Transnational religious networks and geopolitics in the Muslim World

Simon Mabon, s.mabon@lancaster.ac.uk
Lancaster University, UK

Edward Wastnidge, edward.wastnidge@open.ac.uk
The Open University, UK

Debates around the sectarianisation of politics across the Middle East and Muslim world more broadly have opened new spaces of enquiry into the interrelationship between religion and geopolitics. The nature of links between Iran and Saudi Arabia and various groups in the Muslim world differs across time and space, shaped by a range of context specific factors. Networks are shaped by the interaction of their constituent parts and the organisation of power among their members and thus, as a consequence networks are neither fixed nor universal. Here, context is key, resulting in different types of relationships across spaces.

Much academic and policy-oriented work on transnational religious networks has historically reflected Western governments' preoccupation with security issues vis-à-vis Islamist 'extremist' groups. This narrow prism distorts understanding of the roles that such networks play, and thus necessitates further exploration of the multiple levels and characteristics of transnational religious networks, be they state, sect or community-led.

In May 2019, tensions between Iran and the United States dramatically escalated following the imposition of US sanctions. Across the Persian Gulf a number of tankers were attacked, while others were seized, including a British oil tanker detained for 'violating international maritime rules'. Amid this escalation of tensions, international news outlets carried stories suggesting that Iran told its proxies to prepare for war. Referring to Iran's longstanding relationships with groups across Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and Palestine, these stories played on the idea of a complex web of often – although not exclusively – sectarian networks that cut across sovereign borders and help Tehran to achieve its geopolitical aims. Yet the reality of relations between Iran and local groups is far more complex, determined by a range of factors. In the years after the Arab Uprisings, relations between rulers and ruled have become increasingly frayed, leading to political contestation in a number of states across the Middle East. Amid this contestation, political organisation began to fragment, leading to conditions of uncertainty, violence and, in some cases, conflict. As war broke out in Syria and Yemen, local actors sought external patrons, while regional powers sought local allies to further their own interests. These moves echo similar events across the Middle East's turbulent history where actors directly involved in the conflict built relations with external powers to further their cause and external actors cultivated local actors in pursuit of their own geopolitical goals. Perhaps the most obvious manifestation of this type of relationship was the emergence of Hizballah, the Lebanese Party of God, which was formed in 1982 during the Lebanese civil war with help from Iran. In the formative years of the group there was a very clear patron–client relationship that existed between Tehran and Hizballah, with the former dictating the actions of the latter. The relationship was made more complex by the addition of Syria, a logistical conduit through which Iranian support could reach the group. Relations between Iran, Syria and Hizballah became known as the 'axis of resistance' (El Husseini, 2010), a complex set of interconnections united by ideology and positioned against Israel and the United States. While Iran appears the most dominant, historically none was able to exert hegemony over the others (Mohns and Bank, 2012). This is perhaps best seen in the summer of 2006 and the actions of the Party of God becoming embroiled in conflict with Israel, seemingly without the direct approval of its patron. In standing up to the Israeli Defence Force, Hizballah and the 'Axis of Resistance' gained a great deal of popular support across the Middle East, resulting in the group's leader Hassan Nasrallah and the Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, becoming two of the most popular leaders across the region, much to the chagrin of Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Arab states.

In a 2004 interview with the US news channel NBC, King Abdullah of Jordan articulated concerns about a burgeoning 'Shia Crescent' and increased Iranian influence across the Middle East, stretching from the West coast of Iran to Lebanon, accusing Shia groups of possessing strong relationships with Iran as a consequence of existing Shia networks that cut across sovereign borders. The history of Iranian support for some of these groups – such as Hizballah or the Islamic Front of the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB) – meant that Abdullah's narrative found traction among many across the Middle East, often resulting in efforts to securitise the 'Shia threat' amid the collapsing of geopolitical and theological concerns (Mabon, 2018).

The perception of complex links and of mixed loyalties continues to plague relations between Shia populations and their host countries across the Middle East. Allegations of nefarious intent on the part of Shia groups in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and in pre-2003 Iraq resulted in widespread marginalisation and discrimination, albeit with little visible evidence documenting links between these populations and Iran. Yet such allegations are not new. During the Iran–Iraq war, Saddam Hussein was deeply suspicious about the loyalties of Shia groups across the state, fearing that shared religious ties to the nascent Islamic Republic would trump both ethnic and national affinity. History shows us that these fears were misguided, yet amid widespread geopolitical concerns post 2003 about burgeoning Iranian influence, regimes once again viewed Shia communities as fifth columnists.

In the 1980s, in the aftermath of the establishment of the Islamic Republic, Iran engaged in a pro-active process of exporting the revolution, working to establish groups that would support its geopolitical agendas. The most prominent example is Hizballah, yet Iranian support for the IFLB was key in supporting the group's attempted coup d'état against the Al Khalifa ruling family through the provision of weapons, funding and ideological support. While ultimately unsuccessful, the legacy of the attempted coup remains, as a means of supporting claims of perfidious Iranian support for Shia groups across Bahrain.

While there is little doubting the existence of links between Iran and a range of groups across the Middle East, the nature of these links differs across time and space, shaped by a range of context specific factors. Networks are shaped by the interaction of their constituent parts and the organisation of power among their members and, as a consequence, networks are neither fixed nor universal. Here, context is key, resulting in different types of relationships across spaces. Moreover, while many refer to groups within these networks as Iranian proxies, emerging from power relations and the apparent dominance of Tehran, this denies the agency of groups who have a degree of capacity to operate independently of Iranian dominance.

Yet these allegations are not limited to Shia communities. Indeed, amid turbulent events in peripheral areas of Iran, largely populated by ethnic minorities – many of whom are Sunni – Tehran alleged that groups possessed links with Saudi Arabia, the US, UK, or Israel. While much of this is a consequence of political blustering, it reveals deeper issues concerning the nature of trans-state relationships amid shared ethno-religious links.

Religion plays a prominent role in domestic and foreign politics across the region. It serves as a source of legitimacy and a means of uniting people. By extension, it also can play a divisive role for social, political and economic relations. During the Lebanese civil war, local actors involved in the fighting sought external patrons to support their cause, while external actors sought local patrons in pursuit of their agendas. The nature of these relationships differed across time and space, reflecting myriad often competing agendas at play. Shared sectarian identities have provided increased opportunities for the cultivation of trans-state networks and relationships and the sectarianisation of political life has increased this possibility.

Debates around the sectarianisation of politics across the Middle East and Muslim world more broadly have opened new spaces of enquiry into the interrelationship between religion and geopolitics. As key regional powers exhibiting strong identity claims and in their respective foreign policies, Iran and Saudi Arabia are prominent in such debates (Mabon, 2013). However, their transnational influence, based in part – yet not exclusively – on sectarian affiliation, is often taken as a given thus reinforcing sectarian analyses and narratives, and ignoring the inherent complexities at play. The intricacies of the rivalry are currently being debated in much academic and media analysis, with a focus on the high politics, diplomacy and strategic posturing of both governments. Furthermore, the focus of much academic and policy-oriented work on transnational religious networks has historically reflected Western governments' preoccupation with security issues vis-à-vis Islamist 'extremist' groups. This narrow prism distorts understanding of the roles that such

networks play, and thus necessitates further exploration of the multiple levels and characteristics of transnational religious networks, be they state, sect or community-led.

In the years following the Arab Uprisings, this focus on extremism has been coupled with the in-depth study of sectarianism, resulting in a number of global projects exploring the manifestation of sect based difference, such as SEPAD and its sister project, SWAR (Sectarianism in the Wake of the Arab Revolts), based at Aarhus and led by Morten Valbjørn. Traditional approaches to the study of sectarianism draw work from identity politics, typically falling into primordialist, instrumentalist or 'third way' approaches (Valbjørn, 2018). These positions typically focus on how and why sectarian groups have been mobilised within states, either emerging from primordial differences or, as Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel suggest, from the manipulation of sect based differences by regimes in pursuit of regime survival (Hashemi and Postel, 2017). A key feature of Hashemi and Postel's *sectarianisation thesis* is the context within which regimes operate, namely increasing tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran. As the authors note,

> The Saudi-Iranian rivalry is critical to understanding the rise of sectarianism in Muslim societies at the end of the 20th century. Both Tehran and Riyadh lay claim to leadership of the Islamic world, and since 1979 they have battled for hearts and minds across the Middle East, North Africa and parts of Asia. This conflict, however, has experienced ebbs and flows, and sectarian relations in the region have mirrored this pattern (2017: 7).

Such a claim appears intuitive, particularly when mapping the characteristics of the rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran onto the history of sect based violence across the Islamic world. In spite of this, Hashemi and Postel – and many others – fail to delve deeper into the relationships between the two states and their co-sectarian kin across the Islamic world. While there have been some studies on Saudi funding of clerics (Farquhar, 2016) and extremist groups, and on Iranian transnational religious links and diplomacy (Mervin, 2010; von Maltzahn, 2013; Wastnidge, 2015; 2018), little work has been undertaken looking at the networks that exist and operate across shared sectarian positions and in a spatial context also. Despite this, it is routinely suggested that regional powers exert influence over their sectarian kin.

History appears to support such a hypothesis. In times of crisis, such as the Syrian conflict, Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Arab states provided a great deal of financial, logistical and military support to rebel groups in their struggle against the Assad regime (Phillips, 2016) while Iran continued to support to the regime of Bashar Al Assad, reproducing the 'axis of resistance' narrative in the process. Similar things were seen in the aftermath of the 2003 US led invasion of Iraq as Iran sought to exert influence across the state, drawing on religious ties with the majority Shia population, much to the chagrin of Saudi Arabia. In these cases we see the overlap of political, theological and geopolitical, as myriad pressures, fears, hopes and prejudices coalesce, penetrating and transcending borders, seemingly with little regard for sovereignty. Yet these flows are more complex than *prima facia* observations would suggest, as this special issue endeavours to show.

To help further understanding of the wider geopolitical currents in the Muslim world, this special edition will focus on the varied transnational religious networks that help to facilitate the spread of ideas and influence in the Middle East and beyond. It aims to shed light on hitherto under-explored and over-simplified case studies of religious networks in the Muslim world. In doing so it will show how questions of religious authority, political legitimacy and claims of leadership are intertwined and made ever more complex when overlaid with the destabilising effects of geopolitical rivalries. A number of key questions have been considered by contributing authors in the workshop and subsequent discussions that preceded this collection. These include: the extent to which religious networks in the Middle East and wider Muslim world are a product of geopolitical competition between regional powers; the way in which religious authority is transmitted and understood across such networks; the influence that these networks exert on geopolitical dynamics in the Middle East; the extent to which transnational religious networks have become securitised; and how state-sponsored transnational religious networks differ from their non-state equivalents.

Exploring transnational religious networks and their intersection with geopolitics of the Muslim world provides ample opportunity to further examine a range of political and societal engagements between a variety of actors. The study of transnational networks in international politics is nothing new of course, and many of the networks explored in this volume have historical roots stretching back

centuries. However, the academic literature on networks in international politics is very much a product of the late 20th century. The seminal work of Castells (1996) posited the notion of a 'global network society' based on contemporaneous advances in information and communication technologies at the time. This saw such technologies having an enabling character thus paying a key role in globalisation. In the context of the political aspects of globalisation, the growth of transnational networks can be seen as 'the extension of political power and political activity beyond the boundaries of the modern nation-state' (Held et al, 1999: 49). However, transnationalism in the globalising sense is largely rooted in the concerns of liberalism, drawing on the complex interdependence foundations provided by Nye and Keohane (1971), and echoing the thinking of Fukuyama (1992) and others.

Historically, scholars of international politics have tended to link transnational networks to issues of global governance (Willetts, 1996; 2010; Risse-Kappen, 1995; Weiss and Gordenker, 1996) focusing on non-governmental organisations (NGOs), transnational companies and other actors challenging state power. Working in the constructivist International Relations (IR) tradition, Sikkink (2009: 245) notes that 'networks have not replaced the state but exist as an alternative organisational form alongside of states, international organisations and markets'. While Sikkink and others note the power of ideas and values in shaping the international system, insufficient attention is given to the agency of the actors within this context (Barnett, 1999). The networks under exploration within this collection of essays note the agency not only of the networks in question as organisational forms, but also seek to emphasise the relative agency of the actors involved. In doing so, one can observe how appeals to state, sub-state, transnational, religious and myriad other identities act as a complexifying and contestable feature. These feed into wider geopolitical currents, such as the Saudi–Iran rivalry, and other domains, such as contestation of religious authority between competing religious centres of power. Adopting a one size fits all or discipline-specific framework to understand such networks does scant justice to the contributions to this special edition. By adopting and synthesising a range of approaches from IR, religious studies, social and political theory and beyond, the authors ably demonstrate how the varied networks under consideration intersect with the complex geopolitics of the Muslim world.

In terms of the Muslim world, academic debate on transnational, non or sub-state networks has all too often fallen prey to the mores of the policy world and media through its focus on 'terrorist' networks, particularly since 2001 and the start of the War on Terror. Issues of definition aside, which constitute a whole other volume, such work has drawn on network theory and tended to focus on violent non-state actors such as al Qaeda (Burke, 2004; Sageman, 2004; Lowenheim, 2007; Kahler, 2009). While we acknowledge this as a corpus of literature, our intention is to move away from essentialised notions of Islam that are conflated with such extremist standpoints and to offer a more nuanced understanding of networks that are shaped by myriad factors, contingent on place and space. Identity considerations remain key, however, to any discussion of transnational religious networks. The scope of this special edition is broad, encompassing the Muslim world and highlighting lesser known case studies whereby wider transnational identities are articulated through multiple networks.

Scholars such as Mandaville (2001; 2014) and Telhami and Barnett (2002) have explored the various identity currents in the politics and international relations of the Muslim world. Studies that have engaged with the concept of soft power, in terms of state behaviour and foreign policy making (Haynes, 2008; 2016; Wastnidge, 2015; 2018; Mandaville and Hamid, 2018), have also highlighted how states in the Middle East have utilised their religious influence to expand their reach. The literature in this area has tended to focus on state-led articulations of identity, whereas this collection looks at networks that are at once situated within and sometimes of the state, yet also operate outside. This is extensively documented by Laurence Louer, who explores who Shia groups capitalised on existing clerical networks to increase their influence across Gulf societies. Yet as Louer (2008) articulates, this was not a monolithic process, as factional differences came to the fore, while networks existed within the maelstrom of local politics, shaped by questions about identity, ideology and security.

Once again, the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran provides paradigmatic examples of religious 'soft power' competition. In the formative stages of the Islamic Republic, the two states embarked on a cycle of competing rhetoric over claims to leadership of the Islamic world, rejecting the claims of the other in the process. This competition took place in a range of arenas including the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and through the cultivation of relationships across the Muslim world. Over

the years that followed, the OIC became a space for the articulation of political concerns, often concerning the actions of Iran and its 'proxies' across the Middle East (Mabon, 2013), though it also momentarily acted as a forum for dialogue during the more constructive era of ties that coincided with the Khatami presidency in Iran (Wastnidge, 2011).

The historical rootedness of the networks explored in the following contributions shows that much of the literature on transnational networks and movements in international politics misses out their inherent depth and complexity. Furthermore, its emphasis on space and time compression means that spatial issues tend to get overlooked in the rush to reduce all networks to technologically-linked phenomena. The contention of this volume is that the interplay of transnational religious networks with geopolitics, an inherently spatial concept, is ripe for further exploration, as the case studies offered in the following ably demonstrate.

As Doreen Massey (2005) argues, space plays an integral role in contemporary political life yet is largely ignored within discussions of IR. For Massey, space should be seen as a site of heterogeneity that is shaped through the interaction of the global with the 'intimately tiny'. Giving credence to local communities within the context of a globalising world, Massey's approach emphasises the role of agency within broader geopolitical currents, while also acknowledging the potentiality of politics. This approach is implicitly adopted in what follows, which gives credence to the actions of local actors within the context of broader regional currents. While it remains important to acknowledge the importance and influence of geopolitical currents, we must not disregard the role of local actors who operate not only within the context of broader questions of regional security but also within the confines of localised concern or, put another way, the contingencies of local context.

In a similar vein to 'networks', geopolitics is a term that has entered the popular lexicon and is oft-quoted in academic works, newspapers and news coverage. However, there is often little attention given to what is actually meant by the term. By means of a definition, Braden and Shelley (2000: 5) state that 'Geopolitics is the study of International Relations from a geographical perspective'. In advancing this perception, the authors highlight how location remains of primary importance in IR, and how the discipline itself is distinguished from other social sciences through defining issues of place, location, scale, region and boundaries, in other words a spatial perspective on human behaviour. As such, the state remains an important tool for geopolitical analysis, and interstate relations within the Middle East and beyond can be understood partly in such terms. In his work on the relationship between geography and national identity, David Hooson (1994: 3) notes that

> The urge to express one's identity, and to have it recognised tangibly by others, is increasingly contagious and has to be recognised as an elemental force even in the shrunken, apparently homogenising, hi-tech world of the end of the 20th Century.

Works, such as Agnew's *Geopolitics* have sought to move it on from its basis in classical realist thinking. In his discussion of what he terms 'binary geopolitics', Agnew (2003) makes an important point in highlighting how definition of the 'self' is only possible through identification of an 'other' that is both threatening and alluring, thus showing the importance of self-identification in international relations, a theme of particular relevance to debates around securitisation of certain identity groups. Of greater relevance to this collection, Ewan Anderson's work has applied geopolitical analysis to the Middle Eastern region. Recognising the importance of land routes for trade, namely the old 'Silk Road' that passed through Iran, Anderson demonstrates the significance of Iran's geographical location stating that 'Although it is in a sense peripheral, it is highly influential in that it provides the Middle East … links with the Trans-Caucasus, Central Asia and the Indian Subcontinent.' (Anderson, 2000: 316), thus emphasising the spatial element that is intrinsic to any discussion of transnational networks. Be they religious or otherwise. Though scholars such as Kelly (2016: 25) argue that geopolitics provides a 'neutral, objective and ideologically free tool for use by foreign policy experts', its intersection with transitional religious networks provides a rich area for further study, as Iran's position as a regional power with strong religious identity claims demonstrates.

This special edition is comprised of six articles which interrogate the complex interrelationships between transnational religious networks and geopolitics in the Muslim world. As previously noted, part of the aim is to move away from the oft-sensationalised idea of proxy actors operating across the region, doing the bidding of nefarious actors – typically Iran – to offer a more nuanced reading of relationships that operate across state borders. Each piece is followed by a response from an expert in the respective fields of each author.

The first contribution to this collection starts with the transnational in its broadest sense, looking at how identities that reach beyond the nation state are articulated and instrumentalised by leading regional powers. In his treatment of transnational identities in the foreign policies of Iran and Turkey, Edward Wastnidge explores how identity claims are inherent in the transnational appeal of these two regional powers. By examining Turkey and Iran as states that exhibit strong identity currents within their foreign relations, Wastnidge demonstrates how claims to wider transnational identities help serve as justification for certain foreign policy actions. This is illustrated through an analytical framework that combines role-based Foreign Policy Analysis and the concept of strategic narrative. In doing so, the article highlights how multiple and overlapping identities articulated at the transnational level serve as vectors in which to pursue strategic foreign policy narratives in each country's perceived sphere of influence.

Amal Saad's contribution homes in on one of the most regularly cited yet often misunderstood relationships in the international relations of the Middle East, that of Iran and Hizballah. Drawing on extensive interviews and unparalleled access to key Hizballah figures, Saad deftly debunks the notion of proxy so often used in relation to the Iran–Hizballah relationship. By emphasising its relative autonomy from Iran, Saad utilises insight from across IR theory to demonstrate how Hizballah can be viewed as a regional power in its own right. In doing so, she surmises that the relationship is far from one of proxy and is better conceived of as an interdependent symbiosis between close allies. The response to this article is by Adham Saouli.

Focusing on Yemen, Vincent Durac's contribution starts by critically contextualising the notion of sectarianism in relation to politics and conflict in the Middle East. This sheds light on the inflexibility of sectarian analyses and understandings of regional political dynamics which often underplay the significance of domestic political concerns. Durac moves on to critically appraise sectarian interpretations of the conflict in Yemen, exposing the limitations of sectarian framing. To apply such logic, Durac argues, is simplistic and belies both history and current realities. Rather, Yemen's own complicated domestic political experience, its religious composition, and the complex motivations of regional powers all challenge predominant narratives of this enduring conflict. The response to this piece is given by Maria-Louise Clausen.

Using insight from securitisation theory to offer a novel framework for analysis, Hasan Hafidh and Maryyum Mehmood trace the securitisation of Shi'i communities in two cases studies, Bahrain and Pakistan. By putting forward a model of 'transnational securitisation', Hafidh and Mehmood take securitisation theory in a new direction by viewing 'othering' as a by-product of various types of securitisation of identities. Through the two cases studies, the authors skilfully demonstrate how securitisation of identity can be amplified through state-led repressive practices, as seen in the case of Bahrain and Saudi intervention there in defence of its Sunni monarchy, and in 'bottom-up' processes of communal othering in Pakistan, as a result of extremist proselytisation and transnational financing of Jihadist groups there. This offering's response is provided by Umer Karim.

While noting the historical impact of Saudi-financed Wahhabist networks, Simon Fuchs' article seeks to debunk some of the arguments surrounding the extent and depth of the Saudi influence on anti-Shi'i sectarian discourses in Pakistan. Drawing on his ground-breaking research in Pakistan, Fuchs focuses on one of the most virulently anti-Shi'i organisations in Pakistan, the Sipah-i Sahabah-i Pakistan (Army of the Companions of the Prophet), exploring its strategies and activities to counter Pakistani Shi'i consciousness following the Iranian Revolution. Fuchs demonstrates how the sectarian discourses utilised by anti-Shi'i Pakistani ulema are considerably divergent from that of their Saudi counterparts, thus emphasising the necessity to focus on local expressions of sectarianism as experienced in Pakistan. Saloni Kapur provides the response to this article.

In her exploration of the dynamics between religious networks in London's 'Shi'i Triangle' , Elvire Corboz ably illustrates the transnational contest over sacred authority in contemporary Shi'ism. Corboz's focus on London's Shi'i community perfectly demonstrates how the space where transnational religious networks intersect with wider geopolitical currents is a fascinating and rich area for further research. Mapping the varied religious networks shows us that while there is a tacit contestation over sacred authority within Shi'i Islam, there are also a number of areas of collaboration and cohabitation, thus refuting zero-sum style analyses that often predominate when exploring the dynamics between those networks associated with the religiopolitical leadership of the Islamic Republic, and those in Karbala. Samira Nasirzadeh replies.

In the review symposium, Francesco Belcastro, Olivia Glombitza and Danny Postel review Christopher Phillips' (2016) *The Battle for Syria. International Rivalry and the New Middle East.* Christopher Phillips provides an author's reply.

From this analysis, a number of points have emerged that help to understand networks operating across the region. First, it is imperative to ground the actors involved in a network within their local context, bringing together political, social, economic, cultural, and theological forces. In doing this, we are better placed to understand the forces that shape behaviour. Second, that networks are fluid entities, shaped – and reshaped – by both their constituent parts and the regional contexts within which they operate. Third, that they are heterogenous, sites of plurality and possibility. As the following articles show, to view networks as static and abstract phenomena that can applied *writ large* is infelicitous and problematic. Thus, the work that these articles undertake in debunking notions of proxy and challenging simplified sectarian analyses demonstrates necessity for nuanced, pluralistic approaches that will help further understanding of cases that are all too often subject to hyperbole and the whims of vested interests that rarely serve the people well.

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