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The Saudi-Iranian antagonism: the case of Yemen

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to focus on the regional antagonism between Saudi Arabia and Iran and examine how it influences the balance of power in the Mediterranean. How does this competition affect the developments in the regional sub-system of the Middle East and what has been the role of the two states in intra-state conflicts? Our central research question is stated as follows: Why do regional powers utilize proxy wars and indirect conflict in their quest to satisfy their national interests and acquire a leadership position in a sub-system? Saudi Arabia and Iran have indirectly intervened in the domestic politics of neighboring countries by supporting their affiliated, often insurgent, groups to increase their influence in the region and have projected their own national interests in their foreign policy regarding neighboring states. That has been the case with Yemen where Riyadh and Tehran support opposing powers in the ongoing civil war in the country, while their involvement has played a vital role in the prolongation and escalation of the conflict. In this thesis we investigate the reasons why states intervene in local conflicts, we examine the levels of the Saudi-Iranian antagonism and focus on its consequences on the case of Yemen.

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Abstract

1. Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to focus on the regional antagonism between Saudi Arabia and Iran and examine how it influences the balance in the Mediterranean. How does this competition affect the developments in the regional sub-system of the Middle East and what has been the role of the two states in intra-state conflicts? In their course to acquire a leading role in the region both Saudi Arabia and Iran have indirectly intervened in the domestic politics of neighboring countries by supporting their affiliated, often insurgent, groups to increase their influence in the region and have projected their own national interests in their foreign policy regarding neighboring states. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran want to claim the leadership role of the Muslim world and the MENA area and thus utilize the state failure of their neighbors to achieve their goals. This practice has resulted in several proxy wars and in the further destabilization of an already fragile region.

In this thesis we focus on the case of Yemen, a fragmented country with a delicate balance. Saudi Arabia and Iran support their affiliated groups and try to promote their own national interests in the political scene of Yemen, a practice that has led to the escalation and prolongation of civil war in the country. What is the impact of the regional competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran, how does it affect neighboring state and non-state actors and what is its impact on the regional balance of power? What are the consequences of this antagonism in the case of Yemen?

The central research question of the analysis is stated as follows: Why do regional powers utilize proxy wars and indirect conflict in their quest to satisfy their national interests and acquire a leadership position in a sub-system? In order to examine this question we make use of the theoretical tools provided by the neorealist school of thought and more specifically, offensive realism. According to Mearsheimer, the ultimate goal of states is to ensure their survival and increase their power over their rivals. In order to do that, states aim at acquiring either global or, if that is not possible, regional hegemony. At the same time, state actors face security dilemmas and cannot be sure of the intentions of other players. These circumstances lead to increased political antagonism as the stakes are high and to a zero-sum game, where the losses of one player are wins to another. Hence, state actors aim at increasing their

share to international or regional power and ensure their survival by becoming the strongest state in the system (Mearsheimer 2011: 75-92).

In line with the English school, Buzan underlines that after the Cold War, one of the main trends regarding international security, is moving from an international to a regional level, as great powers avoid wide political engagements and allow sub-systems to sort their affairs (Buzan et al 1998:9). This development transfers more significance to the local level regarding security issues and allows regional powers not only to sort their differences but also to seek power in a theater where superpowers previously had the leading role. The author acknowledges that states face more threats from their immediate neighbors, highlights the importance of security interdependence and the existence of security complexes, referring to those as sub-systems. These can be defined as "a set of states security perceptions and concerns, which are so interlinked that their national security problems cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another" (Buzan et al 1998:11-12). It is thus pertinent, that in the post-Cold War period realistic concerns regarding security continue to exist, however they are now re-focused on a lower level of analysis, which at the same time still has the state and its interests in its core.

This significant development is also combined with a new strategy followed by the U.S. According to Mearsheimer and Walt, over the last years Washington has paid a heavy price in several operational theaters across the world. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the rise of radical Islamists in the Middle East and the leadership role that Russia and China aspire to take on, have all created a challenging condition for the U.S.. As the country is still facing the consequences of intervention in several conflicts, it may follow a new strategy, the one of offshore balancing. U.S. would focus in ensuring its leadership role in the West and countering powers that could question its leadership in Europe, Northern Asia and the Persian Gulf. This strategy, however, would allow regional players to take on the role of maintaining the balance and countering potential hegemons (Mearsheimer, Walt 2016:70-72). In the case of Saudi Arabia and Iran, this non-involvement U.S. strategy would encourage its main ally Saudi Arabia, to claim the leadership position in the Gulf and take responsibility of balancing Iran. On the contrary, Tehran could see an opportunity in U.S. abandoning an on the ground strategy in the Middle East and could utilize the new

conditions to change the status quo. As the U.S. has to deal with increasing domestic issues providing the space to regional powers to defend its interests, leads to an escalation of regional conflicts and increases instability. Saudi Arabia and Iran both found fertile ground in this disengagement policy and have the chance to pursue their own national interests.

1.1 The phenomenon of proxy wars and support to non-state actors

Under these conditions, an old phenomenon has resurfaced in the region; that of proxy wars. Proxy wars was a phenomenon developed particularly after WWII due to both the moral and political developments of the international system that has made a direct conflict unethical and the technological advancements, which have made conflicts highly destructive (Loveman 2002:30). A definition to the concept of proxy wars can be expressed as "when one state encourages another to take action against a third state". However, we can identify between different levels of proxy intervention and different relationships between the sponsor and the proxy state (Bar-Siman-Tov 2014: 265-267). As Bar-Siman-Tov highlights in his work regarding proxy war, it is a unique alliance, which requires that the sponsor state has the means to either convince or coerce the proxy to start a war on its behalf. Thus, he distinguishes between the case of voluntary proxies that are convinced to go to war to fulfill their interests or get a pay-off in return, and the case of forced proxies that act against their own will (Bar-Siman-Tov 2014:266-267). However, it is anticipated that in a proxy war both the sponsor and the proxy have interests in the intervention. (Loveman 2002: 31). This particular alliance between state and sub-state actors can take several different forms. It can either be informal or in certain cases, it can also be highly institutionalized, as in the paradigm of the cooperation between Iran and Hezbollah (Maoz 2012:721). Participants in proxy wars take advantage of a local conflict in order to, fulfill their interest or get in an indirect conflict with their adversaries. Proxy wars provide an opportunity to sponsor states to distance themselves from a conflict while still playing an important role in its evolving (Loveman 2002:30). Such indirect conflicts can be described as wars by other means (Byman 2001: 32) and as a substitute to a direct confrontation, which could turn out more destructive (Bapat 2012: 2).

However, why do states support non-state actors and get involved in proxy wars, on the side of insurgencies? In their attempt to gain more power and accomplish their national interests, states turn to indirect confrontation and resort to supporting insurgent actors. This behavior can first be identified in the U.S.-Soviet Union rivalry during the years of the Cold War, however after 1990, this phenomenon has become more local rather than international (Byman 2001:31). In this new context, Byman identifies mainly realist motives, which shed light to this practice. States may support non state actors in order to increase their influence in a regional level and especially across their borders. Even more, they do so in an attempt to destabilize their neighbors and in certain cases achieve regime change in their rival state, by supporting a force that will be compatible to their interests (Byman 2001:23-32). That is particularly the case in the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. The two countries support opposing, and in many cases insurgent, forces, in order to change the regional balance of power and gain more influence. In this game of power politics, the ultimate goal of Saudi Arabia is to counter its main rival, Iran, and ensure a leading position for itself in the current status quo. On the contrary, Iran is aiming at challenging the status quo, claiming regional hegemony and in this context face off Saudi Arabia in different operational theaters, such as Syria, Yemen, Lebanon or Iraq. Other reasons that may explain the alliance formation between a state and an insurgent proxy, according to Byman, are to influence the opposition in a rival country, to achieve international security, due to irredentism or due to plunder (2001:33-40).

On the contrary, Mcallister identifies causes that are related to identity and personal motives and which, according to him explain why sponsorship may be prolonged for a greater period of time. Such are the causes of sponsorship due to revenge, acquiring prestige, supporting co-religionists or co-ethnics and even providing support to insurgencies with leftist ideologies. Even though support to leftist ideologies cannot usually be found in the contemporary era, the other causes can still be identified in rivalries today and provide useful explanation to the decision-making of states involved in proxy wars (2006:88-90). In the case of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, we may discern the role of prestige as both seek to enhance their image and credibility internationally, while they also utilize their sectarian ties to certain groups in countries in the state of conflict, in order to support them. In this case, such motivations are indeed present to a local level however they mostly serve as a legitimization tool to

justify their involvement in the conflict. The Saudi-Iranian antagonism has power-related motives to its core and even though motives related to the social factor, such as religion and identity, exist, they mainly work complementarily as a way to mobilize local forces and create a common ground that would activate the rivalry.

As for the conditions under which a state decides to support an insurgency and intervene in the politics of a third country, we need to underline the importance of the conflict for the state's credibility and the reaffirmation of their legitimacy and role as a leading power in a period, during which they might have a decreased level of legitimacy. That is specifically the case in sponsor states that support co-religionists or co-ethnics. In that sense, states choose to intervene in local conflicts not only as a way to increase their influence locally, but also to address domestic concerns (Mcalister 2006: 82).The sponsor uses the proxy as a tool of its foreign policy and provides the necessary political, military and economic assistance to accomplish certain goals (Loveman 2002: 30-32). This is mainly because the sponsor itself lacks the legitimacy to perform military action and the proxy provides this required pretext (Bar-Siman-Tov 2014:267).

This type of coercive diplomacy against rival states, can in certain cases be more efficient, as sponsor states invest in supporting local forces that have more at stakes and are willing to take the risk and costs of a direct confrontation (Bapat 2012:2). States that lack military preponderance to their rivals (Maoz 2012: 720) invest to this strategy as it serves as a bargaining tool for them to achieve their foreign policy objectives. Despite that, it is possible that this asymmetric alliance may prove dangerous for the sponsor state. The sub-state actor may gain more power and start pursuing their own agenda, while no longer serving their sponsor. Non-state actors may become unwilling to stop fighting, as they now have the financial and military means to prolong the confrontation. In this case they may become hard to control and prove to be inefficient. That is mainly because, as the insurgent cannot be controlled, it can no longer be part of a settlement between the sponsor state and the target state, where the conflict is taking place. In that sense the sponsor may not only lose its leverage against its rival but also create a new veto player that may undermine its interests in the region (Bapat 2012:2-7). Hence, the sponsor states may turn out

"trapped" in a costly circle that could even threaten their own security as rival states may in the end retaliate (Mcallister 2006:80-81).

Even more, according to Bapat, the states, which are more likely to sponsor insurgents and intervene in intra-state conflicts of third, particularly bordering, countries, are those that can be characterized as moderately weak that do not acquire the ability to easily control an insurgent but who at the same time are able to disarm it. This feature increases the bargaining power of such states as they impose pressure on their rival by showing they are credible negotiators and have means to achieve their goals (2012: 18). In these moderately weak states, we can identify regional powers that are dissatisfied and want to change the status quo of their sub-system, states that lack the military means to have a direct confrontation with their rival, those that believe, their rival is unlikely to hit back or it may pose a direct threat and states that believe a direct conflict will break out anyway due to their rivals strategy (Maoz 2012:725). Furthermore, for this type of alliance/ patron client relation to exist, certain conditions need to be applicable. The two sides need to have compatible interests, at least to a certain extent, there needs to exist material support, coordination of activities and a form of power relations (Loveman 2002:31). Also, it is important that a relationship prior to the formation of the alliance and proxy war exists (Bar-Siman-Tov 2014:269).

In this context, a paradox of power is observed. Power per se is not important. What is important is the ability to support affiliated state or non-state actors. In this process finding key elements that can lead to the formation of alliances is vital. Alliances are not formed on the basis of ideology and merely on the grounds of power but rather identity also plays a role (Gause 2014: 2-3). And that is also why this New Cold War is characterized by significant underbalancing. Alliance formation is harder and needs to adhere to certain conditions that in many cases cannot be met. Thus, we cannot talk with purely realistic terms. Identity and ideological compatibility also play a role in the antagonism. What is more, the two regional powers utilize the elements of religion to justify their intervention and support to specific groups (Gause 2015).

1. The Saudi-Iranian antagonism

The new Saudi-Iranian Cold War is being built around the developments taking place in the wider Middle East area after the Arab Spring and is taking advantage of the

conditions and the actors created within the uprisings. The two aspiring leaders utilize the weakness of state authorities and the vacuum of power in order to intervene in the conflicts and accomplish their own national interests. The Saudi-Iranian conflict evolved as, states gradually lost the monopoly of legitimate power and new sub-national actors and insurgencies gained momentum and took control of territories. Saudi Arabia, Iran, other regional powers (Turkey, Israel) and even great powers (U.S., Russia, China) participate in this game, which is evolving as a result of state weakness and has as an end goal the acquiring of more influence in the region for the larger players and a leadership role for the local ones (Gause 2014:2-8)).

2.1 The "twin pillar" alliance

The relationship between the two has not always been that of rivals. Before 1979 and as Saudi Arabia and Iran were the two largest powers in the Gulf, they were both on the same sphere of influence, that of the United States. According to the Nixon doctrine, formed in 1969, Saudi Arabia and Iran represented a "twin pillar" and should be acting as U.S. surrogates and deterring the Soviet influence in the region. In those lines, U.S. created a patron/client relation with the two states, as it was providing them with both military means and training assistance needed to realize their goals. This alliance provided Saudi Arabia and Iran with the needed legitimization to acquire a leading role in the wider region and become "status quo" powers (Adib Moghaddam 2006:12). What is interesting to point out is that during this period, the United States were closer to the secular regime of the Shah, rather to the theocratic monarchy of Riyadh (Mabon 2016:3) and Iran was serving as the backbone of the twin-pillar alliance. Tehran was holding a significant geo-strategic role in countering the expansion of the Soviet influence being the "northern tier" of the alliance. This role was enhanced by the internal developments in the country. After the short period of the socialist's Mossadegh rise to power in the position of Prime Minister and his overthrow with a U.S. orchestrated coup, Washington was even more eager to prevent an internal rise of the socialist elements in Iran. Thus, the U.S. sealed their alliance with Iran, through the institutionalization of its relationship with the West. Shortly after the 1953 coup and the restoration of the Shah's regime,

Tehran entered CENTO in 1955[1]. This development enhanced the legitimization of the country as a regional systemic power defending Western interests. As expected, the strong embrace between Iran and the West triggered domestic discontent and worsened the relations between Iran and its Arab neighbors, which perceived these developments as Tehran siding not only with Western powers, but also with Israel. During this period, as the government of Iran tried to silence the voices of dissent, Saudi Arabia was promoting the image of a pan-Islamic umma that was acting as one and could defend the Palestinian people. Under those circumstances the two regional powers led the establishment of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), in 1969, as a means to show Islamic solidarity and Pan-Islamic consciousness. That way Tehran was able to show its support to Palestinian people, while Riyadh appealed to the masses and found a way to counter Ba'thist and Nasserite nationalisms (Adib Moghaddam 2006:12-14).

Despite their relatively good relations, this period of close cooperation, between Riyadh and Tehran was not without turmoil. As Iran was not yet projecting strongly its religious identity, the two did not have doctrinal religious differences. However, the two were contesting for regional dominance in the Gulf and there was underground suspicion and tension regarding their motives (Mabon 2016:3). Even more, Iran was already perceived as a hegemonic power as it was projecting an exclusionary and chauvinistic national identity. The regime was underlining its Indo-European language that was bounding it to the West and its superior Aryan civilization. The Shah utilized these elements of the Iranian identity as a way to ensure the legitimization of his regime and to essentialize the Iranian identity under his rule opposed to the Arab "other". Thus, the regime was emphasizing on the Persian heritage prior to the arrival of Islamism and was underestimating the Islamic elements of their identity. This nationalist discourse described Iran as a fellow Aryan nation to the West and was serving as a way not only to ensure power but also to justify the relation with Europe and the U.S. (Adib Moghaddam 2006: 16-18,20).

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[1] CENTO (Central Treaty Organization) was a U.S. inspired defensive organization founded in 1955 and dissolved in 1979. CENTO aimed at preventing the communist expansion in the region and enhancing peace in the Middle East. Members of the Organization were Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Great Britain and Pakistan. https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/lw/98683.htm

2.2 1979: The new order and its impact on Saudi-Iranian relations

The milestone for the Saudi-Iranian rivalry can be identified in 1979 after the Iranian Revolution and the transition of Iran from a secular nationalist monarchy to a theocratic and revolutionary Republic This development disrupted the order in the region and the Saudi-Iranian equilibrium that was sustained by the Al Saud regime and the Shah. With the revolution, Iran lost its momentum as a status quo power and transformed to a revisionist state (Moghaddam 2006:21-23) seeking revolutionary change, leaving Saudi Arabia as the only status quo power and thus, the only power that the U.S. could entrust with deterring the Soviet influence and other resurgent powers in the Middle East (Terrill 2012:1).

After 1979, the identity of the Iranian nation was transformed. The state projected itself as the "defender" and "natural leader of all the Shiites while it wanted to expand its influence in the Gulf and neighboring states (Terrill 2012:2). The Republic claimed that it was a "true and unique Islamic state", carrying the mandate to export the revolution (sudur-e enghelab). It utilized the discourse of a dichotomy between oppressed and oppressor and focused on the idea of justice for all the people. Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the new regime, endorsed this idea and encouraged the notion of an Islamic revolution in other states as well, while he also called (dawat) people to join Islam. The revolutionary regime promoted a new way of changing the status quo, not through coercion as the Shah used to do, rather through propagation (tabligh) and exporting of ideas. Despite that "romantic" approach, we can still identify cases, where Tehran was supporting revolutionary liberation movements as in Lebanon, Palestine and Afghanistan (Adib Moghaddam 2006: 23-25). The most prominent one was the case of Hezbollah, which was founded by religious Shiites that were influenced by the Iranian Revolution and were dissatisfied with the secular shift of the Amal Movement. Hezbollah was created during the Lebanese civil war with Iranian support and has since become a state within a state in Lebanon (Masters, Laub 2014). In Afghanistan, Iran supported the Shiite minority and provided them with support and training during their uprisings against the regime in 1979-1980 and even sent Iranian nationals to fight in the struggle (Emadi 1995:5-8). Furthermore, Iran has also supported Hamas and Islamic Jihad (Terrill 2012:25-27).

However, the radicalization of politics in the Republic was a rather gradual process that escalated as the hardliners prevailed over the moderate voices. A significant milestone is that of November 1979 and the hostage crisis in the U.S. embassy in Tehran, which deteriorated the relations between the two countries. At that time, the Shiites of the Eastern Province in Saudi Arabia also celebrated the Ashura, which is forbidden in the country, while carrying images of Ayatollah Khomeini. Riyadh promptly reacted to the challenge by calling the National Guard and resulting in several casualties. This incident enhanced the Iranian anti-Saudi rhetoric and deteriorated even more their strained relations. (Terrill 2012:7-8).

As mentioned above, after the Revolution, there was a gradual transformation of the Iranian politics that was reflected in the rhetoric of the state and the new discourse it created. The Republic promoted a pan-Islamic motion and the obligation to extent the Sharia law. Even more, it downgraded its Aryan identity in order to enhance the ties with its Arab neighbors and limit the relations with the imperial West. Tehran tried to create a new identity and regain its authenticity. The country adopted three principles that would spark conflict with three major powers in the region. Those principles were anti-imperialism (against the U.S.), anti-monarchism (against Saudi Arabia) and anti-nationalism (against Iraq). These new conditions were followed by the abandoning of international institutions such as CENTO and the disengagement with the bipolar order, while Iran became one of the leaders of the non-aligned movement (NAM). Tehran was following a third road as the Revolution did not only change the "truth conditions" in the Gulf, but also destroyed the order in the region (Adib Moghaddam 2006:26-31,52). That is particularly why, we can identify the roots of the Saudi-Iranian competition in the evolution of the Iranian politics and the by-products of a Revolution that sparked the already existing underground security concerns to Riyadh.

2.3 The period of rapprochement

After the first years of the Revolution, the antagonism between the two went through several fluctuations. In the 1980s, Saudi Arabia opposed Iran and supported Iraq in the 8-year Iran-Iraq war (Adib Moghaddam 2006:42). However, in the 1990s, there was a significant change in the relations between the two countries. In 1997, the reformist Mohammad Khatami was elected as the President of the Republic of Iran.

Khatami was aiming at implementing domestic reforms, promoting an Islamic democracy and focusing on cooperation with other countries, including those of the Gulf (Adib Moghaddam 2006:82-83). His election marks a period of rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia and is characterized by initiatives that would bolster mutual cooperation (Terrill 2012:8-9). During this period, there are also developments in the Saudi politics. Crown Prince Abdullah was making an effort to disengage his country from the U.S. policies in the region and moved closer to Iran. This new condition provided a boost to the relations between Tehran and Riyadh. In 1998, the two countries performed joint investments and implemented confidence building measures, while Iran suspended its drillings in a contested area in the Gulf. Tehran even accepted the legitimacy of the Saudi leadership and tightened its relations with the other GCC states (Adib Moghaddam 2006: 88-89). This milestone in the relations between the two marks the only period after the Revolution, where we can identify a more modest approach in the politics of the two countries regarding their vis-à-vis relations.(Terrill 2012:8-12).

2.4 The U.S. invasions and the vacuum of power in the Middle East

It is pertinent that specifically during the first decades of the Saudi-Iranian antagonism the competition between the two was mostly affected by the changes in the Iranian politics. Until the beginning of the 2000s, Saudi Arabia projected itself as a status quo power and adopted the role of the "reactor" to the developments in the Iranian Republic. This condition changed in the 21st century as Saudi Arabia undertook a more active role in order to tackle the expansion of the Iranian influence and the "axis" it had created.

In the current years, there has been a significant shift in the Saudi-Iranian antagonism. After the end of the Cold War and the change it produced for the Middle East politics, Saudi Arabia and Iran have acquired a more central role in the area. The two powers compete to expand their influence in the region, not with military means, but rather with interfering in the politics of their neighboring and significantly weaker states (Gause 2014:1). The ongoing objective of both states is to either maintain or increase their leadership role in the Gulf region. Thus, Saudi Arabia has established strong ties with all GCC states, while Iran is trying to decrease the military support the Gulf states receive from the West and Saudi Arabia. Even more, Tehran knowing that

Riyadh has almost all Gulf states by its side, is supporting Shiite minorities in those countries, which could promote its own interests (Terrill 2012:13).

Prior to the Arab Spring and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, it was only the weak states in the region that were affected by the struggle of Iran and Saudi Arabia to increase their share to power. That is pertinent in the case of Lebanon, where Iran managed to create a state within the state by forming and supporting Hezbollah and in the case of Yemen, where Saudi Arabia was intervening in the domestic politics of the country since the creation of the two Yemeni states in the 1970s. What mostly disrupted the order in the region and created new opportunities to seek power was the invasion of the U.S. first in Afghanistan in 2001 and then in Iraq in 2003. The two wars did not only result in the fall of one of the strongest leaders in the region, Saddam Hussein, but also created a vacuum that paved the way for Iranian influence (Gause 2014:9-10). Until then the U.S. followed a policy of dual containment when it comes to Iran and Iraq, by containing the two countries and keeping them in an equal and low level of power to feel threatened by one another and not be able to affect developments in the Middle East. However, after the demise of Iraqi regime and the U.S. being occupied in Baghdad, Tehran was able to seize the opportunity of one of its rivals falling and increasing its influence. This significant increase of Iranian power posed a challenge to the Saudi influence in the area (Gause 2014:9-10).

At the time Saudi Arabia was utilizing a more modest approach in international politics and specifically in politics related to the Arab-Israeli conflict. While Tehran was supporting Hamas and presenting itself as the leading anti-Israeli power in the conflict, Riyadh, was promoting a peace-plan that would recognize Israel in exchange to returning in the 1967 arrangement of the Palestine-Israeli lands. The country was even denouncing the attacks Hamas was performing, even though it was secretly providing it with support (Terrill 2012:25-27). However, this approach provided even more leverage to Iran. Tehran was also maintaining a long alliance with Damascus, which provided it with support during the Iran-Iraq war, due to their shared animosity against Saddam Hussain. The two countries were also following the same lines regarding their resentment against the U.S.. Under these circumstances, Iran claimed it was leading the "Axis of resistance" against Israel, but most importantly had extended its influence towards significant players in the Middle East region (Terrill

2012:21-22). During this period, Iran was gaining ground in operational theaters in Lebanon, Iraq and Palestine and that is exactly what Saudi Arabia wanted to change given the opportunity of the uprisings (Gause 2014:13).

2.5 The levels of the Saudi-Iranian antagonism

2.5.1 Questioning the Saudi leadership and the monarchical system

After the fall of the Shah the main difference between the two powers was their governing systems. On the one hand there was a revisionist, revolutionary Republic and from the other, a conservative monarchy committed to maintain the status quo in the region. The Iranian Republic was questioning the legitimacy of the Saudi monarchy and its source of power. Tehran was utilizing the Islamic teachings and claimed that as Shiite Islam believes that monarchy and hereditary rule are wrong, it is the duty of the government to abolish the monarchical system as a whole, a belief that was openly challenging the monarchical regime of Saudi Arabia. On the contrary, Khomeini was promoting the governance of the supreme jurisprudent (velayat'e faqih), that should be moral, just and "untainted by major sin". On these grounds he was opposing the Saudi leadership and accusing them of an unethical way of life that was not respecting the Quran. These accusations were also based on the alliance between Saudi Arabia and the "Great Satan", the United States. Tehran claimed that by siding with Washington and adhering to monarchical principles, Riyadh compromised its legitimacy as the guardian of the holy shrines (Adib Moghaddam 2006:29-30).

On the contrary, Saudi Arabia saw the Revolution in Iran as merely sectarian and a threat to the Sunni doctrine. Thus the country committed in promoting Wahhabism to all Muslims. The country saw a threat in the face of the new regime in Tehran and expressed the belief that every uprising in the region is incited by Iran. The country along with other Gulf states, thus, deported several Shiite workers residing in the region. Saudi Arabia is trying to serve as the "Sunni equivalent" to Iran and counter its influence in the region as a Wahhabi conservative monarchy. However, other Sunni states, such as Qatar, and non-state actors claim this role as well and undermine the Saudi effort (Byman 2014:91-92). Both states try to promote contradictive

narratives of state identity that are not only limited to political systems but also reach other aspects of social life.

2.5.2 The sectarian element of the rivalry

Strongly connected to the state identity of the two rivals, other than their political system, was also their religious identity. Saudi Arabia and Iran can be described as the leaders of the two major branches of Islam, the Sunni and the Shiite and their doctrinal differences have in many cases provided them with fertile ground for their conflict. Iran follows the Twelver branch of Shiite Islam according to which, the Twelfth Imam that disappeared, was concealed by God from the eyes of men and is in occultation waiting for his return (Momen 1985:165). On the contrary, Saudi Arabia believes in Wahhabi-Hanbali Sunni Islam, one of the most conservative forms of Islam. The Wahhabi branch finds its routes in the 18th century and the reformists of the period, one of whom was also Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, who supported Mohammed Ibn-Saud in the consolidation of the Saudi state. The reformists reacted to people adopting elements from other religions and aimed at returning to the fundamentals of faith. (DeLong Bas 2008:34-35). Regarding the theology of al-Wahhab, he believed in the "unity of God" and absolute monotheism. Furthermore, he was opposed to any sort of idolization and was accusing people that performed acts of polytheism as committing acts of shirk (DeLong Bas 56-58) and thus the Shiites were described as unbelievers (kuffar) (Adib Moghaddam 2006:30).

However, their doctrinal differences cannot be described as the main reason that fuels the antagonism between the two. The focus given to the sectarian factor has its roots in the rise of local conflicts related to interests and acquiring more power locally. Violence in sectarian terms was not new in the region, however there was a period during which strong states kept down sectarian elements. As regional conflicts emerged and states weakened, they paved the way for, previously marginalized, religious players to take on political space (Byman 2014:79-90). Even more, as Kaldor argues, new wars, which became the norm since the 1990s, are not based on ideology but rather on unidimensional identities, while sectarian conflicts break out as a result of violence and conflict (2013:343-344).. After the withdrawal of the USSR from the region in 1980s and the end of the Cold War (Lackner 2017:91), along with the decline of Arab nationalism, the notion of identity rather than ideology became

central to new conflicts. Where state weakness occurs, new players take advantage of this opportunity to enhance identities that were previously suppressed in an attempt to create new ones. This process creates significant frictions in societies and compromises pre-existing sovereignties creating instability (2013:343-344). This shift was particularly evident in the Arab Spring. This rise of sectarianism is not based merely on an increase of religious sentiment, but rather on a decrease of the faith towards state authorities and national identity. During this period we observe that actors such as Saudi Arabia use sectarianism to gain popular support and undermine the credibility of their rivals, while Iran utilizes religious ties as a way to form alliances and secure its influence. In periods of war, sectarianism provides not only a great window of opportunity to intervene in a conflict, but also a way to gain the support of locals, get financial help and training. Actors in a war exploit pre-existing social divisions in their favor. That has been the case not only in Syria, but also in the networks created in Iraq ever since the U.S. invasion in the country in 2003. The creation of those networks has been feeding the Sunni narrative that sees a threat in the face of Shiite expansion and in periods of crisis fuels the conflict even further. In the wake of the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia accused Iran that it was manipulating the opposition in all countries that experienced uprisings and was claiming that the goal was a rise of Shiites and social violence. Riyadh created the narrative of a Shiite conspiracy that aimed at taking down the Sunni regimes (Byman 2014:79-90).

As it is apparent, apart from the struggle for power and regional influence, Saudi Arabia and Iran face off in other levels, which enhance the antagonism between them and fuel feelings of mutual resentment. Such are their political systems and their doctrinal differences. Both issues rose after the Iranian Revolution and are used as part of the de-legitimization rhetoric the two states utilize against each other. Both factors have remained unchanged throughout the years of their rivalry. However, we may observe that specifically in the case of the sectarian factor it is projected more widely in periods of crises, as the one of the Arab Spring. Yet, even in this case, it is not the basis of their rivalry, but rather a mobilization tool that is being used to draw links with local populations that can become their allies (Gause 2014:1).

2.6 The Saudi-Iranian antagonism and the Arab Spring

In the wake of the Arab Spring, the two regional powers took advantage of the popular dissent and the weakness of the central state authorities and utilized the vacuum of power to expand their own influence through their local clients. In order to form alliances and form links with local actors, they both projected their common ideological, religious or identity basis. However, even though it often described as such, the competition is not based on a religious/ sectarian division, but rather it is affected by conflicts that are per se sectarian in their roots and include conflicting religious groups. That is particularly because as the state authority loses its momentum, other supra-national identities may preponderate over the national one (Gause 2014:4-8).

That has been the case with many countries in the region. The most prominent example is probably that of Bahrain, a Shiite majority country that is ruled by a Sunni elite and has been of great importance throughout the years of Saudi-Iranian competition. Even prior to the Revolution, after the U.K. left the area in 1971, the Shah wanted to reunite the country with Iran with any means, based on a short period of Persian occupation in Bahrain during the 18th century. Those assertive claims were reaffirmed when Khomeini seized power. Even though those claims were never materialized, Iran interfered again in the politics of its neighboring Kingdom and in 1981 was accused of supporting a coup d' etat by the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain, which was based in Tehran. The strained relations with the country's government persist to this day as Bahrain was the first theater were the Arab Spring antagonism between Saudi Arabia and Iran occurred. In the wake of the 2011 demonstrations in the country, the Shiite Bahraini clergy that was until then following the practice of quietism, called upon the regime to cease the killings of civilians. As the demonstrations persisted, Saudi Arabia announced its support to the country's regime. Riyadh feared that a possible rise of Shiites to power could result in the cooperation of Bahrain with Iran. Shortly after, in March 2011, Riyadh sent troops to the neighboring country in order to help the government suppress the protesters. Both the Saudis and the Bahraini leadership claimed that the Saudi troops assisted in deterring an Iranian plot to extent its influence in the country; a plot that started in the 1980s. This caused the reaction of Iran that condemned the two and called for a U.N.

intervention in the country (Terrill 2012:16-20). The case of Bahrain is particularly important because it marks the first Saudi intervention in a neighboring country since the beginning of the Arab Spring. Riyadh is traditionally avoiding direct involvement in conflicts and in cases when its sphere of influence was threatened, as in the Iraqi invasion in Kuwait, it called the U.S. to intervene. Before the intervention in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia had intervened in Yemen in 2009. However, in this case, the the incursions of Huthis in Saudi territory and cross-border fire posed a direct threat to Saudi sovereignty. This was not the case with Bahrain as there was no direct threat and no violation of the Saudi sovereignty (Salmoni et al 2010:155-156). In Bahrain the country chose to intervene as it would lose its influence in one of the GCC states and it was possible that other monarchies of the Gulf with large Shiite population, like Kuwait, could follow its paradigm. Thus, we observe a shift in the Saudi politics towards a more active involvement in regional affairs, starting from 2009, escalating with the case of Bahrain and reaching its peak in the Yemeni conflict in 2015.

After the uprising in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia undertook a more active role in the region as it was evident that the Iranian influence could go well beyond the "Axis of resistance". As Iran had previously secured its influence in Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine and partly Syria, Tehran welcomed the uprisings and compared the fall of the regimes in Tunisia and Egypt with its own 1979 Revolution. At the same time, Saudi Arabia saw its ally, Hosni Mubarak, losing power to the Muslim Brotherhood, one of its most significant rivals. Thus, Riyadh tried to reassert its role and deter Iran in any theater it could. Saudi Arabia increased its interference in Yemeni politics, where it brokered Saleh's fall from Presidency and financed the other GCC monarchies to ensure they would secure their rule over the protesters. At the same time it assisted NATO in the operation against Gaddafi in Libya (Gause 2014:14-15). As Iran had acquired a more central role and utilized the opportunity to increase its influence, Saudi Arabia felt threatened and had to find ways to counter Tehran's expansion and make up for the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood. Riyadh took advantage of the uprisings to intervene itself and support its affiliated groups in the countries where the uprisings broke out.

The situation in Syria was indeed more complex. The ongoing crisis and the emergence of several insurgent actors, including the Islamic State and other jihadist groups created a fertile ground for the Saudis to try to increase their influence in the

region. Saudi Arabia was opposing the republican regime in Syria and the Allawite elite (Terrill 2012:23), however during the first months of the conflict it did provide financial support to the Assad regime while it also refrained Saudi media from attacking Assad, even when the West was doing so. That was mainly because Riyadh feared that the fall of Assad would result in more instability in the region and a window of opportunity for other forces, particularly Iran. Gradually Saudi Arabia was becoming more dissatisfied with the Assad regime and was calling for more reforms that could put an end to the crisis. As the international community and most importantly the West hardened their rhetoric regarding the Assad regime, Saudi Arabia turned against the government in Damascus. Following those developments, Riyadh, along with other Arab League countries took action to restore order in the country (Blanga 2017:49-52). Even though Riyadh was at first providing its support only to the official opposition, the FSA, it gradually changed its policy and provided help to several jihadist groups such as Ahrar al-Sham and Jahbat al-Nusra. This significant shift in the Saudi strategy is indeed related to Iran (Blanga 2017:56-57). Tehran is a strong supporter of the Assad regime and during the civil war, proved to be one of the backbones maintaining the regime to power, as Hezbollah and Shiite militias fight along the regime (Byman 2014:82). Saudi Arabia's decision to support insurgents in the Syrian civil war is related to their fear towards Iran. Riyadh perceived the Iranian interference in Syria as a strategic threat and feared that if it did not involve itself in Syria, Iran could even move against Saudi Arabia (Blanga 2017:56-57). From its side, Iran aims at maintaining its influence in Syria and preserving the territorial link to Lebanon and Hezbollah (Mohseni, Ahmadian 10/5/2018).

In general, one can note that in their regional struggle for power the two rivals have conflicting interests, which are related to local actors and fortunes (Gause 2014:8). The first years after the Revolution their rivalry was kept in low levels, however, in periods of crisis the two cross their swords and try to increase their influence. In the recent years Iran has been more successful regarding that policy, despite the ongoing alliance between Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states. Even in this case, during the Arab Spring Tehran challenged Riyadh in Bahrain and took advantage of the opportunity given to become a hegemonic power in the region. This period has proved to be the most challenging yet for the country as it is proving that it can mainly react

to the strategy of Tehran and perform "damage control" to ensure is position in the status quo.

3.The case of Yemen

The state that was once called Arabia Felix by the Romans due to its prosperity and was one of the first states with single, distinct people since the 7th century (Clark 2010:6,12), today is torn by a 3,5 year-long civil war and facing one of the worst humanitarian crisis the world has seen (Lackner 2017:66). Before the civil war, Yemen was already facing serious challenges due to severe geopolitical and environmental challenges due to climate change, shortage in water supplies, a low-skilled labor force, autocratic rule and neo-liberal policies that distressed its population even further. On top of that, Yemen has the second largest population in the Gulf after Saudi Arabia (27 millions), while the birthrate is still high. These conditions, along with the geopolitical position of the country that contains the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the Aden Port and the fact that it is home to one of the deadliest terrorist organizations, AQAP, created a fertile ground not only for the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings but also for wider destabilization with the internationalization of the conflict in 2015 (Lackner 2017:23-33).

3.1 Saudi involvement in Yemeni affairs

Since the beginning of its existence as a single people in the 7th century, Yemen was comprised by a variety of sedentary tribes that occupied different regions of the country and carried distinct characteristics based on the environment they inhabited. The different tribes occupying the area of Yemen had concrete and defined borders and operated as autonomous entities (Weir 2007:6,92). This increased role of the tribes also plays a role in the failure of the notion of a Yemeni nation state (Clark 2010:24). During the Cold War era, the Yemenis felt inspired by Nasser's nationalist ideology and dissent started to grow among citizens that were feeling they were left behind (Clark 2010:60). During this period the northern and southern parts of Yemen were following two different paths. In 1962, Imam Badr was overthrown by Colonel al-Sallal, who received training in Egypt and adopted republican ideas. This is also the first time that we can identify Saudi interference in Yemeni politics. Saudi Arabia saw the 1962 Revolution as a doing of Nasser and was supporting Imam Badr. After

the Revolution, Saudi Arabia continued providing support to the Royalists and the Imam as a way to counter Nasser's influence in the region. Yemen was, even at that time in the middle of a regional antagonism, this time between Cairo and Riyadh.

The first years of the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) were marked both by instability and development. The country had four different Presidents within a period of 11 years, while most of them were removed violently (Lackner 2017:101). The most iconic Yemeni leader was Ali Abdullah Saleh, who was maintaining good relations with all the forces in the country, even the tribes and the trading groups (Lackner 2017:101-102). For a short period of time, people from the YAR were free to move to Saudi Arabia and send remittances to their home country. Riyadh also played a role in this period as it was providing Saleh with significant foreign aid (Lackner 2017:102-103). As for the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), the state, led by the National Liberation Front (Clark 2010:62-91), had smaller population than the YAR and was also impoverished. The country had to rely also on remittances (40%) from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. As PDRY was significantly weaker, Sanaa expanded towards its southern neighbor. In 1990 the unification of the two Yemeni states was realized with a Treaty, without however addressing the pre-existing frictions among the Yemeni population (Clark 2010:113-134).

The first years of the unified state were characterized by instability and a civil war that would deteriorate further the relations between the North and the South. Saleh to a large extent owed the unification of Yemen to the efforts of Saddam Hussein and had built a new strong relationship with Iraq. When Baghdad invaded Kuwait the only choice was to maintain a neutral position, while other Arab states were siding against Saddam. Particularly, Saudi Arabia did not only oppose Iraq's expansionist move, but even invited the U.S. to resolve the conflict. This development deeply dissatisfied Yemenis that would prefer an Arab solution and not one by the international community. The second Gulf war resulted in a devastating outcome for the Yemeni economy, as the Saudis condemned its stance in favor of Iraq by deporting 800.000 Yemeni workers, which did not only result in an increase in unemployment rates, but also led to the loss of remittances, one of the most important sources of income for the country. The Saudi interference in Yemeni domestic affairs continued and in 1994 supported the South separatist movement in a conflict that quickly escalated to civil

war. Even though the separatists did proclaim the creation of a state, the Saudis did not recognize it due to fear of the U.S. reaction (Clark 2010:133-144).

As it is evident, Saudi Arabia played a significant role in Yemeni affairs ever since the formation of the Republic. Riyadh sees Yemen as its "back yard" (Clark 2010:219) and at least until the recent civil war followed a policy of containment and maintenance (Salisbury 2016:3). Yemen could pose a possible threat to the security of Riyadh as the country could host rival Saudi forces such as Egypt, while also the living conditions in the country made Saudi Arabia an ideal destination for Yemeni migrants (Lackner 2017:71-74). Thus, it is to Riyadh's interest that Yemen remains stable, yet dysfunctional in order to ensure it does not threaten its neighbor (Salisbury 2016:3).

As stated above, Riyadh has repeatedly interfered in the domestic affairs of Yemen and has undermined the process of a stable state formation in the country. In the period of Imam Yahya in the 1930s, Saudis took advantage of the poorly trained Yemeni army and took over three Northern provinces of the country with a 20-year renewable agreement. In exchange to that, the treaty enabled Yemenis to freely move in the Saudi Kingdom for work purposes (Lackner 2017:71-72). In the years following the creation of the two Yemeni states, Riyadh maintained closer relations to the YAR and financed its leaders to prevent a possible state collapse but also undermined efforts that would strengthen Yemen. Both a very strong and a weak Yemen is a threat to the Saudis, in the first case because it may challenge the Kingdom's rule in the Gulf and in the second because a Yemen collapse would mean regional instability and a significant number of migrants coming to Saudi Arabia (Salisbury 2016:3) The patronage relationship created with Presidents of the YAR (al-Iryani, Ghashmi and Saleh) was later continued in the unified Republic (Clark 2010: 103-104,219). On those grounds, Saudi Arabia has also financed non state actors, such as tribes in the northern parts of the country in order to gain political influence, a strategy that led to the strengthening of certain actors which later questioned the authority of the country (Lackner 2017:72).

Another important aspect of the Saudi interference in Yemeni affairs was education. Riyadh provided funding to the YAR Ministry of education in order to import Sunni teachers from Egypt and Sudan and for the formation of religious "scientific

institutes". It also trained Yemeni Salafis and created a body of Imams and teachers that returned to Yemen and spread the Salafi ideology. Yemeni workers in Saudi Arabia were also instilled with Wahhabi ideas, which had a great impact on them when they returned in their home country. After the unification of the two Yemeni states, which was perceived as a threat by Riyadh, the country supported the creation of the Islamist party Islah and financed its leaders, Hashed Shaykh Abdullah al-Ahmar and Abdul Majeed al-Zindani to oppose to unity and issue fatwas that would denote the southerners as atheists to undermine the process. That is also why at the same time it supported southerner separatists such as Ali Salim al-Beidh, a policy that contributed in the spark of the 1994 civil war. However, in 2000 the relationship between the two was formally normalized by the Treaty of Jeddah that settled border issues and created a 5klm demilitarized zone. Also with the Treaty, Yemen gained 40.000 square kilometers of land that included oil and gas resources. It was not until 2006 and the gradual rise of the Huthi movement that the relations between the two severely deteriorated (Lackner 2010:73-75). At the time Saudi Arabia also started to build a fence to deter jihadist elements and smugglers of weapons and narcotics such as qat from entering the Kingdom (Whitaker 2004).

3.2 Iranian involvement in Yemeni affairs

The relationship between Yemen and Iran was indeed less complex than the one with the Saudi Kingdom. Iran was not a neighbor to Yemen and did not perceive it as a threat. It was only until recently and on the context of the wider regional antagonism that Iran became more interested to Yemeni affairs. Despite that, we can still identify Iranian involvement in the developments in Yemen. Before 1979, on the grounds of the twin pillar alliance, Iran supported the Imamate along with Saudi Arabia and maintained good relations with the British administration in the south. After the Revolutions in Yemen and Iran, YAR opposed Tehran as a result of a closer relation to Saudi Arabia and their tensed relationship. In 1986, Tehran backed a Marxist movement in the struggle for power in the south, which was also the one that eventually prevailed (Salisbury 2016:4), while it also supported the southern separatists in 1994 (Lackner 2017:82).

Gradually, Iran turned from supporting Marxist movements during the Cold War period to supporting elements defined by a sectarian identity, such as the Huthis. The

Huthis are a revivalist Zaydi movement originating from the youth faction of the Al-Haq party, Believing Youth. The Huthis were at first part of the political system and participated in Parliament in 1993-1997 when Husain al-Huthi lost his seat (Lackner 2017:149). During 2000s, the authoritarian policies the government followed towards them and increasing repression led to the strengthening of the movement (Salisbury). The core of the Huthis' ideology lies on the idea of the innate right of sada, a social group claiming descent from the Prophet, to rule (Lackner 2017:12, 150). The Huthis have military support from local tribesmen in the north and in areas they control and from non-Zaydi members of sada (Lackner 2017:150)

As for their alliance with the Huthis, Zaydism differs from the Twelver branch of Shiite Islam, to which Iran conforms. However, many Zaydis that then became Huthi leaders had studied in Iranian religious schools. The milestone of the deterioration of Iranian-Yemeni relations is the Huthi wars in 2004-2010. Iran was accused by Saleh to be supporting the Huthi movement, an accusation that was aimed at increasing U.S. and Saudi support in the wars. The situation changed dramatically after the Arab Spring and the civil war that broke out in the country as Saudi Arabia utilized Iranian intervention as a legitimization tool for its interference in the war. Despite that, Iran is believed that is mainly using Yemen as a way to keep its rivals busy and drain their human and financial capital (Lackner 2017:81-83).

3.3 The 2011 uprisings and the internationalization of the crisis

The Arab Spring started in Yemen in early 2011 due to the poor living conditions, high unemployment rates, reduced oil exports and as a result of the escalating rivalry between the government and opposition. Dissent was already present among Yemenis as a result of the six Saleh-Huthi wars between 2004-2010 and the regime's policies to maintain its grip to power. Due to instability in the country Saleh had already postponed elections from 2009 to 2011, while he also tried to amend the constitution to ensure his position. Yemen experienced its first demonstrations in 2010, however the Arab Spring related protests started in January 2011. Demonstrators established tents and created what was described as the "Change Squares" to which Saleh reacted by preemptively having his supporters occupy squares in the country. The uprising started as an independent movement that included all parts of society, even women and youth, while the official opposition joined later. The turning point that sparked a

wave of violence in the country was the Friday of Dignity Massacre that took place in 18th March 2011, when government forces attacked protesters and caused a great number of casualties. This event mobilized traditional forces like the Islah party that joined the demonstrators (Lackner 2017:33-38). Saleh's authoritarian reactions sparked international outrage and foreign powers, led by the GCC states created a plan for the President's resignation and a transitional period. The initiative was met with dissatisfaction by the regime. However, Saleh was eventually forced to sign the Agreement in November 2011. The transitional national government of unity led by Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, the former Vice President of Yemen, proved to be inefficient as it was comprised by traditional forces, while the military remained loyal to Saleh. The National Dialogue Conference that followed as a platform to find common ground among the different forces ended leaving both the Huthis and the Southerners unhappy with the proposed territorial divisions that included autonomous entities. Under these conditions and as the living standards further deteriorated, the Huthis gained more popular support (Lackner 2017:49-50) The Movement then formed an unlikely alliance with Saleh and gradually expanded its rule reaching Sanaa in 2014 (Riedel 2017). The last reconciliation attempt came with the Peace and National Partnership Agreement signed between Hadi and the Huthis with the resignation of the government and the formation of a new synthesis including Huthis. What came after was an unfortunate and short coexistence that was sealed by Huthis suspending the Parliament and Hadi escaping to Aden after suspending his previous resignation (Lackner 2017:51-57).

From Aden, Hadi sought support from the GCC states to regain power and Saudi Arabia launched the operation Decisive Storm in 26 March 2015. This internationalization of the conflict worked as a catalyst to its prolongation and had devastating results for all Yemenis. It is believed that the intervention was being prepared for a long period before it occurred and the Saudis are the main architect as well as financiers along with U.A.E.. The coalition is also supported by the West as U.K. and France provide it with weapons and intelligence whilst the U.S. participates actively with drone attacks, which the U.S. however claim are directed only against AQAP (Lackner 2017:51-57). Furthermore, Washington provides arms sales and intelligence to Riyadh, while it also supported the imposition of blockade to rebel-controlled territories (Riedel 2017).

As for Iranian involvement, Tehran does support the Huthis, however the extent of support still remains unknown. Western and Yemeni authorities have accused Iran of such an interference and there have been reports of arms shipments from Tehran, which were blocked by Yemeni security forces. However, it is believed that Iranian support comes to the Huthis not through funding, yet mostly through training and capacity building (Salisbury 2016:6-7). Formally, the Iranian regime is only expressing support toward the movement and has admitted to provide advisory assistance to the Huthis (UN Report 2018). Still though, Khamenei has said the taking of Sanaa was a victory for Iran (Salisbury 2016:6-9). Even more, according to a U.N. Security Council report, a panel of experts has identified arms-related material and particularly ballistic missile technology and unmanned aerial vehicles used by the Huthis and Saleh probably emanating from Iran. Missiles launched by the Huthi-Saleh alliance launched against Saudi territories during the period 2015-2017 have internal features that resemble those of Iranian Qiam-1 missiles. Furthermore, regarding unmanned vehicles the U.N. panel of experts has identified that the Qasef-1 unmanned aerial vehicles used by the Huthi-Saleh alliance are identical to the Iranian Ababil-T, while some of the components of Qasef-1 were either provided by Iran or by a third party after Iranian mediation. The panel has also found that sea mines and anti-tank guided missiles manufactured by Iran were used by the Huthis and Saleh in the Red Sea(UN Report 2018:24-34)

3.3.1 The role of the U.A.E.

Another important actor that influences developments in Yemen are the U.A.E.. U.A.E. maintain special relations with Yemen due to ancient tribal ties, while many Yemenis reside in the Emirates (Lackner 2017:79). Despite the fact that U.A.E. were first involved in the Yemeni civil war as part of the Saudi-led coalition, they gradually adopted a more independent stance and tried to pursue their own interests in the region. Riyadh utilized the U.A.E. in its proxy war with Iran in the Yemeni operational theater, however it lost its control over Abu Dhabi, which is now causing frictions in the coalition and its relations with the official Yemeni government. U.A.E. are mainly focusing in the southern parts of the country were they also hold material interests and their strategy regarding foreign policy indicates a potential long term involvement in the region. The Emirates have established military training facilities

near Mukalla and provide support to local Salafi elements such as the Security Belt Forces, the Hadrami and Shabwani Elite Forces. As for the Elite Forces they have also provided them advisory support with foreign military trainers (UN Report 2018:13). Even more, they have expressed their support towards the separatist Transitional Political Council of the South (STC), which aims at the independence of the region from the rest of Yemen (MEMO 31/1/2018). U.A.E. have also shown particular interest in Socotra, a Yemeni island where they have encouraged locals for a self-determination referendum to achieve independence (MEMO 16/1/2018).

It is believed that U.A.E. played a vital role in the unification of the forces operating in the south and getting rid of terrorist elements, such as AQAP, a development that has encouraged southern separatist forces to seek independence. Despite that U.A.E. support Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi in its fight against the Huthis, the alliance between the two has significant frictions. Even though in December the official Yemeni government led an attack against Hudeydah along with the Saudi-led coalition including the U.A.E., as independence voices grew in the south, Hadi accused the Emirates of plotting a coup in Aden as the legitimacy of the government was allegedly overturned. The President of the country even went as far as comparing them with the Huthis (MEMO 29/1/2018). As Abu Dhabi encouraged independence in the south, in January of 2018 clashes broke out between STC and the national army as STC vowed to overthrow the local government of Aden if the cabinet in the south was not dismissed. STC even took over the offices of the President in Aden after he banned demonstrations in the region (MEMO 29/1/2018). U.A.E.'s interests in the south are in juxtaposition with those of Saudi Arabia and the official government's. Even though, Riyadh has played a mediating role between U.A.E. and the government (MEMO 29/1/2018), the rivalry between the two is creating a significant weakness in the coalition. Such conflicting interests weaken the alliance and undermine Saudi Arabia's goal of maintaining Hadi as the head of a united Yemen and maintaining control of the actors in the proxy war.

3.3.2 The prolongation of the crisis

Since 2015, little has changed in Yemen, while the Huthis-Hadi rivalry lies in the heart of a broader Saudi-Iranian antagonism, which has escalated in fighting several wars in different operational theaters. Saudi Arabia continues its air campaigns, while

Iran is supporting the Huthi movement (now renamed as Ansar Allah) in a situation that is draining the two rivals and pulls them deeper into a costly confrontation. The stakes for Saudi Arabia are higher as it is actively involved in the conflict, while Iran sees its rival being drown in Yemen (Al Monitor 2018). Riyadh has also faced direct repercussions by its involvement as, by November 2017, the Huthis have been targeting the country with missiles in an escalating rate (Riedel 2018). The latest Saudi strategy, which included a conspiracy with Saleh against the Huthis was doomed to fail. In late November Saleh denounced his allies as Iranian proxies (Riedel 2018) and announced he was ready to turn a page in his relations with the Saudi-led coalition should it halt its attacks towards the country. Saudi Arabia praised Saleh and welcomed him back to the "Arab fold", while it provided him with support in the clashes that broke out in Sanaa between Huthis and Saleh supporters (MEMO 2/12/2017, MEMO 3/12/2017). During the fights the Iranian embassy was attacked. However, within 3 days the Huthis turned the tables and killed Saleh (Riedel 2017). This development was praised by Iranian leaders and media (Majidyar 2018), while Riyadh lost its only leverage and saw its strategy collapsing.

Despite that, Saleh's death did not mark the end of his influence in the country. Tareq Saleh, the nephew of the deceased ex-President of the Republic, escaped the clashes and within the following months managed to regroup a new Brigade near Hudeydah (Ali 2018). Tareq Saleh's Republican Guards made their first appearance in April 2018, where they fought their first battle against the Huthis for the control of a strategic outpost near the Red Sea (Reuters 2018). Even though the current government cannot forgive Saleh for siding with the Huthis, Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi has found a new ally in the face of Tareq Saleh, an ally that could change the balance between the two sides. The latest military victories of the Brigade indicate that despite mistrust from the official government, loyalty towards the forces of Saleh still exists and could threaten the Huthis (Ali 2018). Even more, G.P.C., Saleh's former party claimed it supports Tareq Saleh, a development that bolstered his legitimacy further (MEMO 31/1/2018).

3.3.3 The battle of al-Hudeydah

As Huthis have established their control over Sanaa for over 3 years now, the focus of the fighting has moved towards the southern and western parts of the country. Al

Hudaydah is a geostrategic junction as 80% of foreign aid is imported from its port (MEMO 13/6/2018) and has been under Huthi control since 2014. In early 2018 Saudi Arabia imposed a blockade on the port due to alleged smuggling of weapons and material support from Iran towards the Huthis. In June 2018, the Saudi coalition along with U.A.E., Sudanese and Yemeni forces besieged the airport of the city (MEE 16/7/2018). The forces led by Tareq Saleh conducted the Operation Golden Victory, which started in 13 June (Sakkaf 2018) and even though both sides suffered losses the battle resulted in yet another stalemate. Despite that, the siege of Hudaydah is of particular importance as the governmental forces along with Tareq Saleh's Brigade and outside support had most success in this battle than in any other, a development that indicates a shift in the balance between the two sides (MEE 26/6/2018). Hadi himself has stressed the importance of the port as he claimed that recapturing Hudaydah would mean the liberation of Yemen as a whole (Sakkaf 2018), as it is a vital chokepoint for restocking for the Huthis. A possible loss of the city would result in further strengthening of the government forces and a limitation of Houthi influence in Sanaa.

During the fighting, U.A.E called the Huthis to leave Hudaydah unconditionally after talks with the U.N. representation failed (MEE 18/6/2018). Even though, the battle reached a deadlock in late June, tension flared up again in mid-August, while the focus shifted to Duraihami city (MEE 16/8/2018), while by early September the fighting has resumed in the wider region as Saudi Arabia has also destroyed naval forces of the Huthis (Kari et al 24/8/2018). During this period the Huthis suffer yet another loss as the brother of the Huthi leader, Abdul Khaliq al Houthi was killed in Hudaydah in the end of August (Robinson et al 31/8/2018).

3.4 Utilization of proxy wars for leadership aspirations

For Saudi Arabia, and more specifically for its newly appointed Crown Prince, Mohammed Bin Salman, winning the war in Yemen is a boost to the regime's and his own credibility. A loss to Tehran would hamper Riyadh's role as the leader in the Gulf. However, the collapse of the Saudi strategy is already evident and as Riyadh did not back Saleh's supporters, the only probable development is an even greater direct

engagement (Al Monitor 2018, Riedel 2017). Tehran sees great opportunity in Riyadh's trapping in Yemen. Being proactive, Riyadh and the Huthis had already foreseen Saleh's flipping sides and isolated his supporters, while taking over his bases (Riedel 2017). Furthermore, Tehran has come up with a concrete plan on Yemen's future including a ceasefire, humanitarian aid, intra-Yemeni talks and a government of national unity including all forces (Al Monitor 2018). On top of that the involvement in Yemen costs a lot less to Tehran than to Riyadh. Iranians have to put in only a few million dollars yearly in the war, while Hezbollah also provides the Huthis with cheap support. On the contrary Riyadh spends $5-6 billion monthly (Riedel 2017). These developments along with Saudi Arabia's direct involvement have led to the escalation of the Yemeni conflict, which is still evolving.

Both Saudi Arabia and Iran utilize the local conflict in Yemen and the instability emanating from power struggle within the country to achieve regional hegemony. This antagonism, which has led to proxy wars across the Middle East is a by-product of the new conditions in the international system. As Buzan argues the shift from an international to a regional level has enhanced local conflicts and has encouraged regional actors to take on a leading role in regional sub-systems (Buzan et al 1998:9). That is particularly the case with Saudi Arabia and Iran. As Riyadh tries to secure its leading position, Tehran took advantage of the rise of the Shiite element to expand its influence and face off the traditional Saudi power. Despite that, a direct confrontation between the two would be highly destructive and thus they utilize substitutes, in order to weaken their rival, as Bapat highlights (2012:2). These developments are combined with the new U.S. strategy to leave regional players sort out their own affairs (Mearsheimer, Walt 2016:70-72). Washington has transferred the responsibility of leading the Middle East to Saudi Arabia, which it has been supporting indirectly with arm supplies, it is however reluctant to take on a more active role. At the same time this strategy provided a window of opportunity to Iran to claim the leadership of the region and expand its influence.

Civil wars, such as the one in Yemen, provide the pretext for an indirect confrontation that could potentially serve national interests and for intervening in the politics of another country. Yemen was already a fragmented country and was a fertile ground for intervention. Saudi Arabia already maintained a role in the country by supporting

YAR's Presidents and later Saleh as the President of united Yemen, while Iran resorted in supporting an insurgent movement that gradually gained popular support. In fact, there is a significant pattern that can be noted in the behavior of the two rivals. Saudi Arabia is choosing to support the power that will sustain the status quo, as it will give Riyadh the opportunity to interfere in the domestic politics of the country and keep Yemen under its sphere of influence. On the contrary, Iran is supporting a popular revivalist movement, as it has successfully done in the past in the case of Hezbollah. The two also differ in the way they choose to offer support. Saudi Arabia has formed an official alliance with the Yemeni government, while Iran is unofficially providing support to the Huthis and by and large to an unknown extent. However, as Loveman suggests, both use the proxies as their foreign policy tools as they lack the legitimacy to take action in the country (2002:30-31). However, this choice has a significant consequence to the involvement of the two. As Saudi Arabia saw its ally collapsing, it aborted the plan of a proxy war with indirect support and has since been engaged in a costly direct confrontation. This development had yet another consequence. The official Saudi-led coalition was comprised by other regional players such as the U.A.E. and as Riyadh became directly involved in Yemen, such players exploited the opportunity to take a share within the country by supporting other proxies, such us the S.T.C. Saudi Arabia's failure to remain uninvolved is a result of its fear of the Iranian expansion and its need to support vital interests in Yemen. The country was already of great significance for Riyadh as it could become a bulwark for hostile powers. On the contrary, Yemen was not equally significant for Iran before the civil war. It actually became more important as it posed an opportunity to bleed Riyadh's human and financial capital. Thus, Iran resorted to providing limited support to its proxy, resulting in maintaining control and distancing itself from the conflict.

What we also need to point out as a weakness of the Saudi-led coalition is the lack of interests' compatibility, which is vital for the survival of an alliance. Even though the coalition is united against the Huthis we may observe that Saudi Arabia would prefer to keep the power of the government in a level it can control, while U.A.E. has openly challenged Hadi's legitimacy in the south and is claiming its own interests not only in Aden but also in Socotra. This has posed an added challenge to the Saudis that also need to control their allies. Even more, it is evident that as the war seems to continue, the Saudis will keep on sponsoring their proxies that may become unwilling to stop

fighting, as Bapat suggests. This may also pose a threat to Iran that keeps on sponsoring the Huthis and provides them with military and financial means to proceed the fighting. Thus, the two powers seem to be trapped in the ongoing Yemeni conflict as it has gained a central role in their rivalry. This indicates that civil wars are unpredictable particularly when they are prolonged. This prolongation may favor the involvement of more actors pursuing their own agendas or the strengthening of actors that are not directly involved in the war and the stirring up of other conflicts (such as the issue of the south separatist movement).

Despite opportunist motives, we observe that in these new local wars identity and religion find the space to develop and often create frictions that lead to clashes. As Kaldor suggests, supra-national identities, as that of the tribe in the case of the Huthis, or that of shared religion among Salafi groups create a sense of common purpose that brings people together and undermines the role of the state (2013:343-344). That is also the case of the revival of south separatists that share a common identity and the ongoing demand of independence. The latest developments and the shift of focus in the western parts of the country indicate a significant change in the balance between the powers in Yemen that could further deteriorate the situation.

But why do states intervene in local conflicts? States take part in local conflicts and thus proxy wars to achieve regional hegemony, but actually do it on the basis of shared ideology and identity. Realist motives are intertwined with their perception of others and in many cases alliances are formed largely based on common identity and religion. The nature of the state itself plays a role in the extent to which identity plays a role in forming its foreign policy. However, in the unstable Middle Eastern environment, power and interests cannot be described as the sole factors defining state behavior. As the state is weakening and sub-national identities prevail, it is easier for leading powers, as Saudi Arabia and Iran to utilize such elements and create ties with local actors. Those ties will however help them prevail over their rival in their regional competition. Thus, we identify motives related both with identity and power in intervening in local conflicts. Regarding the struggle for power, we identify two aspects. The first one is gaining power through establishing influence in neighboring states in upheaval and the second is undermining the rival power. Yemen is an operational theater that serves both those aims for Riyadh and Tehran. However, the

fragmented nature of the state and the opportunistic goals of other local and regional players perplex the conditions of rivalry and seem to have trapped Saudi Arabia and Iran in a long engagement that has not yet resulted in the prevalence of one of the two.

As the Arab Spring has passed and the Syrian civil war has entered a new phase, Yemen has become the main area the two are facing off each other and a country that could play a decisive role in the competition. The civil war is still ongoing, however the balance between the two is delicate. Currently Iran seems to be winning the undeclared war, as its officials believe Tehran controls Baghdad, Beirut, Damascus and Sanaa (Salisbury 2016:9). Saudi Arabia seems trapped in an unsustainable strategy that includes direct involvement and backing doomed forces and insurgents that were gradually losing their momentum. Should the Yemeni crisis continue, it could mean more Saudi brutality in a last attempt to prove its ability to lead the region. For now, however, both Saudi Arabia and Iran seem to face a lose-lose situation with Riyadh losing money and credibility and Tehran facing international pressure (Al Monitor 2018) in a period of renewed sanctions by the U.S. and talks for its nuclear program showing little progress (Hafezi et al 2018).

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