



TOPIC 1

Bringing an end to the Middle Eastern Cold War

Committee: **Security Council**

Welcome to this document which should guide you through the basics of our topic, its historical background, development and key characters, as well as help you direct your further research. This year, the topic for the Security Council is “Bringing an end to the Middle Eastern Cold War”.

The Middle East is a terribly complex region and is currently home to a lot more than just the ongoing struggle for influence between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Although these two countries never officially declared war on each other, they tend to support opposing sides in other nearby conflicts. The dispute is therefore based on the effort to gain geopolitical and economic supremacy over the region. This is why the conflict can be labelled as the “Middle Eastern Cold War” or also as the “Iran-Saudi Arabia proxy conflict”. By pushing other, smaller and poorer countries, to act as their proxy in this dispute, Iran and Saudi Arabia are further fuelling the tension and destabilizing the region.

Background and history

In the first half of the 20th century, Iran and Saudi Arabia were both more or less sovereign states, rich thanks to oil reserves and both with a large Muslim population. Iran faced an attack of the UK and Russia twice during this time (1907 and 1941). The warfare undermined stability of Iranian government and in 1953, during a coup backed by the US, the popular prime minister was removed, and a monarch, Reza Shah, took his place. Nevertheless, chaos grew as Shah accomplished very little by issuing multiple reforms and terrorizing the population with secret police.

Those are only some of the reasons why the Saudi monarch had more legitimacy and control over his country’s population than Shah. Eventually, this led to the Iranian Revolution of 1979. During this massive event, Iran became a republic. Revolutionists (led by Ayatollah Khomeini) started to call for abolishment of monarchy in other Muslim countries, too. That is exactly where the tension began to grow between Iran and Saudi Arabia, whose monarch had no intention of establishing democracy.

There was also a religious context to the tension. Up until then, Saudi Arabia was considered to be the representative of the Muslim world – that is mainly thanks to their holy sites, Mecca and Medina. At that point though, Khomeini began to claim that his revolution made Iran the only legitimate Muslim state. Not only that – although Islam has always been the prevalent religion in both countries, most Saudis are Sunni, whereas Iranians are mostly Shia. Although these two sects

were never too violent towards each other, their division played a role in development of the conflict.

In the 80s, Iranian government encouraged a lot of Shia-led groups with revolutionary tendencies to stand up to their government and overthrow monarchies in other Middle East countries, including Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Afghanistan. In response to these growing tendencies, Saudi Arabia tried to protect itself by strengthening their relationship with the US and other countries of the Gulf. At that point, the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) was established. Iran, with its growing power, eventually grew into a threat to other countries as well. In the 1980, Iraq, led by Saddam Hussein, invaded Iran. They hoped to stop the revolution as well as gain power and annex some of Iran's areas rich in oil reserves. Iraqi military did not get far, though. They only managed to gain control over a thin strip of land near the border of the two countries, and even this land was regained by Iran by 1982. After that, Iran was on the offensive, which alarmed Saudi government. As Saudis panicked, they provided Iraq with weapons, money, and other help. They needed Iraq to stand and serve as some sort of "buffer" between them and Iran. The war claimed almost half a million lives. Saudis helped Iraq until 1988, when the UN brokered a ceasefire. In 2003, an invasion led by the US occurred and resulted in deposing Hussein. He was later sentenced to death as a war criminal and executed in 2006. The US struggled to find a new government, though, which resulted in armed religious groups taking control of Iraq – some of them even extremist. The population of Iraq separated into Sunni and Shia. Iran and Saudi Arabia saw that as an opportunity to gain influence in the region and started supporting these religious militias materially and financially – Iran encouraged Shia groups to fight, and on the other hand, Saudi Arabia supported Sunni militias. This war, during which Iraq served as a proxy war between the two countries, continued until the Arab Spring.

Middle Eastern Cold War Now

The current conflict began in 2011, when the Arab Spring sparked anti-monarchy, pro-democracy revolutions across the Middle East and North Africa. In Libya and Syria, civil wars outbroke, and through destabilization of three major countries (Syria, Iraq and Egypt), a power void was created. During this time, the Saudi government became very concerned that their monarchy would be overthrown. However, deepening the ties among GCC countries actually centralized Saudi

influence over the region. They gained control over military, economy and political matters in the area.

In nearby countries, just like in Iraq, Iran supported Shia representatives, and Saudi supported the Sunni. This time though, even their own militaries were sent out to neighbouring states (Yemen and Syria) to protect the countries' interests. None of the two key players (Iran and Saudi Arabia) wish for any conflict. Yet, as more civil wars keep flaring up, the Middle East becomes more and more chaotic. These wars create circumstances that put Iranian and Saudi interests at stake, which is why they tend to get so involved, escalating the tension altogether.

With other countries all over the world taking sides in this dispute, military tensions keep growing and "minor" confrontations (including various airstrikes and cyber-attacks) are still taking place with no end in sight. In April 2022, Iran and Saudi Arabia participated in peace talks brokered by Iraq. Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs claims the negotiations were positive and serious, offering a new perspective. They also stated that an agreement was reached to hold the next round of negotiations between the two countries. However, a date was not yet specified.

Key characters:

Iran is a mountainous country in the Middle East. As a consequence of the geographical factors, the area is arid with very little potential for agriculture. Iran is rich in natural resources, especially petroleum. However, an embargo imposed by the USA significantly limits the revenues for Iran.

In the past, Iran (formerly the Persian Empire) used to be the most influential empire in the region due to its convenient location, connecting Asia and Europe. Strong dynasties led the Empire from the 8th century until a revolution in 1979. The formation of the Islamic state followed, forming a parliamentary democracy with a Shi'i Islamic theocracy.

Today, the political system is facing major challenges as the protests, sparked by the recent [death of Mahsa Amini](#), are not coming to an end. Additionally, it has been confirmed that Iran supplies [Russia with missiles and drones](#). This could potentially escalate the Russian war in Ukraine and alter the order of international relations.

Saudi Arabia is a state with remarkable petroleum resources, making up 17% of the global petroleum resources. The kingdom deems itself the only legal guard of the holiest cities - Mecca and Medina. It is also pursuing the idea of pan-islamism in the Middle East region, with Saudi Arabia being the central power.

The kingdom was formed in the 20th century with the rise of the Saud family. Their success was strongly linked to their strictly conservative Islamic ideology. However, the Saudi royal family was continuously accused of corruption and mishandling the country's wealth. Civil discontent increased during the Persian Gulf War in the 1990s. The Persian Gulf War is especially known for the presence of the U.S. military troops until 2005.

Iraq was historically one of the richest countries of the region being the center of ancient Mesopotamia. It was then part of the Greek and Roman Empires, however, it has been an Arabic country since the 7th century. It became part of the Ottoman Empire and gained its independence after World War 1. The region suffered from instability and terrible bloodshed until the 1960s when a nationalist and socialist regime took over.

At that time, rich petroleum resources were found in Iraq making it easy to fund ambitious projects. The era of prosperity came to an end with the rise of power of Saddam Hussein, a ruthless autocrat who led the country into the Iran-Iraq War and the Persian Gulf War. As a result, Iraq was financially drained having no alliance rapport in the Arab region.

Despite the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, the country is financially dependent on other neighboring states.