2017 Qatar crisis and Türkiye's vocal opposition to US sanctions on Iran further demonstrated Ankara's preference for regional autonomy over sectarian alliance with the Gulf monarchies. Thus, Türkiye's approach toward the Shia Crescent is characterized by a combination of sectarian scepticism and

geopolitical adaptability. To strike a balance between Islamic identity politics and realist strategic objectives, Ankara regards Tehran as a rival to be managed and occasionally engaged with. This contrasts with the traditional Sunni approach of Saudi Arabia and Egypt, which portrays Iran solely as an ideological adversary.

Sunni Islamist movements, from the mainstream Muslim Brotherhood to more militant Salafi-jihadist factions, have responded to the Shia Crescent in ideologically intense ways. The Muslim Brotherhood, while primarily dedicated to Sunni empowerment via political Islam, has occasionally sought to eschew explicit sectarianism in pursuit of wider Islamic unity. Nonetheless, Brotherhood-affiliated entities in Syria and elsewhere have contested Iran and its supporters, perceiving them as impediments to Sunni political revitalisation (Helfont, 2009). Conversely, Salafi-jihadist organisations like al-Qaeda and ISIS have established anti-Shia sectarianism as a fundamental principle of their ideology. These factions portray Iran and its allies as "heretics" and "justifiable targets of jihad", and they have perpetrated severe violence against Shia people and institutions (Esfandiary & Tabatabai, 2015). The emergence of ISIS in Iraq and Syria was largely a direct response to the perceived Shia hegemony—instigated by Iran—over the political landscape following 2003. The ideological mobilisation by various factions has complicated the regional dynamics, occasionally driving Sunni governments into precarious positions. Although nations such as Saudi Arabia have formally condemned extremist violence, they have also faced allegations of promoting the sectarian rhetoric that legitimises it (Ghoble, 2019, pp. 46–49). This has established a feedback cycle wherein both state and non-state Sunni actors simultaneously contest and reinforce the narrative of a zero-sum sectarian conflict.

A significant insight into current regional dynamics is the strategic employment of sectarianism by Sunni governments to influence foreign policy and enhance internal legitimacy. In countries such as Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, characterizing local dissent as an Iranian conspiracy serves to delegitimize opposition groups and rationalise repressive actions. Sectarian framing thus serves as a mechanism for authoritarian endurance. The phenomenon of the Shia Crescent has prompted Sunni regimes to establish new alliances, including implicit or explicit normalisation with Israel, driven by mutual apprehensions regarding Iranian expansionism. The Abraham Accords, which resulted in the normalisation of relations between the UAE, Bahrain, and Israel, can be largely seen as an anti-Iran coalition that transcends conventional Arab-Israeli animosities. This evolving dynamic highlights that the Sunni response to the Shia Crescent is not only defensive or ideological—it is strategic, instrumental, and influenced by fluctuating power dynamics. The rhetoric of sectarianism is frequently utilised to rationalise actions, although the fundamental objectives are based on national interest, regime security, and regional dominance.

1.6. Iran-Israel Conflict within the Context of the Shia Crescent

The so-called "Twelve-Day War" between Iran and Israel in June 2025 and the ongoing conflict between the two regimes have been deeply intertwined with Iran's long-term Shia Crescent grand strategy. In fact, it can be seen as a direct test—and, arguably, a partial culmination—of that strategy's strengths, vulnerabilities, and contradictions. Iran's creation and nurturing of a transnational Shia alliance was never just about sectarian solidarity, as its central geopolitical objective has always been countering Israel, projecting power to its borders, and deterring Israeli or US attacks on Iranian soil or nuclear infrastructure (Mousavian & Chitsazian, 2020). Before the 2024 Revolution in Syria and the June 2025 War between Tehran and Tel Aviv, the geopolitical landscape seemed to reflect Iran's supposed success in building a layered regional deterrent. Israel was not confronting Iran in isolation but was besieged by a "ring of fire" encircling it in the form of Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, the Assad regime in Syria, and Shia militants in Iraq and Yemen.

Although Iran likely did not directly command Hamas's October 7 attack in 2023, the broader "axis of resistance"—which includes Hamas, Hezbollah, PIJ, and Iran-backed militias—functioned as a flexible coalition. The Hamas-Israel war triggered the most overt regional activation of Iran's allies in recent memory, including numerous Houthi missile and drone attacks on Israel, Hezbollah's consistent escalation on the northern front, and Iraqi militias targeting US bases in Iraq and Syria (Garfinkle, 2025). These moves were coordinated and framed as part of a shared "resistance" to Israeli actions in Gaza—but beneath that ideological unity lay a clear strategic use of the Shia Crescent to constrain Israel and stretch its military bandwidth. For years, Iran and Israel were engaged in a "shadow war"—covert assassinations, cyberattacks, and airstrikes, especially in Syria. The Twelve-Day War of June 2025 pushed that dynamic into the open, with intense Israeli bombings of Iranian territory and retaliatory missile and drone strikes by Iranian armed forces.

Despite Iran's retaliation, Tehran relied on visible warning and de-escalation signals—suggesting that the Shia Crescent remains primarily a defensive and asymmetric tool, not an engine for total war against Israel and the US The 2025 War also exposed cracks in the Shia Crescent vision: Hezbollah is constrained by the need to avoid a full-blown war that would devastate Lebanon's fragile economy and society; Iraqi Shia militias faced pushback from their own government and public; the Houthis' attacks have invited broader international retaliation and affected Iran's regional image; and Tehran's emphasis on sectarian identity is increasingly out of step with rising anti-sectarian, nationalist, or protest-driven politics in Iraq and Lebanon (Harb, 2024). The largely passive stance of Iran's militant network during the June 2025 War reveals that the Shia Crescent may

mobilise in times of external confrontation but faces domestic legitimacy issues when used as a total war device against the overwhelming military power of Israel.

Despite intense military blows by Israel and the US, political costs, and rising international pressure, Iran's Shia Crescent grand strategy remains remarkably resilient. Its deterrent logic is, of course, weakened after the fall of the Iran-aligned Assad regime in Syria, yet it still functions to some extent. The Israeli-US alliance must still consider Hezbollah and the Houthis before making further escalatory moves. The strategic depth of the Shia Crescent is weakened but endures—as several US bases in the area remain vulnerable due to PMF militias in Iraq. Its ideological and symbolic influence—as defender of Palestinian resistance and opponent of Western imperialism and Israeli war crimes—still holds weight among many Arab publics, despite sectarian differences (Salari & Thaher, 2025). Yet the 2025 War also shows that Iran's grand strategy is reactive as much as proactive. It has succeeded in building a network of deterrents but has limited capacity to control how and when these actors escalate. Overall, the recent Iran-Israel war should not be seen as a break from or turning point in the Shia Crescent grand strategy—it is merely the latest and most intense episode within it.

The Iran-Israel conflict, analysed through the framework of IR theory, exemplifies the interaction between neo-realist imperatives and asymmetric warfare methods in influencing the foreign policy actions of a revolutionary middle power such as Iran. Neo-realism, particularly Kenneth Waltz's structural realism, underscores the manner in which states function within an anarchic international system, striving to secure their safety by maximizing relative strength (Waltz, 2000). States are obligated to counter perceived threats, particularly when confronted with regional hegemons or the possibility of encirclement. As such, Iran's Shia Crescent grand strategy constitutes a regional balancing initiative in response to perceived threats from Israel, the US military presence, and pro-Western Arab states. Subsequent to the 1979 Revolution, Iran became isolated within a hostile regional framework. The Shia Crescent network, comprising Hezbollah, the former Assad government, Iraqi Shia militias and the Houthis, enabled it to counterbalance its conventional military disadvantages through stratified deterrence and geographic depth. In contrast, Israel has implemented a preventative approach to thwart Iran's regional dominance by attacking Iranian presence in Syria, assassinating IRGC leaders, and advocating internationally against Iran's nuclear program. The ongoing Iran-Israel conflict exemplifies neo-realist theory, since each party's actions to bolster its security—such as Iran equipping Hezbollah and Israel targeting Damascus—result in heightened fear for the other side, thereby perpetuating cycles of escalation.

According to the principles of offensive realism, as articulated by John Mearsheimer, great and aspiring powers do not merely pursue balance; they

endeavour to increase their strength whenever opportunities present themselves (Snyder, 2002). Iran's exploitation of crises—such as the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Arab upheavals in 2011, and the disintegration of Syria and Yemen—can be perceived as aggressive strategies to augment its sphere of influence. In Iraq, Iran sought to incorporate loyal militias into governmental institutions (PMF). In Syria, it reinforced its pro-Assad military presence in an attempt to secure control of vital passageways. In Lebanon and Yemen, it supported armed factions that enhance its capacity to exert influence beyond Israel's borders and the Red Sea. This offensive realist rationale elucidates the assertive character of Iran's Shia Crescent; although rationalised through ideological or defensive discourses, it has operated as a regional revisionist initiative, contesting the US-Saudi-Israeli security framework.

Constructivist IR theory would analyse Iran's approach not merely in material terms, but as influenced by its revolutionary identity, anti-Zionist ideology, and the historical narrative of Shia suffering and contemporary empowerment. These shapes Iran's justification for its regional actions (e.g., "defending the oppressed"). Iran characterizes its confrontation with Israel as a civilisational and religious struggle rather than solely a geopolitical one (Mousavian & Chitsazian, 2020). Constructivism elucidates the soft power instruments and ideological rhetoric that accompany Iran's realpolitik strategies. Hence, it can be concluded that the ongoing conflict highlights that Iran's grand strategy in the 21st century is not solely kinetic or conventional, but rather a complex amalgamation of structural necessity (security within an anarchic framework), strategic opportunity (power vacuums), ideological justification (resistance theology), and tactical pragmatism (hybrid warfare). Iran's Shia Crescent exemplifies how middle powers employ asymmetric methods to exert influence beyond their capacity while manoeuvring within a contentious regional framework. The Iran-Israel conflict of 2024–25 is not an exception but an expression of longstanding tensions in an area where neo-realist principles, asymmetric capabilities and ideological perspectives intersect, significantly impacting both regional and global order.

1.7. Conclusion

The concept of the Shia Crescent has evolved into a central framework through which scholars and policymakers interpret Iran's regional strategy and its entanglement in Middle Eastern conflicts. This chapter has demonstrated that the Shia Crescent is not just a myth or an alarmist narrative; it is a dynamic configuration of alliances, ideologies, and instruments that has allowed Iran to exert significant influence in the Middle East, particularly in the wake of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq and the Arab uprisings of 2011. The analysis reveals that Iran's Shia Crescent is far from a monolithic expansionist project. It is shaped by local contexts, the agency of regional actors, and changing global conditions.

Hezbollah in Lebanon remains the model proxy and ideological ally, while Iraq represents both a success in terms of influence and a cautionary tale of overreach and backlash. In Syria, Iran seemingly managed to secure its strategic interests but at great cost in human and financial terms, only to lose all gains in the aftermath of the Sunni militia-led 2024 Revolution. Yemen's Houthi alliance demonstrates the extent of Iranian influence but also the limits of command-and-control in fragmented conflict zones.

The Shia Crescent has clearly not gone uncontested. Israel and Sunni-majority states, led by Saudi Arabia, have developed robust counter-strategies. These include the dissemination of a sectarian narrative that portrays Iran as a hegemonic threat, military interventions in Yemen and Bahrain, and the creation of new regional alliances such as the Saudi-Emirati-Israeli axis. Sunni Islamist movements, ranging from the Muslim Brotherhood to Salafi-jihadist groups, have also opposed Iran's influence, often intensifying sectarian divides in already fractured societies such as Iraq and Yemen. On the other hand, some Sunni-majority powers like Türkiye and Egypt have pursued ambiguous, balancing approaches, reflecting the complexity of intra-Sunni geopolitics.

Crucially, the instrumentalisation of sectarianism has been a hallmark of both Iranian and Sunni Gulf regimes' behaviour. Iran frames its actions as resistance and protection of the Shia, yet it also utilises sectarian mobilisation for strategic gain. Sunni powers, in turn, deploy anti-Shia rhetoric not only to undermine Iran but also to consolidate domestic legitimacy and discredit opposition groups. In Bahrain, Syria, and Yemen, sectarianism has become both a cause and a consequence of domestic power struggles. The result is a deeply polarized region where identity politics are manipulated to serve regime survival.

Looking forward, the future of the Shia Crescent and its regional contestation remains uncertain. The 2023 restoration of diplomatic ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia, brokered by China, may herald a new phase of cautious détente. This development reflects not only regional fatigue from endless proxy wars but also global pressure to stabilise oil markets and prevent regional escalations. If sustained, such rapprochement could de-escalate tensions in flashpoints like Yemen and Iraq and open space for more pragmatic diplomacy. At the same time, structural factors—ideological mistrust, competing security doctrines, and unresolved conflicts—continue to sustain rivalries. While official diplomacy may resume, competition in third-party arenas like Syria and Lebanon may persist, albeit in less overt forms. Sectarian identities have been deeply politicized, and reversing this legacy will require more than state-level agreements. Popular protests in Iraq, Lebanon, and Iran itself have increasingly criticized not only corrupt local elites but also foreign intervention—whether from Tehran, Washington, or Riyadh. This rising civic nationalism and anti-

sectarian sentiment among younger populations may gradually erode the utility of sectarian mobilisation.

In conclusion, the Shia Crescent is best understood not as a fixed alliance or an ideological crusade, but as a multi-layered strategy of influence, protection, and deterrence, forged in the crucible of post-colonial geopolitics, religious solidarities, and regional insecurities. It reflects Iran's unique position as both a revolutionary power and a status quo actor. While its future will depend on both regional developments and global shifts, one thing remains clear: the Shia Crescent—and the sectarian dynamics it has provoked—will continue to shape the Middle East for the foreseeable future, either as a source of conflict or, potentially, as a catalyst for dialogue and recalibration.

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