Saudi-Iranian rivalry within International Relations theory

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Abstract

The conflictual situation in the Middle East and the interrelated Saudi-Iranian rivalry has resulted in a fractured academic opinion. The prominent International Relations theories (IR) often do not succeed to take into account all in-/dependent variables due to (1) an interaction between the different levels of analysis and (2) a gap between regional studies (MES) and IR. The role of states and non-state actors involved in the region and especially their regional motives are interpreted differently depending on the lens through which they are perceived; resulting in an under-representation of constructivism. This article will use the Saudi-Iranian rivalry as a lens to research the application of IR theories within the Middle East. Therefore, the prominent analytical approaches and eclectic frameworks will be thoroughly discussed with regards to regional politics and the changing power constellation since the war in Iraq in 2003. Through a literature study, this article will indicate the main differences between these theories and the mixed approaches as well as their similarities to enable a better use of social constructivism. The use of Wendtian constructivism avoids, through the integration of the state-level, a pure sectarian analysis within the under-represented constructivism and further deepens constructivist application within the Middle Eastern studies. The final chapter of this article argues that there are at least 3 interdependent reasons guiding the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. The first being (1) the Middle Eastern Lockean self-help system, which developed through a process of negative identification between Iran and Saudi- Arabia since 1979. Furthermore (2) their authoritarian nature, leading to the fear of losing their status quo, due to domestic incongruence enhanced by the Arab Uprisings. Lastly (3) the enhanced perception of rivalry which is caused by the diminishing of the American involvement.

KEYWORDS: IR, realism, constructivism, sectarianism, Saudi-Iranian rivalry, Wendt, MES

In accordance with article 59 of the Education and Examination Regulations (2015-2016) of the Ghent University, which allows students to write their dissertation in other languages (i.e. English), I provide the reader with a Dutch summary (abstract) of my article.

De conflictueuze situatie in het Midden-Oosten en de daarmee samenhangende Saoedi-Iraanse rivaliteit heeft geleid tot verdeeldheid in de academische wereld. De meest voornaam theorieën van internationale betrekkingen (IB) blijken ontoereikend om rekening te houden met alle on-/afhankelijke variabelen als gevolg van (1) de interactie tussen de verschillende niveaus van analyse en (2) een kloof tussen area studies (MES) en IB. De rol van verschillende staten en niet-staatelijke actoren betrokken in de regio en vooral hun transnationale motieven worden verschillend geïnterpreteerd, afhankelijk van de theoretische basis, waarbij de constructivistische benadering ondervertegenwoordigd is. Door een literatuuronderzoek, worden de prominente benaderingen en eclectiche aanpakken in dit artikel grondig besproken met betrekking tot regionale politiek en veranderende machtsconstellaties sinds de Irakoorlog in 2003. De Saoedi- Iraanse rivaliteit fungeert als lens om het gebruik van IB-theorieën te kunnen onderzoeken. Hierbij wordt aangetoond dat de prominente invalshoeken elkaar tegenspreken en door een trend naar eclectiche invalshoeken IB-theorieën – en dit vooral met betrekking tot het constructivisme – zich niet verder kunnen ontwikkelen. Door de toepassing van Wendt’s sociaal constructivisme, vanuit een staats-centrische invalshoek, wordt niet alleen het gebruik van het constructivisme gestimuleerd maar hierdoor kan ook een pure sektarische analyse vermeden worden.
Dit artikel stelt dat er tenminste drie onderling afhankelijke redenen bestaan die de Saoedi-Iraanse rivaliteit sturen. Ten eerste (1) bevindt het Midden-Oosten zich in een Lockeaans *self-help system* ontwikkeld door een proces van wederzijdse, negatieve identificatie tussen Iran en Saoedi-Arabië sinds 1979. Verder (2) veroorzaakt hun autoritaire karakter een verhoogde rivaliteit ten gevolge van binnenlandse incongruentie, welke door de Arabische opstanden versterkt is. Ten laatste (3) is door een verminderde invloed van de Verenigde Staten in de regio, de perceptie van rivaliteit versterkt.

**KEYWORDS:** IB, realisme, constructivisme, sektarianisme, Saoedi-Iraanse rivaliteit, Wendt, MES
Introduction

Significant political and societal changes have occurred in the Middle East since the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, such as the newly installed Shi’a-led government in Iraq, the Arab Uprisings and the Syrian civil war. Yemen, Bahrain and Libya's governments can be characterized as dysfunctional and amplify the conflictual situation in the Middle East. Syria as well as Lebanon are conflicted along sectarian lines, giving Iran and Saudi Arabia - being the two major players - the opportunity to influence intra-state conflicts and thus engage in proxy wars. This enables a greater impact of domestic and transnational actors (Gause III, 2014). Meanwhile, Saudi-Arabia is driven to play a more active role in regional conflicts caused by a noticeable decrease of the American involvement. Due to its enormous destabilizing impact on various inter- and intrastate conflicts in the region, the Saudi-Iranian rivalry caught the attention of scholars, specialized in social and political science. This article will use the Saudi-Iranian rivalry as a lens for its meta-analysis. Not the rivalry itself will be analyzed but rather the application of IR theory, its challenges and how its use can be improved within the study of the Middle East. More precisely, this article will first indicate that when International Relations theorists analyze the rivalry, the outcome is either an eclectic realist or a primordial sectarian approach. In general, it seems that placing the rivalry between Saudi-Arabia and Iran within a theoretical framework of IR has been a challenge for the academic community. Commonly, IR theories are not used or, if applied to the contemporary Middle Eastern rivalries, academics tend to use one of the following two analytical approaches: balance of power (e.g. Fürtig or Aarts and Van Duijne) or sectarianism (Abdo, Nasr). The first obstacle - causing a difficult application of IR theory in the Middle East - seems that in-/dependent variables are found within different levels of analysis. Therefore, scholars as Gause III (2014), Mabon (2015) and Hinnebusch & Ehteshami (2002) create eclectic approaches, whereby preposition from the balance of power approach are being supplemented by constructivism or historical sociology. Within their analysis the increased rivalry, sectarian tensions and the influence of the Arab Uprisings are described as an underbalanced or omni-balanced situation. Underbalancing or omni-balancing hereby refers to a situation whereby logical alliances - realistically calculated – do not occur due to ideological differences. This phenomenon challenges a pure realist explanation of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, which often leads to authors supplementing their realist base. Valbjørn and Bank (2011) combine their balance of power analysis with the English school. Their analysis is exceptional because of its focus on Arabism. Where all other authors – either from the realist or the sectarian camp indicate that Arabism has declined - Valbjørn and Bank argue that a new form of Arabism has developed, a so called
societal, political Arabism.

Mixed theoretical approaches, in which scholars circulate around the base of their chosen IR theory, also integrate foreign policy analysis (FPA), sociological and historical approaches and to a lesser extent Middle East Studies (MES). The latter can be identified as the second obstacle, causing IR theory to be challenged by the case of the Middle East. Namely, a separation between the empirical work within regional studies and IR theory. Though, this phenomenon needs further research attention, it will be no part of this article.²

Within the theoretical challenge of the Middle East, the constructivist side faces a different issue. Where the realist approach struggles with the integration of variables from different levels of analysis, the constructivist side – with the exception of Barnett (1998) and Telhami (2002, 2004) – identifies a primordial sectarianism as the main cause of conflicts, and therefore generalizes and oversimplifies not only the Sunni–Shi’a divide³ but the constructivist theory itself. Abdo’s work (2013) demonstrates this difficulty with her pure sectarian analysis. She identifies a primordial sectarianism as the main cause, while simultaneously engaging in an instrumentalist view, leaving out other independent variables. Telhami’s work (2002, 2004) is one of the exceptions, but mostly focusses on the American influence as well as Israel and will therefore not be part of this article. The outstanding work of Barnett (1998) is one of the only constructivist analyses not purely sectarian.

In his book Dialogues between Arab States, he describes the influence of Arabism and Arab identity as well as the regional order from 1920 till 1998. However, his work being over a decade old underlines the argumentation; scholars within constructivism are under-represented when explaining the Saudi-Iranian tensions.

The main research question of this article is: how can one improve the use of constructivism within Middle Eastern International Relations Theory? The second part will use Wendt’s interpretation of social constructivism to propose a solution to the above-mentioned problematique of Middle Eastern IR theorists.

To this end, this article is organized as follows: the next section lays the groundwork by discussing sectarianism, noting the lack of constructivist scholarship. I suggest that at least part of the reason for the under-representation of constructivism is the overemphasis on the Sunni-Shi’a divide and the underestimation of the states’ influence (state-level).

The literature study ends with the challenges of the Westphalian narrative and the eclectic mixes within the realist camp. Since the different approaches discuss important variables, influencing the rivalry, the study will enable a better application of Wendtian constructivism in the second part of this article.

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¹ See p. 13 of this article.
³ Gause III (2014) comes to the same conclusion, the reasoning can be found on p.9
It is important to notice that this article does not aim to propose an alternative approach or yet another eclectic framework but instead aims to increase the applicability of constructivism to the Saudi-Iranian rivalry with the use of Wendt’s constructivism. In my point of view, it enables the field of constructivism within the study of the Middle East to resign from a purely sectarian analysis. This article offers suggestions on the application of constructivism and will stimulate its development. The conclusion ties together the preceding arguments.
Part 1: The challenge of Middle Eastern IR theory: a literature study

Constructing a primordial sectarian analysis: A one-sided constructivist approach on the Saudi-Iranian rivalry

Constructivism focusses on collective identities and ideas whereby state behavior is influenced by elite behavior, social norms and the public’s perceptions (Mingst, Arreguin-Toft, 2011). In the case of the Middle East, its focus primarily lies on a societal split between two religious identities within the individual and elite level, creating transnational formations.

Regrettably, the constructivist approach within the Saudi-Iranian rivalry – with the few exceptions of Telhami (2002, 2004), Barnett (1998) and Altoraifi (2012) – solely identifies a primordial sectarianism as the main cause of conflicts and underestimates the influence of states. This primordial sectarianism is mostly described as a bottom-up phenomenon, through which the Shi’a and Sunni community evolved over years as a supra-state identity influencing the political elite of states (Abdo, 2013). Historically, the Shi’a population has been oppressed and politically marginalized by Arab states (Wehrey, 2014).

The sectarian revival, since the fall of the Ba’ath regime in 2003, continues to aggravate conflicts and therefore manages to create an analytical approach that purely focuses on sectarianism. This approach indicates that when the first Shi’a-led government under al-Maliki was established in Iraq and the Arab Uprisings in 2011 began, a primordial sectarian divide fueled the contemporary tensions and strengthened Iran’s influence (Nasr, 2006; Abdo, 2013). Due to Iran’s involvement in several conflicts as well as its support for Hezbollah, the Shi’a community is hence seen as:

[...] a potential threat in the new geopolitical situation in the eyes of the Sunni Arab regimes in those countries that have a Shia population, either a minority (Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, most small Gulf States, Yemen and to some extent Jordan) or a majority (Bahrain and Iraq). (Luomi, 2008, p.4)

Nasr (2006) warns that the religious split could reshape the Middle Eastern constellation. Arab states have the perception that the ‘Shi’a octopus’ will lead to a radical union and thereby threatens to change the current status quo. Thus, to Nasr’s (2006) conclusion, the Sunni have to mobilize against the Shi’a. This emerging religious identity-divide is, to his understanding, an essential feature to grasp regional politics and simultaneously causes regional destabilization.

Even though the roots of this divide evolved from early Islam, and thus have a religious nature, the sectarian tensions are primarily political, social and economic (Bröning, 2008). Sectarian identities – in a primordial sectarian analysis – thereby influence domestic and foreign policy

\[\text{Malmvig (2015) notes that there are three different strands of sectarianism: a primordial, an instrumentalist, and a historical sociology approach.}\]

\[\text{See Luomi (2008) who states that the following incidents enabled sectarianism: “[...] the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the Iran-Iraq War in 1980-1988, Saddam Hussein’s rule of Iraq, particularly in the 1990s, and finally the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003” (p.9).}\]

\[\text{For more information on the history of the Sunni-Shi’a divide see: M. Ruthven, A. Nanji: Historical Atlas of Islam, Singapore: Cartographical, 2004.}\]
This bottom-up phenomenon leads to an increased influence of non-state agencies. Susser’s (2007) analysis – following a sectarian logic – illustrates the cause and effect relation of the empowered Shi’a identity on the political elite of Arab states. In his point of view, the main variable influencing domestic as well as inter-state relations in the Middle East are primordial identities, whereby the importance of ideological fault lines or power politics between monarchies and republics declined and an identity split, strengthened by Iran, arose.

Abdo (2013) describes the current regional conflict by analyzing the cases of Bahrain and Lebanon to underline her primordial, sectarian argumentation. In her point of view, the sectarianisation of the region developed due to the weakening of the Middle Eastern states caused by the Iraq and Syria war and the Arab Uprisings in 2011. These developments strengthened the conflict over Arab and Islamic identities in states surrounding Syria, enhanced through “[…] the atrocities being committed against Sunni in Syria […]” (p.4).

As a result of the Arab Uprisings, the influential role of local actors and the religion itself enhanced, whereby local domestic policies strongly affect foreign policy.

In fact, the Arab uprising and their knock-on-effects across the region are the very definition of local “retail” politics and represents a significant break with a past largely dictated by outside forces, foreign policy considerations and proxy contest between rival regional and global forces. (Abdo, 2013, p.vii)

In her point of view (2013), people seek comfort with local non-state actors. It is due to the nature of authoritarian regimes that citizens are forced to seek support from local sheiks, religion and their identity. Through interviews (2013) with religious leaders, she reports that the use of the Sunni-Shi’a divide to reinforce their power, is common. These actors enhance both communities’ perceptions whereby, for example, local mosques work as a platform to further polarize the sectarian divide, using sectarian rhetoric. Thus, to Abdo’s (2013) understanding sectarian tensions come to existence due to the weakening of authoritarian regimes in the region and the peoples’ wish for enhanced economic and political power, whereby the Sunni-Shi’a split will reshape society and regimes (Abdo, 2013).

1 Her primordial analysis includes authoritarian resilience theory. It is not clear whether she consciously used this theory or not, since it is part of MES and not fully integrated in her paper. As mentioned earlier, there is an enormous gap between MES and IR theory, which surfaces in various research papers and therefore deserves further research attention.

8 Additionally, Abdo (2013) notes that the Shi’a community feels threatened, not empowered as the “Shiite wave”- noted by Nasr (2006) - seems to reveal. The Shi’a interpret the new Sunni Islamist governments (e.g. Egypt) as a new empowerment of the Sunni, which will lead to an even stronger Sunni-domination in the region (Abdo, 2013). The opposition of the Sunni-led states toward Al Maliki’s government in Iraq enhances their perception (Abdo, 2013).
As a result of the people’s perceptions, each action by states is seen as taking either the side of the Sunni or the Shi’a community. When the United States backed the Muslim Brotherhood, the Sunni felt supported. Since the nuclear talks with Iran, the impression is that the United States have switched sides, generating a fear that they could tip the sectarian balance (Abdo, 2013). Following Abdo’s reasoning (2013) the main level of analysis is not the state but the individual level. Meaning that the raison de la nation - thus the identity of the people - is reformed by the individual level and causes the Middle Eastern tensions and not, as realism would predict, through the raison d’état.

Contending visions of sectarianism

If sectarianism is a bottom-up phenomenon, as the primordial sectarian theory indicates, does it not underestimate the role of states in the Middle East, especially that of Iran? The instrumentalist approach of sectarianism is

[...] deeply skeptical about using a sectarian framework to explain the causes of the region’s present struggles and rivalries. Sectarian identities are primarily seen as superficial political constructs, open to manipulation and exploitation by political elites [...] instrumentalists primarily look to the way that authoritarian states have exacerbated sectarian divisions both domestically and regionally in order to prop up their regimes and remain in power. (Malmvig, 2015, p. 34)

Abdo’s (2013) analysis indicates that the establishment of the Islamic republic of Iran empowered the Shi’a in Bahrain and Lebanon and helped establish Hezbollah as well. Iran is seen as the main guardian of the region’s Shi’a population. “Iran has historically exploited anti-Shia sentiment, portraying the Shi’a as victims, with Iran as their savior. More recently, under the presidency of Ahmadinejad, Iran has sought to improve ties with the Arab Shi’a” (Abdo, 2013, p.52). Following Abdo’s (2013) argumentation, in which she includes the state-level (instrumentalism), the Sunni-Shi’a divide is instrumentalized by Iran.

One of the main priorities for these regime insiders is a realignment of the region whereby the United States’ foes, including Hizballah, are in ascendance and Iran is a major player, spreading its ideological and religious influence to minimize the power of Tehran’s main rivals, the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Israel. (Abdo, 2013, p.52)

Thus, Iran’s foreign policy aims to enhance relations with its Arab neighbors and to increase its regional influence to get leverage in its relations with the United States (Abdo, 2013). By using the ‘Islamic card’, Abdo (2013) explains that Iran is trying to accomplish the above-described goals:

When Supreme Leader Khamenei routinely declares that the Arab uprisings will at last ring in an era of Pan-Islamism, he is highlighting Iran’s Islamic character, which he believes goes hand in hand with enhancing its strategic depth in the region and the world. (p.52)

According to Abdo (2013), the Sunni- Shi’a tensions, reinforced by the Arab Uprisings, not only cause regional tensions but changed the
primary challenges of the Islamic society⁹, meaning that the Palestine question is less a mobilizing factor than religion and ethnicity.

The author’s conclusion reveals a thin line between a primordial and instrumental sectarianism, as she combines a bottom-up and top-down approach. The instrumentalist approach (top-down) within sectarianism is - when integrated - rather a balance of power approach.¹⁰

In Abdo’s (2013) point of view, Iran is not able to influence the region by instrumentalizing the Sunni-Shi’a divide. Nevertheless, “[…] this does not mean Tehran’s prospects for regional hegemony have necessarily been reduced over the long run” (p.54). Henceforth, Iran’s foreign policy is seen from a more realist point of view, including the balance of power theory. Abdo’s work (2013) illustrates that the sole use of the sectarian lens, is insufficient. It cannot explain states aspirations. Therefore, her explanation combines local actors and ambitions of Saudi Arabia, Iran and the United States.

Through the examination of sectarian literature, Luomi (2008) concludes that specific circumstances, reactions and power political interests of states cannot be accurately explained by identity on the regional level alone.

Most importantly – as Gause III (2014) warns – the sectarian theory generalizes sectarian tensions, the “[…] most dangerous oversimplification to come from an un-nuanced acceptance of the “Sunni versus Shi’a” frame is to misunderstand the motivations of the two major state actors in the regional contest for influence” (p.5). Agreeing with Salloukh (2008), he (2014) further explains that Iran and Saudi Arabia use sectarian rhetoric for their power game and simultaneously deny publicly that they are not sectarian-driven or “[…] engaged in a sectarian fight” (p.6).

Thus, can one conclude that, even though Teheran and Riyadh pretend to pursue being the religious center, their actions are politically motivated and to a lesser extent being influenced by a bottom-up sectarian divide? Luomi’s (2008) conclusion follows this logic. In her point of view, the identity-split in the Middle East serves the purpose of forging alliances and containing enemies, therefore religion is less a priority.¹¹

This view is further explored by Valbjørn and Bank (2007). In their point of view, the enhanced popularity of Hezbollah in the Middle East has resulted in an alliance that contains Iran through anti-Shi’a rhetoric. The Arab states are “[…] selling a policy based on non-sectarian motives” (p.7). Additionally, this reveals that even if Iran’s

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⁹ The primary challenge of the Islamic society is mostly described as the Arab goal to free Palestine from its occupation.

¹⁰ Moreover, the instrumentalist approach sees sectarianism as an “[…] artificial import to the region” (Wehrey, 2014) and not as a phenomenon that arose over years through the individual level.

¹¹ Underlining this reasoning, Valbjørn and Bank (2007) note that:
“For instance, the influential Sunni Islamist Yusuf al-Qaradawi, famous for being very attentive to shifting currents in public opinion, expressed his support for Hizballah on al-Jazeera. The Pan-Arab satellite channel, accused by non-Sunni Iraqis of being pro-Sunni, took a very pro-Hizballah stance. On behalf of al-Qaeda, which usually reviles the Shi’a as apostates, Ayman al-Zawahiri published a statement praising Hizballah for its fight against Israel” (p.7).
gains are limited - as Abdo (2013) underlines - its effect and potential on the regional politics cannot be marginalized (Gause III, 2011; Friedman, 2011). Within this perspective Valbjørn and Bank (2012) note that the Saudi-Iranian rivalry can rather be read as a Westphalian narrative, a reaction of states to balance against the rising power of Iran, regardless of its state identity.

In summary, the problematique of a purely sectarian analysis whereby the Saudi-Iranian rivalry is seen as a clash between the Sunni and Shi’a community, leaves out other variables, identified by the other IR theories or MES. Thus, critics of sectarianism indicate that geopolitical goals of states generated a bottom-up effect, resulting in the sectarianisation of the region, enhancing sectarian sentiments and not vice versa (Salloukh, 2013).

The Westphalian narrative

“[…] in a balance of power system, alliances will tend to form as states seek to augment their own power with the power of allied states, in reaction to perceived threat” (Sheehan, 1996, p.56).

The balance of power theory is one of the prominent IR theories, explaining the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. This theory defines the Middle Eastern power politics as a multipolar power game between Iran, the United States, Saudi-Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, as well as their allies. The power vacuum, enabled by the occupation of Iraq in 2003 and Iran’s increased influence, are thus viewed as an unbalanced situation. Middle Eastern tensions are realistically calculated by regimes and state interests (Dalacoura, 2013). Therefore, scholars applying the balance of power theory, mostly focus on how the Arab states - in cooperation with the United States - try to counterbalance Iran. According to Dalacoura (2013), the region’s players active in the confrontation, can be divided into Iran-led and pro-Western camps. “Realpolitik calculations are the cement that binds together Israel with Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey in the pro-Western camp, under the auspices of the United States” (Dalacoura, 2013 p.87). Iran’s nuclear deal as well as the shifting Middle Eastern policy of the United States forces Saudi-Arabia to take up a more active position within this power game (Gause III, 2015).

Even if Saudi-Arabia and Iran are heavily defined by a specific identity, sectarianism – as the above indicates – oversimplifies and overemphasizes the Sunni- Sh’ia divide [Gause III, 2014; Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, 2002; Luomi, 2008; Salloukh, 2015]. Moreover, it underestimates the state-level. In my point of view, these two reasons form the main problematique for the under-representation of constructivism.

In order to increase the applicability of constructivism, the next section will therefore analyze the over-represented, realist theory, its reasoning and eclectic approaches.
Mixed approaches based on realism: an eclectic marriage

If the balance of power theory is sufficient in explaining the ongoing rivalry, the question rises why no alliance actually exists between Turkey and Saudi-Arabia against Iran and Hezbollah. Gause III (2015) uses the framework of underbalancing – introduced by Haas (2014) – to provide a more accurate explanation. Hereby, underbalancing refers to a situation whereby realistically calculated alliances do not occur, due to ideological differences.

[...] it is not simply power that defines the structure of an international system. Identity also structures the system. States that share common ideas about appropriate and legitimate principles of governance will tend to group together. In systems characterized by ideological bipolarity, [...] alliances will tend to follow ideological lines and be very stable. But when there are more than two transnational ideological principles [...] the likelihood of underbalancing increases (Gause III, 2015, p.17).

Within this reasoning, the first glimpse of the Westphalian narrative - not able to fully grasp the contemporary Middle Eastern rivalry - leads to eclectic or mixed frameworks.

Straight balance of power logic, defined narrowly as balancing behavior against threats defined by material capabilities, cannot provide as comprehensive an explanation for underbalancing in the contemporary Middle East (Gause III, 2015, p. 18).

As Gause III (2015) explains, the balance of power approach forms the base of understanding regional tensions, but ignores the sub-state and individual level and their influence on the state-level, indicated by the ongoing underbalancing. Gause III’s (2014) modified framework of the balance of power approach “New Middle East Cold War” complements his realist base with different levels of analysis. He (2014) describes the Middle Eastern regional politics as a cold war between Iran and Saudi-Arabia including a number of regional players. These players are states as well as non-state actors. Thus, he uses realist prepositions to explain state behavior and foreign policy, but includes the sub-state and individual level namely non-state actors and local political factions as well as ideology and ideas.

It is a balance of power game, but not one played by permeable state entities with matching military power and occasionally clashing on the battlefield. It can only be understood by appreciating the links between domestic conflicts, transnational affinities, and regional state ambitions. (Gause III, 2014, p.4)

Further evidence by Brönings (2008), supporting Gause III’s (2014) framework, indicates that “the confessional dimension of regional conflict is repeatedly exaggerated because intra-confessional tensions are neglected. However, it is precisely these that exhibit the greatest political momentum in current developments and disprove the perception of a uniform Shiite bloc” (p.69). Gause III (2014), Bröning (2008) as well as Hinnebusch & Ehteshami (2002) assume that the main protagonist states, Iran and Saudi Arabia, share a common ideological position with their non-state allies and are thereby able to gain influence. In their point of view, the tensions must have a geopolitical nature, whereby Iran and Saudi Arabia are competing for dominance in the region,
with both states having a long tradition of bilateral distrust and being influenced by local rivalry (Gause III, 2014).

Henceforth, Gause III’s (2014) interpretation of domination exceeds military strength, because “the military and political strength of the parties to civil conflicts, and the contributions that outsiders can make to that strength, is more important than the military balance of power between Riyadh and Tehran” (p.1). The fact that military capabilities are less useful than a shared ideological connection with domestic players in weak states is the very reason why Qatar is more able to influence this power game than Turkey or Israel (Gause III, 2014).

The core issue leading to the power game and the resulting tensions is, to his understanding, a bottom-up phenomenon. Even with the inclusion of a raison d’état power game, the main cause lies with the weakening of states.

Bilateral tensions arise as a consequence of opportunities of non-state actors and local political factions (Gause III, 2014). However, his understanding of a bottom-up effect does not solely rely on the religious split as Abdo (2013) indicates. More precisely:

> The weakness or breakdown of state authority creates domestic political vacuums into which outsiders are drawn. These outsiders generally do not have to force themselves into these domestic political arenas. They are invited in by local political factions vying for power against their local rivals. (Gause III, 2014, p.7)

Hinnebusch and Ehteshami (2002) analyzed the Middle Eastern multipolarity and came to a similar mixed framework of the balance of power theory to better grasp multiple variables. Instead of using the concept of underbalancing, their approach indicates omni-balancing which refers to the intra- and interstate balancing, whereby states have to take into account their domestic ideology (Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, 2002). In the authors point of view (2002), the Middle East only partly follows the raison d’état logic.

> It assumes that in the Middle East the state is the main actor in foreign policy and that the states elite have an interest in maximizing the autonomy and security of the state. It accepts the realist claim that a built-in feature of a state system, anarchy, has generated profound insecurity and a pervasive struggle for power. [...] Finally, the book accepts that states seek to counter these threats through “reason of state,” notably power accumulation and balancing, and that the latter is a key to regional order. (Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, 2002, p.1)

In their opinion (2002), the Middle Eastern states are still in a process of consolidation and are more bound by other levels of analysis than solely by the international system or state level.  

12 In Gause III’s (2014) understanding a “weak state” is not measured by the potential of its army, it is rather the disability of a government to control its society. In this sense, Libya, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon are “weak states” in contrast to Qatar.

13 Moreover, this realist interpretation of anarchy, namely that its existence forces states to react in specific ways, is the main difference with Wendtian constructivism. See chapter 2.0. The analysis will seem similar, but it is the interpretation of the effect of anarchy, that distinguishes the two and enables the use of constructivism within the Middle East.
Following the reasoning of Gause III and Hinnebusch & Ehteshami (2002), Salloukh (2015) adds that the influence of transnational and domestic actors should be taken into account. In his point of view, the missing key is the integration of the agendas of local agencies, with whom Saudi-Arabia or Iran are working together and their impact on intra- and interstate conflicts.

Yet lest we deny them agency, domestic actors also possess their own calculations and interests. They invite and align with regional actors in a bid to balance the political influence of their domestic opponents and advance their own local political interests. Lebanon’s sectarian elite mastered this game of aligning with external actors against domestic opponents in overlapping domestic and regional struggles. Consequently, Lebanon has served as a site for geopolitical contests since its creation. (p. 48)

**Rediscovering the Arab dimension**

Using an eclectic, mixed version of the balance of power theory, constructivism and the English school, Valbjørn and Bank (2012) propose the concept of a New Arab Cold War. Conducting a study on the transformed form of Arabism and are thus “[…] rediscovering the Arab dimension of the Middle East regional politics” (p.1). In their point of view (2012) the overall concepts ignore the Arab nationalism on regional politics:

This is reflected in the absence of one of the most prominent themes in twentieth century discussions about Middle East politics: the impact of Arab nationalism on regional politics. This issue is presented as a thing of the past or simply ignored. Instead regional politics in the ‘New Middle East’ is assumed to be driven either by ‘normal’ Westphalian raison d’état logics or by new region-specific dynamics reflecting cleavages within Islam or between so-called moderates and radicals. Thus, a second striking consistency in the overall debate is a consensus on how Arab politics has ceased to be distinctly Arab. (p.6)

Valbjørn and Bank’s (2014) comparison of the current power shift to the old Arab cold war in the 1950-1960 emphasizes the word Arab to underline the neglect of Arab nationalism. Gause III’s New Middle East Cold War (2014) states that the Arabism of the old Arab cold war declined, whereby Valbjørn and Bank (2012) conclude that it has transformed into societal political Arabism. Moreover:

Societal actors, not upstart republics, now represent the ‘radical’ challenge. The rivalry is no longer primarily an interstate competition, but a Cold War between Arab states, or regimes, and societal actors lead by Islamists with considerable popular support and subscribing to a popular driven Islamic Political Arabism. (Valbjørn & Bank, 2012, p.19)

Rather than creating a new lens, they intend to expand the various theories by integrating political Arabism. Notice that even if they (2012) state that they want to “[…] supplement rather than supplant” the various approaches, they are denying a pure sectarian approach. Writing from this perspective (2007), “this [sectarian] development should not, however, be interpreted as disproof of an emerging new Arab cold war, but rather as a major effect of it “(p.11).

Valbjørn and Bank’s (2012) analysis categorizes political fractions of Arabism into Pan-Arabism, Political Arabism and Cultural Arabism. Due to
their comparison with the old Arab cold war, the analysis of the Lebanon war in 2006 and the Gaza war in 2009, they conclude that

[…] a societal political Arabism rising from an Arab-Islamic public rather than a state-led Pan-Arabism constitutes a dominant frame of reference in Middle East politics during the 21st century. Moreover, not only are relations between key players transformed - Egypt and Saudi Arabia have turned from adversaries into allies, for instance - but the nature of actors has also changed. (p.19)

Their (2012) definition of political Arabism is an Arab world perceived as “[…] an anarchical international society, where Arabs, living in different states, are linked by special bonds” (p.9). The structural similarities to the old Arab cold war, are - in their conclusion - a regional, ideological rivalry surrounded by Arab nationalism that is, and was, related with the Palestine question. The Arab-Islamic public is connected by their Arabic language and is more concerned over Arab issues, than the “Iran-Shi’a threat.” The presentation in the media of the Lebanon war in 2006 and the Gaza war in 2009, using Arab nationalist slogans, underlines their (2007) argumentation.

[…] Hizballah not only portrayed itself, but was also popularly perceived as more of an Arab than a Shi’i political movement. Thus, Nasrallah, was praised as ‘the only true Arab leader today’ and as the ‘new Arab Lion’. (p.8)

Barnett (1998) emphasizes Arabism in his research as well, by stating that it is just as threatening as military strength. Nevertheless, he concludes a trend towards greater state autonomy in contrast to Valbjørn & Bank (2012) and a reduction of Pan-Arabism ideology.

Gause III (2014) on the other hand identifies weak states as the drivers of the conflict, whereby different non-state actors invite outside powers into an intra-state conflict. The very definition of Gause III’s (2014) ‘weak states’, namely that the governments are not being seen as legitimate and therefore cannot control their society, has a different result for Valbjørn and Bank (2012).

The authoritarianism in the Arab world as well as the weakening of states leads to discontent citizens, who then search for support on the regional level. This strengthens Arab-Islamist non-state actors. Valbjørn and Bank’s (2012) mixed bottom-up approach, which includes the sub-state and individual level as well as MES theory, is less a “Sunni-Shi’a” divide as Abdo (2013) describes, but rather a “[…] regimes-people divide” (Valbjørn & Bank, 2007, p.7). What defines the contemporary Middle East as a new Arab cold war is - in their (2012) opinion - the enhanced state-society split:

The nature and impact of this ‘radical’ challenge also differs from the 1950–60s, which was associated with coup d’états and grand Pan-Arab unity schemes implying the dissolution of the existing Arab state system. Today it is rather reflected in a growing delink between states and societies as well as the emergence of a parallel non-statist Arab order existing side by side and being in tense relationship with the official Arab state system. (p.5)

Furthermore, they (2012) indicate that the emerging trans-Arab media, like Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, function as a platform for intense discussion concerning relevant Arab issues and to
a lesser extent as a source of enhancement of the religious divide as Abdo (2013) indicated.

Notice that Abdo (2013) also concludes that there is an upcoming awareness of the Arab identity, however in her point of view, this is a dependent variable increasing the sectarian tensions and does not have a tense relation with the state-level as Valbjørn and Bank (2012) indicate.

In summary, Valbjørn and Bank’s analysis (2012) is an eclectic marriage between realism, constructivism, English school and MES. Their integration of a modified Arabism is not only exceptional but raises the question if the Westphalian narrative is sufficient.

Reflection – Adding a number of issues and stirring

The struggle to integrate identity, transnational factors and the states’ interests in this exceptional region into a realist theory seems to lead authors towards multidimensional fusions. Rival theories from IR are used simultaneously until they fit into the authors model. Salloukh’s (2015) work summarizes the “Montréal school” by Michael Hudson, which best describes the problématique of the realist school.

Long before the Islamic State exploded onto the regional scene in its quest for an imagined borderless caliphate, proponents of this school argued that International Relations (IR) theory could ill afford to ignore the overlap between these different levels of analysis. Through a sustained critique of realism’s obsession with external material threats and its underlying assumption of the state as a unitary rational actor, the Montréal School underscored the stubborn interplay between the domestic and regional levels in the making of the Middle East international relations (Salloukh, 2015, p. 47)

In conclusion, the Middle Eastern rivalry is not sufficiently framed using purely the balance of power or the sectarian theory. This is due to

[…] the interplay between the domestic and regional levels in the making of Middle East international relations. Security and ideational threats are intertwined as regimes scramble to defend both their geopolitical interests and their domestic political order from a mix of domestic, regional and transregional actors and ideologies (Salloukh, 2015, p. 49)

that creates difficulties for IR theory. In consequence, due to the interaction between the levels of analysis,

Scholars of Middle East international relations have long mastered this kind of theoretical eclecticism, deploying any mix of neo-realist, regime security, historical sociology and constructivist explanations in a happy theoretical marriage. (Salloukh, 2015, p.50)

Mixed and eclectic approaches enable scholars to take into account the enormous amount of variables influencing the Middle East, but it simultaneously does not help the development of IR theories. Even if realists combine their theoretical base with parts from rival theories, all of the components (e.g. identity, anarchy) are analyzed from a realist point of view, meaning that the variables are predetermined by rationality, power-seeking characteristics and anarchy.
Therefore, I follow Bilgin’s reasoning (2005) that creating a framework “[…] should involve more than adding a number of ‘new’ issues and stirring” (p.6). The question rises how one can improve IR theory without supplementing its base? How can IR theories better […] predict whether two states will be friends or foes, will recognize each other’s sovereignty, will have dynastic ties, will be revisionist or status quo powers […]” (Wendt, 1992, p.396) in the Middle East.

Wendt’s interpretation of constructivism includes a state-centric view into a constructivist analysis (e.g. ideology, interests and identity).

The main point is that ambitions of states as well as other levels of analysis can be interpreted from a constructivist point of view. Hereby, states’ ambitions are characterized, without being structured by anarchy. The following brief application of social constructivism discusses the most important variables indicated above and stimulates the use of social constructivism within the International Relations of the Middle East.
Part 2: Revising the Middle Eastern constructivism: Lessons for the study of IR theory

The major theoretical proposition to which all constructivists subscribe is that neither individual, state, nor international community interests are predetermined or fixed, but are socially constructed through constant interaction. State behavior forge, shape, and change culture through ideas and practices. State and national interests are the result of the social identities of these actors. (Mingst, Arreguin-Toft, 2011, p. 84)

Wendt’s “[…] reconstruction of state-centric international theory is necessary if we are to theorize adequately about the emerging forms of transnational political identity that states will help bring into being” (1992, p.425) in the Middle East as well as the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. It combines a materialist and individualist perspective that tries to enable the integration of basic assumptions of realism. More precisely, he (1999) redefines power politics and its relations with anarchy to enable a constructivist explanation of these phenomena.

**Anarchy: A Middle Eastern Lockean self-help system**

Wendt (1999) describes three cultures of anarchy, depending on the inter-psychological relationships between states: Hobbesian (enemy); Lockean (rivalry) and Kantian (cooperation). These cultures develop through subjective knowledge about the Self and the Other, resulting in either a positive or negative identification with the Other. Within realism and neorealism, culture and shared ideas do not determine state relations, but material capabilities, through the structuring characteristics of anarchy. This in contrast to social constructivism where anarchy is an ‘empty vessel’, state identity14 is influential and correlates with the cultures of anarchy that develop. State identity is created through socialization, internalization and normative change (Wendt, 1999). This also means that if a state changes its state identity – through for example new leadership – it changes its relations with other states (Altoraifi, 2012). The idea of a state identity is important just as its relation with regional specifications. IR theory mostly assumes that there are universal principles of foreign policies and that state identity does not vary depending on the region (Altoraifi, 2012).

I argue - as do Aarts (2009) and Altoraifi (2012) - that, when accepting three different cultures of anarchy whereby states relations are inter-subjectively formed through history and norms, state identity and its changes are being influenced by the region.

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14 State identity refers to sets of relationships where, based on their chosen identity, states recognize others as friends, enemies, or rivals. The link is to assume that one’s state identity is either threatened or preserved when interacting with other states. In other words, state identity plays a role in defining relationships between states (Altoraifi, 2012).
This automatically leads to the conclusion that there are regional specifications and no universal principles.

Accepting regional specifications, how can one apply Wendt’s interpretation of constructivism to the Middle Eastern region? Due to the fact that state identities and the cultures of anarchy are ideational and permanently evolving, taking into account domestic factors as well as the international and regional system (Wendt, 1999), the Saudi-Iranian rivalry should be analyzed within specific time frames (e.g. 1950-1970; 2003-2016) or through a historical comparison. Though this adds depth to the argumentation, this article will only partly integrate historical events and rather focus upon the contemporary situation.

Saudi-Arabia and Iran are examples of a clear state-identity while they simultaneously see their role as a religious center threatened by one another.

When Gause III (2014) describes - from a modified realist point of view - the Saudi-Iranian rivalry as a ‘cold war’, whereby each side tries to enhance their security through support of non-state actors and are simultaneously not able to balance against their threat due to ideological differences, I would rather follow Wendt’s (1999) reasoning and apply a Lockean anarchical culture.

The cold war concept of Gause III (2014) implies a bipolar structure deriving from anarchy due to its realist base, while Wendt’s analysis argues that “anarchy is what states make of it” and that a bipolar structure, as a cold war, is the consequence of a negative identification. Moreover, while Gause III’s concept is static, Wendt’s Lockean culture implies possible process. Realists presume that only authority can create ideas, but due to anarchy and thus the absences of a centralized authority, states always assume a worst case scenario.

The real question is whether the fact of anarchy creates a tendency for all such interactions to realize a single logic at the macro-level. In the neorealist view they do: anarchies are inherently self-help systems that tend to produce military competition, balances of power, and war. Against this I argue that anarchy can have at least three structures at the macro-level, based on what kind of roles – enemy, rival, and friend – dominate the system. (Wendt, 1999, p. 247)

If it is not anarchy structuring the regional system, but shared knowledge and ideas of one another which evolved through interaction and thereby create an either positive or negative identification, then the three cultures of anarchy do bring analysts closer to the enormous amount of variables influencing the Saudi-Iranian rivalry.

15 Altoraifi (2012): “[…] regional norms were often transformed and redefined according to the changing interests of regional regimes, (Owen 2004: 164) This was evident following the Iranian Revolution (1979), when the change of regime led to a whole new identity for the state and a quest by the newly-formed Islamic Republic to re-shape regional norms had started. […] regional norms have evolved before and after the Iranian Revolution. Following Middle Eastern political history, we can trace five apparent phases […]: the eras of independence, Nasserism, the Cold War, the Second Gulf War, and the fall of Baghdad.”

16 See for more detail Wendt (1999): “Five hundred British nuclear weapons are less threatening to the US than five North Korean ones because of the shared understandings that underpin them. What gives meaning to the forces of destruction are the ‘relations of destruction’ in which they are embedded: the shared ideas, whether cooperative of conflictual, that structure violence between states” (p. 255).
Taking into account the above-described theories, I follow Wendt’s separation between enemy and rival which leads me to the conclusion that the Middle East is in the phase of a Lockean (rivalry), not a Hobbesian (enmity) culture.

Enmity and rivalry both imply that the Other does not fully recognize the Self and therefore may act in a “revisionist” fashion toward it, but the object of recognition and revisionism is different. An enemy does not recognize the right of the Self to exist as a free object at all, and therefore seeks to “revise” the latter’s life or liberty [...] A rival in contrast, is thought to recognize the Self’s right to life and liberty, and therefore seeks to revise only its behavior and liberty. Both impute to the Other’s aggressive intent, but the enemy’s intentions are unlimited in nature, the rivals are limited. (p. 261)

Thus, rivalry has specific implications for foreign policy. Most importantly – stating Wendt (1999) – states must somehow behave in a status quo fashion due to the institution of sovereignty which they accepted along the way. This gives states a more ‘relaxed view’ than a Hobbesian culture. Applied to the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, this logic follows Gause III’s (2014) statement, namely that the two states do not fight each other militarily but rather try to gain influence within other weak states to secure their interests.

This ‘relaxed view’ does not mean, Saudi-Arabia and Iran are no longer worried about their security, it is just that “[...] their anxiety is less intense because certain pathways on the ‘game tree’ – those involving their own ‘death’ – have been removed” (Wendt, 1999, p. 282).

Underlining this argumentation is the ongoing underbalancing or omni-balancing Gause III (2014) and Hinnebusch & Ehteshami (2002) identified. As mentioned previously, their analysis follows a modified Westphalian narrative. Balancing is therefore a systemic effect of anarchy. This article uses Wendt’s reasoning whereby underbalancing is rather an effect of mutual recognition of sovereignty even if states are still in consolidation in the Middle East, as Hinnebusch and Ehteshami (2002) indicate.

In this situation balancing can be paradoxically become more a relatively stable source of order with respect to the many non-existential issues that may remain sources of violent conflicts. [...] but in Lockean systems most states most of the time do not in fact need (nor do they have) this insurance because recognition makes it unnecessary. (Wendt, 1999, p. 285)

The question rises if - in the Middle East - the identified underbalancing or omni-balancing is due to ideological differences, fitting into a mixed realist framework, or is the alignment between Saudi-Arabia and Turkey nonexistent because it is not necessary for its survival? Why then, does Saudi-Arabia or Iran interfere in domestic conflicts of weak states and influence transnational or domestic actors against each other, if balancing is not necessary for their survival?

I argue that there are at least 3 interdependent reasons. The first reason is (1) the above described Middle Eastern Lockean self-help system17, which developed through a process of negative

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17 Wendt’s definition of a self-help system is that due to the fact that there is no centralized government in the world, states live in anarchy and therefore have to help themselves. Realist presume that anarchy structures the system, whereby Wendt believe that states create their own world. “Anarchy is what states make of it”
identification between Iran and Saudi-Arabia since 1979.

It can be argued that the Middle Eastern states developed the institution of a self-help system, a self-created process not a natural structure, deriving from anarchy (Wendt, 1992).

I argue that self-help and power politics do not follow either logically or causally from anarchy and that if today we find ourselves in a self-help world, this is due to a process, not structure. There is no “logic” of anarchy apart from the practices that create and instantiate one structure of identities and interests rather than another; structure has no existence or causal power apart from process. Self-help and power politics are institutions, not essential features of anarchy (Wendt, 1992, p. 394)

This self-created process is constructed through historical events, actions by different states on the international, regional and domestic level. As Altoraifi (2012) summarized, Ayatollah Khomeini’s goal of exporting Iran’s Islamic model of governance to neighboring states not only threatened Saudi-Arabia’s position as a regional status quo power, but simultaneously the Kingdom feared a disturbance of their domestic status quo. While the Iraq–Iran War (1980–1988) worsened sectarian and nationalist sentiments of that period, Iran engaged in revisionist rhetoric and Saudi-Arabia became more concerned of Iran’s growing regional ambitions. “The war of words between the two states had escalated considerably by the mid-1980s, nearly reaching military confrontation in 1984. By 1987, diplomatic relations had been suspended.” (Altoraifi, 2012, p.18).

Ahmadinejad was elected president of Iran, relations between the two states worsened. The war of words reached its climax and several incidents, such as political disturbances in Lebanon (Altoraifi, 2012), the nuclear deal in 2015, the falling oil prices and the latest of the Sheik executions in 2016 enhanced the negative perception of each state towards the other.

Using sectarianism as the pure independent variable for the ongoing rivalry is, as described in the previous chapter, not sufficient. The threat perception between Saudi-Arabia and Iran develops not solely due to religious differences as sectarianism would assume or differences between material capabilities as realism would predict, but due to a negative identification (including ideological differences) between states, enabled through interaction between the state and its domestic environment as well as between the two states themselves. This negative identification creates meaning behind material capabilities and sectarianism (Wendt, 1999). “Religion remains an identifying factor (not identity). A Shiite person is more likely to support Houthi rebels in Yemen, for instance, while a Sunni is more likely to support Syrian rebels.” Nevertheless, religious differences do not enable such a rivalry as it is manifested between Iran and Saudi-Arabia. Their competition for religious leadership is just one of several factors, fueling and initiating a Lockean self-help system in the Middle East.
Authoritarian nature: merging the domestic and international level

Saudi Arabia and Iran share, among others, two common factors: Authoritarian form of governance and concentration of power in the hands of few individuals in each country. (Khatib, 2016)

Sectarianism is one specific part of the Middle Eastern Lockean self-help system, which arose through the authoritarian nature of the states. Sectarian sentiments are driven by the fear of states to lose their fragile, domestic status quo. States and identity groups in the Middle East feel threatened because their security is not guaranteed through regional cooperation, human rights and because their interests are repressed. The interaction between the different agents and structures, whereby the latter two are co-determined, socially-constructs perception (Wendt, 1999). Thereby, states try to maintain their perception of a status quo power (Saudi-Arabia) or revisionist power18 (Iran), which leads them to interact in a specific way towards their domestic environment as well as towards the international and regional stage. Authoritarianism mostly indicates that the state’s elite perceive the domestic status quo as fragile. “In the case of changing power structures in Saudi-Arabia or Iran, in which minorities rule the majority, there is no evidence that the majority will enjoy the same rights and security as the victorious minorities” (Khatib, 2016). The Shi’a minority could be motivated to act against its repression19, that Iran’s revisionist rhetoric enabled and the Arab Uprisings enhanced. It is due to Iran’s and Saudi-Arabia’s authoritarian nature, leading to the fear of losing their status quo or revisionist potential, that their foreign policy is guided by their domestic state of affairs. Wendt defines this interaction as a state-society complex, where the domestic and societal circumstances influence the state indirectly but cannot determine the state’s action (Wendt, 1999). The Syrian war can be viewed as an example of Saudi-Arabia’s society-state complex. If the coalition against Assad could not secure the state, Saudi Arabia would fear a possible upheaval of its Eastern Shiite population, enabling a revolt.

The Arab Uprisings20 enhanced domestic and societal struggles with regards to the domestic status quo and the repressed majority of the represented states, and therefore worsen the negative identification and the Lockean anarchical culture of Saudi-Arabia and Iran.

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18 This term refers to the Power Transition Theory. “The main driver of the theory is the emergence of a rising challenger – one dissatisfied not only with its place in the established order but with the legitimacy of the order itself. The insatiable revisionism of the rising challenger triggers persistent crises that eventually ignite a hegemonic war.” (Schweller R. , 2015) See for instance: Jason W. Davidson, The Origin of Revisionist and Status-quo States (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

19 See Kaye and Wehrey (2007); “Saudi Arabia’s Shiite minority population is around ten percent. Shiites form a local majority in the oil-rich Eastern Province, through which about ten percent of the world’s oil is produced daily (Henderson 2011b). Beginning with the Shiite uprising in the town of Qatif in the Eastern Province in 1979, the Saudi ruling family has been wary of Iranian influence among its Shiite minority in the Eastern Province: this was exacerbated with the Khobar Towers bombing in 1996.”

20 Wendt(1999) argues that “[…] states are intentional, corporate actors whose identities and interests are in important part determined by domestic politics rather than the international system.” (p. 246).
The last reason (3) of an enhanced perception of rivalry, is the diminishing of the American involvement. Saudi Arabia became the United States top ally in the region. Where Iran perceives the American involvement as a military threat, Saudi-Arabia feels that its military security is guaranteed (Chubin & Tripp, 2014). Since the disastrous Iraq war, the American involvement diminished and Saudi-Arabia had to pick up a more active role in regional conflicts. Simultaneously, the nuclear deal and the opening of Iran’s economy, dismissed the US as an exclusive safe haven for Saudi-Arabia and gave more possibilities to Iran.

These three factors are not only interdependent but reproduce state identity, “[…] narratives of who they [states] are, which in turn constitute the interests on the basis of which they make behavioral choices […]” (Wendt, 1995, p.366), which in consequence changes the three factors over time, meaning that it can reinforce the concept of rivalry or might change it.

The continuous Saudi-Iranian interaction and their regional and social contexts, with regards to their interpretation of threat and national interests, were only briefly described in the second part of this article. This in order to point out the potential of constructivism, once the state level is integrated within the Middle Eastern IR theory, and further stimulate constructivist research and thus avoiding being reduced to identity alone.

**Conclusion**

This literature review and theoretical discussion on IR theory within the Saudi-Iranian rivalry has not so much been substantive, in terms of developing yet another theoretical model to describe the rivalry, then it has been in improving constructivism within Middle Eastern IR. Having taken a closer look at the relevant literature, it has become clear that the use of the different levels of analysis is one of the major obstacles causing realist to develop mixed approaches. In addition, the constructivist side focusses – with the exception of Barnett (1998) and Telhami (2002, 2004) – primarily on a primordial sectarian divide which not only oversimplifies the different identities existing in the Middle East, but the use of constructivism itself.

The focus of this article has been on this specific part of differences between the used IR theories and the mixed approaches as well as their similarities. Since it has identified a vast array of specific positions on the rivalry, the challenges of IR theory itself to analyze the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, were underlined. It has shown how these positions are related to different visions on the nature of the religious divide and to the role of anarchy. The use of Wendtian constructivism avoids – through the integration of the state-level – a pure sectarian analysis within the under-represented constructivism and further deepens the constructivist application within the Middle Eastern studies. The three interdependent reasons, guiding the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, indicated the importance of the use of constructivism.
The first reason is (1) the Middle Eastern, Lockean self-help system, which developed through a process of negative identification between Iran and Saudi-Arabia since 1979. Furthermore (2) their authoritarian nature which leads to the fear of losing their status quo due to domestic incongruence enhanced by the Arab Uprisings and lastly (3) the enhanced perception of rivalry caused by the diminishing of the American involvement. Regional and domestic characteristic as well as incidents and interactions were only briefly described in this second part of the article. In doing so, this article wants to stimulate the incorporation of the use of constructivism within the Middle Eastern IR theory.

**Discussion**

IR theory generalizations are problematic, and findings provisional. Local context cannot be emphasized enough. Therefore, it became apparent that further research is needed with regards to the gap between Middle Eastern studies and IR theory. It will not only enhance IR theory within the Middle East but in general. Middle-range theories should thereby be taken into account with regards to regional specifications and non-state actors.

Secondly, based on the insights of this study, the discussion if Arabism has declined or transformed into a societal, political Arabism deserves more attention. It seems that only Valbjørn & Bank integrate Arabism, while this kind of supranational identity has played an important role in the Arab states in the 1950’s and 1960’s, influencing enormously Arab politics.

In summary, at this stage, we lack various constructivist interpretations, that look beyond a pure sectarian lens.

This paper has limited itself to a brief application of Wendtian constructivism. Notice, that there are various constructivist scholars that differ from Wendt’s reasoning. The critics remarks are left out in this article, but should be considered when choosing Wendt’s application and conducting further research.

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